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# Escaping the Gift Economy

JEAN-SÉBASTIEN MARCOUX\*

Researchers have analyzed the dark side of the gift, but they have remained blind to what it implies about the market. Drawing on the experiences of a group of informants who participated in an ethnographical study of house moving in Montreal, Canada, this article provides significant evidence that the unattractiveness of the gift economy can incite people to turn to the market as an escape. It examines how people use the market to free themselves from the straitjacket of social expectations—from the sense of indebtedness and emotional oppression—which constrains them in their reciprocity relations inside the gift economy. The standard views of CCT researchers concerning the valorization of the gift economy are challenged, as well as the axiology that implicitly informs their research. As a result, it is necessary to discuss the inversion of this axiology.

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It would be complicated to entrust [my cousin] with the painting job because he won't charge me the market price. . . . I don't want to feel obliged. I don't want to feel that I will have to give back. (Mira)

Mira, 49, is a Yugoslav immigrant who works as an architect. When I met her, she had just purchased a condominium and was preparing her move. Mira considered hiring an unemployed cousin to paint her new home. She also thought of entrusting the moving of her possessions to Yugoslav immigrants she knew—people who were receiving social assistance. She gave up the idea of hiring these people, however, for fear of becoming indebted, preferring to pay professionals to do the job.

Mira's case reveals the difficulty of receiving gifts, services, or favors. It shows how the social indebtedness inherent in the gift-giving process can produce negative feelings, embarrassment, and a sense of dependence—a topic analyzed by consumer culture theory (CCT) researchers interested in the dark side of the gift (Giesler 2006; Joy 2001; Morales 2005). But Mira's case sheds new light on this

topic because it indicates that **people sometimes desire to avoid the gift economy and that it is possible for them to use the market as an escape**. In other words, this case demonstrates how people may move *from* the gift economy *to* the market, and thus it raises new questions.

Notwithstanding the work on the dark side of the gift (Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993), many CCT researchers continue to treat gift giving as a valorized alternative to commercial exchanges. They praise it for humanizing market relationships, for making the market meaningful, and for providing an escape from the commodifying logic of capitalist exchanges. They describe it as a social activity in which a humanizing logic is applied at the interpersonal level. A significant body of work—see, for example, Giesler (2006), Kozinets (2002), Thompson and Arsel (2004), and Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007)—has projected this idea up to the level of the gift economy; and the studies of brand communities by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and by Muñiz and Schau (2005) have invoked a similar notion of the gift in order to make an invidious comparison with the conventional market economy, as have Price and Arnould (1999) in their research on commercial friendship. Few of these authors, however, have questioned the romantic view that exchanges in the gift economy are ennobling, humanizing, or of greater moral worth.

This article looks at the unwanted aspects of the reciprocity relations characteristic of the gift economy. It analyzes how people negotiate the social expectations inherent in these reciprocity relations and how they turn to the anonymity of marketplace exchanges as a kind of liberation from debt-oriented supplications to givers. It seeks to provide theoretical support for rethinking the celebratory accounts of the gift economy in the literature and to show that researchers have underestimated the extent to which the market can be used as an escape from the systems of im-

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placable indebtedness that reciprocity creates. The romanticization of the gift economy raises the following questions: (1) How is it possible for the gift economy to become unattractive? (2) What implications does the dark side of the gift economy have for the market? (3) How should the escape from the gift economy to the market be conceptualized? It is necessary to find answers to these questions.

The research presented here is from an ethnographical study of house moving carried out in Montreal, Canada. Moving is a social event particularly favorable to the emergence of reciprocity relations. Moreover, many people who move use both the gift economy and the market to do so. Thus the analysis of moving, the latter seen as a point of passage between the gift economy and the market, can help us to think beyond the literature on reciprocity and gift giving.

The article is structured as follows. The first section contains a review of the literature on gift giving and the gift economy. The second section sketches the methodology used, and the third provides an analysis of the findings. In the fourth section, the findings are examined in relation to the existing literature, and the implications for consumer research are discussed.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE GIFT ECONOMY

In their studies of reciprocity relations, many CCT researchers—see, for example, Belk (1979), Belk and Coon (1993), Joy (2001), Morales (2005), Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000), and Sherry (1983)—draw on the work of anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss (1976), Godelier (1999), Mauss (1923–24/2000), and Weiner (1992). Other researchers, for example, Kozinets (2002), cite Putnam's recent work (2000) in sociology. However, Gouldner's (1960) classic sociology article on the norm of reciprocity is by far the most popular reference of all, and Sahlins's (1972) discussion of reciprocity is perhaps the most influential.

Starting from the Hobbesian conception of social relations (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651/1985]) as it pertains to Mauss's work (1923–24/2000) on the gift as a social contract, Sahlins (1972) devises a model for describing the various forms of reciprocity. His model presents three types of reciprocity that differ according to the kinds of relationships involved, the expectations of return, and the time horizon. Generalized reciprocity is characterized by exchanges that entail a low obligation to reciprocate or no obligation to reciprocate at all. Balanced reciprocity is characterized by direct exchanges where reciprocation is culturally equivalent and almost immediate. Negative reciprocity is characterized by transactions aimed at making a profit. According to Sahlins (1972), negative reciprocity dominates interactions among strangers and the market. It is characterized by suspicion and exploitation, and it involves an immediate return. As Osteen (2002) notes, Sahlins's (1972) spectrum is helpful for categorizing social expectations. The spectrum captures the duty-bound exchanges that occur among close relatives

where no direct reciprocation is expected, at least in the near future. It shows that the less closely related the people involved in an exchange are, the more the obligation to reciprocate tends to increase and the more the time period for reciprocating tends to diminish.

There are some similarities between Sahlins's (1972) framework and the continuum of gift giving developed by Joy (2001), whose work describes how gift giving in the cultural context of Hong Kong is guided by various types of relationship norms. Joy (2001) reveals how relations with romantic others, close friends or "just" friends, as well as more distant and instrumental relations with people such as *guanxi*, entail different kinds of reciprocity. Like Sahlins's (1972) spectrum, Joy's (2001) continuum accounts for the increasing social distance between exchange partners. Contrary to Sahlins's (1972) spectrum, however, her continuum does not incorporate the market. Perhaps this is because for Joy (2001) and other researchers—see Granovetter's (1985) economic sociology and Kozinets's (2002) consumer research—the market is embedded in the matrix of social relations. Sahlins (1972) clearly implies that the market is located at the end of the spectrum of estrangement, but consumer researchers maintain that relations with people in the market can stand at almost any point on Joy's (2001) continuum and that these relations are not irreconcilable with proximity. In other words, they maintain that it is possible to have close relations with someone from the marketplace (Price and Arnould 1999).

## Learning from the Dark Side of the Gift

Reciprocity in its various forms, from micro-individual-level (dyadic) exchanges to multilevel exchanges, is the focus of most CCT research on gift giving. It is the central concept in most of the research on the gift economy published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, from Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) to Napster (Giesler 2006).

