THE GIFT ECONOMY AND INDIGENOUS-MATRIARCHAL LEGACY: AN ALTERNATIVE FEMINIST PARADIGM FOR RESOLVING THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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Abstract: All proposals for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accept as a given the Western paradigm based on the State, individualism, nationalism and capitalism. Patriarchy has been the breeding ground of these ideologies with nature, women and the global South - their three colonies to exploit. None of these proposals address the fundamental issue of how the power relations between Israelis and Palestinians or between races, ethnicities and genders will be truly altered. Thus, they preserve, to a large extent, the existing order. Instead, I was inspired by the Gift Economy, by Matriarchal legacy and by Indigenous concepts, especially Satyagraha, Ubuntu and subsistence. Some of these concepts resonate the Jewish legacy of communal life, Tzadaka (giving) and women's wisdom. These ways of thinking suggest a new maternal-feminist and indigenous paradigm to critique existing structures and to formulate the outline of an alternative order, based on giving, needs and need orientation, linking and connecting, communalism, inclusion of all, reconciliation and balance, and earth spirituality. Based on them, I propose an alternative political order between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River founded on inclusion, local and self-sufficient communities, shared spaces, balance and consensual democracy. In fact, we Israelis and Palestinians, standing before a new dawn, have been given the opportunity to experiment and create a different world.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Gift Economy; Matriarchal legacy; Indigenous concepts.

Peace is not an ideal aspiration for the future; peace is not the concluding act of war; peace is not law and order, security and rights; peace is not control over land and sky, a demilitarized zone or walls. Peace is the way we handle ourselves in everyday life; peace is how we treat our fellow humans; peace is our actual, daily lifestyle, which we can choose to apply at all times – if we leave the alienation and loneliness we live in and choose a life of partnership, relationship, closeness, care and responsibility, if (as Martin Luther King said) we take the entire world to be a home, a family capable of containing women and men around us, including the acceptance of strangers and enemies as family. Peace is what we already do today, while involved in cycles of free giving, with no exchange or power relations – mothers tending to their newborns’ needs, friends sharing moments of happiness and sadness, websites such as Wikipedia, advice or words of wisdom offered to a friend, the tray of donuts brought...
over by a neighbor. All we need to do is to translate our everyday actions into a society of peace.

Our duty is to draw its image, or at least the outline, of a society of peace, that accords a new meaning to the existing destructive situation while it creates a social structure that resists and contradicts the ruling hegemony: the democratic system, that does not stand up to its promises of liberty, equality and solidarity; the totalitarianism of capitalism that dominates every new social idea and social movement; the over exploitation of nature that gives us free air to breathe, free water to drink and free land to work; leadership, that put the blame on women, minorities and foreigners; economy and government that dominate us through fear and intimidation and false promises of wealth and happiness; and finally, the state that abandons us to support the evolving corporate regime and a society with no solidarity and social responsibility.

We need hope and we can give hope to one another: hope is subversive and vision is our compass.

Today more than ever we are aware of the too many failures of the existing system in which the rich control the world through a sort of democracy administered by a sympathetic state that makes sure not only that the rich will make a profit but also that the corporations will dominate most of its resources and institutions.

Faced with the corporate regime and the withdrawal of the state, individuals feel isolated and insecure – existentially and physically – though it seems as if they enjoy prosperity and liberty that are no more than illusion. Within today’s structure of social power, a new historical structure, unique to our era, the individual in his or her war for survival, is more or less directly subject to the rule of banks and corporations, to global markets, while the enforcement of the monetary system is becoming totalitarian. Consequently, we not only lose our confidence in capitalism, the political system, academia and the rest of the institutions that the West has built, but we also feel that we need radical change, new paradigms, new ways to imagine another world. Therefore, the search for an alternative economy and a different society is so immediate all over the world among thinkers, scholars and activists.

Hope is subversive and vision is our compass.
My vision begins with the maternal gift economy, so vividly and innovatively developed and presented by Genevieve Vaughan. Instead of the accumulation of wealth and property, instead of an exchange system, the gift economy paradigm exposes gift giving that exists at all stages of our life and is expanding these days to new areas. The roots of this free giving is in mothering, a model of free distribution of goods and services in response to needs. This economy constructs linking rather than ranking among people, although it is denied and exploited by capitalism. Giving is evident of course in Nature and among babies that show empathy from a very young age – what leads to the understanding that the Homo Sapien is also Homo Donnas, perhaps, Fema Donnas, that is, the gift giving being.

