

THE CHANNEL KEEPS IT · CHAPTER SEVEN

Communities That Kept the Gift

Chapter Seven of The Channel Keeps It

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Every Thursday at noon, outside the Apostles' Door of Valencia Cathedral, eight farmers in black smocks sit down on a semicircle of chairs behind a low railing. Tourists gather. A bailiff calls out, in Valencian, the names of the irrigation channels whose users have a complaint to bring. If there is a dispute, it is heard on the spot, aloud, without lawyers or written pleadings, and decided the same morning. The decision cannot be appealed. If there is no dispute, the eight stand up and go home. This is the Water Tribunal of the plain of Valencia. Its eight members are farmers, each elected by the users of one of the irrigation channels that carry water from the river Turia across the market gardens around the city. In 2009 UNESCO inscribed it, together with the Council of Wise Men of the plain of Murcia, on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, describing a tribunal of eight elected administrators representing 11,691 members from nine communities, settling disputes orally, quickly, openly and impartially.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Communities That Kept the Gift

Thursday, at noon, at the cathedral door

Every Thursday at noon, outside the Apostles' Door of Valencia Cathedral, eight farmers in black smocks sit down on a semicircle of chairs behind a low railing. Tourists gather. A bailiff calls out, in Valencian, the names of the irrigation channels whose users have a complaint to bring. If there is a dispute, it is heard on the spot, aloud, without lawyers or written pleadings, and decided the same morning. The decision cannot be appealed. If there is no dispute, the eight stand up and go home.

This is the Water Tribunal of the plain of Valencia. Its eight members are farmers, each elected by the users of one of the irrigation channels that carry water from the river Turia across the market gardens around the city. In 2009 UNESCO inscribed it, together with the Council of Wise Men of the plain of Murcia, on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, describing a tribunal of eight elected administrators representing 11,691 members from nine communities, settling disputes orally, quickly, openly and impartially.[29] UNESCO traces both tribunals to the period of al-Andalus, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Popular accounts push the date further back, to Rome; the honest position is that nobody knows exactly when it began, only that it has been sitting for a very long time.

This chapter is the second of the book's deeper cases. Chapter 6 looked at a firm. This one looks at two communities that have kept a gift economy running, one for centuries and one for decades, with no market price at its centre and no state running it. They are not models to be copied. They are evidence of what a reciprocal system needs in order to last, and of where even a well-designed one runs into trouble.

What the irrigators share

The water in a Valencian channel is a gift economy of the most literal kind. Nobody buys it. Each farmer along a channel takes water in turn, for a set time, and then closes the gate so that it moves on. A farmer's field is watered because somebody upstream closed their gate on time; the field below will be watered because she closes hers.

Elinor Ostrom, who studied the huertas of Valencia, Murcia and Alicante alongside irrigation societies in the Philippines, mountain pastures in Switzerland and Japan and fisheries in Turkey and Sri Lanka, put

them among the long-enduring institutions in her 1990 book *Governing the Commons*.[30] Her question was why some communities manage a shared resource for centuries without destroying it, when standard theory predicted that each user would take as much as possible and the resource would collapse. The sibling volume on her work (*The Pasture Was Never Empty*) sets out her answer in full: eight design principles, from clear boundaries to graduated sanctions to cheap, local ways of resolving conflict. Here it is enough to notice how closely the Valencian arrangement matches the three obligations of Chapter 2.

To give. Each farmer gives up water by closing the gate. The giving is not optional, but neither is it enforced by a price. It is enforced by the shared understanding of how the channel works, and by the knowledge that everyone else is giving up water too.

To receive. Each farmer receives water from those upstream. Receiving is visible: the water arrives, or it does not. A farmer who does not receive her turn knows at once, and knows roughly where along the channel the water went.

To return. The return is the next turn, and the one after it, indefinitely. No farmer is ever square with the channel. Each is, at any moment, both owed and owing, which is exactly Mauss's description of a gift relationship that is still alive.

What makes the system durable is that the obligations are visible to the people who bear them. A rotation means that each farmer, waiting for her turn, has every reason to watch the farmer before her. Monitoring is not a separate job imposed from outside. It is a by-product of the way the water moves, done by the people with the most at stake. That is Chapter 4's feedback loop, built into the plumbing.

The tribunal as an immune system

Chapter 4 argued that a reciprocal system needs both a root system and an immune system: trust that lets people give, and a way of answering those who take without giving. The laboratory found that groups with no way to sanction free riders decay, and that groups with a crude way, a fine imposed anonymously, sometimes turn the fine on the cooperators.

