



# Language, Communication and the Gift Economy: A Semioethic Approach

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## Abstract

Maternal gift-giving sustains life and creates positive human relations. Addressing important issues in the theory of language and communication, Genevieve Vaughan associates language and mothering to the free gift economy. A fundamental hypothesis is that maternal gift-giving, mothering/being-mothered forms a non-essentialist, but fundamental core process of material and verbal communication that has been neglected by the Western view of the world. The mothering/being-mothered paradigm is thematized in the framework of gift logic, which is otherness logic. Restoring such a paradigm offers a new light on language, communication and human relations, contributing to recovery of the “properly human” in terms of gift economy values, ultimately to the end of affecting social praxis for radical social change and creating better worlds. The second part of this text is titled “For the Sake of the Other” and presents an exchange of ideas with Vaughan in the form of a written conversation.

This text is structured around the following titles: 1. Otherness and Gifting as the Basis of Communication: 1.1. Semiosis, Language, and the Gift Economy; 1.2. The Gift of Speaking and the “Mother Work Schema”; 1.3. Material gifting, Verbal Nurturing, Imagination; 1.4. New Perspectives for Studies in Language and Communication; 2. For the Sake of the Other, with Genevieve Vaughan.

**Keywords** Gifting · Language · Mothering/being mothered · Otherness · Verbal nurturing

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## 1 Otherness and Gifting as the Basis of Communication<sup>1</sup>

It is just here, then, that the place and work of Significs is to be found, as the necessary link—rather, the medium of interpretative communication—between the constant “givings” of Mother sense and the constant “constructions” (in all senses) of the intellect. (Victoria Welby 1907 [20: 704])

### 1.1 Semiosis, Language, and the Gift Economy

When we speak about language and communication we are not referring to isolated spheres of human behaviour, nor to objects of study exclusive to a specialist in signs, whether verbal or non-verbal. To discuss language and communication is to discuss human life in its globality insofar as it is perfused with signs, indeed is engendered in signs. As claimed in the sphere of biosemiotics, where there is life there is semiosis, sign activity, which means to say that life is construed in the materiality of signs (which does not mean to exclude other forms of materiality, or to submit to sign idealism). With reference to the specifically human this sign materiality is both verbal and non-verbal (on the concept of materiality in relation to signs, see [21, 41, 57–59, 65]).

By expanding the “semiosphere” (Lotman) into the “semiobiosphere”, Thomas Sebeok’s “global semiotics” [68] has pioneered the capacity to question the presumed totalities that constitute semiotics and show them for what they really are, its parts [43, 44, 48]: the verbal sign sphere is part of the non-verbal, the anthroposphere is part of the biosphere, and so forth. Global semiotics has contributed significantly to the transition from “code semiotics” to “interpretation semiotics”, from approaches to semiotics centred on linguistics to approaches that refer to linguistics but also place linguistics in perspective and do not depend on it. In the human world,

<sup>1</sup> The original draft of this paper was redacted as a presentation of Genevieve Vaughan’s book, *The Gift in the Heart of Language. The Maternal Source of Meaning* (2015), (which at the time had only just appeared, and now in Italian translation, 2022), for a lecture I was invited to deliver at the conference “The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy”, which took place between 25–27 April 2015, organized by the Centro Studi Femminista per l’Economia del Dono (Feminist Study Centre for the Gift Economy) and by International Feminists for a Gift Economy at the Casa Internazionale delle Donne (International Women’s House), Via della Lungara 19, 00165, Rome, Italy. The proceedings are published in English under the same title, *The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy*, 2019, and in Italian as *Le radici materne dell’economia del dono*, 2017, both edited by Vaughan (the latter in collab.). This paper in its current form has benefitted from critical comments made by Genevieve Vaughan in email exchanges which took place in April 2016, Gen in Rome, Italy, me in Adelaide, South Australia. I wish to convey my heartfelt gratitude to her. I have incorporated her input and evidenced any divergences in our positions. Since then this paper has been reviewed and reworked. My aim is to convey a sense of the complexity and originality of Vaughan’s research without claims to exhaustiveness and signal a universe of ideas for the reader to explore with a certain urgency given their relevancy to life and communication in today’s world and the search for a solution to worldwide crisis. Gen and I at last met again during the Italian summer of 2019, which has resulted in the dialogue presented here as the second part of this text, “For the Sake of the Other, with Genevieve Vaughan”. I wish to thank her for reading this paper which is published with her approval.

oral and written verbal signs are signs *tout court* in the sense that they carry out sign functions alone; thus, verbal signs are devoid of residues in terms of non-sign functions [2, 57, 83].

This is why Ferdinand de Saussure [60] stated that the pure science was not economics but linguistics, because linguistics is a science of pure values. This explains why from the very beginning, linguistics has served as yet another pillar in the science of signs. Indeed, the study of verbal signs has strongly influenced the criteria employed in determining what may be considered as a sign. That said, the origins of semiotics as a field of knowledge must be sought in non-verbal signs. From a historical perspective, the development of semiotics is associated mainly with the rise of medical semeiotics, that is, symptomatology, or the study of symptoms. However, given that the human being is a “semiotic animal” [8], human life has always been characterized by the capacity for knowledge of a semiotic order.

The specific object of my reflections in what follows is the original approach to sign, language and communication studies proposed by Genevieve Vaughan in the framework of her understanding of the gift economy. The idea of a *free gift economy* has become important in the movement for alternative economics, but Vaughan points out that the connection with women and especially with mothers or caregivers has not been sufficiently understood. Vaughan emphasizes how the gift economy has its roots in mothering/being mothered. Our focus in this essay is on the idea that gift-giving is at the basis of the faculty of language. Vaughan maintains that gifting subjectivity is part of the structure of language and that we cannot communicate without it. In our own terminology this is paramount to claiming that otherness is at the basis of communication [34].

The association between language and economics, linguistics and economics is not new in language and communication studies. The model of sign in general linguistics from the very beginning, as conceived by Ferdinand de Saussure, follows a template similar to that of “marginalistic” economics. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi [57, 58] demonstrated clearly that the Saussurean sign model is heavily influenced by the marginalistic theory of economic value as developed by the School of Lausanne (Leon Walras and Vilfredo Pareto). Thus, this sign model is largely the result of applying the *point de vue statique* of “pure economics” to the study of language. Yet the semiotic boundaries of Saussurean matrix are also determined by their connection with the mathematical theory of communication. The Saussurean sign model is grounded in a series of dichotomous concepts, and this favours its reformulation in terms of code and message, transmitter and receiver, codification and decodification. This explains why Saussurean semiotics has been described as “decodification semiotics” [57]. “Decodification semiotics”—or “code and message semiotics”—takes a reductive approach to signifying and interpreting processes. The concept pairs just listed are oversimplifying by their very nature, yet it was long thought that they could adequately describe all sign processes. Thus, they were employed to describe not only simple sign processes of the *signal* type relative to information transmission, but also the complex type—that is, processes of the *sign* in the strict sense as it related to human verbal and non-verbal communication in its universality and variation.

Genevieve Vaughan also associates the study of language to economy, but this is no longer the exchange economy, which indeed she dismantles and closely critiques. Interpreting language in terms of the gift economy, Vaughan makes an original contribution to linguistics as she grounds verbal signs in “gift logic,” a pivotal concept in her work, promising to revolutionize our understanding of communication and human relationships, beginning from that between mothers—or motherers—and children. In addition to many essays and book chapters, Vaughan’s writings include the monographs *For-Giving. A Feminist Criticism of Exchange* [74], *Homo Donans* [77], *The Gift in the Heart of Language. The Maternal Source of Meaning* [80], and the collective volumes edited by Vaughan, *The Gift. A Feminist Analysis* [76], *Women and the Gift Economy, a Radically Different Worldview is Possible* [78], *The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy* [82, 83]. All explore the gift paradigm from different points of view as the basis of mothering, ultimately of human intersubjectivity and communication, critiquing social behaviour and interpersonal relationships through the lens of her studies on language.

Vaughan thematizes the gift economy as the foundation of a different paradigm from that based on equal exchange logic, giving for the sake of a return, *do ut des*, now dominant across the globe. Gift logic is described as the very condition of possibility for the reproduction of the current social form of production, as paradoxical as this may seem. But the relation between exchange economy and gift economy is one of exploitation and alienation, as Vaughan makes very clear. What this means is that social reproduction today is based on the exchange economy which in order to subsist and flourish exploits and plunders the gift economy. In other words, the gift economy is the basis of the exchange economy, but the exchange economy is its distortion, and in terms of social praxis the gift economy is relegated to the margins and alienated.

In the framework of our own approach to studies in philosophy of language and semiotics, Vaughan’s critique amounts to recognizing that otherness is inscribed in the sign, in the very body, and ultimately in life overall, and this amounts to acknowledging that the other is inevitable and inescapable, the other is with us whether we like it or not. We could even go so far as to claim that the lack of awareness, of consideration of the human propensity for otherness (and of the inexorable presence of the other), for gifting as the fundamental form of human interaction, to the point of indifference towards the other, whether human or nonhuman, is largely the cause of deviations in behaviour throughout history as much as in contemporaneity, in a world now constantly boarding on disaster and overwhelmed by a sense of precarity.

According to Charles Peirce’s pragmatism, knowledge understood in terms of innovation and inventiveness is not a purely epistemic process. Knowledge presupposes ethical knowledge, responsiveness to the other, both the other *from* self and the other *of* self, which the self should welcome and listen to: for there to be an interpreted sign, an object of interpretation there must be an interpretant, even when a question of cognitive signs in a strict sense. The sign, insofar as it is a sign, is other; in other words, a sign can be characterized as a sign because of its structural opening to the other and, therefore, because it is dialogue with the other. This suggests that the sign’s identity is based in the logic of otherness. Consequently, such phenomena as learning, knowledge, wisdom, understanding and sagacity in

their various forms emerge in a sign situation that in the last analysis is permeated with otherness, is opening to the other, listening to the other. Cognitive identity is subject to the other and as such is constantly placed in crisis by the restlessness of signs, inexorably provoked by the attraction, the appeal exerted on that subject by the other. Therefore, insofar as it is part of the semiotic network solely by virtue of which it earns its status as sign, the cognitive sign is situated and modelled in a context that is irreducibly of the ethical order as well.

In the language of biosemiotics (an area of study fast developing at the interface between the “life sciences” and the “sign sciences”) and Thomas Sebeok’s global semiotics, the inhabitants of the earth are interrelated by a bacterial network which converges with the sign network and renders us all, indeed all life-forms interdependent and co-participative. Before Sebeok, Charles Peirce and Victoria Welby had already elaborated on the view that we are all interconnected as actors in the great semio-signifying universe. With respect to this state of affairs, Sebeok posited the axiom that where there are signs there is life and where there is life there are signs; indeed signs are the criterial attribute of life [43, 44, 67]. All this underlines the sign nature of life, on the one hand, and the vital nature of signs, on the other, and together the condition of interdependency, of co-participative interrelatedness with the other in the great sign network that is the biosphere.

In the face of the impending global crisis—ecological, economic, political, humanitarian—throughout the biosphere affecting all of life, human and nonhuman, nature and culture, the sign’s vocation for the other should be recovered and replenished. There is a desperate need in the world for a shift to cooperation and participative involvement in the life of the other, for unindifference towards the other, for a culture of “global care” and “responsibility” towards the other, of “global listening,” rather than of “global indifference”. Such a movement is in consonance with the appeal for a new form of humanism, what has been happily described as the “humanism of otherness,” to use an expression introduced by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his book, *Humanisme de l’autre homme* [11]. Most urgent is the need for authenticity of commitment at a pragmatic level, in action, beyond the purely theoretical, for participation and involvement with the other beyond individualism, separatism and short-sighted self-interest. The health of life globally requires nothing less.