Grounded in cognitive consistency theory (Belk 1976), in economic rewards theory (Fisher and Ackerman 1998), in equity theory (Morales 2005), and in systemic theories of social solidarity (Giesler 2006), the notion of reciprocity used by consumer researchers often implies the norm of a balanced exchange. The idea that reciprocity may entail asymmetry, imbalances—even inequalities between the givers and the receivers—is nonetheless an important, indeed almost inescapable concept. At least, this is what emerges from CCT research on the dark side of reciprocity. The research on the topic uncovers the tensions manifest in one-sided exchanges (Belk 1976, 1979), in unbalanced exchanges (Belk and Coon 1993), not to mention those involved in extortion or theft (Giesler 2006). It analyzes the negative relational effects of gift giving (Ruth et al. 1999) and the anxiety that can accompany gift giving (Wooten 2000). It also reveals how a sense of indebtedness may produce negative feelings (Morales 2005), as well as how it may lead to a condition of dependence (Giesler 2006), even enslavement (Joy 2001). Sherry et al. (1993) question the assumption that the exchanges are equal, and they crit-

icize what they view as the romanticized concept of gift giving. In doing so, they echo Mauss's classic work (1923–24/2000) on excessive gifts and Bataille's (1988) reflections on sacrificial gifts.

The research on the dark side of the gift suggests that gift giving is often embedded in less salubrious social dynamics. It highlights the asymmetry of gift-giving relations, the idea of the giver's superiority, as well as the possible use of gifts as a means of exerting power over people or even oppressing them. It also makes clear that the norm of balanced reciprocity (Sahlins 1972) described earlier may be idealized and that more romanticized views of the gift have a conceptual blind spot.

However, none of the research on the dark side of the gift has examined how the systems of indebtedness that reciprocity creates and the feeling of perpetual obligation that the gift often entails can affect peoples' attitudes toward the market. And the possibility of people escaping from the gift economy to the market is never discussed. This body of research has also failed to examine the ways in which people challenge the moral and ideological assumptions that underlie the gift economy–market antithesis. In other words, the authors who have analyzed the dark side of the gift have failed to see that the fundamental axiology that informs their own research is perhaps questionable.

### Sociologists on the Concept of Escape

In critical sociology, French anti-utilitarians have an interesting reading of the concept of escape. Anti-utilitarians like Godbout (1994) acknowledge that reciprocity relations may be constraining. They suggest that by turning to the market for services that are usually obtained in the gift economy, people can avoid the sense of obligation that is inherent in the gift-giving process. In other words, for the anti-utilitarians, escaping to the market is a form of social divestment and can become a means of preserving autonomy.

It is important to mention that the anti-utilitarians consider the gift to be one of the foundations of social life. For anti-utilitarians like Caillé (1993, 2000), Godbout (1994, 1995, 1998), and Godbout and Caillé (1998), the obligation to give (as opposed to the Maussian obligation to reciprocate) lies at the heart of social bonding, as does the desire to give more to others than what one has received. As a result, escaping to the market can only be seen as a manifestation of rampant individualism, which leads to the dissolution of social bonds or, even worse, to the death of the gift.

The anti-utilitarians provide a critique of the utilitarian-instrumental construction of social relations that ostensibly prevails in disciplines such as economics. To a certain extent, their view corresponds to the position of authors like Hyde (1983) who talk about the gift as “erotic” commerce, which binds people together instead of separating and differentiating them the way the market does. Their view also corresponds to the position of CCT researchers like Belk and Coon (1993), who analyze agapic gifts that entail no reciprocation, or to the position of Kozinets (2002), who reflects

on emancipatory consumption while taking care not to celebrate individualism.

However, the anti-utilitarian perspective raises moral and ideological questions. It has been criticized for idealizing and exoticizing gifts (Callon and Latour 1997): the anti-utilitarians' reading of Mauss (1923–24/2000), for example, depends on an idealistic interpretation of gift giving in “primitive” societies. According to this interpretation, gift exchanges in such societies are based on gratuity, generosity, and altruism, as opposed to calculation, interest, and instrumentality. But a closer reading reveals that the Melanesian, Polynesian, and Native American peoples described by Mauss (1923–24/2000) are also gift-giving calculators.

It could even be argued that the anti-utilitarians' interpretation of the gift flirts with what Parry (1986) calls ideological obfuscation because it masks the fact that no one does anything for nothing.

By conceptualizing escape, the anti-utilitarian perspective helps to take us outside reciprocity relations (at the point where reciprocity is negated), but it becomes problematic to the extent that it pits the gift economy against the market and presupposes that the former is morally superior to the latter. Anti-utilitarians not only idealize the gift, they also hold the normative view that market relations are—by definition—less authentic, less human, less important.

Anthropologists like Miller (1998) would challenge the idea that the gift economy is inherently nobler than the market. Miller (2001) inverts the standard gift economy–market antithesis and even speaks of inalienable commodities and alienable gifts. He attacks, though only indirectly, social scientists such as the anti-utilitarians who idealize the gift, and he tries to lead us out of the moral trap into which their thinking has led us. Nevertheless, his position remains as thorny as theirs, for it fails to recognize the role of escape.

## METHODOLOGY

From the perspective of CCT research, house moving is an interesting social phenomenon. It involves discourses, practices, and rituals that dictate who can or cannot manipulate the objects involved. When people move their possessions, the norms that govern their relationships come into play in revealing ways.

During a move, family members, friends—and also more distant relations or acquaintances—give, swap, exchange, and trade instrumental and emotional resources; they may sell them as well, usually informally and sometimes illicitly. They also draw on the market. Indeed, many of the people who were interviewed during the course of this study indicated that they often call on the market as a complement to, a substitute for, or an exit from the gift economy.

In line with Arnould and Thompson's (2005) position on CCT research, it can be argued that house moving is an exemplary social activity for researchers seeking concrete empirical access to theoretical insights on the escape from the gift economy to the market. In what follows, moving is considered as one of those social events that Price et al. (2000) describe as precipitating events. As such, it reveals

some of the hidden aspects of reciprocity relations and the gift economy.

This analysis adopts a methodological perspective on family and social networks that is very similar to the one adopted by Epp and Price (2008), by Joy (2001), and by Üstüner and Holt (2007). It seeks to go beyond the individual level of analysis. On a philosophical level, the research presented here is in the tradition of the contemporary material culture studies that have developed since the 1990s at University College London based on the work of anthropologist Daniel Miller (Miller 1987; Miller and Tilley 1996). Contemporary material culture studies focus on how cultural phenomena become significant through the use of material objects. They suggest that researchers can develop an in-depth understanding of people's practices by actively participating in them—even in the most mundane activities—as they are actually taking place in the material world. In the case at hand, this meant getting actively involved in the moving of people's personal possessions.

The research presented here is from an ethnographical study that began in 1997 with a pilot project. Intensive fieldwork was carried out between January 1998 and July 1999, and follow-up was conducted until 2007. A mixture of methods (Tilley 2001) was used in the fieldwork, including formal interviewing, observation, and photography. Data were also collected through participant observation, that is, by accompanying people throughout the physical and metaphorical journey of their move, from the early stages, including the organizing and boxing of personal belongings, on through moving day and the arrival at the new home or residence. In many instances, in my role as researcher, I accompanied people as they did what might be described as an "archeological dig" in cluttered cupboards, chests of drawers, and basements. I sorted things with them, listened to them, and in some instances even helped them move their furniture.

