

Economies and Human Desire

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When, at the end of January 1987, the Vatican Justice and Peace Commission advised debtor countries of the Third World that they were not always morally obliged to repay their international creditors, the announcement did not set off even a tiny ripple in the world's money markets. But when Reagan blunders yet again or Thatcher slips back in the opinion polls the major stock markets react nervously. The Church is somehow excluded; it does not play any role in the making of economic decisions, though, today, these so deeply influence our personal lives. And Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* accepts at least one of the basic presuppositions of modern economics as a good one: progress ought to be made-albeit it ought to be made within the moral order and oriented to serve mankind. We can read subsections 64 and 65 as a criticism of the modern economic and social process, but at the same time they seem to approve fundamentally of what they criticise.

What the preachers, theologians and synods of 400 years ago had to say about economic practices seems to have had relevance. This is not to say that people did what they were told, but, even when they neglected Church warnings and prohibitions, at least they knew that they did so. Today economies are thought to be a science, a field reserved for experts only, an autonomous process clearly separated from the contents of the Christian tradition.

Were theologians and preachers cleverer before the industrial Revolution? In fact, their teaching on economic practices appears to have been rather limited and monotonous; forbidding people from making money by usury was their main theme. A boring theme, it sounds to us. It becomes a little less boring as soon as we realise that 'usury' denotes every form of profit making. Someone who saved up his grain, harvested in September, to sell it at a higher price in March, was committing 'usury'; he was enriching himself at the expense of the buyer.

Until the Industrial Revolution markets were places where goods were exchanged and redistributed through money, not places where people went to make a financial killing. This basic rule had one important exception: it was allowable to profiteer in dealings with foreigners. Aristotle already makes the distinction between 'natural' exchange (i.e. with members of the same *polis*, society) and 'unnatural' exchange (i.e. with outsiders).ⁱ[1] But in most cases foreigners were not admitted to local markets, and so few people had a direct contact with this kind of 'unnatural' trade. Natives of colonies were foreigners and so it was permissible to profiteer in dealings with them - the first stock exchange, founded in Amsterdam, dealt mainly with colonial goods. Within Western Europe, however, profit making was not allowed. Culture and Church agreed on this. Originally this was not Church teaching, it was part-and-parcel of the old society, be it Saxon, Greek, Persian or Indian. The Church only corroborated this economic tradition and gave it a kind of sacred halo by defending it as the expression of the way God wanted justice to be done in this world. After all, the man in the parable of Luke 12, 15-21 who wanted to build bigger storehouses to store his heavy crops died the same night!

Neither capitalist nor Marxist theories explain sufficiently why all the human societies before the Industrial Revolution restricted the making of profit, and were structured in a way that did not favour the increase of production. We have to make use of the hypothesis developed by René Girard to understand.ⁱⁱ[2] According to Girard, a human being desires something because it is desired (or already possessed) by another person and is thus marked out as something important.

We learn languages, human behaviour and culture by imitating one another, but we also irritate one another in our desiring. We desire by desiring what another person desires. He is our 'model' and, when he seems to be greater in some way than we are, we find it difficult to resist imitating him in his desires, his behaviour, and his use of words. It is unimportant in itself what is desired for we copy the desires of other people, and those models determine which objects we desire. We do not desire spontaneously. We are not completely autonomous beings.

Conflict emerges when two or more people desire the same object, the same political function, the same man or woman. Often the model of my desires turns out to be at the same time the obstacle to my desires. For he already possesses what I desire, or he desired before I desired. I start rivaling with my model. When the conflict comes into the open, my model becomes aware of my rivalry, feels threatened, and imitates my rivalry by rivaling with me. In this process of imitating one another the rivals will become more and more alike in their actions, desires, words, strategies and behaviour. The object becomes more and more important when the conflict is building up. The competitors feel very different from each other, but to an outsider they are doubles and the value of the object (e. g. the 'football cup') is an enigma to him. If the conflict is not ended by one overcoming the other and the escalation of the conflict cannot be endured any more, the only way to peace is finding a scapegoat and uniting together against him or her. He or she is the reason of our conflict, for ... (the reason may be quite arbitrary, as long as a scapegoat can be found and peace restored).

