



Research on Gift Alienability from Anthropology Perspective

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Abstract

Economics is usually elaborate economic phenomena from an objective point of view. While Anthropologist is more related with the social and culture field, to describe the sequential change of the particular economic action and bring it to a particular social structure.

As a social behavior, the characteristics of economic activity have notable humanism particularity. The economic study includes not only the data collection or logic calculation, though the universal law exists for the base of academic conjecture. The economic phenomenon also receives influence from integrated factors, full of uncertainty as other human activity. Only if we take the social and cultural background and personal experience into our consideration, the conventional and exceptional economic phenomenon might be more recognizable.

The mutual influence between culture and economy will be examined. Culture has its significant impact on economic activity, and in certain condition, culture or immaterial ideology would become commodity itself. It is inaccessible to interpret these phenomenon by stereotype the classical economic rule mechanically. Besides the traditional practical value, emotional value should also be taken into account. The explanation of economic phenomena would be more thoroughly with the Anthropology perspective involved.

Keywords: Commodity and gift, Practical value, Emotional value, Inalienability

1. Introduction

At the first part, this article start form the questions derived from the discussion of barter exchange. Some anthropologists questioning the essence of those products in the barter market, whether they are commodities same as those one in capitalistic market, or it has gift characters that reflects the social relationship?

Then the discussion turns to the distinctness of commodity and gift, and some notions given out for reference. The inalienability been regarded as one of the main character of gifts.

A different definition of commodities and gifts been defined. There is no absolute boundary between them, and the status could be changed from one to another. The basic factor determines the possibility of exchange is value. This value concerns both the emotional part and the practical one.

2. Start from barter

As an economic phenomenon, "barter" existed in aboriginal sociality and still could be found in some indigenous place. The definition of barter means: to exchange goods for other goods, without the media of "money". There are two kinds of analyses which have different way of explanation.

One of the analyses based on the typical western economic knowledge. Such as Sir James Frazer questioning the "Savage Commerce" with his western economic standard.

"Do the people trade among themselves or with neighbouring tribes? What products are especially exchanged? Is there a special class of traders or merchants? Are there regular markets? ... If so, how are they established? Have the natives any kind of money or anything that passes for money, such as cattle, shells, salt, axes, &c.? Do they employ weights and measures? What are their standards of weight and measure?" (Nicholas Thomas, 1991)

These questions are projected form the typical western point of view. All the notions of "merchants", "market", "money", "weights and measures" and "standards of weight and measure" come from general economic knowledge. And Frazer tries to apply the general economic law to the specific tribe environment by asking these questions.

It is believed that the reason of goods interchangeability is the economic conventional law stands for the essence of commodity value despite the category diversity. And this conventional law is universal. With this understanding, everyone could get involved in all kinds of merchandise exchanges. And the reciprocity and parity of exchange should be insisted. In fact it sounds like the economic theory of Marxism, but have some subtle differences. In this perspective, the goods in barter exchange are more like the commodities.

Another tendency is mostly focus on the social relation part of the barter exchange. It is mainly represent by Bronislaw Malinowski.

“Bronislaw Malinowski has a strong polemical interest in turning his back upon the kind of speculative and detached anthropology epitomized by Frazer’s questionnaires. As we all known, he placed great emphasis on localized and intensive ethnographic study which adopted the native point of view. The aim was to see institutions and behavior in native terms, rather than in the context of some grand hypothetical scheme.” (Nicholas Thomas, 1991)

According to this opinion, the goods used for exchange are primary for expresses a kind of social relationship tie in specifically culture context, not for its practical and economic function. Then the barter is become a kind of special custom with exotic flavor. And the economic role be ignored and the goods in exchanges are more like a gift from one person to another for weave a social network and become an inter-personal dynamical action in the sociality.

