3. Economy of Communion, Poverty, and a Humanized Economy

Luca Crivelli, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland

Abstract

This contribution makes more explicit the link existing between the Economy of Communion and the objectives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, in particular with regard to the human rights approach to poverty reduction.

Keywords: Economy of Communion, poverty, United Nation Millennium Declaration, spiritual humus, relational poverty

The Spiritual Humus of the Economy of Communion

Let me start my talk by reminding that the Economy of Communion (EoC) is not an economic model that has emerged from a discussion held by some economists around a
conference table or a project drawn up by experts in sustainable development. The EoC is an experience based on a “spiritual humus,” which gives the EoC its identity and meaning. While maintaining a continuous and fruitful dialogue with various expressions of the so called “social economy,” the EoC follows its own trajectory. The culture from which the EoC has emerged is well described by Vera Araújo, a sociologist who has accompanied this project from its very beginnings. She writes: “EoC isn’t a matter of being generous, of giving charity; it isn’t philanthropy or merely a way of providing assistance. It has to do with acknowledging and living the dimension of giving and giving of oneself as essential to one’s own existence” (36, author’s translation).

This culture of giving, therefore, is above all a culture of “self-giving” and of unconditional giving. It requires a mentality that leads people to develop certain ways of behavior not so much for the benefits they will bring but because they have value in themselves, because we experienced their goodness and truth in our lives.

In April 2001, Chiara Lubich explained that “giving” and “unconditional giving” in the EoC are synonymous with “loving”: “Love your employees, even your competitors, your clients and suppliers too, love everyone. The life-style of the company has to change, everything has to be evangelical, otherwise it isn’t Economy of Communion” (37-38, author’s translation).

By speaking explicitly of love, the EoC goes against the mainstream with respect to the ordinary way of understanding economics in theory and in practice.

The conviction that love as communion must characterize the life of the company lies at the heart of this project. And this conviction, that love must have a central place in the world of business, is a nonconformist and revolutionary proposition. Apart from a few luminous exceptions, the mainstream of economics has not only used terms that are less challenging to describe unselfish conduct (like altruism, philanthropy, donation), but, above all, it has been skeptical of behavior motivated by love for others and has dismissed it as inefficient. Economics has focused on the sphere of human life in which love can be avoided and considers that the more the market is able to cut down on love, the more efficient it will be. There is also a second cause of conflict between love and economics: love requires the gift to be free, unconditional, which is a scandal for economics which believes a price must be attributed to everything.

Unconditional giving is not present in the EoC companies only in the form of devolving a part of the profit, but it is manifest in many other actions as well, that change in a very deep way the operating of these businesses. Love means the ability to create options even when a correct carrying out of one’s own role would not seem to allow them. Love does not only give or do something for others, it also knows how to love its neighbor, to stand by him or her, to put itself in its neighbor’s place without being intrusive. When a solution to the problems does not emerge in the short run, love requires one to be concerned by sharing the difficulties of the employees, providing support in seeking an alternative solution and in certain cases in offering help which goes beyond the company’s expected role. This “something more” of unconditional giving in relationships is the secret behind the companies of the EoC.
There is plenty of room for action and choices, which no contract could ever regulate. In those situations, the decision to love or not to love comes into play and the company’s values matter greatly.

**A Different Attitude Towards Poverty**

The EOC project shares the fundamental values and the objectives of the United Nation Millennium Declaration, in particular those regarding development and eradication of extreme poverty, but fulfils them in a peculiar way. Central to the ethos of solidarity underpinning the Focolare is the idea of building relationships based on communion, emphasizing the importance of overcoming material inequalities principally through radical sharing. The EoC recognizes that there are two different kinds of poverty. On the one hand there is a poverty which people suffer, almost always brought about and fomented by the injustices of human beings and by the “sinful structures”: this is indigence, misery, the lack of the most basic needs so as to live a life worthy of human beings; it is poverty which must be opposed with great commitment and on all levels (personal and institutional), because it attacks the dignity of the human person and cannot make anyone happy and fully human.

In the last years, as EoC we tried to support some initiatives promoted under the leadership of the United Nation with the objective of fighting against this form of poverty. For instance we could be part of the United Nations Expert Group Meeting in Copenhagen on Social Responsibility of the Private Sector and give our modest contribution to other U.N. initiatives in the area of development financing.

On the other hand, there is a second type of poverty, one that is freely chosen and which truly renders a person blessed. This is the poverty which is born from the awareness that all that I am has been given to me; likewise, all that I have must, in turn, be given. This is the foundation of the dynamics of reciprocity. This poverty prompts us to free ourselves of goods as absolute possessions in order to make them gifts, and thus to be free to love, the only thing that is truly important.

