



“The new horizons of the Economy of Communion”
International Convention – september 10 -12, 2004

PANEL 5
NEW HORIZONS FOR ECONOMIC REFLECTION
INTRODUCTION

Benedetto Gui

As it was said before, the EoC project consists of a group of enterprises that take on a double commitment: to share their profits, according to the criteria that we know; and to adopt a management style that commands great attention and care for the employee, the customer, the supplier. Indeed, this very meeting suggests that EoC enterprises are an especially eye-catching manifestation of a vision that encompasses the person, society, and productive organisations (that within society play an important role). This round table give us the opportunity to dwell on this vision and its implications for how we view the economy, and human behaviour in the economic sphere.

In describing this view, I find it useful to make recourse to Paul Ricoeur’s division of ethics into three “dimensions”.

The first dimension is associated with the third-person pronoun “he/she”. It concerns each of us in relation with the generic other, typically a faceless human being to whom we found ourselves bound by innumerable interdependencies that are mediated by the institutions of society: the economic institutions that connect the buyer to the thousands who participate in the production, transportation, marketing of a good; or the political institutions that tie a taxpayer to a low income parent who expects the school of her children paid for by the public purse.

As far as the economic sphere is concerned, this dimension is the one that attracts most attention.

It embraces considerations of justice (that surface for instance when tax rates are to be legislated), but also of efficiency (which, if correctly defined, is a morally commendable objective, and may require the observance, for instance, of rules of fair competition).



What can be said of EoC enterprises in this regard? First of all, their guidelines demand ethically correct behaviour in all the domains of business activity. This is certainly not an obvious achievement, but is not distinctive of the EoC project. What is distinctive in regard of this dimension of ethics, is that – in addition to complying with government mediated redistribution schemes - the enterprise participates in an additional voluntary redistribution scheme, a *supererogatory* deed, mediated by a non-governmental institution, toward receivers whose names contributors will most probably never know. Not surprisingly, much of the attention paid to the project by observers has been directed to the sharing of profits and its implications for EoC companies (the morale of their workers, accumulation and growth,...), and for society as a whole.

The second dimension of ethics – according to Ricoeur – corresponds to the second person pronoun “tu” and concerns the relations with well specified others, those we encounter face-to-face. This dimension has been somewhat neglected in discussions and treatises about economic ethics. Indeed, for an employer respecting the clauses of the labour contract is certainly praiseworthy, but cannot exhaust his moral responsibility toward his employees, if it is true that their quality of life depends no less on their spending their working life in a climate characterised by respect, listening, and sympathy, rather than disdain, derision, or indifference.

Indeed, disregard for the dimension of “solicitude” (as Ricoeur also names it) is to be connected with a widespread distortion in the customary definition of well-being. Indeed, the market value of the extravagant gadgets and lousy useless items that stuff the houses of affluent citizens of the world, is accurately recorded and included in welfare measures, while being involved in network of positive interpersonal relations remains unaccounted for, despite its contributing not only to human happiness, but also to the development of our personality and identity. However, there are signals of an increasing awareness in this regard. One is the attention paid to “mobbing”, and more in general to maltreatments of relational nature workers may be subjected to. Logically, since the appellative “tu” is by its nature reciprocal, the employee bears his own bit of responsibility of solicitude toward his employer. The same



holds, although with different features, as to the relations that both have with customers, suppliers, or other stakeholders.

Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of EoC companies is just their emphasizing the dimension of “you”. One of the aims that owners and managers of these enterprises pursue is just creating a social environment in which everybody is received as a person. An example among many is the Argentinean producer of lighting systems Lanin (see EoC newsletter no. 18).

The dimension of “solicitude” has been present from the beginning in the cultural/scientific dialogue that has been conducted in these years around the project, in interaction with the actors of EoC companies. One such theme is “relational goods”, i.e. the statement that there are aspects of interpersonal relations that from the viewpoint of those involved can be likened to goods – both consumption and capital goods – and are at the same time produced and consumed (or utilised) by interactants themselves. Another such theme is trust, a valuable economic mechanism that makes it possible for actors to play cooperative strategies even in situations in which the pursuit of self-interest would advise at least one of the parties against starting or continuing a business relation. In some circumstances, it has been observed, the trustworthy behaviour of the responding player is stimulated by the “provocation to reciprocate” inherent in the trusting behaviour of the other party. A third theme, not far from the previous two, has to do with the newly reborn debate on “economy and happiness”.

Abundant data confirm that income and material goods do not exert a significant impact on perceived happiness; instead, among crucial factors is the quality of relations with family members, friends, or others. Such empirical evidence cannot leave us indifferent: our society’s stubbornness in pursuing material plenty as if it were the key to securing happiness, is likely to end up deteriorating just those other factors on which life satisfaction depends.

Someone could ask which are the factors other than relationships with others, that contribute most to granting people happiness, or personal fulfilment. I think that nobody will be surprised on hearing that prominent among these is finding “intrinsic meanings” in one’s acts, both on the job and in personal life. The expression “intrinsic meaning”, that interestingly recurs more



and more often in the recent economic literature, has to do just with the third dimension mentioned by Ricoeur, the “I” dimension.

At first sight one could think that economic reasoning has not certainly forgotten people’s concern for themselves, no matter how it is expressed: consuming, possessing, conquering some positions in the economic race. Indeed, each person needs these achievements to some degree (they nurture self-esteem, a precondition of the capacity of turning oneself towards others); but she has subtler needs, among which the need of spending one’s energies for intrinsically valuable goals.

In front of this inner demand for meaning, Ricoeur maintains, each of us has a moral responsibility, this time towards him/herself. The importance of the demand for meaning on the part of workers is witnessed by empirical investigations (among these Borzaga, 2002), by great number of job applications addressed to organisations operating for the public interest, and by casual contact with young graduates.

The “I” dimension is also one of the strengths of the EoC project. Being an entrepreneur (or a manager, or anyway having some responsibility in an enterprise) is seen as a veritable vocation: a vocation to pursuing the highest values (even spiritual values) through the accomplishment of worldly tasks. The theme of intrinsic motivations has also been commented upon at the cultural level within the project (see for instance the last EoC newsletter).

Let me observe that in EoC companies consideration of the dimensions of “you” and “I” entails additional concerns for managers, as they feel an implicit obligation to secure employees not simply good jobs, but also opportunities for being involved in positive personal relations and being engaged in the pursuit of activities that accord with their moral values. However, there is another side of the coin: a surplus of motivation and of mobilisation of voluntary resources. It is thanks to this effect that many EoC companies survive or even thrive, despite the “handicap” represented by their adherence to standards of correct behaviour as to respecting the environment, paying taxes, etc...



The vision of man, society, and productive organisations that stays behind the EoC project and has its fulcrum in the word “communion”, contains, comprises, underlines all these three dimensions of a “good life”, and stresses that the management of enterprises is to favour the realisation of a full three-dimensional life by all those involved.

Of course, the vision of an economy of communion (literally!) I have tried to sketch represents a demanding ideal that we cannot but look at from some distance. This is partly a question of day by day practice – indeed, at this conference several speakers have shared with the other participants their daily efforts for living up to this ideal. However, it is also a question of designing the structures of EoC companies and of the whole project so they can best serve the logic of communion.

This afternoon we have the pleasure of having with us five guests who look with sympathy at our project, and at the same time are in the position of privileged outside observers – privileged because of their studies, their involvement in economic and social movements or other institutions, their personal life path. We ask them to react to the EoC proposal that has been presented in these days and I have tried to summarise in this introduction, to give us suggestions as to how best to realise its aims, to enrich the discussion with new insights by drawing on their own experience and their reflections.