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GIVING AND RECEIVING SIGNS

My hypothesis is that an older form of society, of economy shines through the threadbare cloth of Patriarchal capitalism. Because we do not see it clearly and in its entirety, we interpret this older form in different ways: as morality, mothering, love, sweetness, generosity, solidarity, caring, but it is basically another economy, accompanied by a superstructure of ideas and values, the paradigm in which it is embedded. By mapping this paradigm onto our present thinking, we can allow more of the other economy to shine through the fabric of our belief system so that we can access it as an alternative that is already, there waiting to emerge. In order to begin this mapping we will give a different cast to some terms that are nodal points in semiotic discussions. Since our friends are usually the ones we want to convince first, I will take a look at some of Augusto Ponzio's favorite terms and concepts.

Gift economies, typical of egalitarian matriarchies¹, and continuing in other types of less egalitarian societies, spread the values of mothering into the society at large, satisfying needs, circulating gifts and creating festivals of gift giving. Yvette Abrahams, speaking of the abundance in the traditional South African Khoekhoe society, says "If you have enough and I have enough, our gift giving can take on a symbolic character" (2004). In fact abundance is the case with verbal language, where all of the speakers have enough of the "means of giving" to give a symbolic character to their linguistic gifts. Similarly, living together, we cannot not give off non-verbal signs abundantly to those who can receive them. Giving them intentionally, consciously presenting ourselves non verbally through clothes, hairstyles and jewelry or face painting, also satisfies the others' need to know about us on the basis of our abundant available signs. The economy of market exchange occupies the field of symbolic giving and turns it backwards, objectifying relations and creating the scarcity, which allows only the few to give abundantly, materially and symbolically. The few have the privilege of giving-to-view the individual symbols of wealth and power: the corporate phallic symbols of skyscrapers, the national symbols of space rockets and the missiles, which are used to conquer

¹ Heide Goettner-Abendroth has written extensively on these societies which are "not a mirror image of patriarchies".

by giving the “gift” of death to those who “need” it. The creation of scarcity deprives the many of their ability to give abundantly, and imposes upon them the symbols of power of the wealthy few as part of a “reality”, which appears pre ordained and permanent.

The market may be seen as a gigantic sorting process, which sorts “in” commodities and sorts “out” gifts, using money as an exemplar of value, while at the same time creating a parasitic situation in which it feeds on the unseen and unacknowledged gifts of the many. The abundance, which is necessary for both direct material giving and for symbolic giving is drained out of the society leaving the field of material provisioning to the market. Similarly the values of gift giving are drained away, and made to seem impractical. The gifts, which remain are invisible as such and they are also misrecognized and easily misnamed (as profit, housework, cheap resources). The market, imposing itself as reality and the norm, habituates the many to the levels of scarcity to which the market itself is best adapted. Indeed, abundance would undermine the market and it would no longer function. (People would not work for capitalists if they were already able to satisfy their own and other’s needs without doing it). Thus exchange value, and money as its expression, could no longer be the norm. Abundance threatens the market and thus is destroyed by it through non-nurturing production of waste – such as the production of armaments, and thrown away through the destruction of wars. A mothering economic system, which distributes goods to needs, does not have to create scarcity, and uses the “excess” wealth as community-fostering gifts in festivals and ceremonies. In this case there is an economy of abundance, an economy of material communication, which functions in alignment with the communication-in-abundance of verbal language and with the abundant signs of the pluri semiotic biosphere available to human experience. It is only to a mentality habituated to the scarcity imposed by the market that abundance appears to be excessive. And it is to a market based conception of reality that abundance is threatening. Abundance does not threaten egalitarian mothering economies, in fact it is the optimum everyday state of things, where humans can develop their capacities. “Excess” goods can be given to others or used collectively, materially and symbolically, so that the individual is not overwhelmed either by lacking or by having them and the community benefits.