3. Commodity and Gift

When talking about the inalienability of the gift, Gregory give the differences of the two as below:

Commodities	Gifts
Alienable	Inalienable
Independence	Dependence
Quantity (price)	Quality (rank)
Objects	Subjects

The set of dichotomies provides a useful departure point by showing that gifts are radically different from commodities. (Nicholas Thomas, 1991)

That is to say the commodities is always ready for exchange only if the values are equal and balance, commodities is something have no emotional or other relations with us except the actual functions. And commodities have a price with have accurate scale.

On the other hand, gift could not be exchanged freely for economic benefit, the common knowledge of practical value equivalence is not applicable to the operational approach. On certain degree, the gift is tightly related with social relations, and as an attachment of its owner.

4. Value and Alienability

But this model is not a perfect one. For instance, I bought a film star’s picture with signature by unreasonable high price, cherish it so much and never change hands. Obviously, the picture is a commodity, because I paid money for it, but one the other hand there are bonds of affections, it is inalienable.

Again, something which are supposed never should be separate from ourselves also could be sold, such as organ and sex, as Nicholas Thomas mentioned in his article. If the organ and sex could be sold, then it is obviously reasonable to sell out a gift. It against the first identity of gift—Inalienable. Another example, during the college years, one of senior student gave some books which are unable to bring home to his friends as gifts before the graduation. And one year later, when his friends also about to graduate from school, they sold out all of these books by a very cheap price. In this case, again, the gifts are alienable. So there are no absolute distinguish between commodities and gifts.

The thing is alienable or not still based on the value. Just the value we mentioned here are not simply an economic scale.

4.1 $Total Value = Practical Value + Emotional Value$

Practical Value

Emotional Value



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Universal economic rule ▪ Regularized ▪ The precondition of exchange is the indistinctive human labor in equal quantity ▪ The analysis of Maxism ▪ In traditional economic field | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Related with social cultural background & personal experience ▪ Diversified ▪ Different from place to place ▪ Different from one individual to another ▪ Different within life period ▪ In Anthropology study field |
|--|--|

Commodities

Gifts

We divide the value as two parts, the practical value and emotional value. And in the process of exchange, only the total value (practical value plus emotional value) of the commodities in exchange are equal with each other, the exchange would be carry out. In another words, the exchange value should be equal with the total value=practical value + emotional value.

And it is a reference frame with the two poles as practical and emotional value. And the two poles are not isolated ones, that means, a commodity would have both practical and emotional value. So inalienable, dependence, quality, and subjects are not the basic precondition of gifts.

4.2 Marxism for explain practical value

From the perspective of practical value, Marxist Economics gave an excellent interpretation.

Once we have determined that the production and exchange of commodities becomes regular and generalized in a society based on an economy of labor-time, on an accounting system in work-hours, we can readily understand why the exchange of commodities, in its origins and inherent nature, rests on this fundamental basis of an accounting system in work-hours and consequently follows this general rule: *the exchange value of a commodity is determined by the quantity of labor necessary to produce it*. The quantity of labor is measured by the length of time it takes to produce the commodity.

(Ernest Mandel, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1967/intromet/ch01.htm>)

Why the goods could be exchanged in barter? It is not unrestricted, but follow the certain rules. There is a commonsense that, for instance, 3 baskets is equal with 1 pair of shoes, why 3 baskets, but not 2 or 4? Because the human labor power spent in 3 baskets is equal with to make of 1 pair of shoes. If under the same labor intensity, to make of 3 baskets and 1 pair of shoes both need the worker spend 7 hours on. So, even without money as media, the exchange of basket and shoes are, essentially, is the exchange of human labor in equal quantity. So, although both of the exchanger did not talk about money or price, and with friendly smile on face, we can't say they are exchange gifts for tie up the social relationship.

Meanwhile, Marxist Economics do not absolutize the equalization. The price will be effected by the condition of supply and demand.

“At a certain price, a commodity occupies just so much place on the market. This place remains the same in case of a price change only if the higher price is accompanied by a drop in the supply of the commodity, and a lower price by an increase of supply. And if the demand is so great that it does not contract when the price is regulated by the value of commodities produced under the least favourable conditions, then these determine the market-value. This is not possible unless demand is greater than usual, or if supply drops below the usual level.” (Karl Marx, 1990)

That is to say when the demand exceeds supply, the exchange price will higher than its practical value, in another word, when the market is short of shoes, than you need exchange 1 pair of shoes by 4 or more baskets. And when the supply exceeds demand, the exchange price will lower than the practical value.

