



Gifts, sustainable consumption and giving up green anxieties at Christmas



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the proposition that gifting is a little recognised yet important practice bound up in the quest for sustainable consumption, which has largely been studied with reference to market rather than gift economies. It draws on gift theories in economic anthropology which explain gifts as engendering social relations of reciprocity and beyond, and shaping social life differently to commodities. Understanding how and why commodities become gifts (and vice versa), we contend, provides a new way of understanding some of the complex ways in which social relations are implicated in sustainable consumption. We use a study of Christmas gifting practices within a group of environmentally engaged households to begin to empirically explore if and how environmental considerations are expressed in the gift economy. We conclude that the fashioning of a particular social identity, namely, the 'green consumer' can operate very differently in the context of gift-exchange than in the context of non-gifting consumption.

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1. Introduction

The role of gift-giving has been little explored in research into sustainable consumption. In the quest to understand the possibilities and limitations of sustainable consumption as a tool for political and environmental change, what insights can be gleaned from analyses of gifts and gift economies? Far from being trivial, practices of gift giving have long constituted some of the most important modes of social exchange in human societies, pre-dating commercial markets and continuing to operate alongside and in interaction with them. As Yan (2005, p. 246) explains, 'the give-and-take of gifts in everyday life creates, maintains and strengthens various social bonds – be they cooperative, competitive or antagonistic.' In this paper we explore the proposition that gifting is a little recognised yet important practice bound up in the quest for sustainable consumption, which has largely been studied with reference to market rather than gift economies (cf. Miller, 1998, 2001). Specifically, we draw on theories of gifting that insist that gifts always engender social relations of reciprocity and beyond – they are always more than 'disguised payments' of economic exchange, and hence must be understood as shaping social life differently to commodities (Osteen, 2010; Callari, 2002). As gifts are given and received, identities are both cemented and augmented,

and social and kinship relations are affirmed and extended. The things we call 'gifts' are a product of meaning accumulated over time, and the meanings attached to gifts are subject to change as they circulate (or not) among different people or groups (Osteen, 2002). Understanding how and why commodities become gifts (and vice versa), we contend, provides a fresh means of understanding some of the complex ways in which social relations are bound up in the quest for sustainable consumption. We use a study of Christmas gifting practices within a group of environmentally engaged households to begin to empirically explore if and how environmental considerations are expressed in the gift economy.

We proceed as follows. First, we explore theories of gifts, examining in particular how apprehending gift economies may be able to expand our understanding of sustainable consumption as a complex, incomplete project bound up in social relations. Then, we turn to gift-giving at Christmas, and consider the environmental anxieties associated with this practice. We draw on a study of environmentally engaged households that we conducted in Wollongong, Australia to examine empirically how environmental concerns and gifting practices are negotiated at Christmas. We conclude that the fashioning of a particular social identity, namely, the 'green consumer' can operate very differently in the context of gift-exchange than in the context of non-gifting consumption.

2. Gifts and sustainable consumption

The utility function of *Homo economicus* has been understood overwhelmingly in terms of consumption in an ordinary sense.

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Allowing the purchase of a gift for another to count as consumption has been a concession from which nothing has followed. If one emphasized the pleasure *Homo economicus* takes in the pleasure of gift recipients, the inconsistency of not allowing him or her to take pleasure in any other enjoyment by others would be too striking to be tolerable. The concession to this enjoyment of generosity is made so that purchase of gifts for others need not be subtracted from utility function. It is not taken as a significant feature of *Homo economicus* (Daly and Cobb Jr., 1994, p. 88).

Daly and Cobb Jr. describe, but do not pursue, the failure of neo-classical economics to adequately account for the ways in which gifting practices differ from and yet interact with consumption as ordinarily understood. This description, it seems to us, is highly suggestive of the need for an expanded account of social exchange in understanding sustainable consumption. If sustainable consumption is the act of consuming differently for the purposes of reduced social and environmental impact, it is an unfinished, and widely critiqued, project (Evans, 2011; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Seyfang, 2005). Yet while the current environmental benefits of sustainable consumption may be uncertain, its possibilities as a political project are not exhausted (Seyfang, 2006). It is increasingly clear that consumption is closely linked to the construction and maintenance of green identities as well as being shaped by the structural contexts in which everyday life unfolds (Sorón, 2010; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Horton, 2003). While sustainable consumption research has begun to pay attention to the effects on identity of the commodities and commercial markets that seem to dominate late modernity, there has been little focus on the readily observable co-existence of consumption as generally understood (non-gifting consumption for self or household), and generous ritualized gifting (for example, in birthday and Christmas celebrations). As the goal of sustainability becomes increasingly important for some consumers, the ways in which professed environmental concerns might be changing gift practices have received little scholarly attention (although see Kasser and Sheldon, 2002). The issue of whether those who identify as 'green consumers' are also concerned with being 'green givers' has not, to our knowledge, been explored.

