

Permaculture and the Gift Economy

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Terry Leahy: Sociological Utopias and Social Transformation : Permaculture and the Gift Economy. (2005.) [Excerpt]

2. The Gift Economy

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It's funny. We can't seem to. We couldn't come to a situation, where, if money was say totally - meant nothing, right and we said to each other righto, now Matt, you bloody drive a good boat, you know and Barry you're good on splicing and knots, you're good at what you do. Everyone. We've all got our little bit to do, you know. And we said righto. Well let's all just do it that way, you know. Instead of working for money, and we'll just. And the people who grow the fruit, we'll bring in the fertiliser and that they need, you know. And you know, you got people who make cars, and you know. So every one. The whole world is just self sufficient with each other you know.

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Interviewing Hunter residents about environmental problems I often asked whether some alternative economic and political structure could solve environmental problems better than representative democracy and capitalism. In some cases interviewees would initiate such discussions without any prompting on my part. One group of three men who were co-workers in a maritime industry spent the first part of the interview inveighing against the failings of the Federal Labor Government; it's embrace of right wing economic rationalism. They blamed global capitalism for environmental problems. One of the interviewees, nicknamed "Prawn", introduced the following outline of a utopia:

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As I shall explain later, Prawn went on to say why he doubted whether such a system could work in reality. However I was struck by the way Prawn quite spontaneously produced the basic outline of the utopia that I call "the gift economy", following Vaneigem's appropriation of this term from Marcel Mauss (Vaneigem 1983; Mauss 1970). As I have argued in an earlier article, the project of creating an environmentally sustainable economy is difficult within the framework of global capitalism and its political form as representative democracy and consumerism within the first world (Leahy 1994). Accordingly a change in the mode of production is necessary if we are to move to an effective solution to ecological problems. There are a number of green theorists who have proposed alternative modes of production to deal with environmental problems (e.g. Bahro 1986; Daly & Cobb 1991; Mellor 1992; Trainer 1985; Dobson 1990; Mollison 1988). As my own preferred utopia I favour a mode of production in which we have abolished capitalism, state socialism, remnant feudalism, wage labour and money itself. Instead we would have a "gift economy". Mostly, people would operate according to an ethic of maximizing their own pleasure and giving useful services and products to other people. In a sense all production would be voluntary; it would be organized to satisfy the immediate needs of the producers themselves or would be given away to meet the needs of others. We can envisage it in terms of a vast extension of the voluntary forms of organisation that in Australia are responsible for such services as surf life saving, rescuing whales from beaches or knitting jumpers for relatives.

Such a system can be argued to be more compatible with ecological imperatives than capitalism for a number of reasons. For example, in the context of such a gift economy useless production would be reduced by the producers themselves - to save effort. It would make no sense to work hard producing useless items that no one else particularly needed and that you did not enjoy making. By contrast in a capitalist society, it makes sense for entrepreneurs to produce any marketable commodity, however unnecessary, to make a profit. Those who produce such commodities have no choice as to the nature of their work, which is dictated by their superiors, and finally the purchase of useless goods comes to seem sensible as a compensation for a life of forced labour.

One can consider the implications of the end of alienated labour for what we are accustomed to think of as necessary organisations of authoritative coordination - the government or state. My view is that if producers controlled the distribution of their products and directly organized this, the powers of national government would be severely limited. An aspiring state could not regulate conduct by denying livelihood to any section of the population - since all sections of the populations would be supplied by gifts from a multiplicity of independent collectives of producers. People would not need to be in an army or police force to get access to a livelihood so it would be impossible to recruit a force whose obedience

was premised on their need to keep their job. Any armed force would be dependent for provisions and arms on the whims of various producers' collectives on the occasion in question - there could be no reliable control of an armed force by a central body. So there could be no state in the sense of an automatically authoritative body monopolizing the use of legitimate force. Meetings of regional representatives could perhaps be found useful but they would not be the main means of coordination or have any automatic coercive authority.