During the fieldwork, some 30 adult informants were recruited. The informants were equally distributed between the ages of 18 and 89 (see appendix). In most cases, I met with them before moving day as well as during and after the move. The length of the follow-up ranged from a few weeks to a few months and sometimes to a few years. The follow-up depended on the relationship that I had developed with the informants, on their willingness to be accompanied, and on respect for their privacy. It is important to mention that people who are moving are often emotionally and psychologically vulnerable and that this situation calls for special care and concern on the part of the researcher. Indeed, some of the participants in this study were moving in the course of a separation or a divorce or because of health problems or the death of a partner. One elderly woman died during the research. When necessary, separate interviews were conducted with family members who emerged as important individuals. Interviews were also conducted with professional resources such as health care workers and social workers.

The data were analyzed following Thompson, Locander,

and Pollio's (1990) interpretive methodology. As these authors point out, at the idiographic level, the issue is to understand how the phenomena under study are meaningfully organized in the participant's life world. At a nomothetic level, the question is whether or not similar patterns emerge for other participants. Particular attention was given at this stage to comparing (and contrasting) people's discourses and practices. My field study observations were then taken into account. These observations related to gift-giving behaviors that were not consciously or reflexively commented upon by informants themselves during the move. Three themes were identified as part of this iterative process: the bright side of the gift economy, the dark side of the gift economy, and the opposition between the gift economy and the market.

### FINDINGS: THE TWO FACES OF THE GIFT ECONOMY

In Montreal, moving is grounded in the city's working-class history (Choko 1980; Linteau 2000). Historians report that until the 1960s–70s, working-class people and the poor, who moved in great numbers every year, were often forced to do so. In other words, moving was associated with poverty and lack of stability, a permanent family home being a privilege tied to social status and financial means.

The 1960s–70s constituted a particularly relevant era in this regard. The extremely high number of tenants moving in Montreal became a social concern. Unions, consumer associations, and tenants' associations fought for recognition of tenants' rights. They also called for greater state intervention in the relationship between landlords and tenants. It is worth mentioning that the 1960s–70s in the province of Quebec are known for a process of political, institutional, and social reforms commonly referred to as the Quiet Revolution (Dickinson and Young 1995). This period witnessed the establishment of the welfare state and the creation of various government programs in the housing sector as well as the adoption of legislation (commonly known as the Stability Policy [Jobin 1982]) aimed at correcting the imbalance of power between a small minority tenure class composed of powerful owners and a large majority tenant class (Brosard 1974–75). In 1971, fully 80.8% of the dwellings in Montreal were rented. In 1996, the year before I started my fieldwork, this percentage remained high at 72.8%. It was 65.6% in 2006 (Statistics Canada). The percentage of people who rent is important because most leases in Quebec are 1-year agreements beginning on July 1, which means that almost all of the Montrealers who move do so at the same time of the year.

Moving is still a strong feature of Montreal culture. It has been characterized in the media as a "hobby" and even as the "national sport" of the city's inhabitants (Abley 1996; Nadeau 1994). For many of them, moving is part of their identity—part of what it means to be a Montrealer. As such, it has inspired influential writers like Gabrielle Roy, whose acclaimed novel *The Tin Flute*, published in 1945, portrays the impoverished living conditions of a working-class family

and their frequent moves. It inspired well-known Quebec author Réjean Ducharme and Quebec popular music icon Robert Charlebois to cowrite the hit song “Déménager ou rester là” [Move out or stay put], which was interpreted by Pauline Julien in 1972. More recently, it has influenced the local advertising of corporations like Labatt Breweries, McDonald’s, and Wal-Mart (Centre d’archives publicitaires, Association des Agences de Publicité du Québec; see fig. 1).

Using the gift economy when moving was a widespread economic solution in the 1970s, the obvious thing to do, and this still remains the norm. Indeed, a popular image of moving day in Montreal is that of family unity and social network solidarity—a day when a few large pizzas are washed down with a case of beer on the veranda at the new house or on the balcony at the new apartment, the invitation to partake of this communal meal serving as a means of showing gratitude (Abley 1996). The situation is more complex, however, than it might appear at first sight.

### The Bright Side of the Gift Economy

*Cooperation.* The Montreal media describe people who move themselves—those who do not use the market—as “self-movers,” “apprentices,” and “do-it-yourself movers.” Marjo, 30, and Rupert, 28, who moved in together before the birth of their child, can be considered as such. Marjo explained proudly:

We are almost professional movers [*laugh*]. . . . We got help from my father, his girlfriend and my sister. We also got help from my aunt, who came with her husband, my cousin who brought her partner, and some of my friends. . . . Overall, some 20 people helped with the carrying and the loading,

cleaned rooms and arranged things at the new place, lent cars and trucks, and so forth.

Marjo’s depiction recalls the popular cliché of the moving-day party. It stresses the importance of family solidarity, mutual aid, and resourcefulness. After the move was over, she declared, “It was fun. It was a nice moving day—almost a party. . . . Even if people struggle, well, it doesn’t matter. There’s beer and pizza. . . . It’s a dirty job, but we have to do it. If we have fun, so much the better!”

When I first met Marjo and Rupert, they had low incomes and no job security. Marjo was a community worker, Rupert a nonunionized municipal employee. Both had university degrees in anthropology. Before moving in together, both lived in a rented apartment and shared expenses with their respective roommates. This form of arrangement is common in Montreal, especially among students and young adults.

People like Marjo and Rupert privilege the gift economy for economic purposes. The help they receive responds to the needs of the moment. To the extent that it is directed toward goals external to their relationship as a couple, it corresponds to Belk and Coon’s (1993) definition of instrumental gifts. This type of gift is also important, however, as an expressive act of sharing. Rupert made this clear:

These people who helped us, I’ve helped them move in the past. They helped me when I was seeking a job. . . . We, our kind of people . . . how should I say? Not leftists, socialists or, whatever, hippies, we don’t bother with this. . . . We are proud, very proud to have people around us like this and to receive so much. You feel you’re valued. Wow! People are here for you. You’re not in a mess. You’re not alone. You know some people. . . . I think it’s a gift they’ve made to us. When they need some help in the future, I’ll be there.

FIGURE 1

THE MOVING-DAY RITUAL



NOTE.—This image is from a Labatt Blue TV commercial that aired in 2000. The scene takes place on a staircase somewhere in Montreal. A man is moving with the help of his friends. They carry a sofa bed down the stairs while a woman brings up a case of beer. The ad emphasizes the sociality of the moving-day ritual and the festive character of the event. Image reproduced with the kind permission of Labatt Breweries.

Marjo and Rupert are people who praise resourcefulness. They subscribe to a cooperative, communal ethos and use the gift economy (as in the case of Kozinets's [2002] informants) to express this ideal. Their case finds an echo with other tenants and small homeowners who consider the gift economy an economic solution.

During the study, I also met people whose economic condition was precarious, poor people who were forced to use the gift economy when they moved. These people tended to praise the gift economy even if it created tensions in their lives. They were compelled to use solidarity relations—sometimes with very negative emotional consequences—but they still spoke about the help that they were receiving as if accepting it were a choice. Their explicitly articulated preference for the gift economy, and the embodiment of this preference in their concrete everyday behavior and practices, displayed what Bourdieu (1984) calls a “taste for necessity.” They talked about an obligation, and they acted in accord with overriding necessity, in ways that suggested that it was a matter of free choice. In a word, they transformed a social constraint into a preference.

