

Women and the Gift Economy: A Radically Different Worldview is Possible. Genevieve Vaughan, editor. Toronto, Canada: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2007; 388 pages; ISBN 978-0-9736709-7-4; \$39.95 (paper).

Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions. Deborah Cohen. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006; illustrations, photographs, alk.paper; xvii + 296 pages; ISBN 0-300-11213-0; \$40.00US (cloth).

The relationship of women to things is a key element of gender. These two books examine this relationship, but do so within profoundly different intellectual traditions. *Women and The Gift Economy*, edited by independent scholar/activist Genevieve Vaughan, consists of a set of essays and articles drawn from a 2004 conference on "A Radically Different Worldview is Possible: Women and the Gift Economy." The conference, held in Las Vegas, was one of the last events organized by the Foundation for a Compassionate Society, an independent foundation that had been located in Austin, Texas. Both the conference and many of the articles and essays in the book represent the work of feminist activists and scholars from within and outside academia, and is published by an independent Canadian feminist press. *Household Gods* is a lavishly illustrated publication from a major U.S. university press. Its author, Deborah Cohen, is a professor at another major U.S. University. The quantity of illustrations and the quality of the paper make this close to a coffee table art book, but the quality and nature of the text mark it as a serious academic work.

As different as they are in content and style, these two books have some similarities in their aims. Both examine the ways in which human uses of material objects reflect, embody, create, and replicate gender roles and norms. Both look at the material objects of everyday life and the ways in which these are gendered. Both analyze ways in which material objects, their acquisition, ownership and management, mediate relations between the sexes and help to define gender.

Women and the Gift Economy focuses on ways in which women relate to the material aspects of life. The book is organized around Vaughan's concept of the "gift economy" as an alternative to "Patriarchal Capitalism." This concept is neo-Marxist in its emphasis on the importance of material goods to human social relations, but moves away from neo-Marxist concepts in its emphasis on relations in exchange rather than on relations in production. Vaughan and many of the contributors to this volume share the idea that (some) early human societies were essentially matriarchal and based on gift exchange rather than the market, and that these societies were overrun and subordinated by male-dominated, warrior-oriented societies based on the exploitation and commodification of the material needs of life. Vaughan argues that orientations to gift or to market are part of human psychodynamic development, so that the "gift economy" is a matter of

fundamentally different female and male personality types as well as of processes of production, exchange, and consumption of material goods.

Gender is not the central focus of *Household Gods*, yet gender is central to Cohen's analysis of the place material goods held in prosperous British households in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cohen focuses on the material goods that appear in the semi-public spaces of these households: the parlors, studies, and dining rooms that might be used by guests as well as by family. She argues that furniture, decorative objects, colours, and other aspects of household display had significant moral meanings rooted in changing concepts and practices of religion. She argues that the decoration of the bourgeois home was a site of significant gender struggles, with men in control at the beginning of the period she studied, and women taking control by the end. Cohen portrays the increasing association of women with decoration as a process of feminization, not just of households, but of women themselves. Yet she also sees this as a process through which women gained some power, not only within households, but sometimes in the larger world.

In many ways, *Household Gods* is more effective than *Women and the Gift Economy* in analyzing femininity as a dynamic social force that is inflected by the relations we have to the material elements of our everyday lives. Cohen focuses on goods that are luxurious or symbolic more than on necessities, and she makes no attempt to analyze the larger socioeconomic changes that gave rise to a middle class that could afford to surround itself with such goods. Her focus is on the symbolic meanings of material possessions and on the gendered nature of the processes that gave rise to those meanings. Cohen shows how the material things that are part of our everyday lives come to be gendered, and how the social relations and places accorded to the two sexes are inflected by their relationships to things.

Women and the Gift Economy is a problematic book. Like most multi-authored texts, its contents vary in form and quality. Contributions range from poems to academic articles. The contributors range from community activists with little formal education to senior academics. This is not in and of itself a weakness; activists and independent scholars have insights that are often beyond the reach of academic researchers and writers. One of the points of this book is to demonstrate that knowledge, like material goods, is a gift that we need to exchange freely for the benefit of the many, rather than a commodity to control and exploit to the benefit of a few. But some of the contributions are poorly written, some are in inaccessible jargon, and some are poorly researched. The ideological framework of the volume is debatable, and many of the contributions contain arguments based on unexamined assertions about historical processes (in particular, the existence of early matriarchal gift economies).

Perhaps the most serious difference between these two books is in how they view gender. To Cohen, gender involves socially constructed meanings of the sexes. To Vaughan and many of the authors in her book, gender is an essential difference between the sexes. While Cohen explicitly argues that gender is a contested and shifting sociocultural terrain, Vaughan argues that the tendency of the two sexes to either gift or to market lies in their

bodies; females naturally create a “gift economy” through their maternity. Cohen’s “straight” academic work thus ends up with a more radical vision of gender than Vaughan’s analysis, which promises a radical critique but falls back on essentialist ideas about the two sexes.

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