

What Kind of Economy in the Era of Commons?

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The author discusses the Economy of Communion (EoC) as the main legacy of Chiara Lubich's charism to both the economy and the field of economics. He argues that the EoC is particularly relevant to the present economic situation, which he defines as "the era of commons," commons being shared goods that are crucial for the peace and well-being of people. He goes on to show how the Economy of Communion can offer important guidance in the domains of poverty, relational goods, and reciprocity.

From a Charism Comes an Economy of Communion
The Economy of Communion (EoC) is not the only legacy Chiara Lubich has left to the field of economics, but it is the main one, in terms of both praxis and theory, which I will

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outline in this paper. It is a legacy of no small importance when we consider how the economic crisis is one of the most significant elements of the larger anthropological and relational crisis of our times. Although the EoC is still little more than a seed, many consider it to be a substantial experience within the economic-social activities that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, so much so that—to give just one example from the Catholic world—Pope Benedict XVI cited it as a model to be developed in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (n. 46), not a marginal reference given the structure of this writing. The EoC is also a modern milestone in the long history of “charismatic economics,” that is, in the history of those economic and civil experiences born from charisms capable of generating great innovations in the civil and economic spheres. We need think only of the fundamental economic role monasticism played in the first millennium, of the Franciscan orders, and of the many social charisms in the second millennium up to our present age to recognize this as true.

I will try in particular to show how EoC—in its concrete proposals as well as in the humanism from which it emerges—is particularly germane to the contemporary era, which is marked not only by economic crises and sweeping paradigm shifts but also by the centrality of the “commons,” as they are called. Indeed, our era has been called an “era of commons.” In the era of commons, the enemies of the Common Good are not only vices (old and new) but also the traditional virtues that need to be reconsidered in a more explicitly relational way. If we fail to do so, we will fall into the so-called “tragedy of the commons,” along with people who are individually virtuous (in the classical sense) but who are not able to exercise relationality and reciprocity as well as transact business.

The EoC proposes an economic logic characterized by two fundamental anthropological ideas:

- an idea of the “person” as an economic agent, whose very being is relationship; and
- an idea of commerce and economy viewed as reciprocity and “mutual assistance” (in the words of the Neapolitan economist Antonio Genovesi).

Not only are these ideas not contrary to an authentic sociality and gratuitousness, they are integral to, and an essential element of, commerce and economics, which are fully and authentically human environments.

May 1991 is the date on which Chiara launched the economic project to be called the Economy of Communion, a project that invited entrepreneurs and businesses to personally take up the struggle against extreme poverty by profit sharing. What took place on that providential day in São Paolo must be placed within the context of the history of the Focolare Movement, then already fifty years old, so as to be understood correctly and without reductionisms. It can be seen as a tip of a very deep iceberg. Many of the ideal, social, and spiritual elements characterizing the experience and spirituality of Chiara and the Focolare Movement from its very earliest days in Trent came together in that concrete proposal. Twenty-two years ago, that new evangelical sociality also became a new economy because, at least implicitly, it already existed, although without any specific theoretical reflection at that time.

Therefore, the EoC became a large-scale embodiment of the charismatic pillars that had characterized the life of the Movement up until then and still does today. We can list some of these pillars:

- **The communitarian inclusion of the poor** of Trent in the 1940s. The Focolare Movement did not set up a soup kitchen; rather the focolarine lived together with the poor, inviting them home for dinner (“a poor person and a focolarina”). In 1991, all of this became a *productive inclusion* in which the invitation of the poor person to dinner translates into the creation of jobs with and for them. The table of brotherly love becomes the workbench, the office, the factory. And as is recounted, the best celebratory tablecloths used to welcome them today become the celebration of fellowship using working clothes.
- **The first way to heal exclusion and extreme poverty** is to build “with” one another—to build together—new relationships of true fraternity. Over and beyond the material objectivity of the relationship, it is the *relationship* itself that heals and generates the strength needed to escape all the traps of destitution and marginalization. Fraternity requires sharing and affection. Just as the symbolic and foundational moment of the Franciscan brotherhood is to be found in Francis’s kiss of the leper, so too inviting the poor home and caring for them in the Focolare house, since some of the people had picked up infectious diseases, were Chiara’s acts of “brotherhood.” It is this spirit of fraternity that in the EoC became, becomes, and will become always a more specific form of economy. This leads to a type of economy that goes beyond paternalism and state aid *to* the poor, an economy not born from true fraternity, to an economy *with* persons who are in need and who remain truly equal to all in dignity. This is

the basis of equality and real reciprocity among the various protagonists in the EoC development process.