This is not a trivial issue, we contend, as it opens up sustainable consumption research to the fruitful perspectives of the feminist economic geography project to recognise wider sets of practices that constitute economic activity (Gibson-Graham et al., in press; Gibson-Graham, 2006). To assist in this task, we turn to economic anthropology, which views the capitalist market as a dominant but not a singular economic system, and the world as possessing multiple, intertwined systems of social exchange. Gift economies operate simultaneously with, not separately from, the market economy and in complex interaction with it. Gift exchanges are different to barter or market exchanges in that there is no explicit agreement for reward for valuables exchanged. Rather, rewards are shaped by social expectations and customs, particularly an expectation of reciprocation, and are generally not immediate (Mauss, 2002). Marcel Mauss published his seminal theory of gifting in 1925, at a time when industrialisation had taken place and mass-consumption was rapidly being established as the basis of a booming Western, if not yet global, economy. Mauss drew on studies of social exchange in non-western societies to argue that gifting practices involve obligations to give, receive and reciprocate. Crucially, the issue of reciprocation underscores that the interests of others, as well as self-interest, are furthered in gift exchange. The wish of the parties to express and foster a social tie generally takes precedence over any market value of items exchanged. Gift exchanges express the personal bonds between givers and recipients, while in market exchanges personal bonds are secondary to market value. Reciprocity involves a commitment to exchanging gifts over time, an ongoing affirmation of a social relationship through the

periodic offering and receiving of goods. A 'lean Christmas' or the 'year my mum forgot my birthday' are not rendered cheerless because of the lack of an exchange in goods *per se*, but because the ability to give, or the worthiness to receive, seems to be denied, and valued social relations are thus in doubt. Gifting is associated with affirming and extending social relations, and so gifts need to be understood as shaping social life differently to commodities (Osteen, 2010; Callari, 2002). Indeed, as gifts are given and received, identities are both cemented and augmented, and social and kinship relations are affirmed and extended (Mauss, 2002; Osteen, 2002). Mauss argued that there may also be element of coercion in gift practice, and hence receivers may also perceive obligations to reciprocate as a social burden. Indeed, when objects are given they never become completely detached from the giver (Mauss, 2002). If gifts are exchanged, then, consumption is never a simple matter of commodities bought and sold at market value. Mauss was clear that the more-than-market value of gifts was important in understanding social life: 'fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorised in terms of buying and selling. Things still have sentimental as well as venal value' (Mauss, 2002, p. 83).

To understand interactions between capitalism and gift economies, it is helpful to briefly situate historically the shift from handmade gifts to those sourced from mass-produced commodity markets. Following the industrial revolution, when mass-produced items could become purchased as gifts for the first time, there was a new context for social relationships in urban settings. Gifts became likely to possess both market and social value as urban workers had less time, and eventually less skill, than their earlier rural counterparts possessed in early winter to make things for gifting purposes, particularly Christmas gifts. In the case of handmade gifts, time spent in crafting was indicative of the value of the giver's bond with the receiver (Waits, 1993). Importantly, the expression of social relationships in commercially-bought gifts was not uncontested, even while it was taken up in enthusiastic numbers. Time and skill spent making personalised, unique gifts was replaced by shopping for mass-produced items as well as by various practices, such as gift-wrapping, that were directed at removing a perceived market 'taint' attached to the goods, practices which continue today (Carrier, 1993; Waits, 1993; Cheal, 1987). Paradoxically perhaps, givers are assisted in removing perceived market taint by manufacturers and shop-owners. Strategies such as advertising, and special labelling and packaging, are used to help customers accept the notion that mass-produced commodities may be successfully transformed into personalised gifts and embody a valued relation between giver and receiver.

Gift-giving practices in contemporary industrial societies can thus be understood as attempts to nurture meaningful social relationships within the dominant market of transient, mass-produced consumer goods. Whether such attempts are doomed to failure is a question for empirical as well as theoretical research. It may be difficult to construct a meaningful self-identity through individualistic consumption practices, because consumer goods are characterised by transience and the market by impersonal relations (Sorón, 2010). But gifts define consumption relating to gifting as, necessarily, a social rather than individual consumption practice. With this view, goods are never pure gifts nor pure commodities, but shift with time along a continuum between the two (Mauss, 2002). Anxieties commonly associated with market consumption, such as extreme individualism or financial burden, may be tempered by a stronger need to acknowledge and nurture the social relation embodied in a gift. On the other hand, anxieties about environmental impact are generally thought to act as prompts towards sustainable consumption practices, but if consumption is linked to gift-giving, we need to understand the ways in which social relations are implicated in nurturing or tempering the expression of professed environmental concerns. A Maussian

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