The expression “semioethics” has been introduced by the present author, in collaboration with Augusto Ponzio, to signal a special orientation in the study of signs and life that keeps account of developments in biosemiotics and has a special focus on the relation between signs, values and responsibility [45]. The general science of signs, or semiotics, today “global semiotics” [31, 47, 68], must be founded in cognitive semiotics, but must also open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, which is the ethical, what we have designated as the “semioethical” dimension. “Semioethics” is related to the proposal for a new form of humanism, the “humanism of otherness,” precisely. We have dwelled upon such issues in a series of books of which the most recent include *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective. Semioethics and Responsibility* [21], *Expression and Interpretation in Language* [23], *The Self as a Sign, the World, and the Other. Living Semiotics* [26], *Sign Studies and Semioethics. Communication, Translation and Values* [27], *The Global*

*World and Its Manifold Faces* [34], and most recently *Identità e alterità. Per una semioetica della comunicazione globale* (with A. Ponzio) [51], *Significare, interpretare e intendere. Tra segni, lingue, linguaggi e valori* [40], and *Signs, Language and Listening. Semioethic Perspectives* [41]. All these books are foregrounded by another book co-authored with Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded. Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* [46].

## 1.2 The Gift of Speaking and the “Mother Work Schema”

Now to focus on the main topic of the present essay which is Genevieve Vaughan’s theory of language and gifting with special reference to her book, *The Gift in the Heart of Language: The Maternal Source of Meaning*, in which I find her analysis of language especially interesting and enjoyable. The issue of language is completely embedded in the overall structure of this book as throughout all her writings, just as it is an integral part of my own research in the spheres of philosophy of language and semiotics.

Language is clearly of central importance in human interactions. As much as these interactions are based on exchange at a surface level (or, better, at a superficial glance would seem to be based on exchange), in reality they are structured primarily as gifts. Therefore, we could claim that to speak of language in terms of gifting is to go to the heart of social relationships, not only as they exist, but also in the process of their becoming, as they form and take shape. Vaughan believes that society today is based on two economies: the domestic economy which is a gift economy with mothering practice as its core; the market economy which is superimposed upon the domestic economy and flourishes by exploiting the gift economy while giving back scarce goods to it through monetary exchange, as she had already explained in an early paper of 1991, “The Gift Economy”:

Two basic economic paradigms coexist in the world today. They are logically contradictory, but also complementary. One is visible, the other invisible; one highly valued, the other undervalued. One is connected with men; the other with women. What we need to do is validate the one connected with women, causing a basic shift in the values by which we direct our lives and policies. [73: 84]

All human interactions are subtended by the fundamental interaction that is the relationship between mother—or motherer—and child, or the mother who nurtures the child and the nourishment. All humans who survive have been nurtured and mothered to some extent. Whilst the feminist movement has largely rejected the belief that the main role of women is to be mothers, the belief that the role of children is to be children can hardly be refuted. In fact, we adults are grown-up children whatever our gender, which means to say we have all received the role of being mothered. In this context, nurturing also involves what Vaughan describes as “verbal nurturing.” An understanding of the child’s needs, which are vital survival needs, is based on a mother’s capacity to listen to somebody who does not yet know how to speak, that is, the child, the infant, *in-fans* (non speaker), precisely. To this

“material” gift—the gift of nurturing and nourishment that is situated in an interactive communication relation—is gradually added the gift of speaking, verbal nurturing, and vocal gifting.

Vaughan distinguishes between “language” (Fr. *langage*; It. *linguaggio*) and “mother tongue” (Fr. *langue*; It. *lingua*). Both expressions as used by her—“language” and “mother tongue”—refer to verbal language. She describes “language” as a gift-giving device; a device modeled on the giving and receiving of gifts/nurture, and not just a device for conveying gifts. The different “mother tongues” (historical natural languages and the special and sectorial languages forming each mother-tongue) are different constructions based on this gift-giving model in various ways.

“Language” in Vaughan’s description may be associated to what Victorian scholar Victoria Welby<sup>2</sup> denominated “mother sense” synonyms include “primal sense,” “racial sense,” “original sense,” “native sense”, and “matrix”. As I have described in my essay “Gift-giving, Mother-sense and Subjectivity in Victoria Welby” [18], she in fact distinguishes between “mother sense” and “intellect,” between what she specifies as the “givings” of mother sense and the “constructions” of the intellect (see the epigraph to this essay). The relationship between “mother sense” and “intellect” is such that where the intellect is detached from mother sense, it tends towards dogma and authoritarianism, towards reasoning devoid of reason, or better of reasonableness, that is, reason oriented by otherness [20, 29, 86, 87].

The necessary giving and receiving of the material gifts of nurture is the a priori with respect to verbal language, to the production of specific sign systems for communication. This gifting device and modeling mechanism is characterized by the actual practice and experience of gifting and by the human capacity for creativity. As a gifting device in turn language is an integral part of the construction of the social and of the sign systems we employ to express ourselves and produce sense.

On this account Vaughan speaks of an “altercentric capacity” which finds full expression in the conditions and practices of *mothering* (from the verb “to mother,” which can be performed by any sexual gender). Given that Gen (like me) lives her everyday life and professional life in two worlds at least, and in two languages (English and Italian) in constant dialogue with each other, let me point out that this English verb with all its implications is difficult to translate appropriately into Italian: “to mother”—to act as a mother, to care as a mother and to love as a mother, beyond gender boundaries (*fare da madre, curare, amare come una madre*).

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Welby (1837-1912) developed a theory of meaning which she denominated “Significs”. She dedicated her research to the relation between signs and values, language, sense and significance, and evidenced how meaning is not constrained to any one type of sign, language, field of discourse or area of experience, though her own special focus was on verbal language. “Mother sense” is a central concept in her research. She discusses this at depth in her correspondence with interesting figures of the time such as Mary Everest Boole, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, and Charles S. Peirce. Welby’s two main theoretical books are *What Is Meaning?* (1903, new ed. 1983) and *Significs and Language* (1911, new ed. 1985). A substantial collection of her writings, some previously published and others unpublished from the archives, is now available in the volume, *Signifying and Understanding* [20], 2009, by S. Petrilli. This is followed by my monograph, *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs* [29], 2015.

Linguists and scholars of verbal language, semioticians included, generally postulate a faculty of speaking, a faculty of (verbal) language, understood as an *innate* mechanism, which is a concept disputed by Vaughan [80: 63, 103, 110–117, 197, 298, 309–310]. Among the distinctions posited by Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, between *langage* and *langue*, fundamentally *langage* stands for the faculty of language: the *langue*, or multiple *langues* are possible because all human beings are endowed, at the level of species, with *langage*, a specific, special faculty. And with Vaughan we might add that all human beings at the level of species are born vulnerable and survive because they are nurtured freely to some extent, that is, they are mothered.

According to Sebeok and his global semiotics, a fundamental distinction is that between *language* and *speech*. However, *language* here is not simply the faculty of speaking, but rather is described as a modeling device, a species-specific modeling device and an a priori with respect to “speech”. Language as *modeling* in the human world is distinguished from language as *communication*, whether verbal language or non-verbal language, with respect to which modeling, precisely “primary modeling”, is the condition of possibility and a priori [66]. According to studies in biosemiotics, language as modeling appears much before the appearance of *homo loquens*, *homo* capable of speaking, and precisely with *homo sapiens*. So, from an evolutionary perspective, language as modeling is antecedent with respect to verbal language (speech), which is based on this modeling device, indeed a “primary modeling device” and arises thanks to it, just like the languages of non-verbal communication [23: 150–152]. The special characteristic of language as modeling is that it is endowed with syntactics. Though communication occurs among hominids before the appearance of the primary modeling device or language thus described, when communication through verbal and non-verbal language emerges it is implanted in language as modeling, wholly conditioned and oriented by the latter and its syntactical nature (on the concepts of semiosis, modeling, communication, see [39, 45, 49, 50]; with specific reference to modeling in learning processes, also [35]).

The dichotomy between the faculty of speaking, interpreted for the occasion as “innate universal grammar,” and (speaker) linguistic competence, accompanied by relative linguistic usage (utterance), on the other, is hypostatized at a maximum degree in Chomskyan linguistic theory. With Noam Chomsky it is no longer just a question of an innate linguistic faculty, but of innate grammatical rules [6: 113–124].

In light of recent findings in the neurosciences with special reference to interpersonal neurobiology, Vaughan as anticipated above disputes the concept of “innate”. As she argues in *The Gift in the Heart of Language* as well as in subsequent writings, the so-called “innate faculty of language” is not at all innate. Instead, it is acquired in the first year of the child’s life through maternal care. With specific reference to the “symbolic order,” she firmly rejects the idea that language learning—verbal language learning—comes about through innate mechanisms: “Not an innate grammar but the learned patterns of giving and receiving form the communicative mechanism that is actualized in languages and reposed verbally in syntax and ‘merging’” [81]. In this sense rather than innate, she describes such mechanisms as “circumstantial”. From this point of view, Vaughan too marks her distance from Chomsky’s linguistic theory.



Research in infant psychology with such figures as Colwyn Trevarthen [71], Stein Bråten (1991, 1998), Andrew Meltzoff [13] has revolutionized our understanding of childhood. The infant is no longer viewed as passive and solipsistic, but rather as highly social from birth. This leaves space for a new vision of mothering.

Vaughan replaces the innate mechanism with the “mother work schema” or the “nurture work schema,” expressions that allude to the processes of interiorization of primordial unilateral gifting interaction between “motherer” and child. In her own words: “This new understanding makes the care-giving mother a partner in altercentric interaction, with an alert and intelligent other, who is already able to represent her supramodally as ‘Like Me’. In her interchanges with the mother the child is not only a receiver but also a unilateral giver: of signs, gestures, vocalizations and bodily products” [81].

The centrality of giving and receiving in material nurturing interaction is validated by recent studies (see, e.g., [56]) on the child’s mirror neurons. On Vaughan’s account these studies communicate “the extremely important idea that each partner in the maternal dyad at least subconsciously knows what the other is feeling when giving or when receiving (and vice versa) and perhaps also knows *that* the other knows. Emotionally, at least to some extent, receiving is giving and giving is receiving” [81]. All the same, Vaughan points out that thematization of “material giving and receiving,” of “mother work,” “nurture work” is mostly lacking from new infant psychology, just as an adequate understanding of the maternal, of mothering is lacking in conceptualizations of the gift economy.

Research in interpersonal neurobiology (see, e.g., Schore, Siegel) integrates attachment theory and neurobiology and operates an important shift in perspective. In fact, interpersonal neurobiology places a more central focus on the mother, showing how *nurture (gifting) becomes nature*, so that the motherer’s care is incorporated into the physiology of the child’s brain.

However, Vaughan goes a step further to maintain that the core patterns of neuron connections across cultures are necessarily the patterns of giving and receiving and that this is not sufficiently evidenced, not even in neurobiology. The fact is that the psychological continues to be privileged over “material interactions”. Instead, material interactions provide the very “substrata for the psychological interactions” [81]. The growth of the brain, the neuron activations and emotional responses all arise in relation to free unilateral gifts and giving, in the context of what for the child is free gift economy. The gift perspective is common to the maternal, while at once allowing for culturally specific interactions between “motherers” and children.

### 1.3 Material Gifting, Verbal Nurturing, Imagination

In *The Gift in the Heart of Language*, conceptions of language learning that not only belittle, but even deny the paramount importance of material gifting by the mother and of verbal nurturing (which too is “material” in terms of “semiotic materiality,” see [21: Ch. 5; 28: Ch. V]) are carefully and extensively called to question. We could maintain that the motherer does not simply gift language (*langue*) in the sense of the

mother tongue, but rather that she gifts language (*langage*) understood as the very faculty of speaking, and *langage* is gifting, so that the motherer in fact gifts gifting.