A gift economy of the type I am proposing would not depend on dividing the population up into self sufficient communes. Instead people would continue to participate in multiple networks of overlapping productive activities. Such coordination as there was in a gift economy would also have to be achieved by voluntary organizations - of media workers, pollsters and statisticians, advising other voluntary organizations of problems of shortages, waste, future requirements and so forth. As I have argued, in such a society no policing would be legitimate and authoritative. All control of the activities of other people would be contestable and would depend upon sufficient force being mustered by the offended parties. For such a system to work to produce roughly equal outcomes there would have to be a cultural commitment to equality on the part of most people, but then no democratic system can produce equal outcomes unless this is the case.

The gift economy is envisaged as a society that is socially, racially and sexually egalitarian. For a system of gifts to work to produce this effect people would have to be motivated to achieve this outcome by a generous and sympathetic benevolence to others. Equality could not arise from a rationed out impartiality which would require a central authority to determine equal shares. Instead it would come about through relations with particular others that in aggregate were not balanced to the disadvantage of any sex, sexuality or cultural/ethnic group. While this account stresses benevolence and the gift it would also make sense to call such an order a theft economy in that people would not respect any supposed rights of others to dominate or unfairly hoard.

I take the point made by radical feminists that patriarchy provides the soil in which other forms of social domination take root (Firestone 1972). A system in which one gender dominates at the expense of the other creates a culture of dominance and submission which promotes ruling groups as the stern fathers of their societies. I also agree with Chodorow's claim that anxious and insecure masculine rivalries are fostered by a situation in which men avoid child care and "take" boys from women for initiation into "manhood" (Chodorow 1974). Such rivalries with their winners and losers are ripe to be solidified as established structures of class and ethnic inequality.

Critiques of the gift economy

Typical objections to anarchistically inclined utopias come from socialist adherents to a statist solution to our problems and from conservatives who see a stateless egalitarian society as a hopelessly optimistic ideal. In both cases what is criticised is not the ethical desirability of such utopias but their practicability. Some of these criticisms may be relevant to the gift economy and some are not.

Many of Frankel's (1983; 1987) criticisms of anarchist green utopias could without doubt be applied to the gift economy. One of these is that a gift economy in which producers decided the allocation of the social product could favour male factory workers, farmers and miners at the expense of those who do not produce consumer goods; namely those in the bureaucratic or service sectors of society, the unemployed, women who are mainly preoccupied with housework or childcare, children and old people who are not involved in the direct production of consumer goods. Frankel uses this as an argument that we need to maintain a state. The role of the state is to ensure that those who are not "direct producers" can have guaranteed access to the goods produced in the industrial sector of the economy. It also ensures that all people have democratic control over decisions about what goods are to be made by the direct producers.

There are a number of ways of replying to Frankel's argument. To begin with, in a gift economy all services are gifts. The power of distribution, the social status of producer and the right to receive gifts are just as much the prerogative of those who engage in domestic work, service work or bureaucratic work as they are the prerogative of those who produce durable material objects. A strike in domestic labour or bureaucratic labour is just as crippling to a gift economy as a strike in steel production. Secondly we can envisage a gift economy as being one in which socially useful tasks are not life long sentences but are spread about so that people are not generally exclusively occupied in any one sector. If indeed manufacturing is a source of power, prestige and status - through the ability of workers in that sector to determine the initial destiny of durable goods - then such work would be shared widely in the community.

As Frankel's argument suggests, a gift economy would be one in which producers made decisions about what to produce and how to distribute it so there would be no guaranteed community control of any particular instance of production. However producers in any sector of the economy would be making decisions about what to produce and how to distribute it that were based on their understandings of the needs of other groups. For a start the status of the givers would depend on genuine needs being met by the gift. Secondly, producers in each sector would be aware of their dependence on the services of other sectors. To produce without considering the needs of others would be to undermine the social ethic which guaranteed services from others.

