

A 100000 years journey ~8 min read

ORIGINS • EXCHANGE • MEMORY

DIVERGENCE

How humanity shifted from **collaborative gift economies** to **competition-first systems**

For 90,000 years, humans lived in gift economies. Then everything changed.

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HISTORICAL SHARE

90%
of human history was gift-based



TRANSITION START

~10 k
years ago the crack opened



MARKET ADOPTION

98%
market economy by 1990

Based on research by Polly Wiessner, Marshall Sahlins, and Elinor Ostrom

For **90,000** of the last **100,000** years, humans thrived without markets.

We shared. We gifted. We built networks of mutual obligation that stretched across continents. Then something cracked.

90k

years of gift economies

10k

years of transition

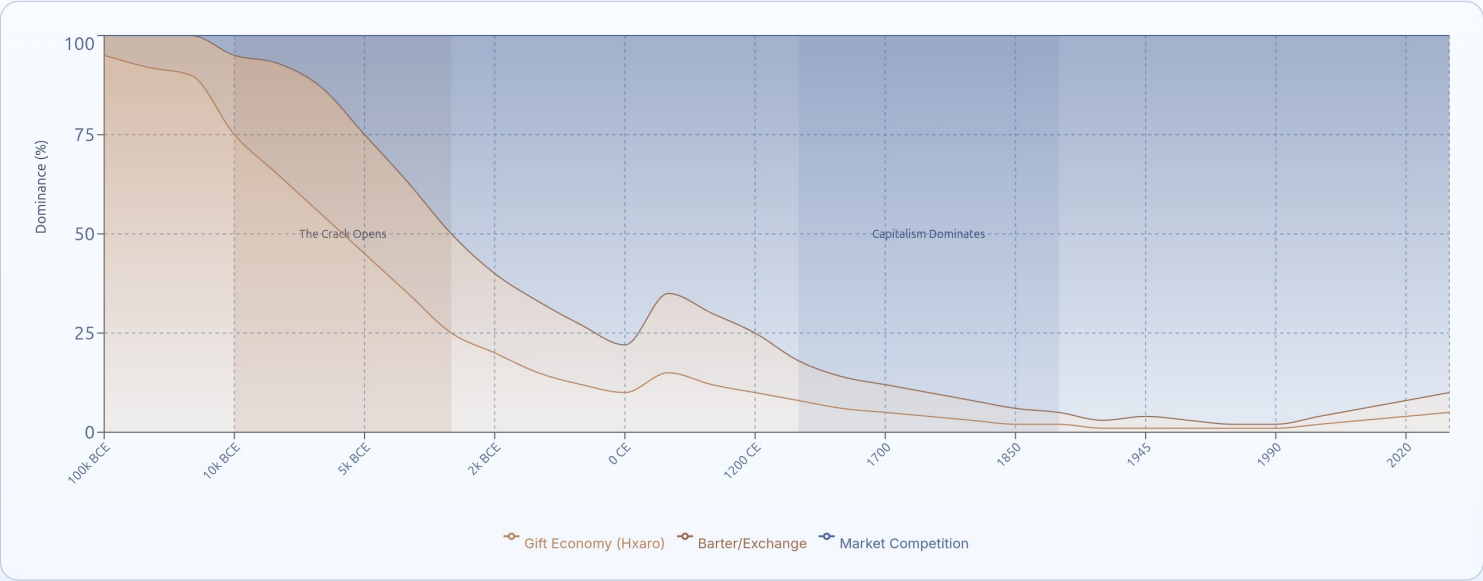
~250

years of pure market dominance

100,000 Years of Economic Evolution

Watch the dominance of gift economies collapse as markets rise

Active mode: Stacked long-view dominance



Hover/tap data points for details · Toggle views above · Data synthesized from anthropological research



The Crack: Critical Turning Points

Seven moments that fractured humanity's cooperative foundations. Click any event to explore deeper.

10,000 BCE
Agricultural Revolution
Surplus enables trade, weakens gift economy
[Click to learn more >](#)



3,000 BCE
Private Property
Ownership replaces communal sharing
[Click to learn more >](#)



500 BCE
Coinage Spreads
Money enables abstracted value exchange
[Click to learn more >](#)



1500
Mercantilism
National competition for wealth
[Click to learn more >](#)



1776
Capitalism Codified
Adam Smith legitimizes self-interest
[Click to learn more >](#)



1800
Industrial Revolution
Mass production, wage labor dominates
[Click to learn more >](#)



[Click to learn more](#)



1980

Neoliberal Turn

Markets über alles, deregulation

[Click to learn more >](#)

What is Hxaro?

Hxaro is the gift-exchange system of the **Ju/'hoansi (!Kung San)** of the Kalahari — one of the oldest economic systems ever documented. Not a quaint custom, but a **sophisticated regional network** connecting ~2,000 people across 200km of desert through bonds of mutual generosity.

15 each
Avg Partners

200 km
Max Distance

69%
Possessions from Hxaro

33K+ yrs
Archaeological Age

A Living Web Across the Desert

Each Ju/'hoansi person maintained an average of **15 hxaro partnerships** with kin living between 2 and 200 km away. Both men and women maintained these networks equally.