On this account Vaughan speaks of “virtualization”: the *schema*, we might say *à la Kant*, is the *schema of gift-giving*. In such a framework, it follows that it is not correct to say that the sign stands for something else, for something that it replaces: the relation is not one of substitution. Instead, there are two levels that run parallel to each other: the level of material things and the level of words. Thanks to maternal gifting, these two levels enter into a relationship with each other that is not at all static, but rather is dynamical and continuously renewed, precisely because it is based on gift-giving interaction.

In verbal gift-giving as it gradually emerges in the mother–child relationship, the mother’s gifting finds a correspondence in the child’s gifting. This is within a relationship that is completely outside the exchange paradigm. In fact, each time the child makes a request, an observation, expresses something, calls attention to one of her needs, or plays with words, she is gifting the mother with an expansion of her visual, experiential, imaginative space. The mother satisfies the child’s cognitive and communicative needs. As part of the same interactive, indeed “dialogical” process (where dialogism is understood in a Bakhtinian sense, see [2]), from the very beginning the child’s cries and gestures help the mother know what she needs, so she can give her the appropriate gifts.

Moreover, to interpret language as gift-giving helps understand the workings of the human imagination which otherwise is not adequately explained, or only partially so, and again by resorting to innate faculties. The imaginary arises in relation to language insofar as it is not based on equal exchange relations: rather, language is always associated with something more, with a degree of excess. Such excess can only be explained by abandoning the semiotic “standing for” schema. This “standing for” paradigm contradicts and obstructs arguments that seek to explain the imaginative use of language. In verbal language there is always a presence-absence relationship. It is also in this capacity of rendering the absent present, of bringing absence into presence, that the gift mechanism functions.

Vaughan’s hypothesis is that it is possible to converse with words only thanks to the gift mechanism that subtends them, beginning from the mother’s original gifting to the child. This is to say that education to gifting is linguistic education, and education to language is education to the gift. To explain all this, Vaughan contrasts her concept of gifting to Marx’s concept of “the commodity form of value” in market exchange, which she believes contradicts and compromises the gift mechanism [80: 263–266]. Moreover, the materiality of exchange is not sufficient to explain exchange itself. In this sense, Vaughan speaks of the “virtualization” of language and of its “devirtualization” into commodity exchange.

The gift work schema and virtualization of the shared world through language, described by Vaughan in her essay “Mother Sense and the Image Schema of the Gift” [79], contribute to explaining linguistic situations like dialogue. If effectively a question of dialogue, where each partner responds to the other and as a consequence grows in the relationship, what occurs is not a mere exchange, an equal exchange, giving to receive, mutual exchange for the sake of receiving: instead, effective dialogue takes place in the gifting, turn-taking mode.

The same principle applies to the relationship between reading and writing functions. The gift mechanism is at work here too. The writer is a giver and to read is not merely to reproduce, to repeat, to voice, or recite the text. Instead, to the extent that the reader puts the maternal gift of speaking, understanding and listening back into circulation, we could claim that reading is “responsive understanding,” an act in the sign of involvement and participation as the reader responds to the text, the interpreted sign, and takes a stand in relation to it [46].

In addition to dialogue and reading, gift-giving is necessarily involved in another linguistic practice, that of translation. This is a problematic subject I treat regularly and directly in the classroom, given that I teach courses in semiotics of translation. The translator is a giver. To translate is not merely to represent the same text in another language; translation is not merely to reproduce the identical [32, 36]. More than this, translation involves responding to a text creatively, reconstructing that text in another language, interpreting it responsively and responsibly, generating signifying processes oriented by the iconicity dimension of semiosis, as described by Peirce, and always in a listening position towards the “otherness” of the source text in translation, what we have also designated as its “semiotic materiality”. To translate a text is to re-create the “same other”.

Moreover, translation can be described as a feminine practice. This is not because translators are mostly women, as Jacques Derrida pointed out in his essay “Qu’est-ce que c’est une traduction rélevante?” [9]. Rather, femininity in translational practice is given by the fact that the gift of language that was originally received from the mother is recovered and put back into circulation.

Vaughan dedicates part of *The Gift in the Heart of Language* to clarifying that the function of language is not only that of naming: language learning is not limited to learning a nomenclature. This is a stance that in a sense Saussure also maintained, that is, that language is not a nomenclature. However, beyond this or that language, beyond the “mother tongue,” Vaughan is concerned with the concept of language as the faculty of gifting, with language as gift-giving, and with the gift of the faculty of language. Beyond reading, writing and translating, that is, linguistic activities conceived as gift-giving activities, being only some of the capacities of the gift, Vaughan believes that *all of life is based on gift-giving*, on the motherer’s material and verbal nurturing, on vocal gift-giving, and on verbal gift-giving. Gift-giving and language which is based upon gifting, organize life, sociality, distinguish relationships, orient responses, condition behavior, establish orientations, modify situations, indicate ways out, and so forth.

The primary function of language is not that of naming things, but of constructing worlds, human worlds prone to growth and transformation, worlds in becoming, in translation, where the role of the imagination is of central importance. The fundamental function of language is neither to nominate nor to interpret, but to imagine and create in response to the other, in semiotic processes oriented by otherness, as is inscribed in the sign, thereby learning as part of the process to nominate, signify, interpret, translate.

However, on this point Vaughan dissents [81] and clarifies as follows: “I don’t agree. I think we have to learn the word gifts to which diverse world gifts are related. I also think that projecting the giving and receiving relation on to the world

is the way we know it and this is a kind of primordial interpretation of which we are not usually conscious”. According to Vaughan, words are connected to the world and are so on the basis of gifting, so that gifting is the structure of language. And, in fact, once we are born into a given so-called “natural language,” we doubtlessly engage in learning how words relate to the world in that given language. Vaughan here suggests that nomination in the usual sense of naming is like claiming—sort of modeled on private property –, while a gift concept would be more like *accompagnement* as the mother does with the child in “joint attention” [81].

To this I would respond that to underline the role of the imagination in language and communication is not to undermine the role of nomination and interpretation, but to recognize the centrality of excess in sense producing processes, that is of signifying excess in language and communication. I am alluding here to the capacity to give and receive more than what is established by the code. Imagination is associated with *dépense* to evoke Georges Bataille [3], with giving without contemplating a return, with the play of musement to recall Charles Peirce, with such states as desire, expectation, anticipation, memory, anxiety, fear, hope, happiness, therefore with hidden meanings, the implicit, the unsaid, understanding and misunderstanding beyond the letter [34]. All this is associated to the iconic dimension of semiosis over indexicality and symbolicity in the Peircean sense of these terms, with infinity in the finite, with absolute otherness to evoke Emmanuel Levinas.

From a global semiotic perspective let us repeat that such signifying and expressive potential is largely connected with a primordial form of semiosis before the appearance of verbal language for communication. This is the human species-specific modeling device that Sebeok denominated “language” thanks to its syntactical structure [67], and that with Vaughan and with Welby before her (and her concept of “mother sense”), we could now also translate as a “gifting device” [33, 35].

Interpretation is possible thanks to human creativity and the capacity for imagination: interpretation and imagination are closely interconnected and interdependent. We could claim that the central function of language *is* imagination and that thanks to the human propensity for imagination we are able to proceed as speakers to nomination. The imagination is other oriented and highly creative. In terms of inference imagination proceeds according to abductive associative procedure. And to repeat: in terms of Charles Peirce’s most renowned sign triad imagination is regulated by iconicity.

As effectively explained by Vaughan, the mother imagines what the infant’s needs are. In giving and responding to the other through speaking, each partner in the interaction imagines what the other’s communicative and cognitive needs are. In everyday life we each imagine a better life. In the flow of communication gift-giving is never a question of symmetrical exchange, but rather an extensive process of responding to and anticipating what we imagine to be the needs and desires of the other, beyond the limits of equal exchange logic, beyond the boundaries of symmetrical exchange. What we experience is a succession of gifts, a gift-giving process in which gift-giving is never a conditional giving of one thing for another, but rather a unilateral gifting mechanism where the bids are always higher in open-ended turn-taking interactional processes.

Nonetheless, Vaughan observes how in the economic order of things mothering has been displaced by the market. All the more reason to insist on foregrounding the centrality of the mothering/gifting device: before sentimentality, before love, before subjectivization, before personalization of the motherer-child relationship, before morality, mothering/gifting is structural to the social and in this sense it is “material.” Such materiality is endowed with a value of its own, namely gift value, the value of “unilateral giving,” of “free gifting,” and all this is in net contrast with the *do ut des* logic of the market.

In the language of biosemiotics (at the interface between the “life sciences” and the “sign sciences”), Thomas Sebeok maintained that the inhabitants of the earth are interrelated by a bacterial network which converges with the sign network and renders us all, indeed all life-forms interdependent. Before Sebeok, Peirce and Welby had already elaborated on the view that we are all interconnected as actors in the great semio-signifying universe. With respect to this state of affairs, Sebeok posited the axiom that where there are signs there is life. And where there is life there are signs; indeed, signs are the criterial attribute of life [43, 44, 67]. All this underlines the sign nature of life and the vital nature of signs, and together the “desperate vitality” of interdependency—to recall the poetic vision of Pier Paolo Pasolini –, and of necessary co-participation.

#### 1.4 New Perspectives for Studies in Language and Communication

Vaughan’s gift economy underlines how we are interconnected as “mothered beings”. Mothering/gifting, that is, free gifting is the original interface between the child and the world, as much as between words and the world. To validate her thesis, Vaughan refers both to Alan Schore and his interpersonal neurobiology and to Valentin N. Voloshinov, author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [84].

Voloshinov analyses the complex problem of the relation between basis and superstructure in association with questions of philosophy of language, which he believes throw light upon the former. He illustrates how the problem of the relation between basis and superstructure can be explained in terms of the “material of the word” (p. 19). The essence of the problem concerns how actual existence, the basis, determines the sign, and how the sign reflects and refracts existence in the very process of its becoming (in contrast to relations of mechanical causality with the basis).

The word is endowed with ideological materiality to the highest degree. This renders it suitable to register social change in the dynamical process of its becoming, even in its most subtle expressions and not only when change has already occurred and is fixed on the level of ideology. Social interactions occur in sign material and are conditioned by social organization, Voloshinov speaks of the “social life” of the sign. Moreover, all social signs are endowed with value. In the face of complexity at the basis, signs are accentuated by different values. Signs are everywhere, they are ubiquitous and may even communicate contradictory values. In this sense social signs are “multiaccentuated”. The actual process of verbal communication and interaction (which is semiotic communication and interaction) provides the transitional link between the sociopolitical order and ideology with reference to science, art, etc.

To the question of which signs enter society's attention and what determines their value, Voloshinov responds in terms of Marxist dialectics and relation to the material conditions of a given society, which are vital socioeconomic conditions.

With respect to this position Vaughan offers a further response in light of the findings of recent research with the neurobiologist Allan Schore [61–64]. In his studies on the relationship between external stimuli and the brain, Schore emphasizes the “valence-tagging” function through which perceptions of the world are registered as pleasurable or unpleasurable. With reference to mother–child interaction and how it affects the brain, the mother and her perception of the world act as a model for the child. This amounts to validating the idea that the self develops in the sharing processes of mother–child emotional-affective interactions.

Keeping account of all this, Vaughan further observes that much of the emphasis of valences “takes place within the framework of the mother–child interaction, as motherers emotionally process the shared environment in resonance with the child”. Motherers satisfy children's needs unilaterally, investing them with value and emphasizing their importance, thereby creating in them feelings of wellbeing and self esteem. Vaughan describes “gift value” as a positive valence that the mother attributes to the child, which she communicates in her nurturing interaction with the child and which the child in turn perceives, such that it may even feel a commonality with other positively valenced things.