Informants like Marjo and Rupert differ from the poor people described above and from the working-class people described by Bourdieu (1984). They are young, educated, middle-class individuals with high cultural capital. Yet, just like Bourdieu's (1984) subjects, they celebrate an image—perhaps a romanticized one—of working-class solidarity. They extol the virtues of the gift economy as opposed to a form of individualism that is objectified by the market. They stand united against the market. Using the gift economy as opposed to the market is, for them, a means of affirming a shared, communal identity. This is clear when Marjo's expertise statement is examined. And it is obvious in Rupert's claim that “we” (as opposed to an abstract “other”) know how to surround “ourselves” and share without keeping accounts. Unlike Giesler's (2006) informants, however, who derive meaning from the ideological comparison to the marketplace, these informants take pride in demonstrating their capacity to avoid what might be called “the easy way out.”

The need to show resourcefulness is an important aspect of the norm of the gift economy. It evokes the opposition, documented by Kozinets (2002), between a creative, cooperative, collective effort and a passive, selfish, individualistic form of consumption. As such, it involves transforming a constraint—marginalization from the market—into a self-defining practice. In other words, moving becomes an opportunity to exhibit social skills in what Holt (1998) calls the “management of material contingencies.” It becomes a means of affirming values.

*Absolution.* My field notes contain many observations on people who moved during hard times. In contrast to the previous informants, many of them used the market, but they did so only to the extent that it did not compromise their ideal of the gift.

The case of Bea, 41, is exemplary. Her friends “insisted” on helping her on moving day because she was moving as a result of a separation (field notes, June 27). They contended

that it was unwise for her to try to confront adversity alone by taking on too many responsibilities without outside help.

Bea was pleased to be surrounded by her friends—her “network”—at such a difficult time. A single mother and teacher, Bea was a strong advocate of the gift economy. As in Marjo and Rupert's case, she identified herself with her support network, composed essentially of women with children. She went so far as to describe her network as her family.

When I met her, Bea was receiving help from her friends. But she insisted that it was essential for her to contribute actively to her network and to help the other members when needed. She maintained that the women of her network continually help each other by swapping resources. Although her friends did not provide the physical labor required to move Bea's possessions from her old residence to her new one, they did help her to get settled in by cleaning rooms and arranging things. They knew that she wanted to be able to take her children to the new home the same evening.

Bea's network, which provided her with basic instrumental help, became truly meaningful owing to the emotional and moral support that it provided. This is clear when considering that she hired movers so as to spare her friends the riskiest part of the work:

It is not worth hurting ourselves. I never let [my friends] move things like the fridge, the washing machine, and the dryer. . . . I prefer to hire people who are used to doing this kind of job. . . . They don't hurt themselves. They are paid for this job. They have their own insurance policy. Everyone is happy. I find it less dangerous.

Another case is that of Mathilde, 79, who acted as a caretaker when her sister, Mrs. Bolduc, 89, moved into a care facility. She was her sister's only relative and sole resource. She felt that she had to take care of everything. She explained:

My sister did not want any strangers in her house. She did not want strangers to handle her possessions. . . . I am the one who has been taking care of everything. . . . I have been fixing her meals, checking her medications, looking after her. . . . I found her a room in residential care. I will decorate that room. . . . [Pause] My sister is unable to do anything. She is lucky, really, that someone takes care of her. . . . It's been an unpleasant chore. It wasn't fun at all. I'm the one who did everything. Was I right? [*She asks me the question.*]

While Bea's friends spontaneously made themselves available—in fact, nearly imposed themselves—Mathilde felt duty-bound to help her sister. She did so at great effort, however, going so far as to risk her own health despite her age and her own family's advice. Indeed, she added, “I wonder if [my sister] is not relying too much on me. . . . Now, my son and my daughter-in-law fear that I put too many responsibilities on my shoulders. They worry for my health.” The gifts, the services, and the favors provided by Bea's friends and the efforts made by Mathilde acquire a

particular meaning when cast into a broader ritual process. They become a form of sacrifice (Miller 2001). This is consistent with Ruth et al. (1999), who speak of how the amount of effort and care invested in a gift reflects a relationship's degree of intensity.

If we push this line of thought further, we may begin to appreciate why lack of effort is usually interpreted negatively. Mrs. Debray, 68, who was depressed at the idea of moving into residential care, expected her children to help her. Mrs. Debray had hired a moving company to spare them the most difficult part of the work, hoping that this would encourage them to show up. On moving day, however, no one but her brother came to help, which affected her (field notes, December 29). The social worker who followed Mrs. Debray told me that her children only showed up when there were gifts for them: "Otherwise, they are not involved at all."

If the gift-giving effort is an essential part of the ritual, the effort required from the givers is often a source of embarrassment for the receivers. The informants who participated in this study often talked about the embarrassment and the fear of imposing themselves. Many of them used the market to make sure that friends and family members were not involved in reciprocal exchanges, at least not in the riskiest ones, or in the most effortful or degrading parts of the work. They released their friends and family members from the obligation, or from the responsibility, to help them. They used the market as a gift of absolution. As explained earlier, Bea hired professional movers because she did not want to expose her friends to the risk of injury. Mrs. Debray hired movers because she did not want to burden her children and grandchildren with the chores involved in moving. Other informants radically withheld any requests for gifts, services, or favors from significant others. One informant even said that she refused to impose "slave labor" on her friends.

The gift of absolution can be seen as an altruistic gesture. It entails or authorizes using the market to help negotiate the expectations of the gift economy. This use of the market does not compromise a person's faith in the gift, however. Nor does it challenge the moral and ideological primacy of the gift economy. It reinforces an axiology that becomes particularly meaningful in times of necessity. Of course, my informants' condition of necessity differs from that of the working-class people analyzed by Bourdieu (1984) who have no other choice but to rely on solidarity relations. Their condition of necessity also differs from that of the disenfranchised Turkish women studied by Üstüner and Holt (2007), who offer another example of the "taste for necessity" and for whom social networks provide a fundamental means of surviving on the margins of the market. Nevertheless, moving is still a chore. It often reveals a crisis, and it can be, in itself, a crisis to get through. Mrs. Debray, who suffered from a heart condition and who was depressed at the idea of moving into a care facility, died only a few days afterward. I cannot adequately assess whether there is a relationship between her move into a seniors' residence, the

absence of her children at the peak of the crisis, and the tragic deterioration of her condition, but it is plausible to think that her move had a harmful effect.

### The Dark Side of the Gift Economy

*Subjection.* In his research on the gift, Godelier (1999) talks about the paradox of the gift. He contends that a gift is an act of generosity and an act of subjection, for it places the recipient in a position of dependence until the gift is reciprocated, if it is ever reciprocated.

Mrs. Bolduc, for instance, knew about everything her sister was doing for her. She knew that Mathilde generously sacrificed herself, going so far as to put her health at risk. She was grateful to her sister. At the same time, however, she resented accepting her sister's help. She explained:

It is difficult to watch Mathilde take care of everything and not be able to help her. . . . It is appalling to feel so powerless. . . . I always lived on my own, without asking anyone. I have always been independent. It is a question of pride. . . . Isn't it? [*She reflects loudly.*] No, it is a question of freedom. My freedom is my wealth. It is difficult to lose it.

