

THE CHANNEL KEEPS IT · CHAPTER TWELVE

A Current, Not a Store

Chapter Twelve of The Channel Keeps It

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Chapter Twelve of The Channel Keeps It. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-channel-keeps-it (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989022).

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

Go back to the plain of Valencia, but not to the cathedral door. Go out to the fields, on a weekday morning, to a stone channel running along the edge of a market garden. Water enters at the top of the slope and passes each field in turn. A farmer opens her gate for her hours, closes it, and the water moves on to the next field down. Nobody owns the water. Everybody depends on it moving. A farmer who held her gate open past her turn would flood her own field and parch her neighbour's, and in every system of this kind that has lasted, the community has a way of noticing and a way of answering. Elinor Ostrom spent her career studying channels like these. In a 2000 review in the Journal of Economic Perspectives , she drew the link this book has been building toward: that the norms of reciprocity found in the laboratory are the same norms that let real communities govern what they share. Her conditional cooperators are Fehr's conditional cooperators, standing in a field.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Current, Not a Store

Water in a channel

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Elinor Ostrom spent her career studying channels like these. In a 2000 review in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, she drew the link this book has been building toward: that the norms of reciprocity found in the laboratory are the same norms that let real communities govern what they share.[35] Her conditional cooperators are Fehr's conditional cooperators, standing in a field.

This last chapter reads the whole book as a living system, sets the gift beside the rest of the house's economics, says what to do with it on Monday, and ends where it should, with the water.

Its claim is the one the channel makes: the gift is not a sector of the economy, beside the market and the state. It is the current that runs underneath both, and every arrangement that lasts, from a commons to a firm to a family, is a way of keeping it moving.

The book, read as one organism

Each chapter of this book has described one organ of a single body.

Chapter 2 described its anatomy: three obligations, to give, to receive and to return, and the delay between them that keeps a relationship open. Chapter 3 described its pathologies: the price that replaces the gift, the gift without a relationship that fades, the incentive that conveys distrust, the gift that dominates. Chapter 4 described its physiology: a root system of trust, an immune system of healthy conflict, a circulation that balances over seasons and not rounds. Chapters 5 to 7 were case histories: a gift wage with conditions that turned it into control, a wage held as a reference point for decades, a community whose immune system has sat in public for centuries, and a care system that tried to substitute a record for a relationship.

Chapters 8 to 11 were practice: how to see the organism without injuring it, how to listen to it, how to feed it, how to measure its health, how to speak about it to people who doubt it is there, and how to tend it at home.

Ecstatic Economics states the common thread across the traditions it surveys in one long sentence, and it serves here as the whole book in brief:

> *An economy that serves life must be grounded in the qualities of life itself — in flow rather than accumulation, in relationship rather than isolation, in sufficiency rather than craving, in reciprocity rather than extraction, and in the understanding that genuine wealth is inseparable from the vitality of human experience and the health of the living systems that sustain it.*

The channel is that sentence in stone. Flow rather than accumulation is the water moving on. Reciprocity rather than extraction is the gate closed when the hours are up.

Beneath the commons

Ostrom's design principles for long-enduring commons, the subject of the sibling volume on governing the commons (*The Pasture Was Never Empty*), read differently after this book. Clear boundaries tell members whose gifts they are in a line with. Rules that fit local conditions let the obligations be the right size. Collective choice lets the people who give shape what is asked. Monitoring by members makes the circulation visible. Graduated sanctions are Chapter 4's immune system, set at the lowest dose that works. Cheap, local conflict resolution keeps a refused gift from becoming a feud, which is what the Water Tribunal does on Thursdays.

Read that way, the principles are not an alternative to the gift. They are its engineering. The communities Ostrom studied did not choose between generosity and rules. They built rules that let generosity persist among people who could not all trust each other at once.

Beneath the market

Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944), the subject of the sibling volume on embedded markets (*The Embedded Market*), argued that before the nineteenth century, economies were organised by three principles in different mixtures: reciprocity, redistribution and exchange. The market, in his account, was always present and always embedded in social relationship, until industrial Britain tried to make land, labour and money into commodities like any other. The attempt, he argued, produced a society that defended itself against the market as fiercely as the market spread.