My vision continues with the society that practises gift giving on a daily basis – the matriarchal legacy. Matriarchy is not the opposite of patriarchy. It is a society not of power relations and domination but rather of peace, balance, cooperation and equality, of responsiveness to the needs of others and living within communities that treat people and nature with respect. For all these features, matriarchy provides full and genuine security and liberty, including sexual freedom. Matriarchy exists today (like the Mosu in China, the Minangkabau in Indonesia and the Khasi in India), and it has existed in the pre-patriarchal era and its remains may be found in all of today’s societies. In matriarchies mothers are central to the culture but without dominating other members of the community. In fact, the mother is the only power-holder that gives up her/his power.

Indigenous knowledge, beyond matriarchal legacy, enriches my imagination: without our notice – indigenous culture and practices infiltrate our lives as a real alternative: Restorative Justice gains access to our legal and police systems, Truth Commissions began even in my country, spirituality has spread in the West over a few decades, alternative healing originating in Native knowledge is spreading too.

In the background stand the struggles of First Nations – including those in North and South America and the Bedouins in Israel – demanding land and human rights and striving for Mother Earth.

Communal life is central for First Nations and is reflected in concepts like Ubuntu in South Africa and Kapwa among the Philippines, meaning: "I am because I belong" or, as Desmond Tutu said: "a human being is a human being through other human beings." When I am part of relationships, I am never alone. I am connected to everything, to the world, to Nature. Thus, the community is important to me not less than myself. The community is
especially crucial for mothering – as the African proverb goes: "You need a whole village to raise one child." And I, like so many others, learned this lesson from my experience. And, of course, giving is the connecting glue among members of a community and between them and other communities and Nature in general.

I will only mention, briefly, that some of these values and practices, such as needs, giving, communalism, security – echo elements of the Jewish legacy, though my relations with it are rather perplexed.

These sources of inspiration and ideas, together, lead to a new way of thinking, to a new paradigm. They enable me to re-connect to women's legacy that has been silenced and ignored for centuries, to engage with re-matriation – as the Native American poet, Susan Deer Cloud calls it – meaning the re-appropriation of the remains, spirituality, culture, knowledge and resources of the maternal legacy. It finally leads me outside the patriarchal order and into the symbolic order of the mother, as the Italian philosopher, Luisa Moraro, calls it. They, in particular, allow me to imagine a different human behavior and another social order.

I believe the signs are already here: Slowly but surely a different kind of community and multi-cultural society are emerging, not necessarily competitive and hateful, which develop a unique, local identity, different culturally and institutionally from other communities. The new trends converge within identity communities (such as ultra-religious, secular, Russian and so on in Israel) or geographical area, to build urban kibbutzim, co-housing for elderly people, cooperative employment, responsible businesses, Wikipedia, time banks, eco-villages, urban gardening. They construct from below the foundation for a new social order.

All these activities may be conceived as expressing a growing movement towards an alternative global order. This movement can be framed as a mothering movement, even when it is often implemented by men. Unfortunately it has not been clear that unilateral gift giving, which is necessary for mothering even in a society based on market values, is the foundational logic of all these attempts.

If we take it a little further, I can imagine an alternative political order between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, that is placed at the center of local communities, rather than statehood, gift economy and sharing rather than exchange and accumulation, subsistence perspective and life production rather than goods production, inclusion rather than exclusion. Unlike other peace proposals on the table today, mine explicitly deals with the
problematic of the . pillars of the West – capitalism, nation statehood and liberalism as well as Patriarchy – and it suggests how the power relations between Israelis and Palestinians may be truly altered. In this respect the principle of balance between communities is absolutely important.

The balance among the various communities would be established through real and virtual common spaces to discuss all issues, non-violent conflict resolution, community, regional and State decision-making by consensus, sharing resources such as water and ports, and, finally, and not less important, balance could be achieved through including other communities in celebrations and rituals as well as gift giving.

I suggest here a new perspective that perhaps may not be precisely adopted, yet it allows us to embark on a path to a new conceptual world and a new path to peace in the Middle East and perhaps elsewhere too.

It is not an unattainable utopia but a vision that can guide our thinking, politics and practice already today. All that are needed are an open heart, attention, drive. Not much. We cannot go on looking for peace within the existing systems. In fact, we Israelis and Palestinians, standing before a new dawn, have been given the opportunity to experiment and create a different world.

As I said, hope is subversive and vision is our compass.