Mrs. Bolduc's case stands apart because of her old age, her dependence on others, and her incapacity to reciprocate (or pay back her debt) in like fashion, that is, by performing strenuous labor. Nevertheless, her case is quite significant, because it points to the feeling of subjection resulting from the systems of indebtedness that the gift economy often creates.

The relation of subjection that a gift instills (Godelier 1999) is inherent in many of the cases that were observed during the course of the research presented here, even in the cases involving the brightest manifestations of the gift economy, as Mrs. Bolduc's case shows. If Mrs. Bolduc accepted—with resignation—this condition of subjection, most of my informants resisted their loss of freedom. For example, Bea often praised her support network. She stressed how important it was for her to contribute to it, but it is clear that insisting on her capacity to give to others was essentially an effort to protect her sense of autonomy.

The fear of subjection is nowhere more evident, however, than in the case of Mira, who, as explained in the introduction, refused to draw on her personal network when she moved. During the interviews, Mira often took pride in saying that she had started from nothing when she had come to Canada and that she had achieved a great deal. She often stated that she could manage by herself. Her experience of war and deprivation had probably tinged her view of solidarity and the gift economy. She mentioned that during the war in Yugoslavia, she had obtained basic goods, like shoes, from the Red Cross. She went on to explain: "It is never easy, you know, to accept help from other people. . . . It is not easy for the one who receives it, but also for the one who helps." In fact, what Marjo and Rupert celebrated—the romanticized ideal of working-class solidarity—was something that Mira did not want to be associated with at all.



Mira knew that she could count on her cousin and her compatriots. They had already offered her their services. She was also aware of the possibility of offending them by refusing their help. In this context, her refusal to become obliged and her stressing the difficulty that receiving help entails are very relevant. Her attitude in this respect tends to show that she saw herself as the one who would be helped if she accepted special treatment. Her decision to favor the market over the gift economy brings to mind the Turkish women followed by Üstüner and Holt (2007), who distanced themselves from the primary networks associated with basic help, survival, and resourcefulness. However, Üstüner and Holt's (2007) informants used the market to break with tradition, whereas Mira acted as if she wanted to show that she had freed herself from necessity. She refused to appear needy, "broke," or unable to provide for herself. Her case points to the social stigma attached to solidarity relations.

There is a link between the fear of subjection, as described by Godelier (1999), and indebtedness, as analyzed in consumer research. This link relates more to social than to economic deficits (Giesler 2006; Joy 2001; Morales 2005). Mrs. Bolduc was trapped into Godelier's (1999) paradox because of her incapacity to reciprocate. Bea sought to avoid this trap by actively contributing to the gift economy. As for Mira, she escaped the dilemma altogether by turning away from the gift economy. She turned to the market in order to shun any favored treatment, avoid obligations, and preserve her autonomy. In a sense, she personifies the anti-utilitarians' fear of the dissolution of social bonding. Her use of the market is diametrically opposed to the gift of absolution. It is the perfect expression of the anti-gift.

People like Mrs. Bolduc, Bea, and Mira are not, properly speaking, examples of the dark side of the gift as researchers such as Ruth et al. (1999) and Sherry et al. (1993) understand it. Yet they reveal the relational costs that can make the gift economy unattractive. Their cases remind us that accepting help from others can create obligations and demanding expectations. They highlight the fact that becoming socially indebted through the expectation of reciprocity is sometimes embarrassing.

*Humiliation.* As pointed out earlier, moving reveals some of the hidden aspects of reciprocity relations. It often exposes the deeper conflicts within the gift economy. The case of the Lamberts is illuminating in this respect. They preferred not to call upon their family when they moved into their new bungalow. Instead they relied on acquaintances and colleagues for help.

Members of a nontraditional church, they contended that their family rejected them because of their religious beliefs. During a conversation with Mr. Lambert, 47, I commented that moving was often a family matter, but he was evasive and simply insisted that "many" of his colleagues had offered their help. Mrs. Lambert, 42, explained:

We are not a religious sect. But they [our families] don't understand us. . . . My husband's parents have been looking

at us as if we were weirdoes. They went as far as talking about disinheriting us. . . . After all, we don't care. We don't need money.

Mr. Richer, 81, who had had no contact with all but one of his six children since the death of his ex-wife 10 years earlier, provides another illuminating example. When he moved, he refused to call upon his children, preferring to rely on old friends, acquaintances, and ideally, the market. He explained:

I don't want to ask my children for anything. I don't want to oblige them to help me. . . . My children have not spoken to me since the death of my ex-wife because I refused to attend her funeral. . . . I have no close family anymore. . . . One of my daughters, the older one, keeps going at me. She never forgave me. I heard that, when she got married, she was pleased to drop her maiden name. . . . I admit that I was a bad provider. . . . But come on! They're the ones who should take the first steps.

Mr. Richer is not the only elderly person interviewed who felt deeply uncomfortable about reciprocity relations at the time of a move. Mrs. Bouchard, 69, talked about the anxiety involved in depending on others and being left on her own. She said, "I was scared, scared of having no one." Like Mr. Richer, she feared having to ask for help:

I asked my daughter and my son-in-law for some help. But I had to pay someone else for the painting and someone else for cleaning the kitchen. . . . For me, the whole situation is stressful because I depend a lot on my daughter and her husband. . . . What makes it so difficult is to ask those people for help. . . . It is difficult when you must ask them for favors.

Mr. Richer and Mrs. Bouchard both felt entitled to receive help from their family. They alluded to family justice or some form of equity. And yet they preferred not to claim what they considered to be their due. Mr. Richer, for instance, refused to call upon his children even when his health deteriorated critically. This was a matter of pride for him. He declared, "Never! I never want to take the first steps. . . . I'd rather die than ask them for some help."

As in the cases examined in the previous section, a fear of subjection pervades these testimonies. An additional issue also arises as important, however. It is the humiliation of requesting gifts, services, or favors from family members who should normally offer them spontaneously. People feel deeply apprehensive about begging for help.

Anti-utilitarians like Godbout (2000) argue that help is a special category of gift. In contrast to other gifts, which must be provided voluntarily (Belk and Coon 1993; Godelier 1999), it can be requested when circumstances justify it. But this conception of help does not fit well with the cases examined here: the Lamberts rejected the idea of requesting help from the people who had repudiated them; Mr. Richer talked about the humiliation involved in begging his children

for aid; and Mrs. Bouchard dreaded requesting favors from her daughter and possibly facing rejection.

It is not relevant, for the purpose of this discussion, to disclose the reasons for the family tensions and disputes. They relate to disagreements over values and beliefs, and to unresolved conflicts. They conceal intimate, personal, and family issues as well as taboos and secrets. There is also the question of power and personal autonomy, especially in the case of elderly people who feel that they depend on others. The important point, however, is that using reciprocity relations—even for basic, material, and instrumental purposes—may revive conflicts and tensions. It may cause difficult memories to resurface, because it is impossible to mobilize family, friends, and social networks without bringing into play, at the same time, the emotional history attached to them.