The Water Tribunal is an immune system of a particular kind, and its features are worth reading closely.

It is local. Its members are farmers from the channels, elected by the users. They know the land, the channels and very often the parties. Nobody is judged by a stranger applying rules written somewhere else.

It is public. It sits in the open, at the door of the city's cathedral, and anyone can watch. A dispute is not hidden in an office, and a judgment is not issued in writing to be read later. Everyone who cares can see what was decided and why.

It is fast and cheap. Proceedings are oral and the case is decided the same morning. Nobody needs to hire anyone. Ostrom counted cheap, quick conflict resolution as one of her design principles, and the reason is

plain here: a dispute that costs a farmer a season of fees and paperwork is a dispute that will be settled privately, by resentment, which is how gift economies quietly die.

It is proportionate. The tribunal's purpose is to keep the water moving, not to punish. In Ostrom's language the sanctions are graduated, set at the lowest level that works, rising only for repeated offences. That is the opposite of the anonymous fine in the laboratory, which falls on whoever happens to be in the room.

And it is owned by the people it governs. The farmers elect the tribunal. The rules it applies are theirs. A sanction from one's own neighbours, under rules one helped to keep, is received very differently from a sanction imposed by a distant authority. It confirms membership rather than threatening it.

Put together, these features answer the problem Chapter 4 left open: which sanctions heal and which become autoimmune. The Valencian answer is that sanctions heal when they are local, visible, fast, proportionate and owned. Every one of those features can be designed into a modern organisation, and Chapter 8 shows how.

Japan: a ticket for a caring relationship

The second community is younger, more fragile, and more instructive for that reason.

In the mid-1990s, as Japan's population aged and families were increasingly scattered across the country, a non-profit called the Sawayaka Welfare Foundation launched a system in 1995 that came to be called *fureai kippu*, usually translated as "caring relationship tickets".[31] The idea was simple. A volunteer who spent an hour helping an older person, with shopping, housework, companionship or personal care, earned a credit for that hour. The credit could be saved, to be drawn on when the volunteer needed care herself, or transferred to someone else, typically a parent living in another part of the country, who could then receive care from a volunteer there. The idea had an older antecedent in Osaka, where a Volunteer Labour Bank had been set up in 1973.

Ecstatic Economics mentions the system in its discussion of time banking, describing it as a scheme "where people earn credits by caring for elderly neighbors", and draws from time banking in general a somatic point: the "experience of receiving care from a stranger who will be cared for in turn by another stranger." That phrase is an exact description of what *fureai kippu* tried to build: a gift economy that did not depend on knowing the person you gave to, because the circulation was held by the system as a whole.

Read through the three obligations, the design is ingenious. It solves the problem of giving to people one will never meet by keeping a record, and it solves the problem of return across distance by making the credit transferable. A woman in Osaka caring for a stranger's mother is, in effect, giving to her own mother in Hokkaido, through a chain of strangers.

Where the ticket ran into trouble

Here the evidence requires care, because the popular literature on *fureai kippu* is far more confident than the research.

The most careful study available in English, by Mayumi Hayashi, traces the system's origins, its early growth, its slowdown after 2000 and the responses to it, and weighs its contributions against its operational difficulties. Her conclusion is that the system is so complex that it is hard to evaluate, and that "no universal panacea can be expected from it."[31] Other accounts note that the system's growth stalled after Japan introduced public long-term care insurance in 2000, which gave many older people access to paid care through a different route, and that the details and outcomes of the schemes remain poorly documented.

The house's own book is more confident than this. It says that "The research on time banking consistently shows improvements in social cohesion, reciprocity, and the inclusion of people — elderly, disabled, unemployed — who are marginalized by conventional monetary systems." For *fureai kippu* specifically, the research in English does not bear that much weight, and a reader should not repeat the claim in that form. What the record supports is narrower: the system was built, it grew, it attracted members, it did something real for some of them, and it met difficulties that its designers did not fully foresee.

Three of those difficulties are worth naming, because each is a lesson about gift economies in general.

The record became a ledger. The genius of the ticket was that it kept a record, so that a gift to a stranger could be returned across distance and time. The risk of the ticket was the same record. A credit that can be saved and counted begins to look like a price, and Chapter 3 showed what happens when a gift is priced. A system that set out to hold a gift economy together had to keep it from turning into a market for hours.