Another socialist objection to stateless utopias is that coordination in a modern industrial economy cannot be achieved without authoritative and coercive centralised organisation of production. This argument is a recurring theme in Frankel's discussions (1983; 1987) and Pepper quotes the following succinct comment:

Any state policy that relies on utopian assumptions about mutual aid and volunteerism is a formula for economic catastrophe, a descent into chaos (Hall cited in Pepper 1993, 226)

This is an old chestnut and goes back to Engels' "On Authority" if not also to classic functionalist defences of social class from Plato onwards. The gift economy utopia envisages that effective coordination of supply and demand in a gift economy is the result of two factors in combination. On the one hand independent and multipronged collectives of media, research and administrative workers keep the other producers' collectives up to date with what is required by whom and for what. The other factor which ensures fair and adequate distribution of goods and services is the will of the various

producers' collectives to ensure that the outcomes of distribution are in fact equitable. Any further fine tuning could be achieved by informal gift links between consumers' themselves.

Frankel (1983) adds to the standard socialist objections to anarchist utopias by arguing that communalist green utopias suggest a socially divided populace. An insular and smug parochialism would prevent an even handed distribution of goods between autonomous self sufficient communities. The gift economy is not a communalist utopia of this type. I envisage a system in which society is organised into networks of producers' collectives which are geographically overlapping. The gift economy does not put an end to the globalism that contemporary society has produced. Instead global networks of culture, travel, coordination, and the transfer of goods become more effective in producing mutually beneficial outcomes. At the same time, the kinds of transport of people and goods that are environmentally problematic are restricted. Self sufficiency is not a social and cultural goal but may take place to reduce workloads or for environmental reasons.

Above all, Frankel (1983; 1987) and other marxists argue that only a democratic majoritarian state can ensure that the rights and well being of minority groups are adequately protected. It does this by making sure that all groups are paid adequate and equitable wages, protected from violence by the law and afforded social security in a state - guaranteed social wage. This is a very attractive argument, the more so because the rights of indigenous peoples, gays and lesbians, victims of sexual assault, women and the old, not to mention workers are in fact protected within liberal democracies by these very mechanisms. For a radical politics to abandon these gains in some future utopia and cease to defend them in the current context - as part of a statist plot - seems quixotic at best.

What must be remembered about this situation is that these rights, these minimal defences of the well being of the underprivileged, are in fact supported by majorities of the whole population in those liberal democracies where they are currently implemented. A gift economy would do no worse in this situation. If we were to wake up tomorrow in a gift economy the people who have voted for minority rights in the context of liberal democracy would be implementing these same liberal policies through their participation in producers' collectives to ensure just distribution and through the defence of minorities from violence through voluntary organisations of peace keepers, community justice mediators and social workers. They would have a lot more power as producers than they currently have as voters to actually do something concrete about the situation of less privileged groups. A gift economy could not work to produce tolerance and fairness unless most people were committed to these goals. But then a democratically controlled state apparatus could do no better than this.

To me the main problem with the socialist position is that authoritative coordination of the economy or state guarantees of rights are not simple democratic tools that can be used to ensure coordination and a fair distribution of products without other outcomes. They always imply that there is an important section of the economy in which people are engaged as alienated labour. They are employed to produce, distribute products or protect rights in the way that some central government, however democratically elected, has decided is necessary. They are not just doing whatever it may be that they themselves think is necessary. There are two ways to ensure this kind of obedience. The order takers are either slaves or they are employees who have to do this work in order to procure an essential part of their living. Authoritative coordination by a state necessarily goes hand in hand with alienated labour. Whatever one may think about the ethical problems of such authority, my criticism is more practical and more addressed to the present moment in the West. Currently, allegiance to alienated labour is bought by the promise and reality of ever increasing material consumption. Ecologically, this political bargain is no longer viable.

Conservative critiques of the gift economy are much more current in the population at large. These argue that egalitarian generosity is fundamentally at variance with competitive human nature. Prawn, the interviewee who so succinctly set out the overall characteristics of a gift economy also went on to make a typical prognostication on the problems of implementing any such scheme:

Prawn: But then you'd get people who'd say. Ohh no. I want two cars.

