

ABCEconomy "G" as in "Gift" - Part 1

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Friday 15 May 2009 09:57

Gift. Don't think that it means a present...

Published in the weekly Vita, May 15, 2009

We proposed this series as a guide to the key words within economic behavior, after breaking down the myths and bursting a few bubbles. Here's an index of the analyzed words: Happiness, Profit, Market, Bank, Investment, Responsibility, Rules, Interests, Organization, Reciprocity, Capital. This week, as mentioned above, presents the first part about the concluding word, "Gift".

There exists a close relationship between community, life in community, and gift. A study of the origins of the word community shows it as a derivative of *communitas*, from *cum-munus*, or from *munus* (reciprocal gift). But the word's very suggestive origins immediately demonstrate its conflicting meanings, hidden in the Latin word *munus*. *Munus* means both gift and obligation, and the ambivalence continues to be traced in the Anglo-Saxon word "gift", which maintains its form in English but with the same spelling in German means "venom". The perfumed and colorful gift of an apple can also show itself to be poisoned. Why? First of all, because there are many types of gifts, and there are multiple forms of giving. There is the anonymous and unilateral gift of philanthropy, either through donations to help those far away and in need or in the case of natural disasters.

There is the personal gift given to loved ones, which can be material but most often is a gift of our time, attention, a listening-ear, our life. Then, there is the conventional gift that often recalls ancient traditions, like gifts to newlyweds or a bottle of wine when one is invited over for dinner. But there is also the gift of a payoff to one's equals or superiors that don't have anything to do with gratuitousness.

Anyway, the key word that best explains the nature of a gift is reciprocity, about which we have already written in our small handbook. More than the gift, human beings love reciprocity. Or better, they love a gift when given within a relational grammar context where one both gives and receives. We want that the gift, so that it be a good gift, be given with a good reason. The gift is a sign of something more profound.

One day, during a (low cost) plane trip, I decided to offer a sandwich to a young person (who didn't have any money). I remember the disturbed look that I received, as if he was asking himself, "What does this man want from me? Why is he offering me 5 euro?" Not accepting candy or gifts from strangers is still valid advice to children and youth – at least if there isn't a good reason to do so, like in emergency situations or other particular circumstances. And even when we are in need, the gift which does not produce reciprocity over time, or gives life to static and asymmetrical reciprocity, often ends up hiding power-based relationships and a desire to dominate the other.

The free-gift, which is the experience we all associate with a beautiful and good life, requires that we take turns playing the role of giver and recipient. It requires that who receives a gift feels capable of reciprocating, finding himself in the condition to be able to respond on a plan of substantial equality, especially when the gift mechanism falls outside of the family, and when it

deals with adults (even if they are convinced that the experience of gift-reciprocity is fundamental and an important foundation even for youth and children).

Gifts break the balance between social relationships, as they create an asymmetry that the human being, and absolutely the modern one, is not capable of handling for a long period of time. The unreciprocated gift is means for unbalance, disorder. Rather, human societies – even archaic ones and even though differently from modern ones – love symmetry: and so the explanation of the market's great power, based on a symmetrical exchange of equivalent values (or perceived as such). Next week, we'll try to understand in what way "gift" is not necessarily a gift, and neither is it "free".

The second part of this article will be published in the next issue.