

ECONOMY LESSONS. Luigino Bruni: a key category that gambles with well-being

IF NARCISSISM WINS, THE MARKET LOSES

Published in the weekly Vita, October 22, 2010



It's the utopia of doing the job we like. In reality, we need to do the job that the world needs. This is a rule that the market imposes, guaranteeing freedom and healthy reciprocity.

If we observe the market, businesses and all economic life, we immediately notice that we're dealing with an always denser, more global and complex network of relationships. The modern market has not only multiplied our relationships, human contacts and cooperation with respect to the pre-modern world, but it has also changed the nature of them, making it a big moderator that immunizes interpersonal rapports and shared life, substituting strong and ambivalent community relationships with loose contractual links, with *cash nexus*. In fact, we can correctly interpret the last few centuries (and not only in the West) as a progressive spread of market cooperation and its relational logic – an extension and advancement that presents very problematic aspects (or “vices”) but also the virtues we are underlining in this series.

The virtue I want to focus our attention on this week is “anti-narcissism”, which does not immediately jump out in front of the eyes of those who observe a market economy (and society). But personally, I consider it among the market's key characteristics to understanding our society.

Do what you don't like to do

When the market works correctly, it can be seen as a large social mechanism that pays or “rewards” (as Giacinto Dragonetti would have said) those human activities which are useful to everyone but scarce. In the shared life of a complex society, where there is division of labor and division of knowledge, many activities or jobs that are not carried out spontaneously, simply because they are not rewarding in themselves, do not give intrinsic pay-back.

To understand this virtue, let's imagine a society where the market does not exist as a regulating mechanism of people's activities. How would such a community operate? Historically, these communities were the rule in the antique world. The mechanism that allowed them to work was simply the command, a hierarchy. Social order was reached through sacrifice of individual freedom and the very existence of the individual.

Another possibility could consist in a social system in which each person carries out the activity they love or feel is their vocation – activities which are done not under command but because we like them, because they give us intrinsic joy. What would happen in this hypothetical society (which we find every once in awhile throughout history)? The inevitable scene is social “disorder”. We would have an excess (with respect to social demand) of intrinsically rewarding activities (artists, poets, chess players, mushroom hunters, scholars, economists, mystics, athletes, etc.), which are carried out because they produce joy in who does them. At the same time, we would have an insufficient offering of work that is not very rewarding in itself but extremely useful to society (garbage men, night doormen, miners, train conductors, highway workers, electrical workers, night watchmen, jail wardens, etc.).

Of course, ideological work could be done to indoctrinate the street sweeper to spend eight hours a day cleaning the streets as an expression of his vocation and Socratic *daimon*, or all the nurses that their vocation is caring for others only out of the intrinsic joy of the care given.

One will intuit right away that such ideological operations rarely work for everyone or for very long, as they almost inevitably become liberticidal and authoritarian communities. Besides, in such communities, there would be a very high risk of non-communication and non-meeting among persons. Everyone would be so busy following his or her own vocation that they would not worry about interacting with others on a plane of reciprocity. We would be in a society that we could call, without hesitation, narcissistic.

Pay the miner more

What is the market, then, when we view it from this perspective? It is a mechanism that offers “extrinsic” payment, normally money, for jobs that we would not carry out – at least in a sufficient quantity – if we only followed our aspirations or vocation to them. Through the mechanism of prices, the market makes sure that the jobs awarded are not those which we would do only because we like them, but rather those which are seen as useful by the others with which we interact (and therefore, they pay us for that activity). This is why the market is also a system of signals that indicate to us if the things we like to do are also interesting to others.

This is also why market exchange can be understood as a form of reciprocity and social link. It allows activities that are useful to society to be carried out in a free and dignified way, and when we choose a trade or activity, the market pushes us to put ourselves in others’ shoes, to ask ourselves if I am the only one who is enjoying what I am doing or if it also pleases or serves someone else with whom I interact. This was the foundation on which Adam Smith (and many other economists) affirmed that a miner should be paid relatively more than a university professor (who gains intrinsic recompense from his activity that the miner does not) – a thesis that I would subscribe to still today.

Others tell us this

From this point of view, the market pushes us to have an adult attitude rather than a narcissistic one. From this lens, those who complain that their works have no market (in science and the arts, for example) would not be considered virtuous. In some cases, we might be dealing with misunderstood artists, but often we simply find ourselves in front of civilly immature people who do not accept the idea that, in this world, we are not the ones to judge the bounty or quality of what we create and produce – others do. And they tell us they value our work by buying it (although not only in this way).

That does not mean giving up fostering our vocation, even in the working world. We just need to learn that if I’m not able to live off of fostering my *daimon*, I must accept carrying out other paying non-vocational activities in a non-narcissistic way (part-time work), which allows me to follow my vocation (like painting) in other environments. I remember meeting “scholars” who were convinced to have written books that would change history, but as they were unable to convince any editors of this, they paid for the printing of the book themselves, or even easier, they forced their students to buy it. Of course, the instruments or language that the market uses to say that people like your work are very poor (either money or material incentives), but perhaps they are preferable to the commands in an illiberal hierarchy. That does not corrode this market virtue which reminds us that the world is a place where water falls from mountains to valleys, and where human relationships are founded on the law of reciprocity, including the reciprocity as market relationship.

ECONOMY WITHOUT FUNDAMENTALISM

This article on anti-narcissism is the second article of the series dedicated to the Virtues of the Market, which Luigino Bruni thought of and wrote for the readers of *Vita*. Last week, Bruni proposed the first virtue, “cooperation”. Where did the idea of a reflection like this come from? The author himself explained it when he presented the initiative in *Vita*: “We cannot leave the last word about common living and the market to anthropologic pessimism. We have an ethical responsibility to leave to those who come after us a more positive outlook on the world, on mankind, on politics and on the economy”.