Ruth et al. (1999), as well as Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), note that gifts are often accompanied by bittersweet memories and emotions. This is what is observed here. The emotional effort that plays a central role in the gift-giving ritual becomes an obstacle. Indeed, requesting a gift, a service, or a favor may be so embarrassing that people prefer more distant, more instrumental, less committing relations to more intimate ones. People who do not share the same history become useful because they do not bring the same emotional baggage with them. Weak ties (cf. Granovetter 1973) take on a new meaning. There are no previous exchanges with them and, thus, no bad memories. Their neutral, “virgin” character makes them less difficult to deal with.

Pushing this line of thought further, it is important to consider how anonymous market exchanges can represent a positive alternative to difficult reciprocity relations with friends, family members, and social networks. Mr. Richer’s attempt to use the market can be understood in this light. He desperately tried to find someone he could pay to move his possessions instead of going through the humiliation of asking help from his children. He said, “I just want to pay and be free from any constraints.”

However, 7 months after this ethnographical study began, Mr. Richer’s health seriously deteriorated, and he was forced to move into a care facility (field notes, April 19). His sons ended a 10-year silence and agreed to help him. They came on moving day (field notes, May 22). They moved the bulk of his possessions, but they left as soon as the job was done, 3 hours after their arrival. Mr. Richer’s attempts to invite his sons for a meal, give them personal belongings as a token of appreciation, and set up another meeting all failed. One of his sons told him that he had no time for lunch. The other one said that he was not hungry. They acted as if they had fulfilled their duty or paid back what they had owed him.

Afterward, Mr. Richer deeply regretted having gotten his hopes up. A few days after the move, he said, with a sigh of despair, “I stirred up all these memories. . . . For what? I’m not even sure I will see them again.”

*Oppression.* One last case needs to be discussed because it illustrates the emotional oppression that is exerted

via the gift economy. When I met Sandra, 41, she was receiving social assistance and living in a government-subsidized housing complex. The first interview took place 2 weeks before she was supposed to be expelled from her home and relocated. In a word, she was moving at a time of crisis.

Sandra’s situation was extremely precarious. She had very little financial means. One of her sons did not reply to her request for help. The other showed up but did not confirm that he would be coming until the very last minute. She had been relying exclusively on her boyfriend’s help, but 2 weeks before her move, they had had a serious argument. She explained how she felt about her situation:

I’m really fed up. The guys, in fact everybody, let me down. Then my boyfriend has not shown up for the last two weeks. We had an argument; we had a fight. [*Sandra had been physically assaulted by her ex-boyfriend.*] I told him he would regret it. He’s a jerk! . . . He’d promised me he would give me a hand and help me paint the rooms. . . . I don’t know what to do. I don’t even have enough money to hire someone.

These statements do not fully reveal the emotional oppression and nervousness that Sandra expressed during the interview. What emerged from our first meeting was that she depended on her boyfriend’s help and that she felt that he was trying to emotionally blackmail her. The worst part was that she could not afford to pay someone else to do the work. The situation became even more complex when Sandra and her boyfriend separated just a few days before moving day. An excerpt from an interview conducted after the move is relevant:

Moving day was tough. My ex was there. My son and his girlfriend were there, too. . . . That morning, my ex said, “I told you I would help you. I kept my word.” During the day everybody was cool, making jokes, but I kept everything inside. That was hard because nobody except the two of us knew that we had split up. . . . On top of that, my son called me the following morning to give me a load of bullshit. He criticized me for not ordering pizza. I said I had offered the Pepsi to everyone, but I had no money for the food.

Sandra relied exclusively on the gift economy. She broke up with her boyfriend before the move and had to bear his presence because she needed his help. Her condition of dependence is reminiscent of Mrs. Bolduc’s situation, discussed earlier, but there is an important difference between the two cases. To move into a care facility, Mrs. Bolduc received the help of her sister Mathilde, who felt duty-bound to make an apparently generous sacrifice for her. In contrast, Sandra’s ex-boyfriend was clearly acting with ill intentions. He was trying to take advantage of the situation.

There is also a parallel between Sandra and Mr. Richer, who depended on his children’s help. Both of their cases reveal the asymmetry between the giver and the receiver (Belk 1976; Belk and Coon 1993) by showing that the receiver may be vulnerable and that the context of exchange

may exacerbate his or her vulnerability. Their cases resonate with the work of Mauss (1923–24/2000), who describes excessive gift giving as a means for the giver to exert control. According to Mauss (1923–24/2000), the incapacity to reciprocate and the resulting feeling of indebtedness cause embarrassment, with the possibility of emotional exploitation and abuse. We see this in Sandra's case.

Sandra's case also raises the issue of intimate domination, which must be distinguished from statutory domination (Sherry et al. 1993). The latter involves officially sanctioned hierarchical power relations in a public space. Intimate domination involves power imbalances between persons such as family members or close friends. Intimacy becomes a form of tyranny that creates tremendous emotional pressure. It is clear that through the manipulation of reciprocity relations, this form of domination can occur in the gift economy. Sandra's ex-boyfriend used the "privileged" position that intimacy conferred upon him to exert control. He attempted to take advantage of the context of necessity that Sandra's move created. He knew that she could not afford to pay someone else, and he deliberately manipulated her. Borrowing Ruth et al.'s (1999) expression, we could say that he tried to "hijack" the performance of the gift.

It is true that Sandra's case involves a considerable degree of violence and that this sets it apart. Nevertheless, her case shows that intimate relations who exchange or offer services—even the most instrumental ones—may be doing so in order to exert oppressive emotional pressure. In other words, it is possible for the gift economy to become a tyranny.

### DISCUSSION: INVERTING THE AXIOLOGY OF THE GIFT ECONOMY AND THE MARKET

The cases presented above have revealed the tensions that often prevail within the gift economy and the pressure to pull out. They have shown that the gift economy can be emotionally demanding, perhaps even humiliating, or tyrannical.

It is true that like the informants in Kozinets's (2002) Burning Man study, some of the participants in the present study imbued the gift economy with higher moral values. The Burning Man participants struggled to seek refuge from what they perceived as the almost inescapable dehumanization brought on by the all-pervasive market (Kozinets 2002), while some of the informants in the present study, in particular Marjo and Rupert, decided to turn away from the market because they perceived it as the easy way out and felt pride in opting for the gift economy as a personal choice. Other participants in the present study, in particular Bea and Mrs. Debray, withheld requests for gifts for fear of imposing themselves. They drew on the market, but they decommodified it and subjected it to the logic of the gift, as Holt (1998) would put it. They used the market as a gift of absolution.

However, many of the participants in the present study

did not invest the gift economy with higher values, in the way that Kozinets's (2002) informants did. In some cases—think of Mr. Richer and his difficult relationship with his children—they may have secretly wished or hoped that the gift economy would live up to some higher, more idealistic standard of human conduct, but they still saw the gift economy, nevertheless, as disagreeable and even threatening because of the emotional pressure and the sense of indebtedness created by reciprocity relations, and they attempted to avoid it by turning to the market. In other words, if Kozinets's (2002) research demonstrates that people may seek to escape the market through festival events like Burning Man that have the ritual power to "invert," overturn temporarily, or deny social order, the present research provides significant evidence for the opposite tendency. It shows that people may turn to the market in order to escape the unattractiveness of the gift economy.