The purpose of the rules of the pre-capitalist societies becomes now obvious. They aim at reducing the possible sources of rivalry within society. Different societies have different rules. But they all seem to come to the same. Prices are fixed: a discussion is possible on the quality of the object so that one can get the price reduced, but the price itself stands. And whoever receives something, should give back something. Because it will never be clear whether it is of the same value, the process of giving and receiving may go on forever. Gifts keep society together, assure social communication, and establish peace. But they are a burden too, they may poison our existence, they are a dangerous medicine. In Dutch, as in many other languages, the word 'gift' has a double meaning: gift and poison. Being able to give much is a source of wealth; 'to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away' (Mark 4, 25). The rich man is he who stands in the centre of his community and is able to share out abundantly what he possesses, and thus will receive from his dependants abundantly. Property is never completely private; it is, rather, something, which is administered to be shared out. All those pre-capitalist societies tried to restrict production, for an increase in production could provoke rivalry and competition.

Even the origin of coinage is to be found in the attempt to regulate conflicts and to prevent an escalation of rivalry. The politically unstable

Greek, Lydian and Sardinian cities of the 7th century BC discovered that they could prevent much inner strife by 'concentrating' the rivalries on a small piece of metal marked by the rulers of the state. This money was to fulfil the function of scapegoat: it draws all the desires to itself and in this way other objects, which can only be acquired by money, are less subject to immediate rivalry. It owes its value to the power and the violence of the state whose mark it carries. Its use became more and more widespread because the soldiers, all mercenaries, were paid in coinage. Persia and Babylonia did not strike coins until Alexander the Great subdued them. Money is an ambiguous entity: it takes away the rivalry around other objects, but at the same time it becomes itself a centre of rivalry. The state becomes more powerful, but its citizens become more independent.iii[3]

If one follows Girard's hypothesis, the seemingly irrational economic practise of pre-industrial society becomes very rational. Obviously the system was open to a lot of abuse and oppression. For example, the obligation to receive and return gifts was burdensome. For Christians it was self-evident that this was the best economic system for another did not exist. Their task was to fight

the abuses, to defend the poor and to uphold the system itself by forbidding usury. Still, while doing all this the biblical tradition was slowly undermining the basic structures of society with its gift economies. Classic literature always defended the position of those who were rich and had much to give, but biblical literature does not propose them as models to be imitated, but Christ and the poor, all those who had nothing to give and thus received

little.iv[4]

The Industrial Revolution was a revolution of the rich. One of its results would be the end of the aristocracy itself, but the effects of this revolution were much greater. The fabric of society was disturbed. Mutual solidarity disappeared and what was forbidden before - to desire everything, envy, rivalry, competition, increase of production - was now prescribed. The mentality in society changed slowly but completely. Many people felt free, being allowed at last to desire everything, to strive infinitely after material goals, to seek political and economic power, to pursue happiness. Everything seemed possible. After centuries of very limited material development, progress was being made everywhere. Scarcity, caused by the fact that so many people desired the same things (iron, oil, food-stuffs), became the new scapegoat. Scarcity is the cause of both misery and of the drive to compete and increase production.

The workings of modern economies are perhaps illustrated most clearly by what happens on the stock exchange.v[5] We must recall that the value of an object depends on the extent to which it is desired; this desire is always an imitation of other people's desire. On the stock exchange every individual looks for wealth with which a man can fulfil all his desires and feels truly autonomous. However, no one knows where wealth is to be found. Everybody imitates everybody else who he thinks is on the way to wealth. At the same time he tries to give the impression that he has already found wealth to provoke other people to imitate him, so his attempt to find wealth becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more people imitate his desire for e. g. oil, the more they value his oil, and the richer he becomes.