People spent **4.4 months per year** living away from home with their hxaro partners — not as guests, but as family with full rights to hunt and gather on partner territory.

In 1974, Polly Wiessner documented that **69% of all possessions** in the /Kae/kae camp had been received as hxaro gifts. Almost everything people owned was a gift from someone they loved.

Network Mathematics

Population connected	~2,000 people
Partners per person	~15
Total active partnerships	~15,000
Geographic range	200 km radius
Months away/year	4.4 months
Items from hxaro	69%
Hops to reach anyone	~2-3

With 15 partners each having 15 partners, anyone in the network was reachable in 2-3 hops — a small-world network 30,000 years before the internet.

The World's Gift Networks

Gift economies weren't just a Kalahari phenomenon — they emerged independently on every inhabited continent. From Pacific canoe voyages to Arctic potlatches, humanity kept rediscovering the same truth: **generosity scales**.

Four continents. Thousands of years. The same discovery.

These systems weren't anomalies — they were **the norm** of human economic history. From 18 island communities in the Kula Ring to 11 million South Africans in stokvels today, the pattern is clear: humans are wired for generosity, and it works at scale.

The Fundamental Shift

Two radically different approaches to organizing human economic life



Before: Collaboration First

100,000 BCE — 10,000 BCE

- Work: 15-20 hrs/week**
Ju/'hoansi worked less than modern workers and had diverse, nutritious diets (Sahlins, "original affluent society")
- Inequality: Gini \approx 0.25**
Hunter-gatherer societies had some of the lowest inequality ever measured — comparable to modern Scandinavia
- Social ties: 15+ partners**
Average person maintained 15 deep reciprocal relationships spanning 200 km — a living safety net
- Gender: Near-equal**
Wiessner documented equal hxaro participation between men and women; decisions made by consensus
- Ecological footprint: \sim 1 Earth**
Populations lived within carrying capacity for 90,000+ years — the longest sustainability record in history
- Knowledge: Open & shared**
69% of possessions received as gifts — skills, tools, and information flowed freely through the network



After: Competition First

1776 — Present

- Work: 40-60+ hrs/week**
Average American works 47 hrs/week; burnout affects 77% of workers (Gallup 2023)
- Inequality: Gini \approx 0.70 (global)**
Top 1% own more wealth than the bottom 50% combined; gap widening since 1980s
- Social ties: declining**
Average Americans have 0-1 close friends (2021 Survey Center); loneliness epidemic declared by US Surgeon General
- Gender: Persistent gap**
Global gender pay gap of 20%; women do 2.5x more unpaid care work (ILO)
- Ecological footprint: 1.7 Earths**
Humanity uses 1.7 Earth's worth of resources annually; Earth Overshoot Day now falls in July
- Knowledge: Paywalled**
\$10B+ academic publishing industry locks publicly-funded research behind subscriptions; 85% of patents never used

Why Did the Crack Happen?

Three cascading developments that fundamentally rewired human economic behavior



~10,000 BCE

Agricultural Surplus

For the first time, humans produced more than they needed. This surplus could be stored, owned, and traded — breaking the immediate sharing cycle of hunter-gatherers. Villages grew, populations exploded, and the concept of "mine vs. yours" took root.



~5,000 BCE

Private Property

Land, animals, and resources became "owned" by individuals or families. Legal codes formalized exclusion. Once you can prevent others from accessing resources, competition replaces sharing as the dominant economic logic.



~3,000 BCE

Money & Abstraction

Currency allowed value to be stored and accumulated indefinitely. Social relationships became transactions. You no longer needed to know someone to trade. Delayed reciprocity — the foundation of gift economies — died.

Each development amplified the others. Surplus enabled property. Property demanded protection. Protection required currency. Currency enabled accumulation. Accumulation created inequality. And the crack became a chasm.

What If GDP Goes

The assumption that cooperation lowers economic output ignores a massive blind spot: **the hidden tax of competition**. Competition makes individuals work harder — but collaboration makes the *group* work smarter.

Every year, competition wastes an estimated

\$3.3T+

in duplicated effort, zero-sum battles, and trust deficits



\$500B+

Duplicated R&D

Tap to learn more



\$900B+

Advertising Wars

Tap to learn more



\$200B+

IP Litigation & Hoarding

Tap to learn more



\$300B+

Transaction Overhead

Tap to learn more



\$1T+

Mental Health Costs

Tap to learn more



\$400B+

Planned Obsolescence

Tap to learn more

The kicker: GDP counts all of this waste as "economic activity." When Coca-Cola and Pepsi spend billions on ads, GDP goes *up*. When a company sues a competitor, GDP goes *up*. When someone has a breakdown from work stress and sees a therapist, GDP goes *up*.

GDP measures activity, not value. And competition inflates activity while destroying value.

Explore the Correlations

Toggle data layers to discover how cooperation, inequality, wellbeing, and ecological impact relate across 100,000 years

3 / 6 layers active



Hxaro Ego Pressure Profile

You will see 20 core prompts and up to 3 clarifiers. Rate each one from 1 to 10.