But Marxist Economics also mentioned that, the exchange prices fluctuated around the practical value. “If commodities are sold at their market-values, supply and demand coincide”, “Supply and demand coincide when their mutual proportions are such that the mass of commodities of a definite line of production can be sold at their market-value, neither above nor below it.” (Karl Marx, 1990) Although this condition mostly exists in the possibility of scientific deduction, “supply and demand are always equated when the whole is viewed over a certain period”. (Karl Marx, 1990)

Then, we have the question as mentioned above. Why the extremely high price be paid for a signature of a film star, since the celebrity just spend few seconds for produce it? And why a normal shoes once wore by Michael Jordan, the

exchange price will be rocket up? And why a woman will not give her wedding ring up, even you pay for hundreds times of its practical value?

In those cases, the human labor spent in is extremely inconsistent with its exchange value, and the exchange value totally deviate its practical value without the accordance of supply and demand.

4.3 Explanation of emotional value

The emotional value is related with the social cultural background, and personal experience, it is high diversified, different from place to place, from one to another, for the same person it also change in different life period, and it is the field which anthropologist contribute their effort in.

4.3.1 Related with social cultural background & Differences from place to place

The emotional value is closely related with the culture background or personal experience. This part of value is diversified. It explained why the old colonist could exchange the nature resource by very cheap thing from the local people. There is an old story we read from books that the colonist exchange rare mineral resources, such as iron, they exchange iron with some plastic bead. The practical value of these plastic beads is low in each of the society, but when the colonist comes with the plastic bead, they make the local people believe they are valuable treasure. Then the emotional value of the plastic bead increased highly. The total value is the practical value plus emotional value, for the local people, when the emotional value of these beads is high to balance the practical value of the iron, the total value is equal, and exchange could be performed.

Another situation appeared in the example of Starbucks coffee selling in China. The Starbucks coffee cost about 2 USD in America, but the price is doubled in China, because it believed stand for a kind of life style. So the emotional value increased. Why the price increased when it related with the American life style?

It is undoubted that the western culture represented the developed civilization in the world now. Since it is occupied the highland, and let imagine the culture like a flow of current. The high position culture will be easier to reach and influence the place stay in a lower position. So it is understandable that why the people in developing country usually have a respect attitude to observe the things form developed world. The Starbucks coffee, or the coffee, is one of them. So when it comes to China firstly, it already gains it is nobler bloodline bring from the advanced west culture background. People gladly pay the price, which much higher than its practical value or actual value for been west for a moment by enjoy the products. That is the reason how the culture background influence the emotional value, and by increase it, adds the total value during exchange in market.

Worthy to notice here is that the emotional value not only has the positive influence, but also has its negative affect as well. A typical evidence is the rejection of Japanese products in Korean and China. Objectively, those products have good quality in itself and with high practical value. But due to the historical reason, those products been strict exclusive from the market in a practically period, just for their are bearing the association with the image of negative emotion. So these products have to sell out with low price under the influence of negative emotional value counteract with a high practical value, then the total value decreased as the result.

A precondition exists when the culture background having its affect towards the emotional value. This precondition is customer has a common knowledge about the culture background attached with the commodity. That is to say, in the first instance, the colonist must convince the indigenous people to believe and accept the value of the plastic bead, and in China, American culture should be wild spread and the yearning been engendered.

If without the basic knowledge of the certain culture background, for some kinds commodity, the ignorance of its origin or culture background will weaken the exchange value in the market of a different place. Such as when coffee first come into the Chinese market before the American culture popular here, it is very hard to sell it out with a normal price, because nobody want to taste it, and even after taste, most of people think the taste is ugly, much worse than the tea which they are used to. So the merchant must to first launch a promotion and lowing the price to make the chance of contact with customer, and on the other hand, the emotional value increased by advertisement and select and cultivate elite consumer in the sociality as the representative of this commodity. In this aspect, the merchant are not only doing business, they are definitely the spreader of a certain culture.

