

The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England

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This is a hugely welcome book. The informal economy of gifts, favours and support in early-modern England, though of obvious importance, remains extremely elusive. Relationships between early-modern English men and women and their immediate family, their wider kin and ‘friends’, their neighbours and even those whom they had never met were infused with notions of charity, co-operation, and reciprocity. Parents were expected to care for their children, children were expected to love their parents, neighbours were supposed to support each other financially through hard times, and to send money to distant places affected by natural or man-made catastrophes like fires, plagues, and persecution. Mutual support was not confined to the poor: members of the elite supported and patronized their friends’ and kin’s political and economic ambitions, as well as acting as founts of charity to the local needy. It is sometimes assumed that this economy of mutual obligation was eroded in the early modern period, a result of Reformation, state formation, formal poor relief, and the development of market capitalism. Not so, argues Ben-Amos. Certainly there was change, but – the author argues – this was adaptation in the face of new challenges rather than indicative of a ‘traditional’ social system under threat.

In part one, the author presents an overview of the character and form of gift-exchange and informal support. Chapter one reconstructs the parent-child nexus, showing – unsurprisingly – that the relationship was a complex and wide-ranging one. Importantly, it is emphasized that the gift relationship between parents and children was *unequal*. Parents tended to provide much more in the way of cash support, whereas children would reciprocate with non-material gifts such as love and loyalty. This may, of course, be too schematic, and there must have been complex variations between times, places, even households on the same street, but

it is an intriguing and plausible idea which might have significant implications for the economic history of the family. Chapter two emphasizes the complexity of informal, non-familial support, which often involved a considerable degree of mutuality between semi-strangers. Two broad types are suggested: on the one hand there were essentially horizontal relationships (such as between neighbours on a street), built on trust, in which givers expected returns of roughly equal proportions; and on the other, more asymmetrical relationships (e.g. patron-client, master-servant, or lord-tenant), in which social distinctions were greater and in which returns were very divergent. Chapter three adopts a more institutional approach, examining the role of parishes, guilds and associations in fostering mutual support. Here, there are stronger hints of change, with the Reformation doing away with the religious fraternities, while in the 17th century – so the older historiography would have it – informal giving through the parish was gradually swamped by formalized poor relief. This picture is challenged usefully: in London at least (there is little evidence drawn from the remainder of England), parish collections for very diverse charitable causes were going strong in the 18th century. London companies, meanwhile, also continued to provide wide-ranging support to their members. Moreover, as older forms of association disappeared, others sprang up in the form of mutual aid societies, particularly – again – in the capital. This was an alteration to rather than the disintegration of the old economy of mutuality. Finally, in chapter four, more obviously charitable giving is analysed, and while the author makes it clear that some forms of charity, such as the more inclusive elite hospitality, were on the wane, others were simultaneously emergent, most notably associated philanthropy, so that the overall picture was a reordering rather than a decline.

In part two, giving is placed in its broader cultural context, and the ideological pressures favouring gift-giving and some of the social pitfalls are cleverly reconstructed. In chapter five it is argued – plausibly – that gifts reinforced both the status of the giver and their ties of mutuality, conviviality and sociability with the wider community. In chapter six the focus is put more squarely on giving as a reinforcement of honour and reputation: written appeals, for example, showing clearly that the bestowing of patronage was viewed as a way of emphasizing status. It helped, of course, if generosity was displayed conspicuously, and well-publicized gifts to the parish church proved popular partly for this reason. Chapter seven is one of the most interesting, using a range of qualitative source material, such as conduct manuals, courtesy books and funeral sermons, to reconstruct the various discourses of giving. These were complex, with emphasis not just on *noblesse oblige* but on carefulness in *not* giving to unworthy recipients. Funeral sermons are particularly interesting for the light they shed on non-elite conceptions of need and liberality – indeed, historians of the Poor Law will find this a useful window into the cultural worlds of those people likely to hold parochial office. Finally, chapter eight, again extremely useful, looks at the perils associated with gifts, or more particularly with the failure of the gift economy, which was a perennial threat. ‘Exchanges gone awry’ could lead to frustration, resentment and insult between parties which might never heal, while some gifts might confer shame and humiliation on the receiver, notably those associated with poverty.

Part three adopts a more teleological approach, reconstructing the complex relationships between the gift economy and the evolving market and state. Herein lies the crux of the argument, namely that the gift-economy was not expunged or even significantly weakened by early-modern English economic, social and political development, rather it came out altered. Nonetheless, as chapter nine shows, the state was sometimes called to greater prominence at moments of strain, such as during food shortages, when informal networks became frayed. The growing hegemony of wage-labour over service contracts, meanwhile, served to marketize the relationships between employers and employees. Chapter ten, however, shows that the state at times actively encouraged informal giving and support by – for example – licensing begging or issuing ‘briefs’ for collections for particular causes, both at home and overseas. State-backed law courts showed a preference for informal settlement, meanwhile, which served to emphasize neighbourly co-operation. Market development also offered new avenues for giving and for the organization of philanthropy: some charitable organizations were based on joint-stock companies, while newspapers were used creatively to open up potential donors’ purses. In all then, developments sometimes blamed for eroding informal social relations actually in many ways helped them develop.

