



Review of Valentina Rotondi's & Paolo Santori's *Rethinking Economics Starting from the Commons: Towards an Economics of Francesco*, Springer 2023, xiv+242 pp.

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This collection of eighteen contributions aims at articulating ways to move beyond capitalism by drawing on the ideas of Pope Francis, late medieval Franciscan economic thought, and the ideas of the young people of the global movement Economics of Francesco (EOF). Every contribution by an established scholar is followed by a reply written by young EOF-members. The recourse to the language of the 'commons' is believed to be a way to transcend the narrow economic thinking and practices that have led to unsustainable lifestyles and distorted self-understandings. Though the intuition is indeed correct, the conceptualisation of the whole idea of the commons is generally suboptimal because most authors fail to engage with the criticisms of Elinor Ostrom's *economic* conception of the commons and hence to familiarise themselves with alternative understandings of the commons.

One such understanding is provided by Gustavo Esteva in his "Commoning in the new society": "commons is a generic term for a variety of social forms existing in Europe, particularly in England, before capitalist or socialist industrialization transmogrified them into resources" (2014, 46). Commons, understood this way, are not *resources*; they only become resources within our anthropocentric framework of which the mastery of nature is a core feature. As Esteva points out, Ostrom apparently did not realise that "the transformation of commons into resources dissolves them" (2014, 48) by desacralizing them. The commons that Esteva has in mind is one that "marginalizes and limits the economic sphere, re-establishing politics and ethics at the centre of social life; reclaims *comunalidad*, assumes new political horizons, beyond human rights and the nation-state; adopts radical pluralism, to create a world in which many worlds can be embraced; and uses representative and participatory democracy as transitional forms towards radical democracy" (2014, 52). In other words, 'commons' is above all things a political concept and ideal.

The first contribution, after the Introduction, is written by Luigino Bruni. Quite unfortunately, he endorses Ostrom's economic theory of the commons (3). Hence, he envisages "new social enterprises for water management that are the result of an alliance between the public, businesses and civil society" (13). By encouraging pluralist governance and decision-making and the involvement of local communities, he believes that the "tragedy

of the commons” can be prevented. His emphasis on fraternity, however, may bring him a little closer to Esteva’s idea of commoning. Similarly, Sofia Mazzuco, Plinio Limata, and Ignacio Oliva also tend towards Esteva’s understanding of the commons by proposing a “living experience based on love” (17). Their understanding of the commons also enables them to burst the anthropocentric bubble: “This approach calls for humility in recognizing that we are not a ‘superior species,’ nor the rulers of how ecosystems should serve our goals. Instead, we are invited to listen to the wisdom of the earth and recognize ourselves as part of this complex network that is sustained by living ecosystems” (18). However, their exploration, including that of the phenomenon of ‘love,’ is still work in progress, which sometimes enables the economic language of common goods to sneak into the discourse.

It is gratifying to see Julie Nelson, Valentina Rotondi, and Paolo Santori address the dangerous phenomenon of the “numbing of consciousness” (32). Their nuanced thinking about cooperation is a welcome warning about the danger of “over-cooperation (i.e., mandatory conformity and group-think)” (34). Their core argument is that “care work must be done by all genders and across sectors’ since it is “a training ground for social virtues” (36). It could even be argued that care work is a training in being human. The difficulty is, of course, to get real labour markets to value such care work (and hence not penalise caregivers). In line with Nelson, Rotondi, and Santori, Tracey Freiberg, Serena Ionta, and Olena Komisarenko seek a new economic paradigm, one in which taking care of others and being taken care of by others is a normal aspect of human/economic life. Yet, they do not believe that a new economic science should be entirely about “social life, nature, cooperation, and ethics” (57). Instead, they hope to develop better economic models by learning from other disciplines. In any case, the new “paradigm of care,” inspired by feminine “attitudes, talents, way of thinking,” is characterised by “a stronger concern for human relationships, social justice, care for the environment, and future generations” (57).