These processes are semiotic processes, they take place through signs, through multimodal modes, initially non-verbal signs, later verbal signs, signaling to the child how the perception is to be perceived. All this occurs during the initial years of life at least, when human survival is completely dependent upon the other, when the single individual is exposed to the other, in his/her vulnerability and “absolute otherness” [10, 53, 54].

Gifting signs is part of the material nurturing process and is continued at a more abstract level in the symbolic mode, especially when a question of communication through verbal signs. As social signs verbal signs are impregnated with values, intonated, multiaccentuated. Moreover, unilateral giving and receiving processes create relations of mutuality among the participants in communicative interaction, as receivers of the same verbal and perceptual/conceptual gifts. Vaughan comments that.

Word gifts are gifts of verbal “valence tags” which are given both to the child and to the things, which are world gifts. By giving and receiving them we create joint attention with others to the words and to the world. In the practice of “joint attention” we receive together with others specific perceptual and conceptual gifts that are available for us in our cultural and ecological niches. By this attention things are “positively valenced,” that is they are revealed as gifts. Even if the perception or experience in question is negative, the attention to it has a gift aspect in that it satisfies our need to know that we should avoid it. [81]

In Vaughan's studies on human relationships, on the formation of self and society, “gifting” emerges as the basic unit of analysis in both verbal and non-verbal communication. From this perspective, her work offers an original contribution to

understanding language and its formation, including the relation among so-called “word-gifts,” the level of syntax. Interpersonal relations are developed in the context of “linguistic mother work”.

Evoking the concept of “word magic” as conceptualized by Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards [17], Vaughan speaks of “gift magic” characteristic of humanity and claims that what renders human gifting truly human is the capacity for “meta gifting”: “The gift *of* a gift *is* a gift, a meta gift” [81]. The maternal gift of gift-giving is the gift of creating community and communication, a truth that can already be glimpsed in the word itself “communication”: in Latin, “co”=together and “muni”=“gifts,” so “co-muni-ty” and “co-muni-cation” means “giving gifts together” [83: 21, n. 7].

However, keeping account of “civilization and its discontents” (Freud), let me add of human relationships throughout history and their distortions (Welby), Vaughan observes how in the relationship between the gift economy schema and the conscious use of language, between gifting and the physiology of the brain, between the gift and consciousness, awareness of the gift economy has been eliminated. The exchange paradigm has altered how we conceive the self even (on the “semiotic self”, see [26, 51, 69]). Through her detailed analysis of the relation between gift economy and language, Vaughan not only maintains that gifting forms the structure of language, such that we cannot communicate without it, but that it is the fundamental structure of our humanity. In spite of this, the exchange paradigm has repressed, even eliminated knowledge of the gift economy, which has caused a shift in self-awareness as a species from *homo donans* to *homo economicus*. On the contrary, in Vaughan’s vision not only are we *homo sapiens*, but we are also, if not primarily, *homo donans*. She interprets the oppressions that plague society as the struggle between the gift and the exchange economy, between gift and exchange subjectivities, between gifting cultures and market cultures, between gift-giving Mother Nature and Mankind: “Since we do not recognize the importance of mothering among and within us we do not recognize it in others—the oppression of mothering in whatever form it appears is the widespread economic oppression of gifting and the plunder of gifts” [83: 20]. In Vaughan’s view the struggle is between the gift and the exchange identity, between *homo donans* and *homo economicus*.

In Marxist terms, to the economic structure of gifting there corresponds a superstructure of values and ideas. The superstructure of the gift economy is formed of values connected with caring. Care and gifting are pivotal in meaning making processes, irrespective of gender. Also, as we have already hinted, to evidence the centrality of gift-giving not only in material nurturing but also in verbal nurturing, in language, and to underline the social nature of the gifting mechanism is highly significant not only on the psychological, neurobiological, cognitive, gnoseological levels, but also for possible developments on a political level, in practical life, to the benefit of the “*vita activa*,” politics based on action (*praxis*) and discourse (*lexis*)—to evoke the expression used in the title of the 1964 Italian edition of Hannah Arendt’s book of 1958, *The Human Condition* [1]. The semiotic materiality of gift logic, with Vaughan maternal gifting rationale should be recovered for the contribution that may come from it for social change, for world peace and global prosperity.

The sense of Vaughan's work is conveyed in a nutshell by Vaughan herself in the title of her opening chapter to the collective volume edited by her, *The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy* (2019) [83: 11–24]: the title is “Providing a Rationale for Peace. The Maternal Gift Economy”. Ultimately, I would not hesitate to describe Genevieve Vaughan, theorizer and activist, as another “level-headed revolutionary” (Medlin 2020), capable of joining scientific investigation to open-hearted action for the other, mother earth and its people. With Augusto Ponzio interpreter of Emmanuel Levinas, not “humanitarian war,” but “preventive peace” [54, 55]: peace and prosperity for all I believe is the original vocation of language and communication.

Vaughan's book *The Gift in the Heart of Language* as much as her writings before and after, not only make an important contribution to a reconsideration of the role of the maternal for life, whether in the private sphere or the public sphere: her work—which is always informed and updated in terms of the latest research—is also of fundamental significance for investigations in linguistics (consider the space dedicated to renowned scholars in the field), in philosophy of language (an analogous space is dedicated to experts in this area as well), and in the language sciences in general, socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics included (consider the focus on Lev Vygotsky and his studies on the relationship between thought and language). If we wish to say what Vaughan's book *The Gift in the Heart of Language* is in amalgamation, we could say that it is a critique of political economy in a Marxian sense, but a critique founded on the gift economy and ultimately on the maternal gift of language.

## 2 For the Sake of the Other, with Genevieve Vaughan<sup>3</sup>

Susan Petrilli: There are so many different trajectories across many different worlds in the work of a lifetime, and certainly yours, that it's hard to know where to start from. I suppose it doesn't really matter, it's the journey that counts, it's our journey. My desire is simply to have you speak so that I can listen to you, embraced by the sound and the sense of your words, by the wisdom of your life experiences as only you know how to recount them. Nothing is obvious, nothing can be taken for granted: beyond the said, beyond statements, beyond the done, beyond actions, beyond what appears on a surface level how to capture that which drives it all: the nuances of sense, the implications, the values, projects and projections, need and desire. Dialoguing is searching for the other, that other we intuit, perceive, love or even fear, but can neither capture nor pull away from the folds of discourse once and for all. Where do you come from Gen and where are you headed?

Genevieve Vaughan: I was born in November 1939 just two and a half months after the start of the 2nd World War. As a child I lived in Corpus Christi Texas in

<sup>3</sup> Written between August and November 2019 as a follow up on conversations which took place at Vaughan's home in Italy, at Vico Lake, located between Rome and Viterbo, where we spent a few days together, from 21 to 24 August 2019, occasioned by Gen's eightieth birthday, 21 November 2019, and my wish to celebrate her and the commitment of a lifetime, as a theorist and an activist, to social change for a better and more humane world.



a house overlooking a bay of the Gulf of Mexico on the road leading to the Naval Base. The window of the room where my little brother and I slept opened onto the sea and I was always conscious of its moods and of the wind or breeze that filled our room (we didn't have air conditioning back then). From our window we could see the sun rise and the moon rise and the paths of their light on the water. When I was about 10 a Native American (Karankawa) grave was discovered in the vacant lot next door and later I realized that our house was probably built on a burial ground of that tribe. In fact, it was a beautiful place on an earth bluff above the bay. In the spring the vacant lot was covered with wild primroses and verbena. It was a place to look out over the water towards the great unknown. I imagine that the people who buried their loved ones there felt that. Somehow as a child I shared their point of view. It gave me a sense of awe and of the seriousness of things. Back then it was said that the Karankawa tribe was extinct but many years later I met a woman who said she was one of their surviving descendants. She was very angry at everything, probably the angriest person I ever met. I could only feel that she had every right to be.

I do not have space here to recount all the experiences that formed my sense that something had to be done to change the harmful society of which I was/am a part. This sense has been with me all my life though I have not always felt it as strongly as I do now.

I was born into a life of economic privilege and also had the privilege of having good and loving parents. I was not abused. Early on though I began to realize that other people had a lot more problems than I did. An African American woman I loved, Bessie Thomas, worked for us. She didn't know her birthday so she said it was Christmas Day. She had had 20 children but none of them had survived. How could this be possible, I wondered. We went to Mexico—Corpus Christi was just a few hundred miles from the border—and I saw children my age begging there. These and many other experiences showed me that something was terribly wrong. As time went by, I realized it was a systemic problem. It was not my fault or my parents' fault, but something had to be done about it. Eventually I resolved to use my privilege to try to change the system that had privileged me. In order to do that I had to understand what the system was and what was wrong with it.

I spent 4 years in an all female preparatory school (Hockaday) and 4 years in an all female college (Bryn Mawr) just before feminism hit the mainstream in the 1960's. I married philosopher and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi in 1963 and moved with him to Italy. My mother died of cancer at only 53 years of age the year after that, leaving me to manage my adult life without her presence. I just missed the whole hippie movement of the 60's in the USA but was witness to the student and workers movements in Italy and the rest of Europe. I still consider myself a kind of hippie wannabe but actually realize I am lucky not to have risked participating in the drug culture of those times with the result that I have never taken any drugs except one cup of peyote tea when I was about 19 and of course the cigarettes, alcohol and caffeine that are so prevalent everywhere. (I gave up cigarettes and alcohol with the help of hypnosis in 1985).

My attempt to understand the system took a leap forward when I encountered Marxism at 24 and then studied the first book of *Capital* for a couple of years.

Ferruccio had been asked to be part of an *equipe* applying Marx's analysis of the commodity and money to language and I was fascinated by that idea. Eventually though, I realized it could not be the market that was the basis of language, but it could be the gift economy of native peoples. Soon after that my daughters were being born and I was reading Marx and Dr Benjamin Spock on child care at the same time! I realized that the mothering I was doing *was* gifting, that it was economic in that it satisfied needs and that it was *work* even if it was free. And my interest in comparing economics to language sparked by the *equipe* made it easy to take the step of comparing the maternal gift-giving economy to language (as opposed to the work in the market that Ferruccio was using in his homology to explain language). I had read Mauss and Malinowsky in college and knew that indigenous people practicing gift economies, not markets, used language as well as anyone else.

Other influences on me were: protesting the Vietnam war and the US backed coup in Chile, spending time in the US with my children, returning to Italy, writing my first articles in semiotics, 'mental problems', psychoanalysis, my divorce from Rossi-Landi and finally in 1979, the encounter with Italian and international feminism. Feminism confirmed to me that women's unpaid work in the home was indeed work and that it contributed to the profit of the capitalists by (re)producing the workers. An international feminist consciousness raising group and a free feminist university, the Virginia Woolf Cultural Center in Rome gave me places to learn about feminist thinking and to talk about my ideas.

After my divorce I returned to the US in 1983 and, because no one there understood the theory of the gift economy that I was trying to promote, I started a multicultural all women operating foundation to practice it. The foundation involved many women in many innovative projects and functioned until 2005. A short description of the work of the foundation can be found on my website [gift-economy.com](http://gift-economy.com). I finally wrote my first book on the gift economy *For-Giving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, which was published in 1997.

I can't do justice now to all the influences and synchronicities that have made me who I am so I will point anyone who is interested to the book on my life that I am planning to write someday and to a film on my life that was made in 2004.

I had the possibility to 'do something' and I have more or less done it. Really it has been seeing obvious possibilities and embracing them. I am grateful to have been extremely lucky in many things and that I have often been able to make lemonade out of the lemons in my life sooner or later. I have loved having the idea of the maternal gift economy as my guide all these years and I think that it does take a long time to untangle the many threads that weave our unjust society together with many other strands of good. My attempt to uncover and reinstate the maternal gift economy has made me realize that Western Patriarchal Philosophy is *all* wrong because it has excluded mothering and gifting. It is clear to me that we have to start over *from that maternal base*. Even the Western feminism that embraces Western Patriarchal Philosophy problematizes mothering and falls prey to the exclusion of gifting, making it easily assimilable by the patriarchal capitalism that is now committing the crime of matricide against Mother Earth.