This book supplies some of the microscopic evidence for Polanyi's macroscopic claim. The day-care fine, the crowding out of blood donors, the money that bought less reciprocity than a gift chosen with care, the

care tickets that had to compete with a priced service: each is a small instance of what happens when a relationship governed by reciprocity is reorganised as exchange. The relationship does not simply carry on with a price attached. It changes, and some of what it produced stops.

Santa Anna's unpublished *Spiritual Abundance* series is careful to say what the gift principle does not ask: "This isn't an invitation to abandon money, reject markets, or return to pre-industrial arrangements." Polanyi would have agreed. His argument was never that markets should be abolished. It was that they work inside a society, and that the reciprocity underneath them is a resource they consume and do not replenish on their own. Every new price, metric or incentive is an intervention in a gift economy a leader may not have mapped.

Beneath the shared gain

Two more sibling volumes carry the gift into ownership and pay. The evidence on employee ownership and profit sharing (*Owning the Work*), and the history of gainsharing from Joseph Scanlon's plans of the 1930s onward (*The Gain Was Always Shared*), are in one sense experiments in turning Akerlof's gift wage into something more structural. The worker's extra effort is no longer answered only by a wage above the market, given at the employer's discretion. It is answered by a share in what the effort produced.

The lessons of this book apply to those arrangements with full force. A share in the gain is received as a gift only if people can see how it was produced and have some say in the work that produced it. Delivered without that, it reads as a bonus scheme, and Chapter 3 showed how bonus schemes can crowd out what they meant to reward. Chapter 4 found that conditional cooperators need to see what others contribute; a shared gain that nobody can trace is, to a conditional cooperator, a coffee jar with an opaque lid. The book's warning about measurement is the right one to carry: "If a cooperative measures its success only in financial terms, it will gradually drift toward extractive behavior." A shared gain needs a measure of the gain and, as Chapter 9 set out, a careful reading of the giving.

Beneath the idea of scarcity

One more volume meets this one at its root. Scarcity as a design choice (*Enough by Design*) begins with John Maynard Keynes's 1930 essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, which looked ahead a century to a time when the struggle for subsistence might be solved for the rich countries, and the harder problem would be how to live well with enough.

The gift has a particular relationship to that question. A market allocates what is scarce, and it is very good at it. A gift circulates what is abundant, or what becomes abundant by being shared: knowledge that is not used up by being taught, attention that grows by being given, a skill that improves with each use. Santa Anna's *Spiritual Abundance* series makes the contrast directly, of creative capacity: "Unlike money, which circulates but doesn't increase through the act of giving (when you give someone $20, you have $20 less),

creativity actually expands through use." Much of the value inside a modern firm is of this second kind. The ideas offered in a meeting, the judgement passed from a senior cook to a junior one, the trust that lets a team move quickly: none of these is depleted by being given away, and most are increased.

An organisation that runs everything through prices treats these as scarce, because prices are the instrument it has. *Ecstatic Economics* makes the claim in its own register: "*wealth that does not circulate is not wealth.*" Read beside Keynes, the sentence is less mystical than it sounds. It says that the forms of wealth that matter most once subsistence is solved are the ones that exist only in motion. They cannot be stored. They can only be kept moving, and the gift is how people have always kept them moving.

This does not make the market unnecessary or the price wrong. It marks a boundary. On one side are the goods that are used up, which prices allocate well. On the other are the goods that grow by circulation, which a price can stop. The leader's task, and the household's, is to know which side of the line a thing is on before deciding how to handle it.

What to do on Monday

The book has made a case. It is worth turning it, one last time, into four commitments that a leader or a household could make this week.

Map before you price. Before introducing any incentive, fine, tracking system or bonus, draw the Circulation Map for the people it will touch. Find the gifts already moving. The incentive will land on them.

Correct before you give. Close every gap between what people are owed and what they are paid, plainly, through the contract, before offering anything as a gift. A gift laid over an unfairness is received as part of the unfairness.

