

## Earmarking, Matching and Social Order

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One of Viviana Zelizer's most useful analytical contributions is to have made us painfully aware of how hard it is to avoid the pitfalls of what she calls the "nothing but" and the "hostile worlds" approaches to intimate transactions (Zelizer 2000). "Nothing but" mistakes are typical of academics, who often reduce intimate economic arrangements to the one single dimension they have expertise on (e.g., self-interest, power, culture) –in some ways, this is what Pierre Bourdieu (2000) calls the "scholastic fallacy:" taking one's intellectualized view of the world for the real thing. "Hostile Worlds" approaches, on the other hand, refer to the analytical and prescriptive mistake of considering that personal relations and money are radically incommensurable and should not be allowed to mix. But fears of commodification and pollution through money are deeply misguided, Zelizer argues: empirically, life is both more complex and less clear-cut than that: people contest these boundaries all the time in their everyday lives. Maintaining normative distinctions between personal relations and money at all costs leads to all kinds of contradictions and, often, to bad policies. Money, Zelizer reminds us time and again, does not uniformly dry up social ties. Rather, it organizes them by revealing how people perceive and relate to one another.

And so, to capture the fluid, constructed-in-the-relationship nature of intimate economic transactions, Zelizer offers a different vocabulary. The concept of "differentiated ties" modernizes, in a way, the old sociology of roles by acknowledging how thickly embedded, problem-solving individuals develop different but stable personas depending on the form and content of the intimate transactions they carry out. The concepts of "earmarking," so central to *The Social Meaning of Money* (1994), and that, more recent (e.g., Zelizer 2011), of "good matches," point to a form of intentionality in these processes, sometimes more habitual and pragmatic, sometimes self-conscious and strategic. These concepts mark an important analytical point: people and institutions work hard to find means of payments that are *suitable* and appropriate to the relationships they are involved in. Together they form a theoretical stance that is very consistent with the core tradition in American sociology, from pragmatism to interactionism.

This theoretical stance inevitably raises the question of where people get their nearly instinctive knowledge about the "good matches" they habitually make between modes of payments and personal relations—i.e., matches that "sustain the relationship" and "get the economic work done." In its original form, the *Social Meaning of Money* was more silent about *bad* matches—the *gaffes*, *faux-pas*, and calls to order that Erving Goffman (1967) studied in another context. But the interview data from the college economy that Zelizer reported on at this conference raised precisely the possibility of uncertainty and social blunders in the earmarking and matching process (also see Zelizer 2006). College students worry tremendously about making mistakes when offering in-kind or in-cash gifts to their less privileged classmates, for instance. Is their generosity over-the-top and patronizing? Is the medium appropriate? And if they are on the receiving end, should they accept it and how? Will the gift put them in debt, and undermine the presumed equality in the relationship? The students seem to be aware, in a confused sort of way, that the delicate equilibrium that their cross-class friendships have achieved may be at stake in such exchanges. At stake, too, are their feelings about themselves, their social persona, their place in the broader Princeton society.

So how do they know the unwritten rules for navigating these treacherous social situations? Where does their sense of what is appropriate come from?

The form that people's *expressive* economic transactions take, the meanings they ascribe to exchange, are articulated not only with their location in the social structure but also with the structural features of the relation that is being expressed that way. Thus the enormously involved interactional work that people do around their personal relations --their choice of tender, of course, but also their choice of words, and all the unspoken aspects of the interaction: the placement of the body, the gestures, the looks that accompany the transactional moment--, all of this is a powerful reminder that individuals differentiate because they (and their personal relations) *are themselves differentiated*: by class, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, and much more.

Thus the systematic differentiation of ties and the complicated symbolic dances we all do necessarily brings the analytical focus back on to social hierarchies, inequalities, and power relations. As Zelizer suggests, the differentiated modes of payment of a prostitute, a mistress, or a wife contributes to the reproduction of a certain kind of gender order --in fact it is through these processes of symbolic differentiation that the order truly takes shape.

In other words, people certainly produce meanings through the symbolic use of goods and money, but (to paraphrase Karl Marx) they do so out of circumstances not of their own choosing: the institutional order they navigate and negotiate in their everyday economic transactions comes powerfully structured. Erving Goffman, again, highlighted a similar point, when he referred to the "institutional

order" that always stands behind the "interaction order" in his Presidential address to the American Sociological Association: "It is in these processing encounters, then, that the quiet sorting can occur which, as Bourdieu might have it, reproduces the social structure." (Goffman, 1983, 8) Prices, tenders, and special monies not only differentiate: they hierarchize. They exclude or include, stigmatize or honor, humiliate or glorify.

Managing social difference in a democratic society is a delicate exercise. But it is an exercise that happens everywhere and all the time. First, as Mauss (2000) reminds us, the cycle of social life depends on people being in debt to others, and thus on the marking of a difference, even if it is temporary. But it is that very difference, when counteracted by reciprocation --however clumsy or lopsided-- which allows for the establishment and maintenance of the social bond. Olav Velthuis's collectors and artists understood that better than anyone, who created a market out of a cycle of gift and counter-gift. We can recognize in their actions a most general rule of social life --that it arises out of exchange, not the other way around. Second, if exchange is primary, then *how* exchange is performed matters a lot too. Laurence Fontaine's aristocrats understood that, too, who paid their creditors through gifts rather than money, a surer way of maintaining their place in a formally unequal social hierarchy. And so do Viviana Zelizer's undergraduate students, except that, living in a society committed to formal, if not economic equality, they are much more conflicted about it --as are their counterparts in the gift relationship. The effect, however, is quite the same. A social order is being performed and constructed (or reconstructed) in the exchange process, very confidently in the first case, and more obliquely in the second.

## References

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