S.P.: In fact, to pronounce the name "Genevieve Vaughan" is to evoke the "gift economy" and the vital importance of "language" as the place where the gift

economy is formulated and transmitted, communicated to others, having of course come from others. What would you say are the characteristic features of your conception of the gift, of gifting? You have also written about the concept of “for-giving”, and thematized *homo donans*. What is the relation between gifting and language, gifting and communication, gifting and mothering, nurturing as you also say? In short, what would you describe as the main foci in your intellectual work, the main topics and problems that have captured your attention? Is your focus the same today as it was when you first started thinking about these issues?

G.V.: Maternal gift-giving is unilateral because the young child cannot give back an equivalent of what she or he has been given. The mother has to attend to the child to know what s:he needs and provide the appropriate need-satisfaction. This transmission of goods and services is necessary for survival, so all children who survive receive this model. ‘A’ gives to ‘B’ is a very versatile interaction. Its very simplicity allows it to be varied in many ways. It can be enacted with many different kinds of gifts and services at different levels, with different actors, at different times and with different intentions. The receiver can pass the gift on to another or give something else again. One thing can be given to another thing: the water can be given to the pot and the potatoes given to the water. One thing can be given instead of another or together with another. One person can give and/or another can give, many can give and/or receive. My contention is that without our knowing it, this basic transaction forms a schema that underlies most of what we do including language.

The variation upon this schema that is exchange creates an important exception that by making the gift contingent upon an equal return, gives rise to a logical movement that contradicts the other-orientation of the gift schema itself. *Quid pro quo* cancels the other-tending trajectory of the maternal gift and turns it back towards the ‘ex giver’, turning h:er into an exchanger. The purpose of the transaction is the satisfaction of the exchanger’s own need, using the other as means. The motion towards the other is cancelled and contradicted and the equivalence between the two items takes its place. The items or services and the equivalence between them become the focus of attention. Although I am making a point of logic, it is obvious that what we could call the *moral* tenor of the interaction changes as well. What has happened in philosophy in the societies based on patriarchy and the market, is that the schema of exchange has been made primary and that although it continues to function, the schema of the gift has been backgrounded, forgotten and ignored. One reason for this is that the ones doing the philosophy were all males who did not in their own lives have the adult experience of mothering as part of their daily practice (though all humans experience it in childhood). Another reason is that the interaction of ‘equal’ exchange while on the surface cancelling gift-giving, often serves to allocate more to one party or the other beneath the surface. Controlling this ‘more’—which is actually a free ‘gift’ portion given to one or the other—is the motivation of the market which we call ‘profit making’. It behooves the exchangers not to recognize the gift character of this portion because that would undermine their supposed right to appropriate it. This hidden gift is also contained in the surplus labor/surplus value that is transferred free to the capitalist from the worker and accumulates to form capital.

One of the places where the unilateral gift schema has been excluded from consideration is the study of language and communication. ‘Exchange’ is the commonplace term we use when speaking of conversation, of exchanges of ideas and opinions, communicative exchanges, exchanges of words, of love and of glances. My contention is that we need to restore the centrality and primacy of the unilateral gift logic to our thinking about these issues, about communication itself and about the structure of language. It is not primarily by *quid pro quo* interactions or by positing equivalences: ‘X is Y’ that we communicate but by giving and receiving: X gives (a) to Y.

By recapturing the maternal gift as part of our cultural makeup and heritage we can revise our thinking on many issues including, significantly, the question of who we are as a species. I believe that we are a highly maternal species *Homo donans et recipiens* (not just *Homo Sapiens*). If we recognize the importance of the unilateral gift in communication and language, which are so important for our species self-concept, we can begin to act in accordance and let go of that artificial and mistaken self-constructed species being, *homo economicus* who is now destroying Mother Earth.

I must tell you that I have the shocking idea that the logic of commodity exchange infused with patriarchal motivations actually constitutes a kind of mental mechanism that alienates us from our maternal species-being and incites us to appropriate others’ gifts wherever we find them. The philosophy of the maternal gift economy contrasted with the ideology and experience of the market economy allows us to recognize this mechanism, distance ourselves from it and reclaim our original gift-based identities. I believe the consciousness of the maternal gift economy can finally allow us to recognize the presence of the mechanism in society at large and dismantle it while emphasizing the true gift aspects of culture and nature.

For various reasons we usually don’t abstract from maternal gifting, perhaps because in contrast with the hardnosed market mindset it is infused with emotions or seems too simplistic or oppressive and in the present capitalistic society it is made to seem inferior and menial (or alternatively it is made saintly). When we do abstract commonalities from the various kinds and instances of gifting, we find the transitive patterns in language and life that I believe are the patterns of meaning.

We might even say that language itself is the product of the gift schema abstraction at several levels (though we don’t see it because in the beginning in childhood giving-receiving is an experience of the integrated mind–body and as adults we can’t find the thread of the first abstraction). (I contrast this with Sohn-Rethel’s concept of the exchange abstraction, which I will discuss a bit more below).

This approach is of course different from the approach to mothering that feminists describe as essentialism, which sees nurturing as a burden imposed by society on females by considering us genetically disposed towards caring work, while other actors are liberated from that heavy task. I turn this approach upside down. I see the patriarchal market context as *ephemeral* that is, *impermanent* and the reason why mothering is now difficult for *homo donans*. The species is maternal but patriarchy and the market push most men and many women into an anti-maternal, anti-nurturing stance and way of life, depleting the availability of goods, isolating individuals and family units, making mothering sacrificial and the generalization of

the paradigm of mothering impossible while imposing a hierarchical, ego centric, competitive and violent, power-over, non nurturing, gift plundering context.

I began this study of gifting almost by chance, as I mentioned above, and at first it was an intellectual challenge to see if I could figure out an alternative to the market as the basis of language, as well as understand what part commodity exchange might have in the conundrum. Through the years, with the activism in which I was involved and the worsening of the conditions of everyone on Earth, I began to realize more fully the revolutionary potential of the approach. At the same time, many other people had begun writing about the gift economy and, particularly after the crises of capitalism in 2008 showed the internal corruption and weakness of the system, they had seized upon it as a deep alternative—but almost always without the unilateral maternal side of it. Two important exceptions to this were H  l  ne Cixous and Luce Irigaray but neither of them distinguishes between gift and exchange, so the maternal gift paradigm is not clear in their work.

S.P.: In your life there are books, studies and intellectual encounters, of great importance—you have always read, written and published, and you still are reading, writing, and publishing, always engaged and enthusiastic, full of a sense of wonder you never fail to communicate to the world. And then off to conferences and meetings, tirelessly ready to share your thoughts and listen to others as you speak. The books we spend time with somehow inspire and condition what we do, our commitment to the outside world in one way or another, wouldn't you say so? I'd like you to recount your travels, your intellectual travels, the signposts in your life, the books read of significance to you, that have influenced you most, encounters in real life as much as in the virtual that have made a difference in your thinking and discourse. Would you like to tell us the story?

G.V.: I am not really a very good reader. I had an idea many years ago and was convinced of its importance. For quite a while I looked for it in other writers but did not find it. Marx was my main source. I was not in the university, so I did not have to read anything I didn't want to and I also had the idea that the gift paradigm gave a better explanation of most things than the exchange paradigm. Still I did and do read some. Here is a partial list. I am putting an asterisk next to the names of those I have met personally.

Marx, Freud, Mauss, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, Saussure, Rossi-Landi\*, H  l  ne Cixous, Luce Irigaray, J. J. Goux\*, Adam Schaff\*, Sohn-Rethel, Levi-Strauss, Lakoff\* and Johnson\*, C.A. Gregory, John Newman (linguist), Roman Jakobson\*, Lewis Hyde, Jacques Godbout, Thomas Sebeok\*, Vandana Shiva\*, Allan Schore, Stein Braten, Andrew Meltzoff, Vicki Noble\*, Heide Goettner-Abendroth\*, Luisa Muraro\*, Darcia Narvaez, Ursula Le Guinn, Italian and US feminist movement. I also read mystery stories and some poetry. Recently I have been finding many interesting things on the internet. I am particularly interested in the German school of commodity form critique.

S.P.: Ferruccio Rossi-Landi thematizes a homological relation between language and work, introducing the concept of "linguistic work" in line with his "materialistic semiotics". In terms of the disciplines that study these phenomena, language and work, he establishes a connection between "linguistics" and "economics", or, better, he contributes to developing it given that it is, in fact, already present in Saussure's

linguistic theory (however, in this case, reference is to the School of Lausanne and the Marginalist vision of economics). Can you detail your position a bit more with respect to Saussure and Rossi-Landi? Would you say that you have identified other homologies between language and work, language and the market, between linguistics and economics?

G.V.: I believe that the market mediated by money is a child of language. Marx says “[T]he bourgeois economy supplies the key to the ancient.” “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape”. To me this means that the newer development can be used to understand the older one. The market is certainly newer than language and when we recognize the importance of gift-giving in both areas, we can use the ‘child’ to understand the ‘parent’. To do this of course we have to remain conscious of the fact that the newer development, the capitalist market that we know is not a benign ‘child’ but functions as a parasitical mechanism for taking gifts. By looking at money and the equation of value we can understand linguistic categorization and naming. Without the understanding of gifting, however, this monetary incarnation of categorization and naming appears to be just a *sui generis* part of reality.

Much of Ferruccio’s thinking about what he called ‘the homology of production’ depended on the importance of the analogy of tools and tool-making with language as made popular by Wittgenstein and others. I believe that we have to see gifting as prior to tools in order to understand them. The head of the hammer is *given* to the handle and the hammer is used to *give* the nail to the wall, which *receives* it. Syntax works the same way. For example and very briefly, the subject *gives* the predicate to the object, which *receives* it while the speaker *gives* the sentence to the listener; adjectives are *given* to nouns: ‘red’ is *given* to ‘ball’. The schema of giving and receiving that we learn from being nurtured by our motherers, is prior to and informs both language and tool-making and use.

Beyond homologies I believe there are metaphoric resonances in many different areas. They seem to be projections from a ‘base’ to a ‘target’ area as Lakoff and Johnson said about bodily metaphors. Some economic categories resonate strongly on other planes. Saussure’s *langue* where each word is what it is insofar as it is not any other, has the same mutually exclusive logic as private property, where something is mine insofar as it is not someone else’s. The linguistic plane is social property, in that each *signifiant* is collectively taken as having its own *signifié* just as each individual owner is collectively taken as the one to whom his/her private property belongs.

I think Ferruccio and Saussure, like the rest of academe, ignore the basis of communication in the maternal gift economy. My contention is that in ontogenesis, in the womb, in infancy and in early childhood, there is not a homology but an identity between the transfer of material need-satisfying goods and communication. Before verbal language, before left brain lateralization, before the separation of mind and body and the recognition of gender, mothers (or motherers—they can be anyone) unilaterally maintain the child in life and allow her growth and wellbeing. This necessary nurturing provides the first communication and the first model of communication. Value is conferred upon the receiver in this transmission of goods and services. I call this ‘gift value’. It is the value of the other for the giver and it is given

by implication in that the giver would not have nurtured the child if she had not been valuable to her and it is registered by the child as self esteem.

A different kind of material communication arises according to the model of exchange, which takes the place of gifting and interrupts it. Exchange is a distortion of gift-giving communication, based on the use or misuse of the naming or categorizing aspect of language. Money names the value of the commodity using a quantitative *langue* of prices (see my article “Saussure and Vygotsky via Marx”, 1981).

There are many correspondences among the different aspects of social life and many of them have not been understood or even been noticed due to our blindness towards gifting. Whether they are homologies or not, I do not know but I believe we can understand them better when we realize that the picture is clouded because the (language) ape is holding the (market) man in her arms.