In this vein we need to see ourselves as long-term mothered children, exceptional in our known natural environment for that. Our imprinting from our earliest years is derived

from being mothered intensely for a long period. If we do not take the detour of the exchange economy and patriarchy, away from our original mothered state, but instead allow it to inform our lives and thinking, we can see the development of our relation with each other and the universe surrounding us as elaborations of mothering giving and mothered receiving. Thus we project the mother onto the world around us, which thereby becomes a nurturing other, from whom or from which we receive the perceptions that satisfy our needs to perceive, and the gifts of nature that allow us to live, such as air and water, and the earth and all the other species. We can recognize our receivership regarding the gifts of our environment and respond with gratitude. If we do not consciously project the mother or produce in ourselves this relational state we nevertheless are able to make pertinent the world around us because our needs as perceivers and agents are perfectly fitted to our environmental niches, so that our expectations are fulfilled. When we open our eyes we see light. We feel the touch of the air on our skin, and smell the perfume of the dinner cooking in the kitchen, we stand next to our chair, feel our feet on the ground and we know where we are. The expectation that our needs to perceive will be fulfilled makes our environment pertinent to us, full of valuable gifts, which help us in the process of our lives. We can share relations to this environment by giving and receiving those virtual verbal gifts of language, which we and others have received from our mothers and the rest of the linguistic community. Re combining them, and making new gifts, we relate to others and to the environment in ever changing ways. Can we even imagine ourselves outside of such a sea of gifts? Even negative perceptions are gifts that help us flee danger. Thus the modeling of new worlds, our “play of musement”, would have to continue to project the mother in order to allow us to see the worlds we imagine as pertinent to us, to our perceptions – or at least to the perceptions of our instruments. The gift giving character of the universe is always present for us because it is part of our *socialized* cognitive apparatus. Human modeling has to include this gift character. Like bats who bounce sounds off the walls they cannot see, so they can hear the reverberation, we attribute gift giving to the world and then receive its perceptual and material gifts, and this capacity is enhanced because we have a virtual verbal gift system that we use to satisfy each other’s communicative needs.

Thus a human *umwelt*, is one which bears the mark of the fact that humans begin their lives as intensely mothered children. Even if those very humans deny and exploit mothering,

and live in a world, which they have made un-giving through capitalism, they continue to function according to gift principles without knowing it.

There is an ongoing long term patriarchal prejudice that sees women as passive receivers and men as active, creative. For example it was thought that women passively received the male “seed” which grew in the receptacle of the womb in the image of the father (Irigaray 1985 [1974]). This prejudice became generalized to such an extent that all receptivity was and sometimes still is understood as passive. The person who receives a gift is not considered on a par with the person who gives it. According to the stereotypes of European/American gender construction, passivity is considered feminine and inferior, while activity is considered male and superior.

Giving appears active and receiving passive, instead, receiving is active as well because the receiver must use the gift, physically, if it is food for example or in what ever way is appropriate to satisfy h/er needs. Otherwise the gift does not reach its destination and it is, retroactively, no longer a gift, a satisfier of need, but a wasted product. Conscious giving is necessarily informed by understanding, and understanding is creatively receptive. We can communicate as much as we like but if no one understands, our communicative gifts are wasted and retroactively become non-communication. An aspect of creative receptivity is the ability to imitate the giver, as children imitate their mothers, and become givers in their turn.

Mapping the idea of the gift directly onto semiotic ideas one can interpret the sign as a gift for humans by looking at the interpretant as a creative receiver, made up of the group of communicative needs that are satisfied and elicited by a sign (which is a means for their satisfaction), thus creating a relation of the interpretant to the object. The interpretant in turn satisfies and elicits other communicative needs as it is “passed on” as a sign to other creatively receiving interpretants. In this light human sign activity is not autonomously semiotic but depends on the needs humans have to communicate with each other, needs, which emerge from their ongoing engagement with each other and the biosphere. In the economy based on market exchange, attention has been taken away from needs as such, as they are only seen as important “economically”, as “effective demand”, that is, when something can be sold to satisfy them. This deviation of attention away from needs as such, keeps us from looking at them as having explanatory value. From a gift perspective needs and the education of new needs through the satisfaction of the old form the necessary complement

and destination of the great variety of things given and the multiplicity of ways of giving. Important among these needs is the need to relate to others and to share with them the knowledge that provides for the possibilities of combined action. Writers on gift giving generally acknowledge the “bonding power” of gifts (Hyde 1979: 66) and we can extrapolate from this relation-creating capacity of material gifts to understand the relational capacity of sign gifts. In this view it would not be the sign character of something that establishes a relation among humans to it and to its object but the gift character of the sign.