At the beginning the market is in chaos. The chaos on the present-day stock exchange is greater than ever before, because the role of buyer and seller alters so quickly. And computerisation makes the local market a part of a continuous ongoing world market. A choice, made by someone who imitates another's choice, can have a snowball effect, until a temporary unanimity is reached on the stock exchange on what the value of an object is. In our world we tend to think that this unanimity is the result of objective natural forces and that the laws of economics have once again triumphed. We are convinced that the price is the expression of an objective reality and we do not see that the origin of this unanimity is the rivalry between people who try to read from each other's face what is to be desired.

The value is established in and through the confrontation of competitive attempts to find wealth. The buyer does not know what he wants. He desires what other people desire, for those things should be truly desirable and thus valuable. In the capitalist theory, the market is only a passive place, which registers individual preferences, which already exist before anything is exchanged. The price does not determine the preference, because the market is supposed to be a mechanism of trial and error to find the right price. In this theory the price only reveals the already existing social fabric. From the postulate of utility economists suppose that the demand increases when the prices increase, while the preferences and desires remain the same. On the other hand, according to Girard's hypothesis we can conclude that the value is not fixed at all, and thus provokes speculation, mirroring one's own desire. Competition decides what is more and what is less desirable. In an uncertain market the price becomes the measure of the quality and desirability of an object. When the price increases, the object becomes more desirable, so that the demand increases. Scarcity is not a neutral fact that precedes every economic action but is a creation of desire. Since Adam Smith, desire and envy have not been objects of study in the departments of economic studies, though they are fundamental to the understanding of the economic process.

According to the Dutch philosopher W. Klever, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) is not the beginning of economics but the end of it.vi[6]

The modern market clearly shows that money does not have an intrinsic value but is the result of a unanimous choice of people who imitate one another's desire. Money creates order where chaos ruled. It brings about perspicuity and becomes a language with which the human community can communicate and transform itself into a creative entity; the chaotic crowd at the beginning of the market becomes an organised society. Money turns out to be most desirable and is identified with wealth. However, when serious doubts emerge concerning money, e. g. because of political instability or bad economic prospects, people start giving up their money. They start looking for wealth all over again and may find it this time in shares, land, pictures, and foreign currency. Those seem to give more security in such an uncertain situation. Economies are a very insecure business. Social control is impossible, for order is created out of disorder; the price is the result of rivalry. Because the different parts of the world are becoming more and more economically dependent on one another, while at the same time full integration is impossible, the danger grows that uncertainty and instability in one place will spread and infect other places. One of the conditions for investment is stability. In the future, therefore, economic stagnation may increase, and this in its turn could lead to greater political instability and violence.

Actually, it seems to be a miracle that our society and its economic system survive up till now at all. For it is based on limitless desires, on rivalry, on chaos. Former societies always tried to prevent this kind of chaos and rivalry by establishing structures, which limited human desire. Political power was reserved to the nobility, making shoes to members of a certain guild. Were they mistaken? One important reason why we survive in this most irrational system, which we proclaim to be so very rational, is that we have succeeded in multiplying the number of the same objects. Rivalry emerges when there is only one object e.g. this woman, this political function, the house in this street. However, we are producing millions of cars, electric shavers, deep-freezers, and a mountain of milk and butter. I may envy my neighbour's car, but in principle I can buy the same car, or rather, a better one, if only I have the money.

A second reason for our survival is that we have quite a lot of rules, laws and regulations, which restrict our competition. For competition is not a natural phenomenon, as capitalist economists assume.vii[7] Thirdly, we have been able to export the violence generated in our competitive society to the Third World, the poor in our society, and to our natural environment. The pressure of the First World on the Third is immense. In the seventies, the Republic of Mali in Africa succeeded in increasing its export of cotton and wool by 40% within a six-year period, but in the same period the local food production decreased by 30%. It may well be that within ten or fifteen years the Netherlands will only have 10,000 cattle-breeding farms instead of the present 60,000, but these will produce the same amount of milk and meat, too much to be consumed

by the country itself. The river Rhine is highly polluted, mainly by French salt and Dutch and German chemicals, so that the supply of drinking water in the Low Countries becomes more and more a problem. In Holland 25% of the rain is polluted, so that the low vegetation in the Veluwe, one of the richest national parks of the country, is disappearing. The sea, which seemed to offer an infinite source of food, turns out to be finite after all; even if the pollution of the river Rhine were to stop immediately the North Sea would remain polluted till far after the turn of this century.