Giacomo Todeschini’s main argument is that there is an intimate connection between the late medieval Franciscan economics and our modern Western economic thinking. The Franciscan vow of poverty does not reflect a rejection of money as much and certainly does not entail an ignorance about economic matters. In fact, Franciscan economic thought, according to Todeschini, can be seen as “an approval of the productivity of capital and of the possible morality of finance” (69). Franciscan economic thought—like all ancient thought—also includes the salubrious distinction between real and fictive needs (68) and a corresponding conception of the ‘real’ price of commodities—“the calculation of the value of commodities and labors is no more connected to an abstract idea of perfection or of market value, but to the discovery of a deeper standard of value whose core is shaped by the worth of people’s life and customs” (67). Giulia Gioeli, Maxime Menuet, and Andrei Oss-Emer further emphasise that money is only ethical if it is allowed to circulate and is not simply hoarded: “money is ethical because of its function as a medium of exchange, not because of its function as a store of value” (77). They see the Franciscan conception of money as a forerunner of that of the French physiocrats in the eighteenth century.

Alex Edmans wants businesses to transcend the “fixed-pie mindset” and to instead focus on *purpose* as a way to make the pie grow (81). He argues that “under the pie-growing mentality, a company’s primary goal is to serve society rather than generate profits. Surprisingly, this approach typically ends up more profitable than if profits were the end goal” (83). Though Edmans’ perspective can prevent short-term and narrow thinking, his purely economic—and hence politically naïve—perspective makes him overlook the fact that the ratio CEO-to-worker pay will always matter because money is much more than the means to consume. It is the political power to determine dominant values and the direction of societies. So, his claim that “we shouldn’t criticise high CEO pay without first asking whether it results from pie-growing or pie-splitting” (86) is only partly correct. His many examples are indeed inspiring and “give us hope even in bleak times” (89). However, they should not make us forget that realities are far harsher and that the struggle for socioeconomic justice will have to continue in the human world of complex and often obscure motivations. Kyle Ballarta, Andrea Calef, and Andrea Roncella try to reconcile Edmans’ perspective with Catholic Social Thought to the end of humanising the corporate world and work. Aiming to transcend “shareholders capitalism” by transcending its contractual understanding of human beings, they propose to redefine the company as a community (100). Correspondingly, they address the challenge of meaningful work, not only in the sense of “personal self-fulfilment, achievable only by a small number of people, but [as] desire to flourish within a reality where they [corporate workers] can express themselves and grow. A new paradigm is needed that can provide a more integral perspective for the future of work, both in its anthropological dimension and in its social and institutional structure” (101).

Elena Granata discusses a few architectural projects that reflect creative thinking that transcends mainstream approaches to a particular problem. These solutions reflect the intuitions of designers and “a cultured, conscious choice, beyond extemporaneity, which has required skills and far-sightedness” (107). They also reflect a creative engagement with the people (locals), which entails “reaching even beyond what people think they desire” (107). There is a certain tension in Granata’s paper, which seems to stem from unfamiliarity with the language of the commons. Hence, though she advocates “an ecological and not economic vision of the world,” she does not fully succeed in transcending the economic conception of the commons. Hence, she notes that “the introduction of the concept of commons changes the interpretation of this asset—a collective resource rather than a trade good” (108). The language of ‘resource’ is still thoroughly economic and anthropocentric. A similar economic and anthropocentric language is unfortunately to be found in Eleonora Piergallini and Tamiris Resende. But their commitment to social and economic global justice and an inclusive circular economy is evident in the choice of case studies (among others, the dumping of old clothes in Ghana).

The contribution of Sabina Alkire and Angus Ritchie aims to address the question of how to change a dominant economic way of thinking and practices. In arguing that we could apply the strategies of the free marketeers to overcome *laissez-faireism*, they identify five

tactics: “(1) developing a compelling narrative, (2) making the weather in political and economic debate, (3) developing a community of research, (4) fostering talent, and (5) exercising strategic patience” (134-5). This strategy could be applied to make an “economics of Francesco” become reality. However, they note that “the political base for this movement must be far-ranging and truly popular, and their ethical and spiritual values can and must provide the wellsprings for a compelling narrative which will motivate right action” (144). For Dian Safitri, Kathleen Delgado, and Cristian Varela, the EOF can help us develop alternatives to economies that have not been fostering integral human development.

EOF symbolizes a real alternative to transform the economy based on universal principles and values, united scientific knowledge, and social-community entrepreneurship. The EOF refers to patiently and concretely transferring structured knowledge with an attitude of respect and responsibility toward creation, where people collaborate as custodians of creation for its sustainable preservation, creating a new educational path from integral ecology (156).