The construction of similarity of human beings to each other is also made possible through the giving and receiving of material, verbal and non verbal communicative gifts. The content of this similarity regards everything in the biosphere about which we communicate. The circumstances, the timing and the kinds of agency and creative receptivity that we put forward vary, and therefore the subjectivities we create will also differ, though we use a similar process of communication².

A communicative need is the need humans have to create a common relation with other humans regarding something and it varies according to the variety of its objects. This need, considered as a need of the other, usually arises from the “external” in ongoing experience, and a speaker can satisfy it by creating a verbal gift, using the gifts the linguistic community has given h/er, which she combines and gives to the other, who receives it creatively, allowing it to mediate the experience so that both s/he and the speaker have a common relation to the “object”. The receiver thus has the need for the gift of the other, and the giver has a need for the need of the receiver in order to give h/er the means, which will create the relation. By looking at communicative need as the need of the other, the listener, the receiver, rather than the need of the speaker, we can see that the connection between the two comes about prior to the enunciation of the verbal gift, in the educated guess that the speaker makes about what the listener’s needs may be and her production of something appropriate to satisfy them. The fact that we speak in the language of the listener rather than some other language, demonstrates this in a very general way. The speaker recognizes a possible relation of the listener to something, and gives h/er the means for satisfying the need for that relation. Saying “Augusto is having a birthday”, places the listener/reader in a relation

² In this sense Godbout and Caille say “The gift’s memory is the totality of the social bond, the mnemonic traces left by past gifts... That is why every individual, whose history is made up of the totality of bonds from past gifts, is unique compared to every other individual...” (1998 [1991]: 202).

to that fact which s/he was not in before, and this relation is also created for the speaker/writer as a relation to the listener/reader. The sign given satisfies both of these needs for relations and also elicits new needs and associations.

The tendency to respond to a gift by imitating the giver gives us the possibility of saying that the response to a communicative gift is another communicative gift but that this does not require it to be assimilated to the logic of exchange. Indeed the human relations that are created take place beyond debt or constrained reciprocity, and concern the myriad ways we can in-form each other, creating momentarily similar subjectivities on the background of the variety of the rest of our experience. While the return “gift” is a necessity for commodity exchange and makes up part of the eyeglasses with which Western anthropologists and sociologists have usually looked at gift giving, the gift informs, communicates and signifies (creates relations) on its own, beyond constraints of debt and obligation. The response of the other adds to the relation but functions primarily on the basis of imitation rather than on that of a constrained return. I am trying to say what seems obvious to me: that humans relate to each other freely, beyond constraint even if they also relate to each other under constraint. The bond of a debt is different from the bond created by free gifts, among which are the sign gifts that are given on a basis of semiotic abundance. The two kinds of bonds can coexist because they are at different levels: we can continue to speak even when we are obliged to.

By establishing a human relation between the interlocutors to the object, the sign/interpretant satisfies the need(s) for that relation. The ability to do this with a large collection of virtual verbal gifts, which can be combined according to gift principles, gives to human language as a whole the retroactive or abductive capacity of the interpretant, in that it retroactively brings forward the gift character of the world around us. In this human semiosis is an aspect of our projection of gift giving onto the world. It makes Nature a Nurturer, and the Earth our Mother. At the same time it makes culture and community our nurturers as well. We construct our detailed variegated relational similarity to each other using gifts and virtual gifts, which have been passed on to us and we construct it BY passing them on. A give x to B, B gives x to C, C gives x to n... Because the world is so varied, “x” can be used in many different situations, and combined with many other virtual gifts though it maintains its character as x. It also can retroactively identify its object(s) as gifts ie. at least potentially pertinent to humans.

