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Wertewelten Essay Competition Entry

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Why do human beings help one another? A perspective on the Newfoundland world of values

I grew up in Newfoundland, a large island off the coast of Eastern Canada with a small population that is often seen as unsophisticated by the rest of the country. Throughout my twenties I have spent considerable time in mainland Canada and Europe, and various experiences have shown me that Newfoundland has an unusual value system, largely because of the unique society that it has developed. Whenever I go back to the island, I feel the difference in its value system as something tangible and I have long been preoccupied with exploring this difference and trying to identify reasons for it. In this essay I would like to explore the meaning of helpfulness in Newfoundland society, or as social psychologists would term it, the "norm of reciprocity."

Until very recent times the classic form of Newfoundland social organisation was the tiny fishing village or 'outport.' Such communities were generally very poor until Confederation with Canada, and for a large part of Newfoundland's history were tightly controlled by the fishing merchants, who supplied fishing families with food and supplies in return for fish in a non-money economy built on a system of credit. The margin of survival was very narrow for many communities, and the residents developed a system of mutual assistance, helping each other in the knowledge that when they themselves were in need, others would help them in return. The high importance of mutual help was partly a product of the harsh conditions of outport life and partly due to the lack of money, which meant that services rendered had to be paid for in other ways. This web of favours owed and returned has made Newfoundland an unusually cohesive society. While the extended family network was (and is) a major vehicle for the giving and receiving of help, the outport community more generally could not have functioned without such co-operation at a time when there was no social security system to support its members through difficult periods. For example, owners of local stores would often unilaterally write off debts owed to them by families in diminished circumstances. The community struggle to survive is the origin of many of the self-beliefs and social views held by Newfoundlanders. It is often said that people in Newfoundland "would never let each other starve," for example. Though homelessness is generally rare in the province, the idea of it causes distress, as does the possibility that provision for the elderly may not be adequate, or that the medical system might be failing patients. Generally, the notion that other people may not be receiving what they need provokes an extraordinary level of indignation, and the Newfoundland media harness this public concern as a means of forcing the government to address such issues.

It is instructive to ponder the place of helpfulness in the general constellation of values in Newfoundland. The system of mutual help went with an almost complete lack of social class distinctions in the outport community, and even today Newfoundlanders remain largely indifferent to ideas of social hierarchy, at any rate in the sense of any sort of traditional class system. In particular, the distinction between middle class and working class, so integral to the modern Western outlook, does not seem to form part of the Newfoundland world view. Other

features associated with the struggle for survival and the exchange of favours include a profound discomfort with conflict and disagreement, a general dislike of extreme points of view, a concern for fairness in the allocation of resources (shown for example in the traditional distribution of fishing spots by an annual lottery), and a critical attitude to top-down government, expressed in the long-standing antagonism between the capital St John's and its 'Townies,' and everywhere else, populated by 'Baymen.' It is interesting to compare Newfoundland's history, especially its very late development of money-based capitalism, with early modern England, in which the advance of agrarian capitalism was accompanied by the development of absolute property rights and the extinction of common land, laying the foundation for a deeply stratified modern class system and eroding traditional networks of exchange. From this point of view, Newfoundland may perhaps represent an earlier stage of British/Irish social development, or perhaps its society is unique to its own special circumstances. Particularly as regards property rights, it is remarkable that proof of ownership of land was often not necessary in Newfoundland outport society, in stark contrast to England. A family's occupation of a particular piece of land was a matter of general tacit acceptance, built on the norm of community co-operation, and therefore did not require title deeds or an entry on a Land Registry. Even today in some isolated areas of Newfoundland, lawyers are in the process of establishing property boundaries by taking down oral testimony from the oldest inhabitants of various tiny communities. Indeed, more isolated communities in Newfoundland often had to exist without the benefit of law, order and good government, and in most cases succeeded in regulating themselves well--a fact which would have startled Thomas Hobbes and gratified Rousseau.

While the strength of the norm of reciprocity has its roots in a unique set of economic circumstances, it is also interesting to observe its translation into more formal political terms. The combination of the norm and the lack of social stratification in outports is arguably partly responsible for the power of labour unions in modern Newfoundland, which is the most unionised province in Canada, but the most interesting historical example of the norm's power is probably the social-political-economic experiment conducted by William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union, which he founded in 1908. Coaker was a farmer in the area of Herring Neck, a tiny community on the English Shore of Newfoundland, but he was born the son of a carpenter in St John's and thus came from a similar social background to the contemporary artisans who provided the intellectual leadership for the British socialist movement. Coaker critiqued the St John's merchant class and Establishment as exploitative, in terms derived in part from his reading of the Victorian English socialist William Morris. (This was not the first time that Newfoundlanders had transposed European political theory to their own circumstances: John Locke also had a significant impact on St John's politics.) The most interesting aspect of Coaker's vision is its wide-ranging nature, however. He envisioned fishing communities co-operating to take control of their future and provide everything for themselves and one another, including regulation of the fishery itself, hospitals, education for children, and old-age pensions. Although eventually defeated by Establishment interests, the movement is fascinating for the way in which it appears to have developed the norm of reciprocity into a highly sophisticated blueprint for a new, fairer and more independent society.

From my (admittedly highly subjective) standpoint, the norm of reciprocity still has great value in Newfoundland life today. Newfoundlanders are capable of behaving with a generosity that often startles foreigners. For example, catastrophes in other parts of the world tend to be felt

with an immediacy that is remarkable given Newfoundland's isolation. I was in the province during the recent Haitian earthquake, and for weeks on end it formed the major subject of conversation and focus of charitable giving. Indeed, Newfoundland gives more per capita to charity than any other province in Canada, although it is traditionally one of the least prosperous. During the September 2001 attacks on New York many American flights were rerouted to the small airport in Gander, Newfoundland, where passengers were given food, shelter and the necessities of life in a spontaneous display of generosity by local residents. On a more everyday level, the sharing of food that helped outport communities survive is still a feature of modern Newfoundland social behaviour: for example, my parents often find neighbours or former students at their front door with unexpected presents of fish or other food that they have harvested. Informal collections for expensive medical treatment or presents for sick children are usually overwhelmingly successful. It appears that the norm of reciprocity has become so strong that generosity has come to be regarded as a good in itself, bringing the giver satisfaction even when there is little prospect of receiving a return on the favour. It may be that Newfoundlanders instinctively know that cohesion and stability in their society is built on such foundations.