



Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs

Kieran Healy

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More than any other altruistic gesture, blood and organ donation exemplifies the true spirit of self-sacrifice. Donors literally give of themselves for no reward so that the life of an individual—often anonymous—may be spared. But as the demand for blood and organs has grown, the value of a system that depends solely on gifts has been called into question, and the possibility has surfaced that donors might be supplemented or replaced by paid suppliers.

Last Best Gifts offers a fresh perspective on this ethical dilemma by examining the social organization of blood and organ donation in Europe and the United States. Gifts of blood and organs are not given everywhere in the same way or to the same extent—contrasts that allow Kieran Healy to uncover the pivotal role that institutions play in fashioning the contexts for donations. Procurement organizations, he shows, sustain altruism by providing opportunities to give and by producing public accounts of what giving means. In the end, Healy suggests, successful systems rest on the fairness of the exchange, rather than the purity of a donor's altruism or the size of a financial incentive.

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