In this light we would not look at the Saussurean relation between signifier and signified as an exchange (Ponzio 1974) but as a pair of gifts, at different levels. A thorough justification of this viewpoint, would require a critique of value and the market which is not possible. We may just mention that in comparing the relation between signifier and signified to the exchange of money for bread, Saussure left out the whole issue of the market, the price and the generality of money as compared to bread (Vaughan 1983). If we use gift giving as an interpretative key here, we can turn back the exchange model or metaphor to the logic of the double gift.

Signifier and signified can be viewed as two gifts, gifts at two levels. Indeed they are not given by two different people (as are money and bread in exchange) but they are both given by the same speaker or emitter (as happens when one says the price). It is as if one person gave both the bread and the money to the other person. In other words there are two unilateral gifts of which the one can be used to satisfy the communicative needs of the person who hears it, regarding something, in this case the bread, which can be used to satisfy material needs. The price satisfies the need of the buyer to know how much, and elicits the money from h/er pocket in that mode of distorted material communication that is market exchange³. Given to the seller, the money can be used again as the material interpretant of another product, when the seller gives it to another seller satisfying h/er need for money. For Marx the price is determined by the relation of the commodity (the bread) to all the other commodities on the market – particularly the commodities in that branch of production, and the amount of abstract labor they contain. While this is not a situation of market equilibrium as proposed by the Lausanne school (important in Ponzio's critique of Saussure), it can be seen as a relational determination based on the one hand on the fact that one price is not any of the others along the number continuum (a relation of mutual exclusion like the words in the langue) and on the other the quantity of abstract labor contained in the products. I have tried to develop an idea of gift value as opposed to exchange value, and abstract labor as gift labor placed in the contradictory role of exchange (1997). Abstract labor is gift labor that does not reach its

³ The human relations that are needed here are similar human relations regarding mutually exclusive relations of private property. The buyer satisfies the economic communicative need of the seller with the money, which s/he then passes on to someone else, another seller. In exchange it is not the need of the other that the giver satisfies but h/er own. The price is a linguistic gift and satisfies the need of the other to know, so it is other oriented (speaking about the exchange), while exchange itself takes place at the material level and is ego oriented.

destination immediately in a need (and so is living labor “congealed” in the commodity as Marx says). Thus loosely the word-gift (signifier) would correspond to the price, and the object-gift would correspond to the commodity (signified), with the important proviso that neither one is in an exchange, but rather both are being given. One is given to satisfy the need for a common relation to the other in which it too is brought into focus as a gift (retroactively). In the market however, our common relation to the object is mutually exclusive so the commodity is a “gift”, which can only be received through the gift-contradicting interaction of exchange, which provides that we have either the money or the commodity, but not both at once.

Thus we can say that the linear causal process of source to destination communication, and the bipartite exchange and equilibrium relation both of which Ponzio (2006b) rejects, as well as the Peircean tripartite sign, interpreted, interpretant relation, which he embraces, all have a place in a gift based view of human linguistic communication. By projecting mothering onto the biosphere, moreover, we find ourselves in continual receivership of gifts of all kinds and we give many kinds of gifts ourselves as well. In this sense “dialogism” could coincide with the gift interaction.

By looking at the gift economy and the market as both using semiotic processes *in res* we identify an extra-linguistic realm in which to test our semiotic inquiries. From this perspective the gift economy as an economy of extended mothering lays down the relational pathways, which are repeated at another level in human sign communication. The economy based on exchange is a contradictory anti-giving, gift-canceling process, which splits the material signifier from the material signified and requires that they be given by the two different actors in exchange. The market is thus a distortion of the relational pathways of human sign communication as well. Putting the gift economy on a par with the exchange economy can be useful for semiotic investigation but it can also help us understand how and why such a predatory mechanism as the market, with its new diabolical development in global capitalism, is seizing and destroying all the gifts of the biosphere.

Compared to language, the market is a relative latecomer phylogenetically and ontogenetically and the market is not universal among human groups, while language is. Children learn language years before they learn to exchange. Nurturing is also universal because children require it. Thus the deep connection between language and economics,

which Rossi-Landi (1968) recognized, does not regard economics only as market (or exchange) economics. Rather it has to do with the mothering or gift giving mode of distribution. In this sense we can say that the original gestural language, Vico's *lingua mutola* (Ponzio 2005) is composed of the concrete care-giving, life-giving economic gestures of giving and receiving. This *lingua mutola* does not cease to exist when the child (or the society) "grows up"⁴. Rather it becomes audible and is elaborated and transposed onto the verbal plane, as a virtual verbal gift economy and it can also occur at many different levels (for example giving a book, giving a lesson, giving an education, giving a literacy campaign). Giving and receiving, turn taking, is the "constitutive intercorporeity" (Ponzio 2006b: 51) which even as adults our bodies and minds remember.