In his discussion of Jean Tirole, Flavio Comim wishes to show how mainstream economics ignores the role of moral sentiments in collective actions (163). He proposes to consider “moral sentiments, such as love, ... as part of social choice mechanisms” (165). However, he himself—unwittingly—expresses the limits of the language of moral sentiments, which belongs to an individualistic and dualistic anthropological framework: “more importantly, love can be civic, social and political. ... Love is not a mere sentiment, but a force, a motivation that to a large extent represents what social choice should be about” (166). Valentina Erasmo, Maria Jordet, and Julia Wdowin wish to enlarge the economic conception of the human by including not only moral sentiments but also ‘reflexivity,’ which entails the capacity to self-examination and self-cultivation (to become a better self). Reflexive beings are not narrowly “focused on their own private concerns and objectives” (177). In this contribution as well, the commons are conceived in the economic sense of ‘resources’ (179).

Jeffrey Sachs discusses five economic traditions, namely, the ancient Greeks and Romans, Biblical Judaism and early Christianity, British empiricism, Social Darwinism, and Catholic Social Teaching in order to come to some kind of synthesis (202). His belief that such a synthesis is at all possible reflects the lack of profundity of his analysis of these various traditions and his technological determinism (which is simply a form of materialism, in the philosophical sense of the term). Hence, according to him, what we can learn from the ancients is that “human nature is divided between reason and impulse” (202). It is disconcerting that Sachs missed perhaps the greatest insight of ancient traditions, namely, that we ought all to strive for the unity of the soul since justice begins with such unified souls. The question of whether technological determinism follows from the lack of profundity or leads to it is one that can only be answered by the author himself. In response to Sachs, Valentina Rotondi and Paolo Santori (drawing on John Rawls) argue that virtue ethics might be too paternalistic for

us today (208). Though they are right to problematise the simple application of virtue ethics to a different context, they fail to conceptualise why it is problematic. Their focus on ‘human nature’ misses the point. The issue is not so much different conceptions of human nature—which Rawls systematically tried to avoid, though not very successfully—but the absence of a shared notion of a common good, life, and destiny. Their exploration of gratuitousness as an alternative to virtue ethics unfortunately misses a minimum of theoretical underpinning. Hence, they overlook that gratuitousness must be cultivated as a habit of the heart and of the mind, just as in ancient times.

Pierbattista Pizzaballa emphasises the ‘conversion’ that is required for a radical transformation of our economies. This means resisting the technocratic paradigm and starting a new culture of communion, which in turn will inform a new economic model. Bernat Gómez, Nayeli Pereznegrón, and Elena Batani distil two concepts from the contribution by Pizzaballa, which according to them, are useful to understand our contemporary global challenges, namely power and vulnerability (234). Their contribution is the only one where the possibility of degrowth as an alternative is embraced. They also show that degrowth does not necessarily mean lowering our standard of living, but that it, above all things, entails “a generous view that contrasts with the obsession with rivalry and widespread competition in mainstream economic environments” (241).

This transcendence of dominant economic models—and hence of the miserly depiction of our highest human possibilities—is a common thread running through most contributions in this collection. Love, generosity, and creativity can be expected from humans on condition that political and economic institutions integrate and cultivate these potentials. Correspondingly, the authors try to move beyond a shallow individualism and social atomism. Some of them, including Bruni, wish to move beyond capitalism squarely. They show that the discourse that there is no alternative world besides capitalism and historical forms of communism is misleading at best and harmful at worst. A more generous anthropology that does not ignore selfish and dangerous human propensities will be one of the core elements of new economic models. In this anthropology, the thoroughly human and humanising nature of caring activities will be integrated, which will also result in the correction of traditional gender roles. New economic paradigms or models, however, must reckon with an additional challenge, namely, our ecological crisis. Since it is highly probable that an anthropocentric (and androcentric) anthropology has contributed to this crisis, any reform of economic thinking and practice must address this anthropocentrism. The new non-anthropocentric attitude to nature and the world will be reflected in a new language that avoids the term ‘resources,’ including ‘common resources.’ The present collection has not yet achieved this goal, but it exudes the necessary attitude of reverence and hope. The authors simply need to find the appropriate non-economic language for their economics and economy of Francesco.

References

Esteva, Gustavo. 2014. "Commoning in the New Society." *Community Development Journal* 49, suppl. 1: i144-i159.