

EXPENSIVE GIFTS. EXCHANGE AND IRREDEEMABLE DEBTS IN WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE

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1. A well-known economic sociologist, Mark Granovetter (of the Department of Sociology at Stanford University), in his paper entitled *The Social Construction of Corruption* (Granovetter 2004), written in two thousand and four, underlines that:

2. "... many behaviorally identical actions may be interpreted very differently depending on circumstances. To say that an exchange involves a "gift," "favor," or "loan" is morally neutral. But if we code the same exchanges as "bribery" or "extortion," this is quite different and implies condemnation. We need to explore what social principles govern our interpretations of given exchanges. Gifts and favors are regulated by a norm of reciprocity, which operates in more than one dimension. One aspect is that return gifts or favors should be in a similar modality as the original. It is hard to say precisely what this means, but some instances are obvious to nearly everyone, such as that one should not reciprocate an invitation to dinner at someone's home with a cash payment. There is also an etiquette about the timing of reciprocation, for example, invitations to dinner should not be reciprocated the very next day. As La Rochefoucauld reminds us in his *Maxims* (1665: Maxim #226), "excessive eagerness to discharge an obligation is a form of ingratitude." The norm of reciprocity also specifies that return gifts and favors should be roughly in proportion to the original offering. If a gift or favor falls far short, the attribution of ingratitude inhibits further exchange. But if it is excessive, either when originally given or in reciprocation, recipients may suspect that the giver expects something more in return than is appropriate."

3. To say it in other words, the process of western civilization implies the strong ambiguity of the gift notion. Actually this notion, considered from an historical perspective, can't be separated from the complementary notion of fruitful exchange. The desire to participate in a secure and trusty kinship is historically firmly linked with the will to gain a profit whose meaning could be represented as honorable.

4. At the origin of this apparent contradiction we can detect the ancient idea of obligation, connecting two individuals through the social and at the same time economic interplay shaped by an exchange of gifts, opening the way to systematic commercial relations whose core is the mutual recognition of the involved persons both as trustworthy partners and friends and as participants in an interfamilial, religious and local kinship. In this light, the today wide circulated representation of an European past characterized by an economy of the gift, namely by a system of gratuitous exchanges challenging the economy of profit is deeply faulty.

5. It would however a mistake to forget that this link between gift and exchange, or between friendship and fruitful relation, was specifically transformed and reshaped through the Christian political and symbolical reorganization of the West especially between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Era.

6. The core of this reorganization was shaped by a redefinition of the notion itself of economy and profit, neatly distinguishing the institutional and sacred meaning of the transactions concerning Churches and public powers, from the private and profane meaning of the transactions performed in the domestic area. Especially the semantic field connoted by the words gift (*donum*) and exchange (*commercium*) was thoroughly reshaped through the capital metaphor of the sacred exchange, at the same time commerce and gift, describing, circulating and making seemingly understandable the Incarnation of God.

7. Actually, since fourth-fifth century, the humanization of God and the dogma of the double, human and divine, nature of Christ, as well as the Passion and death of Christ, were represented as a sacred Commerce between God and humankind. The Christ was normally described as a holy, heavenly merchant exchanging a commodity of inestimable price, the immortality namely the salvation and the eternal life, with the vile commodity shaped by the human condition of mortality and sinfulness. The blood of Christ, in this perspective, was depicted as a value, as a price, disbursed by Christ himself to acquire the salvation of the humankind through the cancellation of the debt (the original sin) pledging humankind to be in serfdom of the devil and death. The specific commercial image of the merchant buying and destroying the documentary guarantee of a contract of lending on interest was used very often by Christian authors of the high middle ages to denote the power of Christ to destroy—by acquiring it—the obligation shaped by the original sin, metaphorically represented on its turn as a chirography; the economy of salvation was then commonly illustrated as a form of credit economy whose protagonists are both the Christ playing the role of the rich, omnipotent merchant and the devil interpreting the part of the usurer, actually of the wicked and despicable businessman (Bogaert, 1973; Todeschini, 1994.) The infinite power of Christ, the God become man, was then expressed and divulged through this metaphorical rhetoric as a form of huge economic power apt to buy and cancel the obligation to reimburse a debt impossible to repay.