Overall this is a significant contribution to English social history. Arguments are subtly made and the author

is very good at conveying the complexities of the gift economy in early-modern England. In questioning the easy teleological 'modernization' paradigm the book is very successful. The analysis of diaries, autobiographies, and a number of London parishes and companies is thoughtful and perceptive. In particular, the author's exploration of the discourses of giving in conduct literature and funeral sermons is especially welcome. The book is of considerable relevance to historians of welfare, and most especially those concerned with the so-called 'economy of makeshifts'. The Poor Law is supposed by many to have 'crowded out' informal charity in the community, but there was, the author argues, 'no zero-sum relation between charitable giving and an emerging public relief system'. This is an important point, and one worth dwelling on. It certainly appears there was little crowding out of *endowed* charity: bequests to the author's parishes and institutions clearly accumulated considerably, well after the embedding of formal poor relief in English society. Fasting and occasional charitable briefs were also sustained and revitalised across the period, and it is clear that the support of the poor by their kin, friends and neighbours continued into the 18th century and beyond to the present day in fact. On the other hand, it is still very possible that the quantitative contribution of 'informal support' to the livelihoods of the needy reduced. Recounting the amount of money endowed in various parishes, guilds and institutions is only part of the story: such figures can show absolute growth but simultaneously hide a decline in per capita terms. It is also unhealthy to extrapolate from the experience of London parishes, which were almost certainly considerably better endowed in absolute terms than their rural counterparts.

But it is not just as context for the Poor Law that *The Culture of Giving* is an important addition to the literature. It is also able to show that giving in its exceptionally varied forms was central to social life in early-modern England, and that this centrality was extremely resilient in the face of considerable social change, and development in terms of state institutions and the market. For this, the book is essential reading for the early-modern social historian. Nonetheless, there are some problems, though they do not overly detract from the quality of the book. The argument suffers from the limitations of the source base: most of the manuscript research is centred on London, but the potential distortions of such a focus are not sufficiently acknowledged. When the spotlight shifts to the rest of England (in which around 80-90 per cent of the population lived) the source material is either secondary, or relies upon the standard corpus of published diaries and autobiographies. Many of these are, of course, wonderful documents, and the book does a great service by going into the detail it does, but there are also multiple rich seams of manuscript sources for provincial England which could have been analysed. There seems no reason that the use of court depositions could not have been expanded beyond the Old Bailey, for example, or that the accounts of a few rural parishes could not have been analysed for evidence of charitable collections. It is a particular shame that the author did not turn her expertise to analysing pauper petitions, which Jeremy Boulton and Steve Hindle have shown can shed fascinating light on the kinds of support provided by neighbours and kin to the needy.

The written style is not always particularly accessible: several sentences run on so long that they require multiple readings in order fully to grasp their sense. The ten-line whopper on page 273 is an extreme example. On a couple of occasions, the analysis of a single case study becomes a little too heavy, almost to the point of digression. When the aim is so wide-ranging, it would have been more useful to draw examples widely rather than string out the discussion of one source for several pages.

Finally, there are some knotty conceptual problems, particularly relating to definition. Concepts such as 'the state', 'the market' and 'support systems' are allowed to pass without proper definition, while the concept of the 'gift' is defined but briefly. I for one am sympathetic with the identification of the Poor Law as an arm of the 'state', but not all readers will be without justification. Of course, defining the 'gift' is extremely difficult, and perhaps one of the book's many strengths is conversely that it does not spend too long chasing its tail trying to define gift-giving, but there are times when readers will question the inclusion of a particular kind of relationship and yearn for more conceptual discussion. Membership of friendly societies is one example: these are included largely unquestioningly in the analysis, but in many ways these were simply a form of savings bank: people paid their money in and, when they needed it, they drew from it. This is, of course, related to the older gift economy, but it was also a step closer to modern concepts of actuarial

insurance. The expectations that surrounded apprenticeship are also problematic. Clearly, there were certain things expected of both masters and apprentices, many of which were not explicitly set out in the initial contract, but the fact that at least some of them were enforceable at common law suggests that including them in a study of 'the culture of giving' at the very least problematic and invites conceptual discussion.

These quibbles should not detract too much from the book's importance, however. In tackling a particularly difficult subject, in analysing a wide variety of different types of source material, primary and secondary, and in posing a thoughtful challenge to ideas about 'modernization' and the supposed 'decline of gift-giving' in early-modern England, *The Culture of Giving* more than earns its place on the shelves of any self-respecting social historian of the period. It will not satisfy everyone: those who crave theory will find the book too heavily empiricist (no bad thing) and those who require minute quantification of every aspect of the past will struggle with the overwhelmingly qualitative approach. But everyone should find something here to stimulate their interest in the gift economy, and the society in which it obviously played such a major role.

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