

102. New Horizons for Economic Reflection

Summary of the contribution to Panel 5 of Focolare Conference

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<http://www.edc-online.org/uk/testi-PDF/panel5-goudzwaard-e.pdf>

1. In an interview given in 1991 Clara Lubich made the following remark: “In contrast to the consumerist society, which based on a culture of having, the Economy of Communion is an economy of giving”. This is an important remark because it reveals that at the root of the Economy of Communion another view on the human being is present than that which is found in mainstream economics and in western society; not the reduced image of a *homo consumens* or a *homo economicus* but the view of a personhood in community, with traits of what Vera Araujo once called “a homo donator” (The EoC p 22). It becomes indeed increasingly clear in the recent development of economic thought, not least by the work of Amartya Sen, that the concept of economic man as a selfish, utility-seeking individual is far too narrow to understand the present economic reality; a reality so well described by Tibor Scitovsky as a ‘joyless economy’. The link between growing consumption and growing happiness is extremely weak, especially in richer countries and sometimes even negative. Millions of people are looking for a deeper level of meaning than what the most luxurious of consumption goods can offer them; they even become aware in their wealth of a deep sense of unhappiness and alienation. This implies, in my view, that next to a ‘productive communion’ as Clara Lubich called it (The EoC p 35) something like a ‘consumption communion’ is needed in our time. It exists already at several places in the world; this would be in full accordance with the traditions of the origins of the Focolare movement; but at this time it is in need of a new articulation.

2. There are several reasons why I make this statement, but they are all tied to the lack of horizon or perspective in the dominant consumption styles, especially in the richer countries. Let me mention four of them:

a) the systematic shortening of the time which exists between a consumption impulse and the moment in which people react to it. Anna Terruwe has shown that if a desire has no chance to ripen it can never lead to real satisfaction; the desire itself comes back almost immediately;

b) the fact that increasingly consumption desires are ‘produced’ by commercial pressures, in order to confirm future market-demands; the human subject is thereby manipulated to be never satisfied (‘it is a duty of every American to consume’ was Eisenhower’s famous statement);

c) the fact that the growing consumption of the north increasingly shows signs

of what Pope John Paul II once formulated as ‘overdevelopment’ (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), and this is visible in, for instance, the rising concerns, complaints and even neuroses about personal overweight;

d) the growing evidence that the world ‘s ecosystem and energy resources can simply not carry the weight of the combination of a growing world population and endless growing material consumption levels. At this time there are more animal species become extinct per hour than they did forty years ago per day.

This list makes it clear that there is no future in a continually rising standard of material consumption. But it also says more. It also teaches us that in our time the link between growing consumption and human wellbeing has been completely lost. Abundance means literally ‘flowing over’ and in the Gospels it is a positive word; Jesus said, after telling the parable of the good Shepherd, “I have come to give life in all its abundance”. But you cannot see and enjoy abundance - which stands for more than enough - if you have no place for, or awareness of, what enough is or could mean. Our society has lost its horizon of abundance just because it has lost any notion of enough, and it has now become a society of endless growing scarcities. This has to end, because it implies that also the Omega is missing, there is no horizon which brings us nearer to God’s plan for this world.

3. Thoughts about the necessary end of overconsumption have already been developed for years in the context of the concept of a so-called economy of enough, among others by my late friend Harry de Lange, an economist who was the personal secretary of Jan Tinbergen, the first Noble prize winner for Economics. In Canada it is called an ‘economy of care’ , in Indonesia an ‘economy of caring and sharing’, and already those words indicate a deep similarity between an economy of enough with the principles of an economy of communion which has a culture of giving in its heart. For the central plea in the Economy of Enough is that the desire for an ever growing material consumption level has to stop, especially in the richest countries for at least two main purposes: firstly, to make more economic room, to create a better living space for the poorer nations of this world in their need for resources and energy, and secondly to contribute to the return of happiness in our own rich societies. For these societies now live and work under a continuous pressure to produce and consume, more always more, and well in the context of - as J M Keynes coined the word - hard ‘tunnel-economies’, in which every one and everything is viewed from the perspective of the need for maximum growth of output and productivity, because it is believed that **this** alone can lead us to the daylight of a maximum satisfaction. It is this belief which, again and again, is falsified by the growing social, environmental and cultural problems of today.

4. This diagnosis leads me to say that looking for new business styles and new forms of business organisation as envisaged by the Economy of Communion is

extremely useful and important, even if at the same time it is not sufficient in itself to solve the problems of our present society. It is in fact only half of the solution for which we are looking, because something similar is needed at the consumption-side of society. New community-styles of consumption should become visible in our time which are based on sharing, caring and restraint, and it is in such a way that also existing communions of production can orient themselves to that style of consumption-development. The two projects should so to say complement each other to be able to lead to a real break-through of a new horizon of living and giving in our joyless consumerist societies.

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