So our society is surviving, but at a price: a chaotic system which makes the future very uncertain for farms, states and individuals; the danger of local instability contaminating other parts of the world; the poverty of two thirds of the world; rivers and woods dying. We have some reason to be proud of our achievements: we have created a society with a wealth and a level of consumption that was never dreamed of. Later generations may admire us. However, often we do not know what to do with our wealth, we are not sure what to desire next. We feel insecure and

unsafe in a society every member of which is a potential competitor, even my own wife, my children, and my colleagues. Again and again I try to find my identity by desiring something which is unique-this year I am going to Antarctica ... but in two or three years' time all my friends seem to be holidaying in Antarctica too, imitating me, becoming like me. Space travel is for many people the great myth, almost a religion. At least space is infinite and may help to fulfil our infinite desires. This partly explains the terrible shock in the USA and elsewhere in the western world, when at the beginning of 1986 a space shuttle crashed. Our myth was damaged. Some people expect everything from the information industry, but they are the first to say that this could mean that our life becomes much more confined. The tendency to grow bigger and bigger, which has ruled our lives since the Industrial Revolution, may be reversed, with possible changes in our way of thinking and desiring.

It is doubtful that our capitalist society can go on as it does at present, but the Marxist solution does not seem to work either. In its protest against capitalism it adopted too many capitalist presuppositions, such as the importance of economic growth. The pollution of the environment in Eastern Europe is even worse than in our part of the world.

Has the Christian tradition anything to say in this predicament? One of the most central words in Scripture is 'grace'. Grace is a gift, which does not demand a gift in return. It does not provoke competition but it invites people to be glad about the gifts other people receive. Living by grace may change our personal lives and may inspire us to find ways to create 'gracious' structures in our society. We cannot go back to the pre-Capitalist society with its oppressive gift system. We may go forward to a private and public life in which a fundamental role is played by the gift, which does not demand a gift in return. Grace presupposes that I am aware that I have limits and that it belongs to human existence to be finite. It accepts that other people are limited and that our world is not inexhaustible. A man living by grace does not suffer because of the limitations of his own or of other people or of his natural environment. For him other people and the whole world are gifts to be enjoyed. They do not demand gifts from him or sacrifices, but only that he accepts them as gifts. However, at the same time they act as limits to his infinite desire. A man and a woman who truly love each other feel free and at the same time do not feel driven to find other sexual partners.

Christians, living by grace, may become models for other people. They can escape from becoming obstacles by continually referring to the Father of Jesus Christ as the model to be followed and imitated (Eph. 5, 1) in his love for man. They can unmask the modern myths and bring down the idols which modern economies has raised. Those idols are the rich themselves, as Adam Smith, the first ideologist of capitalism, already stated:

The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him ... In a great assembly he is the person upon whom all direct their eyes; it is upon him that their passions seem all to wait with expectation, in order to receive that movement and direction which he shall impress upon them.viii[8]

The mythology of capitalism has invaded our language and convinced almost everybody of its truth. Starting off in private conversation, perhaps, Christians can begin doubting the 'law of supply and demand', the necessity of increase of production, and the adoration of the rich. When they show they can live a fruitful and full life, without trying to become richer but rather by finding their own place (and thus limits), they may inspire other people to do the same. Christian life is now completely an enigma for modern man, for it is supposed to accentuate the fruitfulness of

limiting one's desires. In the future it may receive a new significance as one of the focal points of spiritual and social change.

Christians might get involved in movements such as Green Peace. Though the groups in the environmental movement are small, their impact is great. In November 1986 the minister of transport of the Netherlands - who actually belongs to the Liberal (i.e. capitalist) Party - proposed to demolish the summer dykes so that the waters of the rivers would flow freely again over the fields between the summer dykes and the winter dykes. Those fields would be turned into marshes, and could not be used any more for cattle grazing. Her purpose is to reduce cattle breeding, but in the long run decreasing the production and restoring the original river landscape will promote changes in the way of thinking of a whole country concerning 'economic progress'.