S.P.: In relation to his theory of language as “work and trade”, Rossi-Landi on the model of “social alienation” thematizes the problem of “linguistic alienation”, particularly relevant today given that we are immersed in a communication world that has been thoroughly “globalized” from the point of view of economics. Are such concepts relevant to your own theory of language?

G.V.: I think exchange for money is itself alienated language. And this strange circumstance reverberates back onto language itself and communication. The equation of value is a definition or naming in terms of money of the ‘meaning’, the exchange value, of the commodity. On the other hand, the meaning of words is their value in communication, their human interactive ‘exchange’—actually communicative gift-value. Where exchange value varies quantitatively, communication value varies mainly qualitatively. Linguistic patterns have been materialized in money and the market and they have then influenced our thinking from this powerful unrecognized source. The globalized patriarchal capitalist market is an economic ‘base’ with an ideological superstructure that denies the pre-existing maternal gift economy worldwide, masking it and making it more easily exploitable. Consequently, it also promotes alienated linguistics and semiotics that do not take gift-giving into account. These disciplines are part of an academic world that has embraced feminism to some extent but has not yet recognized how deeply academia itself has been compromised by patriarchy and the market.

S.P.: You have constantly thematized the relationship between language and the economy and today, in a global communication world, this relationship is evident, more so than ever before. We know that this is a globalized world in economical terms and the globalized world is supported by and continuously reinvented in globalized communication: communication not only serves to circulate merchandise, but communication itself has become merchandise to produce and to consume. But how do we transmit wisdom, values and experience, earthly and cosmological may I add? The transmission process subtends human culture, makes it possible, makes for the continuity of memory and experience, but what exactly is this transmission process?, a question of rationality and social programming, or of gifting, nurturing, caring, a combination? How do we resist linguistic exploitation and move towards liberation of the word, of language, of life?

G.V.: The development, indeed the metastasis, of advertising and propaganda has taken over the education of tastes and values that used to be the province of

the affective labor of motherers, commercializing communication and compromising semiotics and semioticians in the service of *marketing*. Lies can easily be promoted with terrible consequences—see for example the so called ‘green revolution’ as critiqued by Vandana Shiva, who demonstrates how the glowing terminology hid the ruinous take over of agriculture in India and throughout the global South by Northern corporations like Monsanto. But already the market itself is the model of a two level forked tongue and alienates the other-tending use of language because it is built upon a lie, giving the appearance of equal exchange (one might say the ‘right naming’ of value) while hiding and plundering gift-giving.

The transmission process as you call it is basically a gift process. A gives to B who (or which) receives. Whenever there is a receiver and a need that can be guessed or elicited, a gift can be given and gifting can take place at many levels and in many ways. Exchange, which is a distortion of gifting, transmits the commodity without gifting it. It separates the gift aspect of the object from the transaction, allocating it up the chain of command towards the capitalist while satisfying the need of the buyer (in a new moment) as a use value devoid of gifts. It is something *deserved* not *given*. No gift value is involved. Deserving seems to be better than giving and receiving, so value is given to it, rather than directly to the receiver. Self referentially, it seems to deserve it. Deserving is an off shoot of exchange.

Despite the dismal aspects of the exchange paradigm, some important effects have accrued for the benefit of humanity (due to the desire of people to satisfy needs...that they appreciate innovations). Technology has made life and work easier in many ways for some people. These innovations should be gifts to all.

The gift based transmission process is not irrational. It accesses a deeper interpersonal rationality than does the transmission based on the abstract ‘objective’ rationality of ego-oriented exchange. Nevertheless, we can use the abstract rationality as a means for satisfying needs. The products of technology invented within the exchange paradigm can be useful and I believe that we should not eliminate these products of work and ingenuity unless they are invented for harm, like armaments. However, they should be carefully investigated and screened before they are used in a future society because they may carry hidden dimensions of harm.

S.P.: You in fact remind me of Noam Chomsky. Like him you work on language, theorizing, philosophizing, critiquing, and at the same time like him you are committed to the social, a critical and creative activist. Let me ask what your thoughts are about Chomsky and his language theory? Can you point out any similarities or differences with respect to your own stances?

G.V.: “Linguistic creativity,” the ability to generate an infinite number of sentences using a finite number of rules, is very different if we look at language as satisfying the needs of the other rather than primarily satisfying the needs of the speaker for self expression. Rather than an abstract system, language becomes a means of nurturing the other, satisfying her relational needs, her needs to be related to us regarding something. Words are gifts to others that satisfy *their* communicative and cognitive relational needs regarding something and others (in this case ourselves), and it is only by giving the appropriate verbal gifts that we express ourselves to them, that is, that they receive our meaning(s), satisfying also our need for a relation with them. In this process we also use gift constructions that connect the words to



each other. The same process that connects people to each other in communication also connects words to each other in syntax. Thus, linguistic creativity is the ability to generate phrases and sentences that satisfy the cognitive and communicative needs of others in a quantitatively open-ended way, but it is not infinite unless those human needs are infinite.

Also the idea of an “innate grammar” circumvents the model of the motherer for material and linguistic communication. I have been trying to show the importance of the model of mothercare for life and language. If we see free nurturing as material communication, giving and receiving, there is no poverty of the stimulus on the non-verbal plane. The giving and receiving interaction can be generalized and extended to almost everything so that the world around the child is also gifted, an Evolved Developmental Niche as conceptualized by Bowlby, Narvaez and others. The gift ‘structure’ is very malleable and can be elaborated upon in many ways with many kinds of contents. There is really not a poverty but an abundance of the stimulus. Allan Schore and Daniel Siegel theorize *interpersonal* neurobiology and they show how human relations ‘sculpt neuronal pathways’. Even though they do not talk about gifting directly they discuss its effects on the brain and the socialization of the child. Giving and receiving are the most important experience the child has because they are responsible for her survival and growth so they must be central in sculpting the neuronal pathways.

It is important to restore mothering and being mothered as the basic human interaction. They are the basis of a grammar of life, not an innate but a post-natal grammar. Recognition of this also helps restore dignity to mothering. As the model of communication prior to and independent of ‘communication’ via exchange, it shows how we need to behave in order to maintain our basic humanity.

I believe that Chomsky’s politics are based on the gift, but I am sorry that his linguistics are not.

S.P.: Language is dialogue, communication and presupposes the body. This is a concept that clearly emerges in studies on language in biosemiotics with authors like Thomas Sebeok, but also with the biologist Jakob von Uexküll before him, with the oncologist Giorgio Prodi, with the scientists from Chile, Maturana and Varela, and many more. Language comes from the other and is turned to the other, it develops in the relation with others, in the condition of intercorporeality. Because of this, we can always invent and reinvent new senses and meanings, new forms of communicative behaviour, new signifying relations and practical habits. Can you say more about the relation between language and the body, between language and the world, language and the other?

G.V.: When people talk about intercorporeality they usually forget that bodies are not just birthed from mothers but they are *made* by the nurturing *work* of motherers. It is this intense, detailed need-satisfying free work, which also requires intelligence and focussed attention (to understand and satisfy the specific need) and the mirroring and reception of its gifts by the child that, repeated numerous times per day, form both the bodies of children and the underlying patterns of language. Following this maternal model, which continues unrecognized as such into adulthood, language is basically verbal nurturance of those who are able to receive it and who can also give verbal nurturance to others in their turn.

The use of language gives us a gifted world, a world that is mediated both by specific others and by the maternal society (of speakers) for our benefit. Inheritors of the speakers and listeners who came before us and progenitors of those who come after us, we are also part of the collective givers and receivers of the *langue*, the collection of word-gifts accumulated through time.

One aspect of language, naming, requires that we step out of the flow of speech and give a word-gift *for* a world-gift of some kind. As I said above, I believe that naming, while generally positive as a linguistic action, forms the template for exchange in the market, where it morphs into the equation of value and the ‘naming’ of the exchange value of the commodity with money.

Like a knot in the handkerchief or reminders in a notebook, money can be considered an early example of the ‘extended mind’ theorized by David Chalmers. More recent examples are cell phones and Google. Exchange for money is an incarnation of the process of quantitative judgement, but because the mental process has been materialized, the equivalent does not disappear after the judgement but passes from hand to hand and can be accumulated. This creates feedback into the individual and the public mind, deeply altering our attitudes and our thinking.

S.P.: With the French philosopher, actually a migrant to France from Lithuania, Emmanuel Levinas, language defers to a relation that precedes thematization, that is irreducible to thematization, to knowledge, to manipulation, to technique, and that constitutes reason (and not the other way around). To understand something, a given particular, means to relate it to the universal, to subject the sensation of the particular to knowledge which is always knowledge of the universal. But this is not possible without language, without meaning. Language is presupposed by thematization, by consciousness itself. The point is to evidence the function of language not as subordination to the conscious but as the condition for conscious awareness. Meaning originates in language and the origin of language is the origin of meaning. Language inevitably involves the other, presupposes the other, a propensity for otherness, search for the other, the other’s ear, listening, contact with the other. Would you agree that language and meaning originate in a relation that is not a relation of rational knowledge, understanding, thematization, in other words in a relation where a given particular is not subject to meaning, to the universal?

G.V.: I do not agree that meaning originates in language but that it is the satisfaction of the material or non-verbal need of the other and the reception of that unilateral gift that are the origin of meaning in life (by satisfying the other’s need we feel we have done something of significance) and then also of meaning in language. The implementation of the (universal) schema of the material nurturing giving-and-receiving transaction and its re-performance on the verbal plane *is* linguistic meaning.

Each linguistic element, perhaps excluding logical connectors and the verb ‘to be’, is the verbal gift *for* a different kind of gift on the non-verbal plane and we give the one in the place of the other to satisfy the listener’s or reader’s communicative or cognitive need in that regard, creating a relationship of mutuality between speaker and listener regarding the specific non-verbal gift. The mystery of syntax and merging can be addressed using the gift schemas, in that words are given to each other on

the verbal plane, forming pairs and clusters such as ‘red ball’, where ‘red’ is *given* to ‘ball’— we say ‘attributed’—or ‘the girl hit the red ball’ which functions according to the schema *giver, gift, receiver*.

The discovery of mirror neurons allows us to understand that the receiver’s mirror neurons are activated when she sees the giver give and the giver’s mirror neurons are activated when she sees the receiver receive. Each human participant unconsciously knows and experiences the action and experience of the other so that, as the saying goes, giving is receiving and receiving is giving. That is, in this case they merge. Projecting this onto words, which are given to each other while they are being given by one person to another, we can see how the words ‘stick together’. They ‘merge’, they have ‘slots’ for each other, the linguists say.

Regarding your question. Gift patterns are already universal in that they are universally necessary for the survival of all children. Using them in language keeps us in the spirit of the gift, directs us towards gifting, even when we are in situations of ego-oriented *quid pro quo* exchange. That is, being human is unilaterally (co-municating) communicating-gifting and doing it with language is one of its main aspects or channels. 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. We see this as satisfying our own needs for self expression but actually in order to express ourselves we have to know which words will satisfy the cognitive and communicative needs of others (listeners/readers), the needs of the topic to be expressed, and the needs of the different elements in the linguistic constructions we are using along with which other elements satisfy them. For example, we need to be able to see when a noun needs a definite or an indefinite article or a singular or plural ending. The basic noun verb structure is giver-gift while the transitive construction is giver-gift-receiver. A translation of the terms of syntax into gift terminology would be useful and very enlightening. The lack of such a translation maintains the (patriarchal) neutral meta language of grammar that continues to replace gifting as an interpretative key, thereby excluding it from our thinking. It would be an important feminist project to perform such a translation. Replacing the neutral meta language of grammar with a meta language of gifting could lead the way to restoring it to the meta language of other aspects of life such as economics. For example to my mind ‘supply and demand’ are a translation *in res* and in language of ‘gift’ and ‘need’ implying the baseline of the market and money as primary. ‘Effective demand’ is the expression of the needs of those who have the money to buy.

