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Suspicious Gifts: Bribery, Morality, and Professional Ethics

Malin Åkerström

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Thought-provoking books sometimes require readers to "connect the dots" to clearly envision a new picture of the times. Such is the case with sociologist Malin Åkerström's book, *Suspicious Gifts*. The work highlights cases and controversies that have arisen in a country widely viewed as among the least corrupt in the world. Proud of this status, Swedish people have developed what Åkerström and others call "the bribery gaze." This gaze, a relatively recent phenomenon, is realized in an "intense questioning of the exchanging of gifts … to see bribes and corrupt behavior where one before saw merely gifts, hospitality, or work routines" (162). The result is the moral construct of "suspicious gifts"—a category of actions deemed to undermine the social democratic version of fair markets, appropriate opportunities, and equitable compensation for performance, absent influence.

Formerly, Swedish sociologists were adjusted to the idea that connections, friendships, and the giving of small gifts could be instrumental in getting desirable jobs or business deals in a state-dominated environment where decision makers had discretion not largely constrained by a need to protect profits. However, norms change—in Sweden's case because of an "anticorruption project" that gained momentum around 2008. The project, while academically supported, was bureaucratically administered with laws, regulations, and organizational policies intended to identify, prevent, and punish corruption. The result was a more watchful state where even a bouquet of flowers or a box of candy might put someone's actions under the suspicious gifts spotlight. For some, the situation eerily calls to mind Alexis de Tocqueville's vision of a despotic democracy that covers the surface of social life with a network of small, complicated rules that stupefy people and bend their will (*Democracy in America*, 1835, chap. 6).

Understandably, Sweden's aim was to deter dubious acts of influence that weaken the link between performance and fair rewards (114). Lamentably for Swedes, the outcome censors basic freedoms essential to community, human happiness, and social flourishing.

As the author explains, "When it transpired that giving or receiving of what had been considered 'simple gifts'—two bottles of wine, dinner at a restaurant, theater tickets, a shawl, a basket of fruit—could evolve into accusations of bribe taking, my interest turned to these contending interpretations of societal interaction" (161). What Åkerström found is that when state socialism grows large, almost anything done for reasons of generosity or camaraderie can result in one's honor and reputation being called into question, especially in a secularized environment where people's sense of morality and integrity is tied narrowly to matters of financial propriety. The result is a climate of inhibition, inconsistent with the larger project of liberal tolerance fostered by social democratic states (65, 173).

The ubiquity of government in the state-dominated society means that authorities must be watchful and even invasive, if necessary, to prevent damage from perceptions of corruption and favoritism. However, bureaucratic attempts to embellish correctitude (as contrasted with culturally enabled and defended propriety) can produce anticorruption institutions that further enlarge the state, thus calling the legitimacy of governance into question. The dependence of society on the will of the state is further highlighted as an attention-hungry media works to turn minor scandals into "background music" (95).

Åkerström pushes back a bit against the state-dominated model by providing examples of how Swedish foreign-aid workers can think creatively to avoid capitulating to bribery demands in developing countries where bribery is a way of life. Allowing for courage and initiative, individual integrity based on conscience remains consequential. Defending liberty without fully interweaving liberty arguments, Åkerström argues that gifts and generosity as expressions of gratitude nourish healthy relationships (122–28). Nonetheless, Åkerström's work would benefit from greater attention to constructs that differentiate innocent gifts from suspicious gifts, and suspicious gifts from stealth or de facto bribery. This is especially important when it comes to large sums of money or special business opportunities for former state officials (114–15).

For example, *Suspicious Gifts* only moves part way toward a framework by which readers could decide whether the former Fed Chair Ben Bernanke acts with moral fidelity in accepting a $250,000 speaker fee from bankers in Abu Dhabi. Back in 2009, the Federal Reserve's easy money policies (including an effective federal funds rate of 0 to 0.25 percent, massive expansion of the Fed's balance sheet, and generous TALF [Term Asset-Backed Securities Loan Fund] collateral provisions) essentially backstopped Abu Dhabi's governing elite from bailing out the extensive, highly leveraged building projects of its neighboring emirate, Dubai. (See, "Bernanke enjoys 'fruits of free market' with first post-Fed speech," March 4, 2014, www.Reuters.com.)

Based on President Bill Clinton's enormous speech earnings subsequent to leaving office (over $13 million in 2011 alone), the *shrewd anticipation* of "financially demonstrated appreciation" from global elites could contribute to crony capitalist actions by political officials. If the anticipatory giving of flowers or a shawl by common folks can be questioned under the suspicious gifts gaze in Sweden, where does a $4,000-per-minute central banker's speech fit in subsequent to a central bank's provision of the cheapest money in history? Arguably, it fits in with Åkerström's assent to Marcel Mauss's proposition that knowledgeable people understand an obligation to return something of value subsequent to receiving a substantial gift (3, 133–39). The question is: Why do not more Americans look askance at the transfer of "thank you wealth" from financial elites to former government officials?

Working further on the issue, Åkerström points to a distinction between a society that relies on contacts, networks, grant awards, or gifts versus "opportunities for competition on merit" (110). However, she misses the opportunity to explain that *noncrony free markets* serve the function of providing clues about value by reason of transactional price: better goods tend to secure better prices. Indeed, as argued by the Reverend Robert Sirico in his 2012 book, *Defending the Free Market,* no substitute for profits has been found in cultivating healthy economies (Sirico, 84–90). There is also a counterpart reality as aptly observed in the intellectual 1965 movie, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*: namely, in political environments where the rule of law has been drained of its moral quality, operators must match the wickedness of their strongest competitors to thrive. Crony capitalism shows a similar dynamic.

Businesses sometimes forget that prudent gifts can uphold morality and merit. While gifts-as-bribes undermine morality and circumvent fair play, appropriate gifts given in recognition of meritorious conduct help keep exemplary and generous actions from being marginalized. The crucial issue regarding business-related gifts (e.g., bonuses, extra vacations, gift cards, or tokens of appreciation) is whether they work to lift efficiency and reward deservedness.

Gifts with business implications, large or small, that undermine the moral good and discount deservedness work to the same ends as bribes. The logic is based on the central premise of prudent action: Morality seeks to generate rewards in proper portion to the value of demonstrated merits. Naturally, an appreciation for justice must be coupled with mercy, fair opportunity, and an honorable plan for human existence. That is where quality religion and sound philosophy fit in (Sirico, 5, 94–97).

For American readers, the Åkerström book may raise cautionary flags about the potential consequences of the unbounded state. Similarly, the developing American experience is raising red flags about the dangers of the crony capitalist state. Tolerance of large-scale financial immorality in capitalist societies threatens the rule of law. Intolerance of small acts of gratitude in social democracies, like Sweden, subverts the future of liberty. It also creates the risk of personal isolation as people avoid friendly, relationship-building acts for fear of generating suspicion (Åkerström, 173). Bearing these hazards in mind, *Suspicious Gifts* provides a timely reminder that to stay free, people must have the moral competency to differentiate trivial defects in the workings of liberty from dangerous deficits in accountability that threaten the integrity of the market system.

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