Barry: Yeah. I want a better one.

Prawn: Yeah, I want a better one. Yeah exactly. And this is the point. If we could come to, you know, an understanding, or I don't know, you know what I mean. It's, maybe it's too idealistic or you know. It would be the perfect system, right, and I'm sure that you could make it work, but you are always going to get those people who are going to say, I don't want to work today, and bugger it, I'm not going to work tomorrow either.

Matt: I don't have to.

Prawn: I don't have to. You know. And then the other people say well shit, I've got to do it. You know. That system in theory would be fantastic but what would destroy it is ourselves. Human nature would destroy it. That's what would destroy it. And it's a shame when you think about it. You know when I think about things like that I really lose faith, you know.

In its most general form such a criticism expresses the view that the gift economy would come to grief as particular groups secured strategic advantage and used it to consolidate power against the interests of others. This is a more bleak picture than that of the marxist critics of the gift economy. Marxists believe that an egalitarian distribution and equal rights could be secured by a socialist state. Conservatives see these goals as impossible in terms of human nature. My reply to this conservative argument is to accept that human nature as it is now socially constructed may indeed operate to prevent a gift economy from being successful. A cultural shift must take place in order for the gift economy to operate effectively to produce egalitarian outcomes.

As I have suggested above, I see three aspects of socialisation as essential to a gift economy and as key signs of the broader cultural patterns that would operate in such a society:

1. Being indulged one's infant and childhood needs is the prerequisite for becoming a generous adult who feels confident that their needs will be met by other people (Hamilton 1981b). 2. The involvement of men in the direct care

and succour of young children is necessary to prevent men from becoming anxious, competitive and insecure adults who seek to gain advantage to establish their masculinity (Chodorow 1974). 3. An experience of family life in childhood in which close familial adults are equal partners negotiating daily life is necessary if people are to grow up without expecting someone to always be the boss (Firestone 1972).

These keys to socialisation for the gift economy can be regarded as practices which are being gradually implemented now as part of a current transition.

Looking at the multiplicity of world cultures, a common objection to utopias is to say that no common new culture could ever gain sufficient currency to dominate global politics (Pepper 1993). This is ill conceived if we look at the history of capitalist society where elements such as private appropriation, heterosexism, wage labour, patriarchy and the work ethic have conquered and succeeded within a great variety of cultural contexts and now dominate in a world in which they were once the cultural inventions of minorities.

The gift economy as current practice

As argued in the first section of this article, a sociological utopia can be considered in terms of its claims to be preferable and possible but it can also be considered as an element within current social practice. In this perspective it is mistaken to evaluate political action in terms of how it contributes now to some future condition in which the gift economy will be the mode of production. Instead I think the present period should be regarded as one of transition, in which we are beginning to implement aspects of the gift economy. In saying this I support Foucault's (1986) criticism of an approach to political life in which actions are directed towards some future revolutionary moment in which all problems will be solved.

Traditionally debates between the anarchist and socialist left have revolved around the extent to which parliamentary strategies and economic trade unionism can be regarded as viable strategies for revolutionaries. Describing the new social movements, Pepper gives a typical marxist rendering of these movements as essentially anarchist in their politics. Unlike the workers' movement:

... they resist incorporation into institutionalised politics, are anti-authoritarian, and seek value and lifestyle changes rather than traditional political outcomes ... The movements' methodological emphasis is on psycho-social practices (consciousness-raising, group therapy and so on), creating geographical space (urban squatting, rural and urban communes), the 'personal is political' (feminism) and grass-roots democracy (greens). (Pepper 1993, 135-136)

In a description of eco-anarchists he claims that they tend to reject class politics, preferring the setting up of mutualist collectives to live out and prefigure the politics of a future society. While Pepper does not deny that these strategies may have a part in an overall socialist programme it is their centrality that he objects to in anarchism and the social movements:

The world cannot be restructured by moral example, or tiny colonies of well-intentioned people who are not members or representatives of the working class. (Pepper 1993, 150)

He goes on to claim that anarchism and the ecological movement are both responses to the powerlessness, guilt and angst of certain sections of the middle class. Furthermore, anarchists should realize that the political freedom of action they enjoy in liberal democracies is secured by the power of the working class movement, however reformist and coopted it may have become in the present day.