Not at all = 1 · Very much = 10 · scenario-lite prompts allow "Not enough context" · science signal: Trait competitiveness and dominance motive reliability research (2022–2025)

Matrix-balanced form: 5 traits × 4 contexts.

Question 1 of 20

Answered: 3/20

Scored: 3 · Marked not-enough-context: 0

SELF-FOCUS & CREDIT NEED · PERFORMANCE 5

Trait: Self-focus & Credit Need

Context: Performance

How much do you optimize for personal brand in projects?

Select one number.

Not like me

Very like me

Selected: -- / 10

Build Your Own Economy

Tune the three cultural levers below and watch wellbeing, inequality, ecological health, and real value rebalance in real time.

Economic Values

Competition ↔ Cooperation 50%
Full Competition Full Cooperation

Accumulation ↔ Sharing 50%
Full Accumulation Full Sharing

Individualism ↔ Community 50%
Full Individualism Full Community

QUICK PRESETS

Predicted Outcomes

48% Mixed trajectory

- Wellbeing** 50% Balanced
- Inequality** 50% Balanced
- Eco Health** 50% Balanced
- Resilience** 50% Balanced
- Innovation** 50% Balanced
- GDP (measured)** 45% Balanced
- Real Value Created** 38% Watch

A mixed economy. Notice how real value starts rising as cooperation increases — the network effects and trust dividends begin outweighing competitive waste.

The Modern Question

We live in the most materially abundant period in human history, yet our economy is built on scarcity. But look closer — **cooperation is making a comeback**.



1991

Open Source Software

Linux, Wikipedia, Firefox — Harvard study found \$8.8 trillion in demand-side value created through voluntary collaboration

\$8.8T value



2001

Creative Commons

Over 2 billion works shared under open licenses, enabling free knowledge exchange

2B+ works



2020

Mutual Aid Networks

COVID-19 saw explosion of community mutual aid — food, medicine, care distributed freely

800+ US networks



1844

Cooperative Movement

Over 3 million cooperatives worldwide employing 280 million people, owned by members

3M+ co-ops



1986

Gift Economy Festivals

Burning Man and similar events operate on gifting principles — no money exchanged

80k+ participants



1980

Time Banking

Exchange hours of service rather than money — everyone's time valued equally

500+ time banks

The cooperation uptick is real — but tiny

90% Market economy (2024) **5%** Gift economy (2024)

Could we close the crack? Or has 10,000 years of competitive systems made collaboration-first economies impossible at scale?

💡 What If?

Imagine Closing the Crack

Not going back — but forward. Combining ancient wisdom with modern capabilities. What would a gift economy look like with the internet?

Digital Hxaro Networks

Growing

AI-powered platforms matching needs with offerings across communities. Already happening: Mutual Aid Hub connects 1,000+ networks; Olio shares 8M+ portions of food; Buy Nothing groups serve 7M+ members across 44 countries.

Commons-Based Peer Production

Emerging

Open source beyond software. Open Source Ecology builds open-source industrial machines. FairPhone designs repairable electronics. Open Insulin Project reverse-engineers affordable insulin. Wikipedia already proved the model.

Universal Basic Services

Debated

Decommodifying essentials so market competition is optional, not survival. Finland's housing-first policy cut homelessness 35%. Costa Rica provides universal healthcare at 1/10 US cost with better outcomes. Barcelona's Decidim platform lets 400K+ citizens shape policy directly.

Regenerative Economics

Pioneering

Waste becomes input, value circulates. Mondragon cooperative employs 80,000+ worker-owners with 6:1 pay ratios. Patagonia gave itself to the Earth. Doughnut Economics adopted by Amsterdam, Brussels, and 50+ cities as their development framework.

The Hxaro Principle, Updated



Give without counting

The relationship IS the return on investment



Network over hierarchy

Distributed systems are more resilient than centralized ones



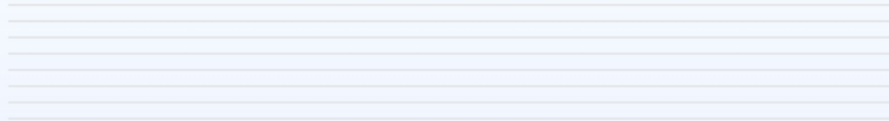
Circulate, don't accumulate

Value that flows creates more value than value that's hoarded

"We have a system that increasingly taxes work and subsidizes non-work."

Charles Murray

The paradox of modern market economies



What if we could

The Hxaro story isn't just history — it's a blueprint. For 90,000 years, humans proved that cooperation works. The question is whether we have the courage to learn from it.

🔄 Start with ego profile

Before joining, take the 20-question Ego Scan so we can protect a reciprocity-first network culture.

RECOMMENDED READING

Debt: The First 5,000 Years
David Graeber

Stone Age Economics
Marshall Sahlins

The Gift
Lewis Hyde

Doughnut Economics
Kate Raworth

Built with data from Wiessner, Sahlins, Graeber, and others · Navigate with ← → keys