A public price arrived alongside it. When public care insurance offered paid care as an entitlement, many families had a simpler option. The gift economy did not vanish, but it had to compete with a priced service for the same need. This is Polanyi's argument, which the sibling volume on embedded markets sets out (*The Embedded Market*), at the scale of one sector: when an exchange that ran on reciprocity is offered through a market or a state instead, the reciprocal version has to find a reason to exist beyond the service itself.

The relationship was thin. The design's great strength, that one could give to strangers, was also its limit. The irrigators of Valencia know each other and will go on knowing each other for decades. A volunteer and the person she helps may meet a handful of times. Chapter 3's field experiments showed what happens to reciprocity when the relationship is thin: a strong first response that fades. The transferable credit was an attempt to substitute a record for a relationship. It worked partly, and the part that did not work is the most instructive part.

What the two communities teach together

Set side by side, the Valencian irrigators and the Japanese care tickets make a single argument with two halves.

The first half is from Valencia. A gift economy lasts when the obligations are visible to the people who bear them, and when the community has an immune system it owns. The channel makes giving and receiving visible without anyone needing to keep accounts. The tribunal makes the community's response to taking without giving local, public, quick, proportionate and owned. Neither feature depends on a price.

The second half is from Japan. When the relationship is thin, a record can carry the gift some of the way, but the record is a risk as well as a help. Counting can hold a circulation together across distance. Counting can also turn a gift into a price. The design question is how much to record, and how to keep the record serving the relationship rather than replacing it.

For a modern organisation, both halves apply at once. A firm of any size has close relationships, where the Valencian lesson holds, and thin ones, across sites, functions and time zones, where something like the ticket is tempting. The temptation is to solve the thin relationships with a record: a recognition platform, a points system, a log of help given and received. Chapter 9 sets out how to keep any such record from becoming the ledger that ends the gift.

The living-systems reading

Ecstatic Economics describes the commons as "an economic domain organized around stewardship rather than extraction, participation rather than consumption, and relationship rather than transaction." The Valencian channel is that sentence made of stone and water. It also shows something the sentence does not say, which is that stewardship needs an organ for it. The tribunal is that organ. It is not a court imposed on the commons from outside. It grew from the commons, as an immune system grows from the body it defends.

The Japanese tickets show the same living system under strain. A circulation that crossed a whole country could not be held by neighbours watching each other's gates. It needed a record, and the record, like a prosthesis, did some of the work of the missing tissue and none of the healing. That is not a failure of the people who built it. It is an honest result of trying to grow a gift economy where the relationships were not yet thick enough to carry it.

Back at the cathedral door

On most Thursdays, the eight farmers at the Apostles' Door hear no case at all. The bailiff calls the channels, nobody comes forward, and the tribunal rises after a few minutes.

That is the tribunal working. Its success is measured in the cases it does not hear: the disputes settled at the gate because both farmers knew that, if they were not, they would be settled by neighbours, in public, on Thursday. A good immune system is mostly invisible. Its presence is enough.

The Tool: The Community Immune-System Check

A review for a team, a department or a household, of how the group answers people who take without giving. It takes forty-five minutes and is best done with three or four people who see the group from different places.

1 · Name the last three times (10 minutes).Write down the last three occasions on which someone in the group took without giving, or failed to return what was owed: a deadline missed that others covered, a share of work avoided, a promise not kept. Describe each in one line, without names.

2 · Describe the response (10 minutes).For each, write what happened next. Who noticed? Who said something, and to whom? Was there any consequence? How long did it take?

3 · Score the response against Valencia (10 minutes).For each response, answer five questions with yes or no:- Local: was it handled by people who knew the work and the people involved?- Public: could the people affected see what was decided and why?- Fast: was it settled within a week?- Proportionate: was the response the smallest that would work, rising only if repeated?- Owned: do the people in the group regard the rule that was applied as theirs?

4 · Look for autoimmunity (5 minutes).Ask whether any response in the last year fell on a person who was giving rather than taking: a generous colleague criticised for doing too much, a newcomer punished for not yet knowing the norm. Write down any example. This is Herrmann's antisocial punishment, from Chapter 4, in your own group.

5 · Choose one repair (10 minutes).Pick the weakest of the five features across your three cases. Decide one change that would strengthen it: a standing slot in a weekly meeting where any member can raise a broken obligation (fast, public); a short rule the group writes itself (owned); a first response that is a conversation, not a sanction (proportionate). Write it down with a start date.

Review in a quarter. The measure is not the number of sanctions. It is the number of disputes settled at the gate, before they needed a Thursday.

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