It is not surprising to think that the intercorporeal relations between mothers and children can be used again at a later time to transmit the same meanings they had in early socialization, which were meanings that did not depend on signs alone but had a corporeal core, which gave rise to very convincing abductive inferences, such as "Mother feeds me, therefore I am important". Such inferences not only could give rise to self esteem anchored in bodily sensations but could be generalized to imply the importance of other humans as the sources and recipients of other need-satisfying interactions, including linguistic nurturing, and to the environment as the source of the gifts of perception.

According to Levi-Strauss (1967), women (gift-givers) were "exchanged" exogamically, given, received and reciprocated, given back, in a social giving of giving, of givers, a meta-giving by which bonds were created among families, clans, moieties. Could we say that the human capacity for meta-semiosis has its cultural correspondent in this meta giving? While the very concrete gifts that women give, the agriculture and cooking, the birthing and caregiving, proliferate in the community, the bonds at a higher level between the groups depend upon their having been given as givers. Actually also the giving done by mothers to children teaches children to do it by modeling it, while the teaching/learning of language is a transmission of the ability to give and receive linguistically, so in that sense is also a meta gift. Mothers give birth to and therefore give the creative receivers without whom there can be no giving, and educate their needs, including the need to give.

⁴ Egalitarian matriarchies do not require that males give up the mothering mode of distribution. Both males and females participate in the mothering mode. Thus being adult and male does not require participation in the market.

On the other hand if semiosis does have its basis in gift giving and if language can be considered as the giving and receiving of verbal gifts, semiotic discourse is meta-giving (meta-mothering) without realizing it.

Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, alterity and the grotesque body, which Ponzio embraces, can be extended in the light of giving, by looking at the present practice of giving to strangers, as explained by Jacques Godbout. In *The World of the Gift* (1998) co authored with Alain Caillé, Godbout describes the different types of gifts typical of the present epoch, which he categorizes as gifts between strangers. Among these he lists the gifts of such self-help organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous, charitable and volunteer or solidarity work, and the donation of blood and bodily organs.

The distance between givers and receivers varies, as does the distance from the other in dialogue, the unknown stranger, the stranger never-to-be-known, literally having the highest degree of "alterity". All of these gifts take place beyond the sphere of commodity exchange and also beyond the "real socialist" concentration of work and productivity as the "only elements considered as what links individuals to each other" (Ponzio 2006a: 8). In spite of the distance and anonymity, which would understandably make the individuals "mutually indifferent to each other and separate" (*ibid.*) gift giving among strangers continues to establish relations. The context of intercorporeity has changed in the last 50 years, due to technology and commodification but gift giving continues to bridge the distances.

The anonymous donors and recipients who are both closest to each other and farthest away are perhaps the givers and receivers of donated hearts since one of them dies while the other receives from h/er the organ that that is the central source of h/er life, circulating h/er blood, taking it out to nourish the cells and bringing it back to be nourished in turn by the oxygen from the lungs. The anonymity, together with the improvements in medical technology perhaps give donors a sense of giving to humanity as a whole and similarly give recipients a sense of receiving from humanity⁵. Strangers may be seen as different, extraneous, yet have compelling needs the donor can satisfy. The bond that is created between strangers also passes through a community that is unknown and anonymous, and may be

⁵ There is an analogy to be made here with the gifts of communication through the mass media.

based in bureaucracy or commodity exchange as well, though the life-giving gift character usually surpasses the commodity aspect⁶.

Another particularly poignant corporeal gift is that of the anonymous sperm donor. In the US there are now groups of up to 100 young people, half-siblings, who have meetings among themselves, whose mothers all chose the same “highly qualified” sperm donor from the same sperm bank (CBS News, March 19, 2006). The issue of the body enters here also in the gift of the egg to the sperm or the sperm to the egg, the gift of life to the child as a gift created between strangers.