In this way the goods themselves become bridges, occasions of community, paths of reciprocity. Consequently, while the first indigent poverty is suffered (by persons or events), this second poverty can only be chosen. Therefore, in addition to the measures which directly address the first type of poverty, the economy of communion fights against misery and indigence also by proposing to all a “chosen poverty” in accordance with the evangelical meaning of poverty. A chosen poverty which is the precondition for understanding the logic of communion and for experiencing the greater freedom and profound happiness that constitutes the typical characteristic of communion.

In one word, the proposal, the humanism of the economy of communion, aims at defeating indigence (the poverty that is not chosen but suffered), by inviting everyone to freely choose a moderate and poor style of life. Being convinced that every interaction both on the inside and on the outside of the company can be transformed into personal face-to-face encounters, the EoC logically alters also the attitude towards the poor.

Poor people are understood and considered as crucial stakeholders and they actively contribute to spread this concept of communion to other persons who live in similar circumstances of poverty.
In fact the Economy of Communion is much more than a simple process of redistribution of goods and resources. It is a new process of production that through sharing goods and activities of a company generates an immaterial yet touchable output: the experience of communion. A new understanding of poverty emerges therefore from the manifold experiences of the Economy of Communion with the poor: we could even use the term of a new “culture of poverty,” where everybody involved would experience a climate of substantial equality between those who give and those who receive, as everybody gives and receives at the same time. On the one hand, the poor people assisted by the Economy of Communion find themselves on an equal level of human dignity. Many people who were supported by the EoC started sharing spontaneously and voluntarily what they have received.

So it does not come as a big surprise to find former persons on need among today’s entrepreneurs of the Economy of Communion. On the other hand, through the choice of the second type of poverty, the entrepreneur himself becomes poor: not indigent, but the one who out of love uses his talents in order to generate resources to be put in communion, even by taking economic risks.

**Humanizing the Market Economy**

Therefore, the EoC can also be seen as an attempt to humanize the market economy. The vision of the market (understood in the broad sense of the term) and of a business entity that emerges from the EoC is substantially positive but not blind to the damage and harm that a wild market could cause. (To make that clear it is enough to remind ourselves that the founding intuition emerged precisely in Brazil where the market miserably failed to solve the problem of extreme poverty.)

The EoC recalls all economic activity to its original vocation which is a peaceful encounter between free persons. That is why the EoC does not radically condemn private entrepreneurship and the free market, but admonishes us to see them too as places where true well-being, happiness, and authentic encounters between people can be brought about. At the same time the EoC is also a radical criticism against today’s common understanding of market economy and its ways of thinking. The EoC try to propose a multi-dimensional view of entrepreneurial activity, where efficiency has its place but is not the only factor that counts. Apart from efficiency, the businesses adhering to the EoC add other, just as essential dimensions to their business models such as giving, solidarity, reciprocity, beauty, gratuity and – why not – spirituality, and the sense of communion. Moreover, the EoC challenges market economics in at least three additional ways.

When Chiara Lubich launched the Economy of Communion in 1991, she did not suggest the creation of foundations, of charity or social assistance organizations – as one might naturally expect. Instead, from the very beginning, she spoke of companies as an unusual instrument for resolving a problem of solidarity. The fact is that communion penetrates these seemingly normal economic organizations and installs itself therein. With the creation of production areas which have been built beside the settlements of the Focolare Movement in recent years, something new is occurring. The construction of these areas gets the entire community involved in a kind of popular shareholding. It enables the raising of capital necessary to start up new companies, especially in developing countries where it can be very difficult and costly to access capital markets (“we are poor, but many” was the slogan of the
EoC from the beginning). These areas are becoming an original and important form of production. They are not classical business groups (holdings) nor are they a simple industrial district (meaning areas characterized by the almost exclusive presence of one industry which leads to the development of many small companies), even if the social culture that accompanies them plays an important role as it does in traditional industrial districts. The development of these zones represents a new stage for the EoC, a coming out of the project into public life and a qualitative leap on the institutional-organizational level.

Secondly, the Economy of Communion shows that it is possible to overcome the dichotomy between the production of wealth and the distribution of it. This is an old dichotomy. Many think that in business one can behave in the following way: no ethical norm must be binding at the moment of production, since the only objective is to maximize economic results and therefore efficiency. Once the maximum size of the cake has been obtained (even if it means that a certain behavior violates fundamental norms and infringes upon fundamental human rights), that is when one can remember the existence of others and their needs and can therefore be generous at the time of distribution. This is the conception that dominates in today’s economy, even among Christians at times. Many think that the important thing is to make a lot of money and then to try to distribute it in an equal way according to some law of redistribution. Unfortunately this is a perverse logic because it tends to dichotomize the person. It makes people schizophrenic. The same person cannot ignore others to obtain better economic results or more profit and then go on to handle the distribution of that wealth. And that is because he will never be able to do justice for the evil produced at the moment of generating that wealth, even if he works towards a more equal distribution. The EoC represents an example of going against the trend demonstrating that it is possible to remain in the market successfully without following this dichotomizing logic.