- **On the level of ideas and cultural paradigms**, the cultural and theoretical categories emerging from the EoC experience are attempts to work out in the language of economics the charismatic categories to be found in the life and doctrine of Chiara's charism of unity.¹ And for this very reason, to truly understand Chiara's EoC, we must read it in the larger context in which it was generated: a new vision of economics that goes beyond individualistic capitalism, on the one hand, and illiberal collectivist economy, on the other. We certainly see businesses and the poor in the EoC, but we also find something more. We catch sight of a new humanism in and beyond the individual persons and businesses involved. In a nutshell, we perceive a proposal, that is already working, of a new practical and theoretical economic paradigm, of a new vision of the economic system as a whole, even if for now we only manage to outline a few features of it.

So a new page of charismatic history is being written with the EoC. In this story one sees living seeds of the Catholic tradition. Francis of Assisi is important, as is Benedict of Nursia, with his "work and pray," and the lay traditions such as the social and cooperative tradition of Trent. In what follows, I will first describe briefly the meaning of the "tragedy of the commons" that characterizes many of the economic realities of our time. Second, I will

1. Among these are reciprocity, relational goods, governance of communion, work as gift, gratuitousness, poverty, relational trust, we-rationality, happiness, and so on.

present the important category of "relational goods" as necessary for addressing the tragedy of the commons. Third, I will show how one can find relational elements in the EoC that can overcome these tragedies and thereby offer a glimpse of a horizon of hope beyond the crisis of our times. What I am trying to do here is to suggest the relevance of some of these categories for the economy in the era of the commons.

The Era of the Commons

The *commons era* is an expression that underlines a historic and cultural fact: the most strategic and essential goods today are no longer the classical private goods (goods that cannot be consumed or enjoyed together without diminishing the consumption of one of the subjects: for example, a sandwich, money, or clothing). Rather, they are commons—goods that are characterized by two elements:

- they are used together by two or more people (for example, a public park); and
- given the above characteristic, if these goods are managed solely by the criterion of individual rationality (e.g., by the capitalistic market), they tend to be used too much in terms of what is best at both a collective and individual level and often end up destroyed.

There is a story, now classic in economics, that tells of pasture held in common. It is a story told by the biologist Garrett Hardin in his article "The Tragedy of the Commons."² The pasture is shared in common by the shepherds of a valley. No one can be

2. *Science Magazine* 162 (1968): 1243–48.

excluded from the pasture. So what would happen if each one were to follow the myopic logic of individual, egotistical self-interest? The individual benefit of bringing one more cow into the pasture is +1. The cost (the reduction of grass) instead is shared between all the farmers, so it is a $-1/N$, and the result is that it is less than the individual benefit. This leads to each *homo oeconomicus* farmer bringing too many head of cattle into the pasture, which in turn depletes too much of the soil. Over time, this leads to the destruction of the pastureland. We see this too often in so many parts of the world today.

But we also know from the history of humanity that communities do not always destroy their shared pastures. Think of the ancient communities of the Alps and Apennines. Or to take an example in Italy, there is the millennia-old “Magnificent Community” to be found in the Fiemme Valley in Trent, not far from where Chiara lived. The main reason for this preservation is that the traditional logic, conventions, and institutions of these communities evolved, were thought through, and were maintained above all to avoid this type of collective failure. Today, however, the development of the individualistic logic in the capitalistic market is multiplying the number of tragedies of the commons: from water to the ozone layer, from forests to finance. In fact, even the recent financial crisis that exploded on September 15, 2008, can be read as a tragedy of that common good called “trust.” Too much private trust was consumed when banks and above all some big companies unburdened the risk inherent in the system onto others until, at a certain point, the reaction exploded.