Give with attention, and let it be refused. A gift chosen for the person, given by someone who knows what they did, with no condition and no inspection, is the version the evidence supports. A gift that cannot be declined is a demand, and the potlatch, as Santa Anna's book says, "could be coercive."

Receive. Mauss's second obligation is the one leaders and families neglect most. People are giving to every organisation and every household all the time, in effort and ideas and care. The audit in Chapter 2 found most of it sitting in the *Give* column, unacknowledged. Receiving it, specifically and by name, is the cheapest act in this book and the one most likely to keep the current moving.

Santa Anna's book offers a phrase for the temperament all four require. The enterprises that last, it says, are "pragmatically idealistic — clear about their values and flexible about their strategies." The gift asks for exactly that: a clear value about relationship, and no attachment to any particular form the return must take.

What the book cannot promise

The evidence in this book is uneven, and the book has tried to say so where it applies. The laboratory findings on reciprocity are among the most replicated in behavioural economics. The field findings on gift wages are mixed, with strong first effects that often fade. The historical and comparative cases cannot separate one cause from another. The composites prove nothing; they show the reasoning. And the house's own book, as Chapter 3 noted, leaned on a neurochemistry of trust that has not held up.

None of this weakens the central claim, which is structural rather than statistical. Reciprocity is present in every group studied. It is sensitive to how it is treated. It can be grown or worn down by design. What no one can promise is that a particular gift, in a particular firm or family, will be returned in a particular way. That is not a gap in the evidence. It is the nature of a gift.

For leaders who want to work this through inside their own organisation, including where the gain a gift economy helps produce might be shared, Ammanuel Santa Anna works with a small number of them one to one, at hautelumiere.life. The rest of the house's economics, and the books named in these pages, are at hautelumiere.life.

Back at the channel

Santa Anna's book describes the moral economy of the potlatch with a sentence that also describes the farmer at her gate: "To hoard was not shrewd. It was shameful. It signaled that the flow of life had become stuck in you — that you had become a blockage in the circulatory system of communal wealth." In *Consciousness Is the New Oil* he puts the turn more simply:

> *The gift economy flips the idea of "What's in it for me?" on its head, replacing it with "How can I contribute?"*

The farmer on the terrace does not experience her closed gate as generosity. She experiences it as the way the water works. Her field was watered because someone upstream closed theirs, and the field below her will be watered because she closes hers. Nobody keeps a ledger of who owes whom a morning's water. The channel keeps it.

The water arrives, does its work, and moves on down the hill.

The Tool: The Weekly Reciprocity Ledger

A fifteen-minute practice for a Monday morning, kept in a notebook. It is the four commitments made into a habit. It is written for a leader; for a household, read *team* as *family*.

1 · Received last week (5 minutes).List three gifts you received last week that were not owed to you: effort beyond a role, an idea offered, a kindness, a correction given carefully. For each, write who gave it and whether you have acknowledged it specifically. If not, write the one sentence you will say to them today, naming exactly what they did and what it made possible.

2 · Given last week (3 minutes).List what you gave that was not owed. For each, ask: could it have been declined without cost? Did it come with any condition, spoken or not? If a gift came with a condition, decide whether to remove the condition or to move the thing into the contract and stop calling it a gift.

3 · Owed this week (3 minutes).Write down anything that someone is owed by you, by contract, promise or fairness, that has not yet been paid: a review that is late, a raise that was promised, a decision someone is waiting on. These come before any gift. Schedule each one.

4 · Pools (2 minutes).From your last Circulation Map, name one person whose giving is pooling: much leaving them, little returning. Write one way the team can give back to them this week that they would choose, not that you would.

5 · Prices (2 minutes).Note any incentive, metric, fine or bonus you are considering. If there is one, mark it for the Crowding-Out Check before it goes further.

Once a quarter, read back through the ledger. Count how many acknowledgements you gave and how many owed items were paid on time. Those two numbers, over a year, are a fair measure of whether the current is moving.

References

1. Ostrom, E. (2000). Collective action and the evolution of social norms. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14(3), 137–158. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.14.3.137. A review drawing together laboratory and field evidence; it does not test any single design principle causally.

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