Anarchists in turn denounce the parliamentary path, arguing that a stateless society of the future cannot be constructed by participation in state politics now. (Richards 1972). This is often joined to a more personalized critique. A recent letter to Sydney Anarchist News described a Green Party forum from the anarchist perspective:

I had the feeling ... that I was witnessing a meeting of greying environmentalists tired of direct action and now opting for the more comfortable and "respectable" parliamentary path. (Bouhours 1995, 3)

The ultra left in general criticizes the workers' movement for its hierarchical bureaucratic politics and denounces the trade unions and the reformist socialist parties for an economic politics which does not deal with the issue of control of the means of production nor with the alienation of everyday working life (Cardan 1974; Vaneigem 1983).

While some of the criticisms on both sides of this debate may make sense, they can also be seen as aspects of social closure in which two sections of the political middle class judgementally distinguish themselves from each other. The anarchist side represents itself as pure and unstained by compromise; as heroic in its disregard for the pragmatic compromises that lead most people to stay out of goal, vote for political parties, get a job, a legal protection of one's rights or government funding for one's projects. The socialist side of the debate presents itself as pragmatic, materialist, not easily fooled, as really representing the working class as they are now, as part of a true mass movement and so on. Both sides evaluate the strategies of the other side in terms of some eventual revolutionary goal rather than in terms of what these politics may achieve now, with the common belief that nothing can really be achieved until after the revolution.

The real practice of the social movements and the workers' movements can be seen as much more inclusive. If the gift economy is being brought about now this process has a number of elements. It is struggles in daily life to gain control of time and labour, to express oneself artistically, relating to other people and the natural world with love and benevolence. It is processes of cultural change and the setting up of alternatives. It is direct action which is designed to alter the conduct of the state or businesses without formal participation in parliamentary processes. It is also the well worn reformist strategies of partial control of production and distribution through the state and through economic trade unionism.

The problem with the state is not that all power corrupts or that reformist tactics are inevitably doomed to failure. The problems are firstly that most people in the first world are generally contented with capitalism and do not seek to radically alter it. So the state and politics cannot be expected to achieve miracles of radicalism. Secondly, the state is experienced contradictorily. On the one hand it may be a vehicle for popular control of the social product. On the other hand it is also inevitably experienced as bureaucratic regulation from above and as theft of the social product through taxation. Nothing

less than the full control of social product through the gift economy would really solve and dissolve the problem of the state - but this utopia is generally seen as impossible.

In despair at right wing attacks on the gains of the welfare state, the left looks to a revival of the power of the traditional workers' movements. However there are also other solutions. As has been pointed out (Mann 1992) the working class has never been a solidaristic social force unified in securing maximum gains from the capitalist class. Historical study of the workers' movement shows how better placed male workers' have excluded the less skilled, women and migrants from privileges through political action, both as unionists and within reformist parties (Mann 1992). More inclusively, the division of the population into differentially endowed strata, both nationally and internationally, is the result of an ongoing privatisation of wealth within all sections of the population, not just the capitalist class. This privatisation is backed up by a state that ensures people's private rights to their differentiated incomes are protected.

This private ownership is part of hegemonic capitalist culture. The culture of the gift economy can also operate by a process of voluntary redistribution of the social product, through kinship, theft, gambling, gifts to friends, charitable organisations within countries and NGO assistance to the Third World.

Instead of quoting from Marx's Manifesto on the errors of the Utopian Socialists, the left should welcome developments such as 'Band-Aid', as moves in the right direction. Such events are not merely hype, false consciousness and ineffective panaceas for first world guilt, as the left usually argues (e.g. Pepper 1993). They are glimmerings of a new spirit of generosity and egalitarianism. Comment this article!