

Economics and theology

By denying that economics and politics are open to sin, we fail to recognize the roots of Europe's present problems.

Not so long ago, the breakdown of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of totalitarian regimes in Eastern and Central Europe rekindled long-forgotten hopes in millions of people.

A deep and terrifying shadow was passing away. A new life of peace, freedom and justice seemed just around the corner.

Little of that optimism remains today.

The new freedom seems to come primarily in a cloak of insecurity about almost everything, and the promise of justice seems overwhelmed by the awful contrast between the luxury of the few rich and the poverty of the old and weak who wait in vain before empty shops.

There is a very different but equally deep uneasiness about freedom and justice in Western Europe.

"Freedom for *whom?*" is the question in the face of the multinational powers who control technology and economy, abuse nature and intervene deeply in private and communal life.

And what does justice mean if extending the Common Market implies high trade barriers for others, dumping agricultural surpluses and closing borders to migrants?

South and East together seem increasingly caught in an enduring bondage of debt to Western centres of money and capital, who compel them to continuous painful economic and financial "adjustments".

How can the liberating and justifying power of the gospel reach the political and economic life of a continent involved in so much pain?

I want to formulate four theses in response to this central question.

Sin and guilt

My first thesis is that *Europe's social, economic and political problems, which cause so much fear, unrest and suffering inside and outside its borders, did not just happen, but are related to concrete sin and guilt.*

In the former "command economies" of Eastern Europe, any reference to "sin" or "guilt" in the public realm was unacceptable. The maximum excuse for bad political or economic results was that "some mistakes were made".

Saying that was not meant as a criticism of the state or the Party or planning as such. The prevalent ideology presupposed the goodness of state and Party and the infallibility of the planning mechanism.

People in the West who think this is a stupid attitude fail to see how similar it is to their own assessment of the market economy and the institutions of political democracy.

They too are primarily seen as mechanisms which, if treated according to the rules, will produce good economic and political results.

Economic and monetary experts have a kind of "engineering" approach to economic life. Growing unemployment, high inflation or stagnating production mean that people and governments have been too slow in applying the rules under changed circumstances.

Sin is a foreign idea from the world of faith and religion, not suitable for the self-sufficient world of politics and economics.

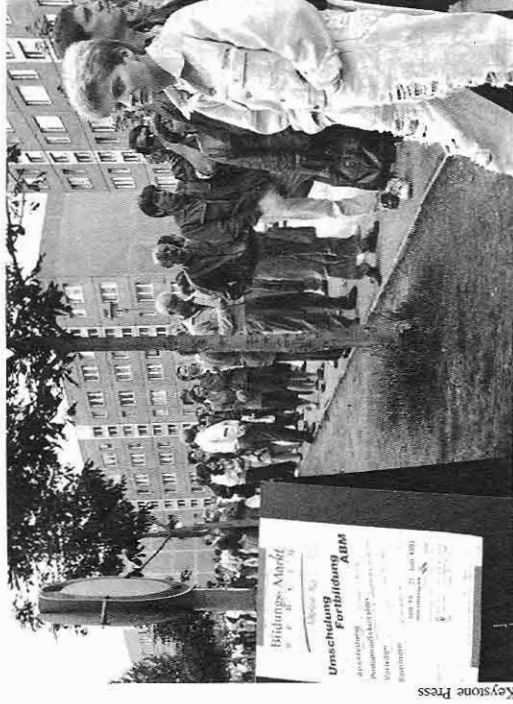
The limits of a mechanistic, pragmatic approach to political and economic life are increasingly evident. The "engineering" approach cannot meet a growing number of problems in both former command economies and traditional market economies.

Deterioration of the ecosystem, hard-core structural unemployment, shifting of burdens from the North to the South — all point to the same conclusion: what we are seeing is the consequence of personal or institutional injustice, lack of care for nature and greed.

The market is a good and useful social institution. But it has at least three inbuilt shortcomings:

- No market can record and fulfill human needs if they are not expressed as *demand*. If people have no buying power, the market does not function.
- No market will offer any *supply* if an adequate financial reward is not given.
- No market can consider something of value if it has no *price*.

To identify these inbuilt shortcomings is just another way of saying that human responsibility has to come in.



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When we talk about people who have no buying power, about necessary public services which do not bring enough financial rewards or about nature and human health, which do not have a price label, human responsibility itself is at stake and cannot be evaded.