Christians might also support movements for more on-going education, and press for the introduction of a sabbatical year for everybody. They could make challenging proposals for the use of this 'unproductive' time. A sabbatical should not be used to train to work more effectively, but become a year of spiritual pilgrimage. (In Thailand every boy has to spend one year in a monastery; perhaps in the future it will be common for men and women to spend some time in a retreat house to look at their situation at decisive moments in their lives.) The drive to organise work on a smaller scale, dominant in the present doctrines of management, might be used to arrive at another goal than those managers think of: less production for ourselves, more human communication, more technology that brings people closer to the things they are producing.

In the Netherlands the discussion on introduction of a 'guaranteed income' for every member of society goes on. Though only one small party is in favour of such a new system, more and more people are taking this possibility seriously. The present social laws in the Netherlands become a burden both for the bureaucracy and for the recipients themselves. At the end of the day, political parties upholding capitalising may well push the introduction of such a system. However, it would change human beings' wants and thoughts regarding work, labour, leisure, money, economics, and spirituality. In my eyes such a system would mean the end of capitalism, not perhaps in the short run, but in two or three generations. The ideas on property might change too. Already many farms feel forced to become more democratic.

Would this new society mean a return to the poverty of the pre-capitalist society as Adam Smith described it in the introduction to *The Wealth of Nations*?

Such nations, however, are so miserably poor that, from mere want, they are frequently reduced, or at least think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants, their old people, and those afflicted with lingering discuses, to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts. This is one of the modern myths Adam Smith brought into the world. Modern research shows convincingly that people living in hunter-gatherer societies are not poor at all. The Bushmen in Botswana turn out to work only 36% of their time, while 35% of the population does not work at all. The rest of the time is spent in sleeping, visiting, entertaining, decorating, and making fun. Rightly M. Sahlins remarks in his book *Stone Age Economies* (Chicago, 1972): 'Wants may be easily satisfied either by producing much or by desiring little'. In prehistory and in pre-capitalist society man desires little and feels easily rich. As two hitchhikers said to me once: 'People who are content are not interesting for modern economics.'

Christians may have some more self-confidence when they are speaking on economic affairs. Admittedly they may not know much about the intricacies of the mechanisms of the 'laws' capitalist and Marxist economists have designed. Their grasp of economic models may be slight. They will not dare to make any economic predictions, but modern economists shy away from making such predictions themselves. However, Scripture offers a treasure of knowledge of human behaviour, models to interpret history, a vision of what it is to be human.

The Christian tradition can help to unmask the modern myths of individual autonomy and confront the modern idol. Nietzsche already knew that God did not disappear from our world because He died a natural death as a result of the development of modern society. We drove Him out and another god entered our world: faith in individual man who stands above all. Man became god.

Living out the acceptance of man's finiteness, enjoying one's own existence and that of others, refusing to make victims, the Christian can offer to today's world a better model to be imitated than the ideal of an absolute autonomy.

i[1] Politeia 1258 a39-b2.

ii[2] See my article 'The Likely Prince of Peace. René Girard's hypothesis', *New Blackfriars* 66 (December 1985) 517-524. Girard's works are slowly being translated into English. Recently his book *The Scapegoat* was published (London, 1986). The translation of his book *Des choses cachées depuis de la fondation du monde* is forthcoming.

iii[3] M. Aglietta and A. Orléan, *La violence de la monnaie*. Paris, 1982. For this article I used also P. Dumouchel and J.-P. Dupuy, *L'enfer des choses. R. Girard et la logique de l'économie*. Paris, 1979.

iv[4] Cfr. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1953.

v[5] See several articles in P. Dumouchel, *Violence et vérité. Colloque de Cerisy autour de René Girard*. Paris, 1985.

vi[6] W.N.A. Klever, *Archeologie van de economie. De economische theorie in de Griekse Oudheid*. Nijmegen, 1986.

vii[7] Cfr. K. Polanyj, *The Great Transformation*. New York, 1957.

viii[8] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London, 1959 (Ed. Oxford, 1976) 1, iii, 2.