

Luigino Bruni, *The Wound and the Blessing:
Economics, Relationships, and Happiness.*
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In the wake of the global financial meltdown and the great recession, more people than ever believe that economics needs fresh thinking that refuses to take the “givens” of capitalist theory for granted, yet affirms what works well in free market economies while addressing what does not. Luigino Bruni is an Italian historian of economics who shows the social and cultural context of all economic activity, and throws on economics a lens shaped by Catholic social thought. The result is an intriguing work of rethinking—the kind of work that is urgently needed if we are to address the social, environmental, and economic challenges facing the world.

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Bruni begins by asserting that there is a great illusion behind much of global economy: an illusion that “the market . . . could offer a painless and peaceful society” (xxi) by means of reducing human interaction to the transactions that take place in anonymous markets. It is taken for granted that the road to human “happiness” lies in organizing life around markets. Yet that premise misses (and ultimately undermines) the central importance of human relationships and leads to “the bleak and lonely drift of modern market societies” (xxi). Bruni wants to affirm relatively free markets, but do it by placing them in the larger context of, and operate them for the benefit of, the inherently relational character of human life, including acknowledging the risks—the “wounds”—that come with those relationships. He traces the development of social thought from the Hebraic view that relationships do involve risk, but joy and depth in life cannot be found without this struggle, through Plato and Aristotle to the gradual emergence of a Modernism in which the basis for common life came to be seen as fear rather than love. According to Bruni, Adam Smith saw the market as a mechanism to free individuals from needing relational networks to help support them—the gratuitous granting of aid that family and friendships provide could be dispensed with for much of life (16). This dispensing with relationships gives an illusion of individual freedom, but at the price of diminishing personal meaning and eroding family and community life.

Most importantly for Americans, Bruni’s argument ignores (and transcends) more American ways of framing these issues, and lays bare the “traps” in both free market (largely Republican) and social equity (largely Democratic) approaches. On the one hand, he makes clear why an untrammled free market ends up undermining family life and “family values,” and on the other hand he

cites research that shows how “Aid without neighborliness, even with the best of intentions, can strengthen the traps of dependency and welfarism” (23). In other words, both ends of the political policy debates in the United States have been framed within the Modern construct of anonymous transactions, and both have led to the thinning of the relational networks that support the full flourishing of human life.

Bruni suggests that economics needs to be re-thought by taking into account the basis for human flourishing that is summed up in the word “gratuitousness.” He argues that this is the literal basis of life—every child is given life gratuitously, and nothing “is of greater value than an act of gratuitousness (given or received), and nothing causes greater spiritual pain than gratuitousness betrayed” (45). He goes on to state that the thesis of the book is “to reclaim the value, including the economic value, of a more fully dimensioned relationality, open to the contract but also to the encounter with the other inspired by gift” (45). Bruni argues that despite all attempts to remove “gratuitousness” from market life, it is impossible and would destroy it, because it would destroy the trust that is the relational glue that keeps markets working. He then examines the various forms of love, and argues that there are parallels in economics for each form, beginning with *eros* as the driving force of the contract, in which each “tries to fulfill itself through the other” (47), and the center of which is the “I.” The result is an “economic narcissism” stripped of real encounter.

The *eros* of the market needs *philia* in the companies that engage in the market—*philia* in which gratuitous relations of trust can be built. Without it, staff cannot move beyond the bare stipulations of contract, and so cannot succeed in “going above and beyond” to real success—even defined as monetary success. Along

with this is the role of *agape* as defined by St. Paul, which includes being with and simply receiving (listening, accepting) the other as beloved other. Only when all three aspects of love are engaged is a fully human life possible. Economically, Bruni sees this more in cooperatives or associations structured to involve equality and participation—but for *philia* to be effective it must be “a relationship of choice” (56). That would rule out the coercive collectives of communism. He sees contract economics as driven primarily by a narcissistic *eros* on the one hand, and civil society as left to the work of philanthropy, and *philia*, on the other. But these are inadequate, and both need the dimension offered by *agape*—the purely gratuitous love that offers itself freely for others. *Agape* can rehumanize the market, and when *philia* leads too far into “communitarianism” that swallows the individual, it is the prophetic voice of *agape* that can pull it back toward more human relations (59).