There are many examples for the price difference among each area, and that is one of important reasons for international trade. And why many countries are make great effort to spread their culture and popularize their value concept.

4.3.2 Individually & personal experience differences

From the angle of microstructure, the emotional value also different from one to another. That is why the evaluation for same thing is always different.

One this part the emotional value is related with the personal experience for everyone. Just as mentioned above, why I would like pay extremely high price for a signature from my favorite film star? And why a normal pair of shoes once worn by Michael Jordan, the exchange price will be rocket up? And why a woman will not exchange her wedding ring even with a price as hundred times of it's practical value?

The exchange value in these cases definitely goes against with the economical law. And the extremely exchange value are unacceptable, at least for most of members of society. But for certain people, the emotional value is overwhelming. For this reason, he or she could ignore the practical value which are more substantial for others.

In the first and second example, youth fever for their idols, and spent money on the signature, pay for the tickets of movie, buy posters, and even travel for million miles for meet the idol in person, paying for join the fans club. They do it for the emotional need, but not concern the rationality of price and value coincidence. But for the parents, it just wastes money. And for the non-fans, it is impossible to spend money this way, because they are mostly focus on the practical value of the same commodity.

Maybe some one would disprove that there are some people collecting the objects of celebrities not because he or she are fond of them, but for investment and appreciation of value. It is completely an economic action.

If the people do it without personal feeling involved, cultural background and social value plays the role. Since the celebrity has the social influence which increased the emotional value from another way, so the collector willing to pay a price which higher than its practical value, and the common opinion will support it. The cultural background and social value make him believe the investment is beneficial. And the collector finally will attorn encash his collections, he must find a end buyer who are willing to pay higher to realize his benefit in this transaction. The whole thing established on the acceptance and appreciation of the object which come from the recognized emotional value of the celebrity in the society.

Another aspect comes from the increase of personal feeling during the long-term consumption by share the life experience together. It could be used to explain why the senior people prefer to keep the old things, like the old building, furniture, cloth, even there are totally useless but they refuse to replace them for a better thing. In fact, those old stuffs, at the very beginning, there was nothing different from other commodities. And the purpose of purchasing was just for its practical value. As time pass by, the actual practical value were decreased or lost during the consumption. But on the other hand, the emotional value which related with life experience increased its total value. So it become indispensability.

It is same when something is from someone who has a special position in your life, or something is accompany with you during a specific time. The involvement of personal feeling and life experience make it more valuable than others.

4.3.3 Differences in different life period

As mentioned above that the emotional value could be developed during the life experience, meanwhile, this part of value would experience a degressive process as well.

The emotional value for the same thing and the same person is also changing in different period as the context changed. That is way the gift from a lover is invaluable, but after break up, the emotional value will drop back to its practical value, till some degree, the thing will able to be sold, give away, or discard. The gift will become the commodities again.

4.3.4 Diversified

From these instances above, we may found that the practical value has a general standard which could be applied in any situation and agreed by all the people. Then the emotional value is highly diversified, it is hard to create a general system for all, and in each case, the social and culture background, the personal experience, and etc. should be concerned. It is more inclined to humanities field of study rather than data analysis and algorithm.

So the tendency of nowadays economic begin to show it's interesting in the people in economic activities. Ultimately, the economic activity is a kind of human action. So it is not worthy to surprise the Chinese economic develop model broken some of the classical western economic law. It is not a miracle, just things happened in difference social and culture environment.

For the same reason, if we talking about the economic development, it should not be just apply the western model mechanically. The western model succeed in western world, and this model is not a suddenly invention. It has its profound social and culture soil, has its clearly course of philosophy logic during the centuries of development. If someone want to copy the western system or apply the western theory to a totally different environment, the result is not guaranteed, such as those cases in Africa. The developing of policy should always take account of the social and culture background as an indispensable factor.