The third contribution to the humanizing of economy is the following: the Economy of Communion shows that economic transactions are inseparable from human relationships. For this reason exchange – even that which takes place in the market – cannot be anonymous or impersonal. The principle language used by economists today is the language of incentives. Economic science tells us it is necessary to offer an economic incentive in order to direct the choices of the individual towards desired behavior. However, using systems of incentives always hides a relationship of power. Certainly power is better expressed in the form of an incentive than in direct coercion. Nevertheless there is a third path which provides an alternative to both, incentives and coercion, in directing individuals in a certain direction as opposed to another. The alternative is persuasion. Perhaps this is the ultimate secret of the Economy of Communion model: those who are involved act without a scheme of incentive – which is always expensive and can produce undesired side effect, by crowding out intrinsic motivation; they act because they are deeply persuaded. And this persuasion is derived from the precise adhesion to the very strong cultural matrix which is the one Chiara Lubich so vigorously upholds.

**Solidarity in a Spirit of Brotherhood**

In seeking a new relationship between market and society, the Economy of Communion sees companies as a social good and as a collective resource and it transcends the idea of the market as a place where relationships are only self-serving. In envisioning and living business
in this way while remaining fully inserted in the market, the experience of the EoC joins together the market and civil society, efficiency and solidarity, economy and communion. And this is not trivial. If market economy wants to function and to have a future which is sustainable and human, it must allow for the development of behavior founded on these other principles.

Most human communities are sustained by the interaction of three fundamental principles: exchange, redistribution of wealth, and donation. In the course of history there have been villages without exchange but there have never been villages that have survived without some form of donation. In our view, market economy, which is centered around the principle of contract, has a tremendous need to incorporate the principle of unconditional giving. But how can we justify the extension of unconditional giving from the private sphere – which no one contests – to the economic sphere, to markets? With the French Revolution modernity has launched its civil and cultural program: freedom, equality, and brotherhood. Liberty has given rise to and is fully expressed in market exchange, equality has given rise to the experiences of the welfare state founded on the redistribution of wealth. Brotherhood has been recognized as an important element for a peaceful cohabitation of people. For instance we can find explicit mention of brotherhood in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the spirit of brotherhood has still a long way to go in order to enter, with equal rights, into the framework of modern society.

Unconditional giving could become a regulating principle of economics and of society if acting towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood is recognized as a founding principle, of which communion is the most immediate concrete expression.

A New Approach to Scientific Work

The fact that an ever growing number of scholars, economists, entrepreneurs, and cultural leaders show attention and interest in the EoC seems to be a sign that there may be some universal elements in this concept that started as the experience of a small group of people. In other words: while the EoC in strict terms is a concrete project with a history and a well-defined scope, some principles stick out that are universally applicable in order to create the category of communion in economics.

A detailed presentation of the first elements of economic theory emerging from the studies on the EoC goes surely beyond the objectives of this round table. However, I would like to quickly highlight one aspect. In the EoC we encounter a different type of economic actors, who can inspire also economic theory. They are quite different from the individual economic actors (the so-called *homo oeconomicus*) that dominate most of economic theories and can provide undesired legitimacy for the behavior of many people in business. Nevertheless, the EoC does not question the centrality or autonomy of the subject that chooses and decides in an autonomous way. What it does, is to complicate the image of human being, proposing a new anthropology. It does not substitute the individual subject with the community or with the group. Rather, it substitutes the subject – defined without reference to its relational dimension – with a relational-subject which has been called person by a typically Christian tradition coming out of twentieth century philosophy. The EoC challenge to economic theory is to go from the methodological individualism – which explains collective phenomena as a result of individual’s actions and choices – to a methodological personalism in which the
person, seen intrinsically and ontologically as being in relation to others, is at the center of the theory.

The theory that emerges from the experience of the EoC tells us in various ways that relationships with other people can also be considered as goods (that is: good things that satisfy us and meet our needs) and that poverty is not only defined by the lack of resources but just as much by the lack of genuine relationships. If business and market interactions become a qualifying moment for civil life, we can hope to brake the massive growth, all over the world, of relational poverty in addition to material poverty.

Bibliography

Araujo, V.

Lubich, C.