Already the gift between strangers had its place in “archaic” societies and was used to establish bonds between groups and individuals in traditions of hospitality. The child h/erself can be considered a small stranger, and the bonds, which are created through giving food and shelter to h/er, also bring h/er into the community in a way that has a kinetic reality. Later intercorporeal relations among humans and with the environment take place on the background of these childhood relations. Sexuality, feasts and carnival do not leave aside the early gestures of giving and receiving (which include a bricolage of variations on the theme: withholding, teasing, giving something new, something old, partly giving, refusing then accepting, taking, feigned indifference etc.). Rather they elaborate upon them.

I believe it is easier for women, who are socialized towards being mothers (even if they never actually have children), to embrace the idea of a gift economy and a gift paradigm than it is for men to do so. For me personally, the fact of being a mother and of personally operating beyond or outside the market much of the time has given me a faith in gift giving and a critical distance from exchange and the market. Nevertheless I realize that my own mind like those of others is tainted with the “mind sickness” of Patriarchal Capitalism, and even I, who spend so much time thinking about the gift perspective, am probably still looking at many things through the glasses of exchange. Because of this it does not surprise me to find that women embrace the idea of the gift economy more readily than men, especially when its connection to mothering is made.

The reason for this is also that Patriarchal Capitalism disqualifies mothering and its values, and many women are now conscious that their realities have been made valueless by a

⁶ On the other hand it is clear that the commercialization of body parts cannot be considered a gift by the “donors”. The billion dollar trade in organs is one more terrible example of the parasitism of the market upon gift giving.

cruel and unworkable exploitative, even parasitic system. The sociologists and anthropologists who study the gift rarely make the connection with mothering and rarely elaborate upon it if they do⁷. Semioticians, even if they criticize the market, do not give much attention to gift giving or to mothering. When we say that our society is one of Patriarchal Capitalism, however, we acknowledge that it works systemically to divide and conquer our perspectives, to keep us from obtaining a total picture of what is wrong and so from knowing what to do. It is important for political as well as for theoretical reasons to consider the importance of mothering/ gift giving as informing human semiosis.

The globalization of capitalism takes over all the free spaces of the commons, transforming gifts of all kinds into commodities and this includes the gifts of language and communication. That is it puts into the cycle of production, exchange and consumption (Ponzio and Petrilli 2005: 538) all the material and verbal communicative means that function(ed) on the principles of the gift. We could say that over the past centuries the gifts of language have been subjected to encroachment by specializations and appropriations of various kinds, in much the same way as the free territories of the earth have been colonized and made into private property. In fact the destruction of the languages of the peoples of those expropriated territories went along with the destruction of the peoples themselves. For example Amerindian people have been destroyed along with their languages, their territories taken, and even those native people who survived were forbidden to use their languages and maintain their cultures. Upon this background, technological jargons, and academic speech maintain a proprietary hold over intellectual territories, and intellectual property rights now dominate fields of knowledge and serve to privatize the gifts of traditional husbandry in such despicable and biopathic assertions of corporate ownership as life form patenting. However perhaps the most widespread and deleterious transformation of the gift has been the metastasizing privatization of semiosis itself, as advertising and propaganda have made words, phrases, texts, messages and non- linguistic signs into commodities, and the channels of communication have been seized by corporations. It may seem that changing these trends would be like turning back the sea. However they must be changed. I believe that by

⁷ Hyde (1983 [1979]) and Godbout and Caille (1998) do address women's connection to the gift but do not give it the centrality it deserves. Perhaps because gift economies are practiced by both genders, the origin of gift giving in mothering is not seen as a given. It is thus not readily available for use in semiotic investigations either.

recognizing their basis in gift giving and the parasitism of the market, a rationale can be created, which will allow us to change, because we will at last realize what we are doing. Semioethics points in this direction. However I believe it is not ethics that can make us change our ways, but a switch into a different way of thinking, a different system of values, which derive from recognizing the importance gift giving has in our being and becoming human.

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