S.P.: Clearly your work, your thoughts and actions are inspired by a vision of life, by a philosophy of life. In the practical world, the public world—including (if not above all) the world of politics and economics regulating and conditioning the life of entire peoples, states and nations —, philosophy is frequently considered with disparagement, a waste of time, irrelevant to life, to the ways of the world, to the wisdom of experience, precisely. But the truth is that these practical sciences, politics and economics, indeed all sciences generally, generate and in turn are generated in the interrelation among discourse and beliefs, on the one hand, acts and plans of action, on the other. Most often what the politician, the economist, the journalist, the

scientist, the political commentator does not seem to understand is that every word pronounced, every word used in the effort to explain to oneself as much as to others what one is doing or intends to do, every word one utters, every action one proclaims, all this already contains elements of philosophy. Most often when discussing problems, plans and phenomena—social, economic, political, ecological, etc. —, when blattering about truth, reality, necessity, desire, hope, imagination, about the market, investments, taxation, about employment and unemployment, sickness and health, education and illiteracy, about peace and war, about religion and fundamentalism, about migration and building walls to keep out the people, what our official representatives don't seem to realize is that they are already philosophising; that to refuse and reject philosophy, or more broadly, to reject the life of reflection, of critical thinking, of creativity and imagination is not to get free of philosophy, but to become a philosopher oneself, a philosophical improviser and an impostor, to practice a vision of life, but to do so unwittingly, careless of implications and the possibility of unforeseen consequences.

Superficial, unknowing philosophy can even be worse than conscious awareness; the unaware philosopher can do more harm than the conscious philosopher. Social plans and public action can end up being driven by personalized philosophies and value systems, without the benefit of confrontation, investigation, interrogation. To recall a writer particularly dear to me, Victoria Lady Welby, such unawareness, such philosophical improvisation, leads to pouring “new wine into old bottles”. In other words, the sense of discovery and understanding, the acquisition of new knowledge and experience is restricted by the tendency to expression in antiquated language and in concepts long surpassed.

The problem involves the scientist as much as all representatives of the public life, but it also involves the “man of the street”, as Welby says. People cry out for “facts” and not “words” and end up denigrating any propensity towards philosophy and philosophers. There are educational systems now in the world that aim to ban philosophy, to be kept in drawers at home they say. And yet as speakers, as communicators we all philosophise. What do you think Gen about the idea of a prejudicial relationship of language, of discourse to philosophies and visions of the world, this language that carries values, ideologies, but also stereotypes and prejudices?

G.V.: When philosophy is unmoored from the basis of thinking in gifting, as Western Philosophy has been for all the centuries of its existence (despite some glimmerings here and there), it cannot actually have a decisive positive impact on our politics, while the negative aspects of its false mooring in the market keep it alternating on the balance of an equivalence, of left and right. It is not language that does this but philosophy that (because it has excluded mothers and mothering) has not provided us the truth. Those of us who feel and embrace the maternal values despite their contradiction by society, tend to try to think in a more altruistic way, for example espousing compassion but with little or no chance of generalizing it or standing for justice (also usually made in the image of the market, of an equal exchange) when compassion seems impossible or ill advised. George Lakoff gave a description of politics in terms of male and female stereotypes (but he did not recognize gifting). Left wing would be more maternal while right wing would be trying to solve problems (give that gift of a solution) through market and

patriarchal processes. Gifting and exchange are caught in a parasitical embrace, where it behooves the exchange mode not to be recognized as parasitic nor to recognize the gift mode as the host. Moreover, the gift mode does not recognize itself as the host nor the exchange mode as parasitic upon it. Indeed, those practicing gifting may consider themselves inferior and that it is their duty to give to the parasite. It is almost impossible for there to be a philosophy that provides the truth in this situation unless it does recognize the two modes. Patriarchal religions have tried to do this (splitting the field between vice and virtue) but they make the paradigms a question of individual moral choice. I believe that a moral code is really the translation into personal ethical terms of the functioning of one mode or the other. The feeling of guilt is the readying of oneself to pay back for a wrong committed, while vengeance is the readying of oneself to make the other pay for a wrong that has been suffered. Both belong to the mode of exchange.

In this situation science perhaps seems the bastion of truth but it remains within the exchange paradigm and presently is very much at the service of the market with its innovations, while its claim to rationality eliminates emotion and makes gifting irrelevant or relegates it to an inferior and deeply exploitable status.

S.P.: The lack of critical reflection, of philosophy and conscious awareness reverberates through practical life in negative ways. I'm thinking of the lack of dignity and responsibility so widespread today, whether towards self or the other, politician or layperson. This lack of dignity and of the sense of responsibility would seem to come with the lack of reflection, the lack of attention, of care for the other, whether the human other or the surrounding environment in all its diversity, from indifference to the other, the lack of participative involvement with the other, of responsiveness to the other—I'm thinking of the world where the money is, where people believe they live well, are in health, indifferent to the plight of others. Dignity and responsibility together with creativity, caring, friendship, dialogue, otherness are interconnected, and values like these are presupposed by language, no less than conditional for the well-being of the people, for peace and social change, for life to continue healthily over the whole planet. What do you think Gen?

G.V.: I believe it is the logic of the market that alienates us. As early childhood comes to an end, we are trained to succeed in the market because our survival is dependent upon it, no longer on the gifts of the motherer. The market model then opposes and eclipses the gift model of the mother, which has already been made problematic by patriarchy.

The logic of *quid pro quo* exchange pits the two owners against each other. The satisfaction of their needs depends upon this equally adversarial transaction. The transaction is generalized to the whole society where each competes against the other on a daily basis at every level, from high finance to buying a piece of bread. This antagonistic interaction seems 'normal' and benign. Overt gifting is hidden and eliminated while each tries to get more (a free portion) from the other. Patriarchy—competition and heartlessness—is spurred on by the seeming lack of alternatives for personal survival.

I believe that all of the negative and egotistical attitudes you mention are due to the deep logic of exchange and the circumstance of our immersion in the market

(which as I mentioned is *motivated by and motivates* patriarchal and gift plundering psychology and values).

What I am saying is that the human qualities or defects are an effect of the market itself, not an independent cause of the market or of the alienated social life or a lack of philosophy as you say. Our actions and thoughts, our moral sense, are determined by the paradigm we embrace, gift or exchange, the mother or the market, and/or some combination of the two. Throughout the centuries, philosophy has been practiced within the exchange paradigm and it has been patriarchal because women who were still practicing the gift paradigm as mothers were not doing it. I believe that only when we liberate ourselves from this false perspective and recognize the damaging character of exchange, will we be able to reclaim those altruistic values that presently we call 'moral'. They emerge spontaneously from the logic and practice of the gift paradigm.

We can change paradigms by deep introspection and by choosing gift practice and values.

This will be easier, more revolutionary and more generalizable if we have a general theory of the maternal gift.

S.P.: In fact in addition to books and intellectual work, your life is full of initiatives for social justice, enterprises for social change, of things done and in the doing, acts of generosity, characterised by an extraordinary, unwavering sense of care, of concern for the other, by hospitality towards the other, by listening, and never the expectation of a return: all for the other, for the other's sake. What do you consider as the main projects you have worked on or contributed to in the public sphere? You have financed conferences to favour the exchange of ideas and experiences, and you have also contributed financially to sustain entire communities, small and large, to help put their economies back on their feet, so to say. Would you like to tell us at least about some of your initiatives?

G.V.: I found myself in an unusual paradoxical situation, bridging the oppositions in our society in many ways. I inherited money and at the same time I recognize how deeply distorted and damaging our society is. My privilege has allowed me to try to change the society that privileged me. People say that I am generous. I say no, I am a revolutionary trying to practice an alternative paradigm in order to make it visible and generalize it.

Doing this has allowed me to engage in a lot of wonderful projects and activities. One of the first of these was putting on the Peace Tent at the UN decade for Women final conference in Nairobi in 1985. It was a project that I did with a group of international women activists the Feminist International for Peace and Food and in collaboration with WILPF. The tent provided space for women who were from countries that were in conflict with one another to have a dialogue in front of an audience of women. Soon after that I started a private operating foundation to practice the gift economy based in 'women's values'. I named it the Foundation for a Compassionate Society. One of its first projects was Stonehaven Ranch in Texas, a retreat Center that was free or very low cost for people to have meetings for social change. It was used by many groups almost every weekend, beginning in 1985 and ending in 2005. Another retreat center near Austin, Alma de Mujer, began operation in 1988 and I turned it over to the Indigenous Women's Network in 1996. I started

a women's radio program, FIRE, the Feminist International Radio Endeavor which began in Costa Rica on shortwave in 1995 under the direction of Maria Suarez and Katarina Anfossi and continued online until 2009. Wings, the Women's International News Gathering Service, is a weekly women's radio program that was started by Frieda Werden in 1986. It was part of the Foundation for many years and still continues today. A Grassroots Peace Organizations Building was located on Austin's mainstreet for about 10 years. We did peace caravans, conferences, demonstrations, trips to war zones. I founded a temple to the Egyptian Goddess Sekhmet in the Nevada desert near the nuclear Test Site in 1992, which still exists today and gave the land where it is located to the Western Shoshone tribe to whom all the land in that area previously belonged. I tried to do gifting on a large and small scale in order to practice what I was preaching and to make the gift paradigm evident. I wish I had written about what I was doing earlier, so that more people would have understood it at a theoretical level instead of just experiencing it. However, to some extent it did work and I think the idea spread. At the same time other experiments were happening such as Burning Man, a yearly meeting in the desert near Reno, that is based on the ideas of Lewis Hyde, and the Michigan Women's Music Festival that functioned from 1976 to 2015 using the gift philosophy but without calling it that. Other people were also writing about the gift economy. For example there was the *Revue du MAUSS (Mouvement Anti Utilitariste des Sciences Sociales)* in France that began in the early 1980's. My first book on the gift economy was finally published in 1997. I think it might have been better if I had written it before I did the practice of the theory, because then the women who worked with me in the foundation would have understood more clearly what it was all about. Recently the crisis of patriarchal capitalism has brought everyone to question the system and many people have embraced the idea of a gift economy. However, they usually do not recognize that the maternal model is its basis.

S.P.: The natural environment and the cultural, the two being inextricably interconnected of course, are under threat, in crisis. Awareness of the gravity of the human condition today, and not only the human, is rising globally. Anthropomorphization of the planet can no longer hide its ugly face: pollution, global warming, flooding, scarcity of food and water, natural disasters, all of which inevitably take their toll on life, human and nonhuman, over the planet. Is there a way out? Scientists have been warning us for decades. It would have been enough to listen to the indigenous peoples of the earth, the natives of America, the Australian aboriginals, just to recall the cultures we both have connections with, given where we come from, but there are infinitely more. These people knew that the earth was their mother, that their lives, their language, their well being comes from the land, the air, the water, from the environing universe, and they have communicated as much through their creation stories. It's time to listen—to them, to the land, to the other. What do you see as the main problems, past and present, threatening humanity, the planet. How do we take care of life and look towards the future, where do we go from here?

G.V.: I am afraid that if you have read my answers up until now, I will not be saying anything new. Perhaps I can only underline again the depth of the paradigms and the parasitism of the market. Our capitalist society is matricidal. It forces the many

to nurture the few, ignoring and exploiting their needs, making them motherers of the capitalists while discrediting real mothering, killing millions of motherers and children and depreciating the maternal model. Then the capitalists and the corporations take over the nurturing men and become philanthropic, doling out a pittance of what they have received from the many, convincing everyone including themselves that they are benign, the real motherers. Charity becomes a big business with 10% of the workforce in the USA employed in non-profits. All of this would be harder to do if the gift paradigm were recognized. Exchange—the equation of value—appears to be just, equal and respectful of both exchangers. However, it almost always hides a free gift portion and thus sets the stage for mendacity in the whole society. We turn off our ‘bullshit detectors’ when we exchange on a daily basis and they remain out of commission when we listen to the news, elect politicians, buy plastics, recycle. Even when we look at ourselves. Indigenous people maintain an idea of Mother Earth through spiritual practice (generalizing the motherer) while for us, it/she has become an object.