Idolatry

Nevertheless it is evaded. And that brings me to a second thesis: that *the deliberate effort to exclude the awareness of sin and injustice from economics and politics is a root cause of our present problems.*

I said that words like "sin", "guilt" and "injustice" are unwelcome in discussions of a planned or of a market economy. Only mistakes are conceded.

In religious terms, this means that the mechanisms of society assume the role of a trustworthy compass for all of society. They summon us as guides and orient us on the way. They may even require sacrifices.

But that looks very much like "serving other gods". For to elevate something in creation and to expect from it a better future in exchange for your own sacrifice is precisely what idolatry is.

One indication of this idolatry is the repeated assurance that only continued and rapid economic growth will save us from present miseries.

This sounds very strange for nations which are already very rich. Why such an infinite run for *more* while others lack even minimal provisions?

Obviously, a new morality has been introduced, one which excludes the awareness of sin and injustice to pave the way for legitimizing greed.

Greed, selfishness and ruthless competition may be objectionable from an "old-fashioned" religious point of view, but they are highly functional for upholding rapid economic growth and achieving a rising standard of living.

There is a more remarkable indication of this idolatry. Even with growing poverty in the world, deep instability in the previous command economies and an alarming environmental crisis, most political and economic actors go on with business as usual. Neither governments, banks and international agencies nor employers, employees and common citizens give any indication of wishing to change their attitudes. They act as if the problems will look after themselves.

How can this be explained, except as a kind of common obedience to anonymous forces, or a deep trust in existing political and economic mechanisms or a combination of these?

In any case, we see a kind of abdication of a crucial part of human responsibility — the delegation of it to blind powers of economic and technological progress as revealed in the working of a worldwide market economy.

Might these blind powers betray us at the very moment we need them most? The planned economy has failed as mechanism; is it impossible that the market economy as mechanism will also fail us in due time?

God's liberating presence

Such alarming questions should not lead us astray. For (and this is my third thesis) *as soon as social, economic and political life are seen as open to sinfulness and even idolatry, in which we ourselves are at least partially included, the power of God's redemption and forgiveness can come in its liberating, healing and disclosing presence.*

Many who would agree that environmental deterioration and the growth of poverty are due to excessive faith in the automatism of plan and market and the self-legitimizing greed of acquisitive Western society would hesitate to conclude that our

repentance may lead to God's redemption, which will offer us new ways in social and economic life.

Is this not a risky effort to "spiritualize" the hard realities of social and economic life? Moreover, does it not presuppose that Europe is still willing and prepared to react as a kind of Christian civilization?

While granting the validity of these remarks, I would defend my thesis in two ways: by explaining what freedom and justice could mean for economic and political life in the light of the gospel, and by referring to the goodness of the Lord in upholding creation.

Jacques Ellul has called freedom and justice the fruits of the Cross-tree of Jesus Christ. These fruits are of such value that every modern ideology has tried to steal them for its own purposes, to redefine freedom and justice to make them serviceable for what peoples and governments want for their own welfare.

But, Ellul goes on, Christians seem to have forgotten the power and value of freedom and justice in their original setting for the renewal of society.

"Freedom" has a far deeper meaning and power than "freedom of the market"; and "justice" goes beyond the "social justice" the planned economy claimed to bring.

Freedom in the gospel is not primarily related to the possibility of doing whatever you like. Freedom is a way-to-go, a calling. Its opposite is not primarily a limitation of choices but slavery, living under the domination of sin, caught in the prison of the powers of the flesh, like selfishness and a lack of care.

Justice, too, is a way-to-walk. Its destiny is to fill the earth. Its Old Testament root word stands for the restoration to human community of the poor and the weak, the widows and the orphans.

It is the state — the king in Old Testament terms — that is directly mandated to take care of them, openly resisting the mighty and the wicked.



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Left: East Berliners queuing outside a government employment office (June 1991). Right: Sophisticated advertising urges the purchase of items supposedly essential to ever-rising living standards.



US and Japanese participants at an April meeting of the G-7 group of industrialized nations whose policies are held responsible for the current global debt crisis.

If we look to Europe in its present predicament, this is exactly what suffering people and exploited nature are waiting for: the return of the King.