But how to build these ideas into economics? Here Bruni reaches for the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity—the principle that human activity should take place at the “lowest” level possible, and “higher” levels of government and organization should get involved only to do what lower levels (family and neighborhood and town) cannot. On these lines, contractual economics should be nested in a new framing of subsidiarity: “let not the contract do what friendship can do; let now friendship do what love can do. The contract remains potentially a positive and civilizing relationship, but it must always be seen as subsidiary to *philia* and *agape*, and not as a form of relationship that can be substituted for the other two at a lower price” (60). Bruni cites microcredit as providing successful examples of this. He also points out that market economics “orders subsidiarity exactly the opposite: let not love do what the market can do” (60). This latter practice has deeply

undercut the role and power of love and confined it to private life, where it is eroded further by the stress economic life puts on the family.

At this point (chapter 5), Bruni draws on the work of Antonio Genovesi, whose work on “civil economy” took place roughly the same time as Adam Smith’s. Genovesi was interested in what in Scottish tradition was known as the natural virtue of friendliness, and insisted that “Man is by nature a social animal.” (65) Accordingly, he viewed markets as “relationships of mutual assistance, thus neither impersonal nor anonymous” (66), and as founded on public trust, which is “the true precondition of economic development” and means that “confidence is the soul of commerce.” Bruni goes on to cite research that shows that relationality is integral to human flourishing, and recognition of this reality is an essential ingredient to creation of a “new ‘economics of well-being’” (72). He believes that neoclassical economic theory fails to take this into account. There is no room for “relational goods” because these emerge from non-instrumental motivations, while neoclassical theory “treats goods as means, never as ends in themselves” (84). The methodology “sees only individuals who choose” and ends up with “methodological narcissism” (84). This ends up crowding out real relationships. Bruni gives an example of what has happened in music: until relatively recently, music could only be heard in a community context, but technology and marketization have made it possible to hear music completely alone. Because recorded music is greatly cheaper monetarily than participation in music as a social event, it has eroded the latter. This kind of erosion is taking place in every aspect of life, so that “we only need look closely at our existence to see just how much authentic and meaningful relationships are being impoverished” (97).

In his final chapter Bruni references the Catholic doctrine of *charisms*—of gifts of grace—as providing a different lens with which to view economics, “of seeing things others do not” (99). What those with a *charism* can see is the gift and blessing that lies in the challenge or threat posed by interaction with others. In economics he points to “the many men and women who committed themselves to create the trade unions, the founders of savings and loans, rural banks, and cooperatives, which continue to turn problems into resources and opportunities” (99–100). Those who have contributed the most to improving civil society all had *charisms* to see “in the poor, the destitute, the . . . sick, and even the deformed something great and beautiful” (102). These gifted people were all ultimately community builders who were “in love.” They were able to help needy people precisely because they found them “attractive, beautiful, and loveable” and were able to convey that to those who needed help. They see wealth in the poor, and help them to see it too, and so are more effective.

Where does this analysis leave us? Bruni ends by arguing that we need to reject “the major dichotomies of modernity: economy/society, gift/contract, *eros/agape*” (110). We need to expand public interaction, not diminish it for private space. We must restore “fraternity” to “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” which has been squeezed out by modern economics. How we are to do these things he does not say.

I think that Bruni has provided an analysis of what has gone missing from modern life in capitalist societies that is insightful and helpful. His argument that economics must be re-thought to take into account the more basic necessity of healthy relationality is right—though it should have included healthy relationships with the rest of creation, and not just human relationships.

Still, his suggestion that the ancient tradition of advancing society through movements created by people with *charisms*—people like Muhammad Yunis—is intriguing. It also dovetails with an emerging movement to upend the Modern trend to professionalize and commodify every area of life, and to see people, especially low-income and others with major challenges, as problems for the state to fix or take care of. The emerging trend is to insist that every individual, however challenged, is gifted and has something to offer others, and that human flourishing depends on cultivating human life in just this way. Called “ABCD” or “asset-based community development,” this movement likewise rejects the dichotomies of Modernity, and also rejects the ways both Republicans and Democrats have framed social policy choices, because both have been trapped in the narrow box of Modern individualism. Bruni’s work is a contribution to this emerging movement to re-think not only economics, but more deeply, how we understand human beings and our need for a common life with relational density in order to flourish.