4.3.5 In Anthropology study field

The purpose of anthropology which extent its study field in economy is to view economics as 'culture'. In other words, importance is given to the study of economic processes related to the social and cultural contexts.

“Economic anthropology is a linking between economic and social life. Similar to evolutionary psychology in that it attempts to use one branch of scientific theory and thought to explain another. In this case, it is an attempt to describe anthropological characteristics as rooted in economic factors.”

(http://www.cateringa.com/articles/Economic_anthropology)

If we regard the practical value is the general standard which will play the rule in any sociality, then the emotional value are developed from the certain culture background, this value is given from a social impression. And it is different from one place to another, different among peoples.

So compare with the practical value, the emotional value is more changeable in a certain period. The proportion of emotional value deciding if the exchange could be performed, and the increase and decrease of the emotional value deciding the product is more close to commodity or gift.

5. The application of emotional value in business

In today's business, the emotional part of value been more recognized. And the usage of advertisement is one of the measures to increase the emotional feeling by wilder the social affection. And some of advertisement linking the image of certain product with one of famous singer or film star, on the one hand is use the reputation of this celebrity to popularize the knowledge of the product, and link it with noble life, high quality and so on; on the other hands is also try to add the emotional value in the eyes of fans, to channel their loyalty towards the star to the product which have their idol as spokesperson.

After the successful image establish and with the good feedback of fine quality, this circulation moving towards a positive direction, the product will build up its own reputation, become a famous brand. Then it will have its own stable consumer who affectional attached to this brand and loyal for it. This add the emotional value into this product and explain why people willing to pay more for the product from a famous brand.

Doctor Janelle Barlow mentioned in her book as below;

Our society is rapidly moving from a service economy to an experience economy. As a result, today's more sophisticated consumers not only demand services and products that are of the highest quality; they also want positive, emotionally sensitive, and memorable experiences. The organizations that learn how to add emotional value to their customers' experiences will leapfrog their competitors.

Emotional value is the economic value or monetary worth of feelings when customers positively experience products and services. Emotional value, as much as quality or any other dimension of an organization's worth, can make or break a business. It is as concrete as that!

And she suggest the companies think serious of emotional value in their production or service, she offer five measures for adding emotional value. They include:

- Building an emotion-friendly service culture
- Choosing emotional competence as your organization's service model
- Maximizing customer experiences with empathy
- Viewing complaints as emotional opportunities
- Using emotional connections to increase customer loyalty

"Emotional value will help speed up the day when businesses not only provide good service, but truly engaging experiences." (Joe Pine & Jim Gilmore, 1993) (Janelle Barlow, 2000)

6. The emotional value and gift

So what is the relationship between emotional value and gift? What is the determinative factor of commodity exchange possibility? When the emotional value is maximized, overwhelming its practical value or actual value, then it is impossible to exchange it out. The gift is the object added with emotional value during the transfer. But the exchange of commodities does not have this particularity.

When the emotional value is maximized, the practical value could be ignored. The precondition of equality in the give and take would be broken. That's why everything from the people whom you attaches importance to is a treasure, and it doesn't matter for the real friends to exchange gift as a golden pen with a common book.

But the situation of emotional value maximum occurs rarely. In most cases the emotional value has its upper limit. So the total value has its upper limit. The practical value must have a concern in total value equivalency. When you

received a gift from others, you should weighing the total value and return, by substance or affection. That is accord with the “debt” mentioned in Nicholas Thomas’s article. Sometimes, gift is also a kind of exchange, just by different way.

7. Conclusion

There is no absolute boundary for the products has inherent quality to be commodity or gift. And the Inalienability is not the partition between them. The determinant of alienable or not is the value, the value is the integration of practical value and emotional value. The thing we consider as a gift, is not because the inalienability. Instead of that, the essentially reason is the emotional value is relative higher. It could not be given out easy unless exchange with something has the same value in total.

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