S.P.: Emmanuel Levinas discusses “human rights” in a paper titled “Human rights and the rights of the other”, a provocation with which he wants to evidence how the rights of identity tend to forget the rights of the other. On this account, paradoxically, so-called “human rights” not only do not include the rights of others, but even exclude them given that responsibility for the other is not recognized. But human rights derive from an original relation with the other, a relation that precedes all legislation and justification. In this sense human rights defer to an I-other relation that could be indicated as an a-priori relation with respect to all declarations of human rights.

The I-other relation is antecedent to the declaration of human rights; it is independent of all initiative, of any form of power; it is also independent from roles, functions, merits and recognitions. Human rights, in the inclusive sense of human rights, are a priori to any form of permission, concession, authority, declaration of human rights, tradition jurisprudence, title or privilege, before all reason, but also before any form of theology. Human rights are the expression of the human individual’s otherness, what Levinas calls “absolute otherness”, independent from any institutional relationship, from reference to a role or social status, juridical status, from community affiliation, etc. As such human rights do not need to be conferred. Absolute otherness refers to the uniqueness of each single individual, beyond individuality determined by association to an agglomeration of some sort, a genre, class, group, gender, community, territory, tradition. This is a question of uniqueness antecedent to a distinctive mark or sign of any kind, the uniqueness of the I’s responsibility in the first person in the face of the other.

This original responsibility for the other is at the basis of human rights and is connected to peace. Without this original responsibility, this original otherness, human rights—like peace that is not really peace but only a truce, between one war and the next—when declared end up appearing limited and abstract, obtained through the power of the State, through politics, its strategies and concessions. Limited by justice, human rights are limited to a community and connected to peace achieved and assured thanks to the imposition of a law.



My freedom begins in relation to the other who appeals to my irreducible responsibility. My freedom and my rights, that is my freedom and the rights of each identity are manifest in unindifference to the other, in responsibility for the other, for the rights of the other, before being manifest as my freedom, as the rights of a given identity.

I know you too have reservations about the concept of “human rights”, as paradoxical as this might seem, though in the light of Levinas’s considerations not so paradoxical. Would you explain your own position on this question?

G.V.: I believe that the rights discourse comes from exchange and the market, not only from private property and its defense and maintenance, but from the logic of the equation of value and the general equivalent. That is, from a horizontal and a vertical logic of identity working together. Items are similar to each other (‘horizontally’) because they are all also related as similar to a general equivalent (‘vertically’). As I said above, this structure derives from language in its aspect of naming and the definition. There each word is one in relation to many gifts of the same kind on the non-verbal plane. (This is repeated with polysemous words, like different pieces of private property related to the same owner.) And those non-verbal gifts are confirmed as similar because they all have the same name. It signals the transfer (again the ‘giving and receiving’) of a shareable relation-creating gift perception from the mainly non-verbal to the verbal plane, from what I call “world gifts” to “word gifts”.

In the languages that have the verb ‘to be’, this is its existential function. I believe it is re-played on the material plane in the relation between commodities and money: 1 pound of coffee = \$5.00.

Like commodity exchange, justice and human rights are based on categorization and naming, on defining the crime or the right, on a contract in which these are enunciated. Judgement places actions and people in one category or another and determines what they ‘deserve’. Future rights depend upon the category in which one is placed. Slogans like ‘Women’s rights are human rights’ play on this categorization. The judge accompanies a verdict with a ‘sentence’, which the police or military enforce. All this is part of the mental mechanism I mentioned above that alienates us from our maternal species being. It is probably impossible for the rights of all humans and the other species to be respected from within the exchange paradigm, because exchange makes us compete with each other for survival. Instead, a maternal gift paradigm would focus on the needs of all and on satisfying them. Freed from the market, that motivation and its implementation would not be interrupted and distorted by the logic of exchange. It is not rights we need but the liberation of our other-orientation. We have been wounded in our compassion.

S.P.: Today is 21 August 2019: I know you are preparing for a series of conferences you will soon be giving in India, leaving on the 30<sup>th</sup>. What are you working on in preparation?, what are the topics and problems you intend to present? And if by the time you get through this text you have already been and gone, what did you end up talking about?, who was there to listen? were your ideas well received?

G.V.: My friend Rajani Kanth, who is Indian but lives in the USA organized some speaking engagements for me in Delhi. I had been to India once before, to Mumbai, to the World Social Forum, which was populated by wonderful Indian and

international activists. This time I got a more thoroughly Indian look at the country though from the inside of a big hotel. I ate something I shouldn't have one of the first days I was there and got sick, so I spent several days in the captivity of my room. In fact, staying in the hotel was like being in captivity. There were guards at the gate who checked the trunks of the cars coming in to make sure there were no explosives and even at the elegant entrance there was an x-ray machine to screen people, packages and purses. I thought this might have been because of the recent decision of Modi to remove the special status of Kashmir and the fear of reprisals against the powerful and the trappings of power, but Rajani tells me that the screening was in place long before because India has been under Jihadi threat for some 15 years.

For two of the talks I got a taste of what Indian higher education is like, with a meeting at a women's college and another at a private university. At the university the students asked the usual questions about essentialism while those at the women's college had already had an iconoclastic session with Rajani and were more open to thinking about the maternal gift economy. The best encounter was the one at a public venue. Rajani had invited Vandana Shiva, and the two of them introduced me. I have known and admired Vandana for a number of years so this was a great occasion for me. I gave an introductory talk, which I always have to give because the maternal gift economy is an unknown theme for everybody, even though it is an important part of life itself. Differently from the USA, people in India as in Italy are familiar with Marxist ideas so it is easier to reason along those lines without having to justify the analysis. I have recently been thinking about gift value as opposed to exchange value and was able to talk about how the gift and gift value fill in the blank of value before and exchange.

S.P.: We've spent a few days together now, you and I here at the lake, surrounded by mother nature in all her overwhelming beauty, immersed in colours, sounds, perfumes, sun and sky, shining water, soft breezes, leaves rustling, birds singing, you and I together singing to mother nature, tree frogs croaking..., in words, utterances, discourses, smiles and embraces. I know that there is so much more we could convey from you to others, but we have to go now – inevitable the limitations on our time and circumstances. All the same, many concerns have emerged from our conversations, not least of all the big problem of the relation between capitalism and feminism and the connected question of value theory. Let me ask you, even if briefly, what is the relation to your mind between women and the capitalist system, therefore between capitalism and feminism?

G.V.: As I have been saying, I believe capitalism is a gift exploiting system based on the market imbued with patriarchy and the patriarchal values of competition for domination. It is not a biological imperative or a necessary social order. Since it is systemic anyone can participate in it and given the exploitation of women worldwide and through the centuries, the participation of women in capitalism has seemed to be liberation, a change for the better. In fact, it has improved the condition of many individual women, but at the same time it has included them in a mechanism that exploits the gifts of the many, while it has also made them dependent on a system that exploits the gifting that many of them still practice in the 'domestic sphere'. Racially and economically privileged women in the over developing world are now almost in a position of ascendancy within

the system that exploits the gifts of their sisters and brothers in other countries as well as at home. It is within our power to understand how this system works and to change it both from within and from the outside, taking strategic initiatives and forming alliances locally and internationally. The system tries to co-opt women everywhere by granting them the privileges of the market, but it is up to us to work through the paradoxes and unite across the variety of our positions in order to dismantle the matricidal exchange paradigm.

S.P.: You return constantly to the question of value and value theory and I know you are particularly excited at the moment as you are reading, or rather re-reading Alfred Sohn-Rethel's works. You seem to be reaching some sort of ultimate understanding concerning your own life's work, what is it that you have discovered, what's so important?

G.V.: I began reading Sohn-Rethel in 1975 and was struck by the importance of the "exchange abstraction". I have thought about and used the idea over the years and now am intrigued by the number of people who are citing him in different contexts. I have saved some 50 articles online that reference his 'exchange abstraction' and am looking forward to having the time to study them. It is like witnessing the celebration of an old friend, but also it justifies my own conjecture that the market and the interaction of exchange itself feed back into our mindsets and alienate us from mothering. Like the feedback loops of warmed sea water that are causing changes in the weather patterns, the feedback loops of the exchange abstraction alter not only our philosophy but our mental patterns, destabilizing us towards a pernicious ego orientation.

I mentioned David Chalmers and the extended mind theory above. Sohn-Rethel shows how the real abstraction has determined our abstract thought from the pre-Socratic philosophers to the Kantian transcendental subject and the apriori categories of space and time. The commodity that is for sale is kept outside of use, abstracted in the store until it is bought, its importance as a quantity of value split from its qualitative use value. For me it is important that the commodity is also outside the gift. By showing that gift value given to the other by satisfying her need, and that it is relational and prior to both exchange value and use value, we reveal an area of original value in ontogeny before the abstraction, that is, before exchange value is divided from use value. Exchange value is relational in that it concerns the individual product in relation to all the products on the market. Use value, as the utility of the product for anyone, does not say anything regarding any relation in which it may be embedded. Gift value is prior to both exchange value and use value and it is relational in that it is the value of the other implied by the satisfaction of her specific need. Thus, we can look at exchange value and use value as the splitting of gift value. In exchange, the value of the individual other is denied and the value of the product in relation to all the other products as quantities of abstract labor, is put in its place. The specificity of the person who is the receiver is also denied, and the product is seen only in its utility to anyone. After the product is bought it can be used as a gift, but this is in a new activity outside the market. Adding gift value to the mix shows what abstract labor is abstracted *from*. And what we can go back to.

Marx's analysis of the commodity and money and of the equation of value shows us the mechanism of the present 'social nexus'. Sohn-Rethel's idea of the exchange abstraction shows how the market interaction on the material plane influences or actually determines our Western (patriarchal) philosophical thought. Both of these leave out the sphere of the gift which has been mainly the province of the half of humanity that has birthed and nurtured life. It is the social nexus of the gift that must now replace that of exchange and the market and provide the new paradigm of thought that must replace the thinking coming from the exchange abstraction.

S.P.: To finish off, even if momentarily, given that the questions are open, with so many more to propose. If you agree that the essence of language implies unindifference to the other, to the other's otherness, would you agree that language in itself, as an act of communication, involves responsibility towards the other, also in the sense of responsiveness to the other, and therefore listening to the other, hospitality, friendship, encounter. Do you see a relation between friendship and language?, friendship and gifting?, how important is friendship in what we do and say?

G.V.: Yes, language permits us to give and receive almost in any moment. In our alienated world friendship is precious indeed. With our friends we can practice a less alienated way of being, try out what it would be like to live in a community of like-minded people whose integrity can be trusted, an island in the shifting seas of neoliberalism. Each human being is a whole world and as friends we have access to perspectives and experiences we cannot have by ourselves. Together we are the harbingers of the better world that must be. Among friends, gifts of all kinds can flow freely without fear of misunderstanding, rejection or reprisal. I am grateful to you Susan for being my friend.

S.P.: As I was looking through your books in the library here, I came across *The Pleasure of the Text*, by Roland Barthes, happening upon words I find particularly significant and can relate to. Let me dedicate them to you: "To be with the one I love and to think of something else: this is how I have my best ideas, how I best invent what is necessary to my work. Likewise for the text: it produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else" (Barthes 1973, Eng. trans.: 24). Spending time with you dear Gen and weaving texts together is for me the pleasure of raising the gaze to contemplate better worlds and to work for social change.

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