An economy in a “commons era” requires a logic, a way of living, that should be immediately relational and that does not reason along the individualistic lines typical of the dominant economic

paradigm. It requires a rationale of communion, an expression of a qualified relational anthropology. For Chiara, the human person is a reality of communion. That is, he or she is a relational reality. From her mystical writings, we read: “On earth all stands in a relationship of love with all: each thing with each thing.”³

There are several fundamental operations to be carried out in order to “communionize” economic theory and practice and thereby render it capable of describing and foreseeing individual and collective behaviors in this new historic phase in order to avoid current and future tragedies. Some, although still few, of these operations are beginning to constitute the heart of the research programs of several economists involved in the EoC. Among these, I would like to mention here the concepts of “relational goods” and “poverty.” These are two subject-exercises that do not touch other fundamental aspects of the economy today, such as the large-scale aspects of the economic system about which our reflection is only at the beginning stages.

Relational Goods

Modern, and even more so contemporary, economics has not generally taken the intrinsic value of human relationships into consideration.⁴ Economists viewed them (*when* they viewed them) as a kind of background for market activity, or as useful and functional elements in the exchange or production of goods and services that

3. Quoted by Callan Slipper, “Towards an Understanding of the Human Person According to the Mystical Experience of Chiara Lubich in the Paradise of ’49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 30.

4. A separate paper could be written on heterodox authors, such as Marx or J. S. Mill, who attributed an important role to relationships. Nevertheless, the concept of relational goods as used within the working group linked to EoC carries its own originality with regard to authors who saw and see the role of relationships.

are fully independent and distinct from human relations and that are the typical objects of economic study. In recent decades, however, attention is being given to relational themes such as confidence, social capital, networking, and reciprocity. Words such as “brotherhood,” “spiritual capital,” and “intrinsic motivation” that, to put it mildly, were rarely used before in the tradition of economics are beginning to be used. In light of this development, and also thanks to the space the discipline of economics has created for such categories, Benedetto Gui, one of the first theoretical economists to become involved in the EoC and in elaborating the cultural categories of the charism of unity, introduced in 1986 the concept of a “relational good” in a company.⁵ He was slightly ahead, by a few months, of other authors including the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. His explicit goal was precisely to contribute to theorizing, in economic language, a central dimension of the charism of unity. The theme of relational goods today represents a true field of theoretical and empirical research.

The basic concept of a relational good, which may vary in terms of technical detail and, in part, of content, is to attribute the status of economic *good* (or *evil*) to *relations in themselves*. Each human relationship is an infinitely “greater” fact than its economic dimension alone. Nevertheless it can be understood and described as an economic good, that is, as a reality to which people attribute an economic value alongside other non-economic values, and from which they obtain well-being.

But what is the goal and “added extra” that comes from such methodology and theory? To understand this, we need to think of

5. Benedetto Gui, “Éléments pour une définition d'économie communautaire,” *Notes et Documents* 19–20 (1987): 32–42.

the problems (and not only economic ones) that determined and still determine those economic analyses that do not “see” relational dimensions. If, for example, when jobs are planned and drawn up, the cost-benefit model with which choices are made “sees” only the typical economic goods and evils (time, efficiency, noise, etc.), then jobs will be implemented in such a way that the interpersonal relationships are mortified or destroyed. This produces, among other things, deplorable economic results. Or we could think of the subject of large-scale distribution. If, when a public administrator turns to economists to analyze whether to open big commercial centers on the outskirts of a city, which would result in the closure of many smaller stores in the city’s historic center, these economists fail to see the “fabric” of relationships woven around the small stores at the city’s center (stores whose benefits reach the elderly, children, and those most vulnerable), then they could make the wrong calculations because in the calculation certain goods will be missing. This is because relational goods depend largely on the well-being of the people, as we can see in the abundant literature focusing on people’s happiness. We could continue with an economic analysis of tourism, culture, health care, and the service sector. We could also look at the success achieved in the Italian industrial district of textiles for shoes, in social cooperatives, or in those choices to change places of work, our working well-being, and so on, to the point of measuring the effects of EoC both inside and outside of those arenas.

Finally, the relationship should be worked out not only in terms of the I-YOU relationship but also the I-HIM/HER and the I-THEM relationships, which are certainly also relevant dimensions of relationality. For example, in a hospital, the doctor-patient relationship is different from the relationships found in

institutional and corporate governance that make the patient welcomed and respected by the doctors and nurses and assure that efficient labs and operating theatres are well prepared—not to mention the relationships of power, of command, and of organization. Relationality exists, but there are many relationalities, and all of them are important to enabling people—in this case hospital doctors, staff, and patients—to live well.