It is obvious that these observations run contrary to the expectations of researchers like Kozinets (2002), but it is also clear that they belie the expectations of researchers like Joy (2001). Indeed, when analyzing the data using Joy's (2001) model of reciprocity, we can reasonably expect that participants will privilege distant relations—strangers (even the market)—for instrumental exchanges and that they will reserve their closest or most intimate relations for higher moral purposes such as emotional support. Yet neither Kozinets's (2002) nor Joy's (2001) model can account for the possibility of these participants' turning away from intimate relations in favor of the anonymous marketplace in order to avoid emotional exchanges in times of crisis. In contrast to Joy's (2001) informants, the people described here are not merely protecting their intimate relations by ensuring that they do not have to do instrumental (inferior) work. They are also protecting themselves from their intimate relations, that is to say, from the difficult memories associated with them, and from the emotional turmoil that may result from participating in a network of gift exchanges with them.

But these observations not only challenge the expectations of specific CCT researchers, they also put into question some of the fundamental tenets of consumer research on the gift. The gift is often praised for humanizing market relationships, for making the market meaningful, and for providing an alternative to the commodifying logic of capitalist exchanges. Yet the research presented here shows that the market is not always feared as dehumanizing, impersonal, or anonymous. On the contrary, it can be valorized precisely because of these features. This challenges the way researchers in this field and elsewhere in the social sciences understand the axiology that underpins the gift economy—market antithesis. In other words, it shows that people may invert this axiology—at least temporarily—and belie researchers' expectations.

Of course, house moving involves a specific type of physical activity that may partially explain why people who move often privilege the market. But it would be a mistake to reduce house moving to nothing over and above a specific instance of the instrumentalization of physical labor. For

house moving is a social phenomenon that often includes or requires sustained involvement in the reciprocity relations characteristic of the gift economy. We have seen that for some people, the emotional cost of such involvement may be too high and that they may turn to the market as an escape. However, the question remains: How should we conceptualize the escape from the gift economy?

### Revisiting the Concept of Escape

In the course of the discussion, several anthropologists and sociologists have been mentioned. It should be clear by now that the work of these social scientists does not provide a sufficient conceptual apparatus for coming to terms with the full complexity of the relationship between the gift economy and the market.

Sahlins's (1972) analysis takes market exchanges into account, but it considers these under the umbrella of reciprocity relations and describes them as a negative form. As one moves along Sahlins's (1972) spectrum of social relations, as more and more alien members and outsiders become participants in exchanges and, most importantly, as market people become involved in these exchanges, the fear of exploitation increases and there is an inversion of the logic of reciprocity—a switch from generosity to exploitation.

As for the anti-utilitarians, they provide some insights into the question of escape. Authors like Godbout (1994, 1995, 1998) and Godbout and Caillé (1998) think that the market can provide an escape from social networks. But for them, turning to the market is symptomatic of the dissolution of social bonding. They are strong advocates of the primacy of the gift. Thus they believe that privileging the market and challenging the axiology that underpins the gift economy–market antithesis are concomitant with moral and social decline.

Miller (2001) stands in contrast to these authors, for he questions the assumptions underlying the standard interpretation of the gift economy–market antithesis. His work shows that commodity relations have the potential to objectify disinterested manifestations of generosity. Although Miller (2001) does not use the specific term, it is clear that for him commodity relations can be emancipatory. But Miller (2001) not only attempts to invert the standard analysis of the gift economy–market antithesis, he also challenges the very idea of the antithesis itself. His position echoes that of researchers like Granovetter (1985), Joy (2001), and Kozinets (2002), for whom the market is socially embedded. This means that there is no room for escape, that escape is a conceptual impossibility.

The situation is much more complex, however, than the above authors suggest. It cannot be an a priori truth, as Sahlins (1972) implies, that market relations are necessarily located at the far end of the spectrum. In some instances, as CCT researchers have documented, people can have close, trustworthy dealings with those they interact with in the market (Price and Arnould 1999). As for the anti-utilitarian concept of exit, it is problematic because it is imbued

with moral and ideological connotations. It idealizes the gift while treating the market with great suspicion. And Miller's (2001) position is insightful, but it fails to account for the perspective of people who are actually negotiating their way through what—at the very least—they experience as a fundamental opposition. In other words, it neglects the values that people actually attach to the gift economy–market antithesis. Indeed, the present study has shown that this antithesis, which Miller (2001) seeks to overcome, has concrete meaning for the people observed. It reflects a fundamental construction of values that cannot be ignored.

In reality, people constantly move between the gift economy and the market. Deviations from the norm of the gift economy are mainly related to the systems of implacable indebtedness that reciprocity creates. It is important to recognize, however, that withholding requests for gifts, services, and favors from significant others can be a driving force for using the market. Thus researchers must not overlook the essential distinction between the gift of absolution, which reinforces the fundamental axiology underpinning the gift economy–market antithesis, and the escape from the gift economy, which challenges this axiology (see fig. 2).

The fear of indebtedness cannot be equated with selfishness in any simple sense. Indeed, freeing oneself from the obligations of the gift economy may mean freeing oneself from emotional oppression and coercion, as they arise or are exerted in the gift economy.

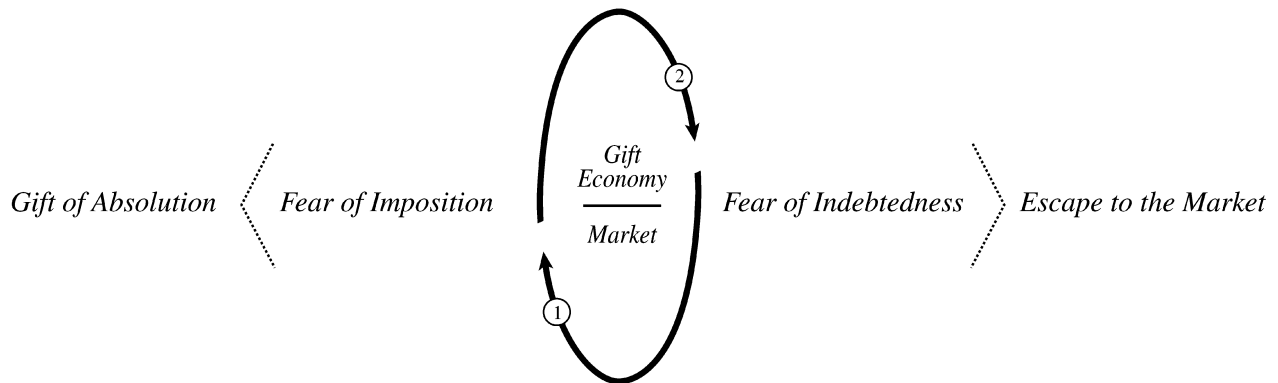
### Implications for Consumer Research

The research presented here accords with the research of Epp and Price (2008) and could enrich the framework that they propose. It shows that people negotiate the social expectations of their relatives by using the market as a complement to the family or as a substitute for it. People may do this to take pressure off their families or to protect them, but they also withdraw—they even attempt to escape completely—from family exchange relationships because of the obligations that are entailed. In a word, the research presented here draws attention to “the ebb and flow” (Epp and Price 2008) of exchange relationships in and out of the family.