The deepest desire of the people in the West is not an ever-rising standard of living and a continuous eruption of the volcano of industrial goods. Nor is the deepest desire of the people of the East having all possible freedoms to possess, to acquire, to become rich.

They long for another freedom, which begins in a profound respect for the dignity of every human being, and for another justice, which stops the cruel games of speculators and exploiters.

Most of them know intuitively that it is not to serve other gods that Jesus freed us, whether those gods appear as the compelling mechanisms of market or plan or the enforcing powers of progress and technology.

They are inwardly aware that the earth is a created earth, which means that in its whole structure and functioning, it still holds a promise of food for all and of a blessing for all living creatures.

It is not because God is not good that we are in trouble; it is because of our own unwillingness to follow his paths of freedom and justice.

The tunnel and the tree

Saying this already makes another way visible. And that leads to my final thesis: that *social, economic and political renewal stands or falls with our willingness to reorient social and economic life to principles other than a maximum rise in our standard of living and to restructure it as a platform for fulfilling still-vacant responsibilities.*

This thesis can be explained by two metaphors: the tunnel and the tree.

In a busy tunnel, all vehicles have to move at the highest possible speed to ensure a continuous flow of traffic. Slow cars and trucks are excluded. The noise and the risk of collision are seen as unavoidable.

Similarly in our societies (and in this respect the market economy and planned economy are much the same), the basic orientation is to a *flow*. The goal is not the preservation of stocks, but the maximum flow of production and consumption.

The highest possible productivity must be reached even if that implies the exclusion of many — like the unemployed — or the expulsion of side-effects to others.

But a society does not have to function like a tunnel. It can also function like a tree.

A living tree does not grow infinitely. It reaches maturity when it has grown to a certain height, for its ultimate purpose is not to grow but to bear fruit.

Thus a tree will not overuse the soil on which it stands, and it can include all its cells in a living participation.

Similarly, a society can give priority to the needs of the poor or to the preservation of nature or to meaningful employment for all if and only if it is willing to abstain from the maximum rise of its standard of living.

The desire to reach maximum production and consumption has to go to make room for those other purposes. Only then can there be enough for all.

But such a reorientation of the economy has to be complemented by a restructuring of society. Otherwise the way of justice, offering a shield for the weak and the poor, and the way of freedom, being liberated from the tyranny of blind forces and mechanisms, will soon be blocked again.

Such a restructuring does not eliminate markets. But it does deprive them of their significance as the ultimate criterion.

That can only happen if a number of concrete responsibilities which have been forgotten are re-attached to concrete institutions and authorities in society which are held accountable for what they do.

It is too cheap to talk about protecting the interests of the poor if no one has the responsibility to fight for them or to be accountable for them. It is too easy to speak of justice for the unemployed if neither employers, firms nor the state have any public duty to restore them to meaningful functions.

Let me give two short examples to illustrate this.

A few months ago the nations of Western Europe agreed on the formation of a political and monetary union. Its goal is to contribute to the peace and well-being of its member states by the creation of a common market.

But there was no agreement about a common social charter or a common policy to protect the environment. Nor was any priority given to the struggle against poverty in the world as a whole.

We must conclude as churches that responsibilities were left vacant which should have been taken up. Here is a clear failure in structuring the paths of freedom and justice in a modern, rich and self-centred society.

A second example. One of the deepest forms of injustice today is the privilege of the rich countries to create their own international liquidities (dollars, francs, marks, pounds, guilders). These currencies are accepted everywhere in the world in exchange for goods.

If you are not rich, you have to borrow the money of the rich countries and their banks as soon as you run into problems.

The debt crisis is thus directly linked to inequality in the world's monetary system. The poor have to borrow the money that the rich can make for themselves and lend to others.

Justice would mean that countries which are not rich should have the right of direct access to the sources of money-creation in the world. But that would mean restructuring the global monetary system, replacing the key currencies of the rich countries at least partially by other kinds of money.

The rich nations continue to reject such proposals because they know this would diminish their privileges and, in consequence, their increasing flow of production and consumption.

These two examples illustrate the barriers that must be surmounted on the way to justice, freedom and good stewardship. A lot of resistance may be expected.

But the way is there. And in the coming years it may prove itself as the only real way, as the tunnel society discovers that the walls of the tunnel are approaching each other and beginning to block the traffic.

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