Dealing with Poverty

By “poverty” I mean destitution and exclusion. The word “poverty” is also found in the gospel and in charisms, where it figures not only as a wound in humanity but also as a freely chosen state and as a beatitude. Poverty is once again growing throughout the developed world. Today, the poverty striking well-off societies is taking new forms on top of old forms. Examples of these new forms include exclusion from public life, mental stress and illness (which is rising sharply), homelessness, migrants not assimilating into society, and new expressions of dependency such as drug addiction, which is an authentic epidemic that strikes above all the lower middle class of our society. Old and new forms of poverty all share the common characteristic of being above all relational forms of poverty. They are not only forms of poverty due to a lack of income. Even when they might seem related to lack of income or wealth, their real root, and therefore their cure, is not to be found in the economic field but in the relational and therefore the social field. On this subject, the Nobel Prize-winning Indian economist A. K. Sen’s question, “Equality of What?” is of great importance.⁶

6. A. K. Sen, “Equality of What?” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 197–220.

The EoC has experienced and continues to experience how the first measure in addressing poverty is to foster relationships, from those of the family to those of politics. Poverty is not a single issue but a collection of unhealthy relationships that proceed to shape individual conditions of exclusion and misery. Therefore, the first treatment of every form of poverty is to offer relationships of fraternity and reciprocity that give dignity to the person in difficulty and help him or her to take the first step toward emerging from the traps of poverty, a first step that only he or she can take.

Generally speaking, in simple subsistence economies where people emerged and are emerging from forms of endemic poverty, and where family and community relationships were and are strong and stable (even if often unjust and illiberal; just think of the role of women), enabling people to emerge from the traps of poverty entailed first of all an increase in per capita income as well as access to public goods (health, housing, etc.) and meritorious goods (school and career training). Today, in an era in which the relational good is very fragile and rare, if we do not *first* heal and rebuild relationships, the necessary interventions on the levels of income and public and meritorious goods will often be ineffective, as evidenced by many decades of public assistance. The approach, therefore, needs to change, and the experience of the EoC, which begins with relation-building as a precondition for every project of human development, can serve as a small model.

The EoC tells us that before poverty (as a category) exists, poor *people* exist. And without meeting the *person* in the poor, poverty will never end. At most, we will manage it while immunizing ourselves against it. The Franciscan brotherhood has its beginning in a solemn moment when Francis embraced and kissed the leper of Assisi. The treatment typical of brotherhood never leaves us immune; rather we let ourselves be contaminated by the poor, who

then truly become our brothers and sisters. In the EoC this experience of embracing (the leper) is lived out in giving tangible assistance and in direct communication, which is always the essential precondition for alleviating poverty, but also, and perhaps above all, in not resting until the poor are offered a job in our businesses. As long as one cannot work, one remains poor.

Furthermore, Chiara helps us discover that a company also has a vocation to fight exclusion and poverty. Entrepreneurs cannot be content just with paying taxes and respecting the law. In these times of crises they must use their talent and entrepreneurial vocation also to combat poverty and exclusion and to create new forms of work. When Chiara proposed that businesses reinvest a third of their profits back into the business in order to create new jobs, she was saying something extremely new. She was saying that businesses can fight poverty above all by creating jobs and thereby productively including persons. And for the EoC businesses, this is achieved not primarily through philanthropy (with 1 to 2 percent of their profits going to charity, what happens to the remaining 99 percent?) that the capitalistic model increasingly presents as the way to deal with those who are excluded. In this, the EoC is linked to, among other things, the great European cooperative movement of which Chiara's native Trent is one of its most fertile regions.

Conclusion

In this short paper I have looked at two examples, two exercises in order to say that a charism highlighting the relational nature of human beings brings those who participate in it and live it—economists in this case—to see things that remain invisible to most people and that present new questions and suggest new solutions.

With the gift I received in accompanying Chiara in the last ten years of the EoC's founding and in the Abba School, I am convinced that the most interesting and innovative part of Chiara's economy has yet to begin: penetrating the heart of the human person's relational mystery and thus penetrating the economic and social relationships that can suggest to present and future economists how to discover and draft new models in this moment of human history. As I proposed at the beginning of this article, the most important goods today are commons. These commons urgently need new economic categories that can better define the proper actions of that relational being we call a person, actions capable of reducing poverty and exclusion, that great wound and great responsibility of our times.

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