However, it also reveals some of the limitations of Epp and Price's (2008) framework. For it shows the need to develop a systematic framework for studying family consumption in a way that better integrates the issues of gift giving, exchanging, and sharing. Epp and Price (2008) discuss intergenerational transfers but remain silent on the logic that governs these exchanges and the power relations that underlie them. The family is at the heart of the gift economy. It is a privileged provider of emotional and instrumental gifts, services, and favors, especially in times of need. It would be an idealistic romanticization of the family (Pitrou 1996), however, to assume that gift exchanges between family members are completely gratuitous and never carry with them the obligation to reciprocate. In times of need, people often have to decide between the family and the market, and this requires that they weigh the instrumental, emotional,

FIGURE 2

## TENSIONS IN THE GIFT ECONOMY



NOTE.—This figure represents the tension between the bright side (*left*) and the dark side (*right*) of the gift economy. The gift of absolution, which is related to the fear of imposition, authorizes a use of the market that does not compromise the primacy of the gift economy. Instead, it reinforces the fundamental axiology. This is depicted by the arrow that points up (1). In contrast, the escape to the market, which is related to the fear of indebtedness, challenges this axiology. It inverts the hierarchy of the gift economy and the market. This is depicted by the arrow that points down (2).

and relational costs and benefits of relying on their relatives for help. As we have seen, some people are afraid of indebtedness and wary of normative expectations. This shows that gift exchanges between relatives are not always gratuitous and that the norm of reciprocity plays a fundamental role in families.

In other words, we need to provide a better account of the dark side of family exchanges and their implications for the market. We need to enrich the current reflections on the generalized form of reciprocity that prevails inside families, as well as among close and intimate relations (Sahlins 1972). A generalized form of reciprocity entails almost no obligation to reciprocate, but it brings with it other forms of personal, intimate, and emotional expectations that have the potential to become oppressive. Epp and Price (2008) discuss at length the use of marketplace resources and the threat that the outsourcing of family tasks to the market may pose. This question is important, but the evidence presented here also shows the need to address the question of the inverse tendency. For it highlights the threat of not turning to the market.

While it is difficult to discuss the family or the gift economy without addressing the question of indebtedness, it is also difficult to analyze the moral aspects of owing without tackling the issue of memory. Indeed, we cannot understand how people choose between the gift economy and the market merely by looking at the record of previous exchanges. When making a decision, people do not simply weigh up what they owe to others with respect to what they have given others. People's personal histories and their most intimate memories (the positive ones as well the negative ones, for instance, those concerning tensions, taboos, and secrets) are important in explaining the choice between the gift economy and the market.

A debt can be paid—and erased—but the memories of

previous exchanges do not simply vanish. On the contrary, they often become part of a person's, a family's, or a network's history. In other words, previous exchanges become part of what Epp and Price (2008) call a person's sense of continuity. Extending the conclusions of these authors' work, it seems safe to suggest that gift economy exchanges are related to identity formation and that indebtedness, particularly when it comes to debts that cannot be paid or to those that are too difficult to bear, will be avoided, at least ideally, so as to ward off threats to personal identity or autonomy. Nevertheless, more investigation may be needed here.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the work on the dark side of the gift, most consumer research has ignored the question of how negative experience in the gift economy can affect attitudes and behavior toward the market. Researchers have analyzed the gift economy and the market separately as two autonomous entities, and they have given almost no consideration to the moral and ideological hierarchy of the two. They have often demonstrated that the gift economy can be a protective haven against the alienation of the market and that gift giving can be a means of appropriating the market, contesting it, or even escaping from it. Yet they have been blind to the inverse tendency. They have failed to see that the unattractiveness of reciprocity relations can lead people to turn away from the gift economy and privilege the market.

The present article has taken a different stance. It has shown that people often confront the social expectations and consequences of the gift economy—for example, they try to avoid indebtedness—by shifting back and forth between the gift economy and the market. But more importantly, and contrary to what the work of many CCT researchers would

lead one to expect, it has shown that people may escape *to* the market. The research presented here offers a fresh look at the fundamental axiology informing our understanding of the gift economy–market antithesis. It suggests that the escape to the market can be understood as an inversion of this axiology. The claim is not, however, that the market can or should be imbued with the higher moral values that consumer researchers and social scientists have traditionally attributed to the gift economy. The claim is that consumer researchers cannot avoid recognizing and questioning the moral and ideological hierarchy of the gift economy and the market. In other words, they must acknowledge that the

antithesis of the two spheres of exchange plays a meaningful role in consumer behavior.

It is hoped that the present discussion will help consumer researchers to achieve a better understanding of how people choose between the gift economy and the market, how they shift back and forth from one to the other, and how they sometimes come to privilege the market over the gift economy, contrary to what CCT research has led us to expect. By recognizing that people sometimes challenge the axiology that underpins the gift economy–market antithesis, researchers will be able to work out a more adequate analysis of the regimes of value that guide consumer behavior.

## APPENDIX

### PROFILES OF INFORMANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Family status	Children	Occupation	New status
Kim	18	F	Single		University student	Tenant
Marie-Sol	18	F	Single		University student	Tenant
Julia	20	F	In couple		University student	Tenant
Caroline	23	F	Single		Horticulturist	Tenant
Julius	25	M	In couple		Delivery person	Tenant
Celine	25	F	Single		Student	Tenant
Charles	26	M	Single		Social worker	Owner
Julie	27	F	Single		Social worker	Tenant
Rupert	28	M	In couple	1 daughter	Municipal employee	Tenant
Marjo	30	F	In couple	1 daughter	Community worker	Tenant
Ann	30	F	Single		Professional researcher	Tenant
Mr. Rivera	34	M	Married	2 daughters, 1 son	Print worker	Tenant
Regina	37	F	Single		Chief nursing assistant	Owner
Mrs. Rivera	38	F	Married	2 daughters, 1 son	Manufacturing worker	Tenant
Gigi	40	F	Single	1 son	Unemployed	Tenant
Sandra	41	F	Separated	3 sons	Unemployed	Tenant
Mrs. Blackburn	41	F	Separated	1 son	Teacher	Owner
Bea	41	F	Separated	2 sons	Teacher	Owner
Mrs. Lambert	42	F	Married	1 daughter, 1 son	Part-time shop assistant	Owner
Mr. Lambert	47	M	Married	1 daughter, 1 son	Electrician	Owner
Mira	49	F	Single	1 daughter	Architect	Owner
Mr. Legrand	63	M	Single		Retired civil servant	Tenant
Mrs. Debray	68	F	Widowed	1 daughter, 2 son	Retired writer	Tenant
Mrs. Bouchard	69	F	Divorced	1 daughter	Retired waitress	Tenant
Mr. Ricard	71	M	Widowed	1 daughter, 3 sons	Retired teacher	Tenant
Mr. Trenet	73	M	Single		Retired musician	Tenant
Mrs. Cabot	78	F	Widowed	2 daughters, 1 son	Retired homemaker	Tenant
Mr. Richer	81	M	Divorced	4 daughters, 2 sons	Retired foreman	Tenant
Mrs. Hebert	89	F	Widowed	2 sons	Retired secretary	Tenant
Mrs. Bolduc	89	F	Single		Retired fashion designer	Tenant

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