8. At the same time, however, the enormity of this dramatic disbursing, the hugeness of this payment liberating humankind from an incalculable debt, was represented as a gift obligating humankind to a gratefulness implying an impossible restitution. The Incarnation of God appeared in the Christian discourse as the symbolic description both of an exchange and a gift creating in both cases an irredeemable obligation and an everlasting sense of indebtedness to Christ, or to the sacred powers representing Christ on earth.

9. This image is so deeply ingrained in western economic culture that today western economists can use the notion of “original sin” to express the fact that a country “cannot borrow abroad in their own currencies” and the resulting “important implications for financial stability and macroeconomic policy” (Eichengreen, Hausmann and Panizza, 2002.)

10. It's very important to grasp that the representation of the Christian religious crucial mystery in economic terms became, through the close connection between religion and

politics, immediately functional to the definition of economic exchange, that is to say of commerce recognized by political powers as of public interest, as a kind of social interplay whose heart was shaped by the exchange of gifts, and whose inner meaning was defined by the effort to realize the difficult equivalence between values that were at the same time quantifiable and immaterial, definable in terms of price and at the same time hinting to the priceless substance of relations between groups and families.

11. The European market society had thus its beginning inside of the space defined by the affective and political relationship between families, neighbors and groups trusting each other as belonging to the same religious namely ideological social body. Inside of this real and metaphorical space gifts and commercial exchange were deeply connected and – as Natalie Zemon Davis (Zemon Davis 2000) well showed for sixteenth century France – perfectly complementary.

12. As John Duns Scotus, an English Franciscan active in Oxford at the beginning of fourteenth century, explicitly writes, any form of commercial exchange aiming in itself to produce a profit, holds in itself an exchange of gifts: in fact, Scotus explains, the desire of the businessman to maintain a good relation with his own partner induce him to discount the price of the exchanged good, namely to low the price roughly fixed by market communities.

13. If we look from this perspective at the relation between exchange and gift namely at the problem of the connection between friendship (the Latin *amicitia*) and profit, we can easily discover that modern economy has its roots in a complex system of market games strictly interconnecting the web of profitable exchanges with the less visible but nonetheless fundamental web of gifts affectively identifying the social place of those who have (or have not) the right to participate in the market.

14. This economy of gifts and exchanges has then its core in the social hierarchisation clearly defining the development of modern market strategies, until today's only apparently free market games. It's actually possible to see that the close interplay between economy of gift and economy of exchange at the beginning of the modern era, on the one hand is the prelude to the development of a market characterized by the social disparity of those who are in the market, and on the other side by the inequality of economic information and knowledge derived by that disparity, that is to say by the fact to not belong to relevant families, groups and clientages.

15. Actually, the interconnection between gift and profitable exchange shaping modern economy and the so-called free market, has been the basis (since fourteenth century) of a western and Christian representation of the world well distinguishing the politically significant economy performed by lords, bishops and kings, as well as by big merchants and bankers that is to say by the holy institutions they represented, from the vile and despised economy performed day by day by the so-called common people. In this frame, wide circulated during

many centuries and finally interiorized as the main form of economic rationality produced by the “first world”, the difference between those who are able to connect charity (gift that affects) and profit (exchange that is utility) and those who are not aware of this superior economic strategy is very notable. In fact, the skill to make a profit through an economic performance characterized by the involvement of its performer in a system of obligations in itself dependent on gifting and countergifting, was yet in pre-modern Europe and is today in the world produced by western Christian economic rationality, the clearest sign of an exclusive social belonging (the mark of a complete “citizenship”). In this light what we see today is not, as it could seem in the perspective of some economic anthropology, the outcome of a progressive degradation of a market based before capitalism on the logic of obligation intended as purely non utilitarian relation.

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