

Towards an Economy of Love

Wendell Berry, *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (Counterpoint Press, 1987)

Reviewed by Patrick M. Fleming

Wendell Berry's writing, as evidenced in *Home Economics*, is knit throughout with the sense that the material world expresses spiritual reality. This is no minor feat. Flannery O'Connor said that one of the greatest difficulties of writing as a Catholic for an audience all but dead to the sense of God is that "for [her], the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation." And while O'Connor often portrayed the nihilistic consequences of a world without God, Berry – in his fiction and non-fiction alike – fleshes out a positive vision, a life composed of ordinary matter that reflects a spiritual reality and a spiritual decision: a loving economy.

Home Economics is a collection of fourteen essays by Wendell Berry, written from the early- to mid-1980s. As one goes from his *Letter to Wes Jackson* in 1982 to his *Defense of the Family Farm* and *Does Community Have Value?* in 1986, the reader witnesses Berry fleshing out an argument that he has been making for over forty years: namely, that "all things connect – that we are wholly dependent on a pattern, an all-inclusive form, that we partly understand" (p. ix).

For Berry, deepening an argument really does mean "fleshing out." *Home Economics* is ripe with story and statement, yet mostly barren of statistics. For the contemporary economist who prefers statistics to either story or statement, this may seem like a weakness. But that would miss the point. A central part of Berry's argument is *not to be* such an economist, much less such a human being: "[those who would say] 'my engineer's mind inclines less toward the poetic and philosophical, and more toward the practical and possible,' [are] unable even to suspect that such a division of mind induces blindness to possibilities of the utmost practical concern" (p. 65). The modern insistence on "being practical" is, ironically, impractical. Of course statistics can help: they can sometimes convince the obstinate, or at times awaken us to a pattern we might otherwise have missed. But to focus on them single-mindedly is to become blind to the practical significance of what cannot be measured, to the complex and permanent patterns that are invisible to statisticians but nonetheless sustain us.

As Berry puts it, the pattern he seeks to describe is nothing less than the Kingdom of God (pp. 55, 60-1). He also calls it the Great Economy (p. 56). In either case, it is an Economy that encompasses us, encompasses everything, and serves as both a generous source of abundance and an exacting limit for any "little human economy" that seeks its daily bread within.¹

Berry contrasts two of these "little human economies" through the pages of *Home Economics*: the industrial economy and "a loving economy" (p. 189). To describe them it is helpful to begin, like Berry, by speaking concretely about how each one cultivates or corrupts the human community that is the family farm.

The Industrial Economy

"If [the family farm] is failing among us, pretty much without being argued against and pretty much without professed enemies, then we must try to ask **why** it should fail... [And] the best

¹ For Berry, nature certainly expresses this Great Economy, but it is also clear that nature, like humanity, is subject to it.

place to begin may be with the fact that the family farm is not the only good thing that is failing among us. The family farm is failing because it belongs to an order of values and a kind of life that are failing. We can only find it wonderful, when we put our minds to it, that many people now seem willing to mount an emergency effort to ‘save the family farm’ who have not yet thought to save the family or the community, the neighborhood schools or the small local businesses, the domestic arts of household and homestead, or cultural and moral tradition – all of which are also failing, and on all of which the survival of the family farm depends. The family farm is failing because the pattern it belongs to is failing, and the principle reason for this failure is the universal adoption, by our people and our leaders alike, of industrial values” (pp. 167-8).

For Berry, the industrial economy is both source and expression of a set of values – difficult to untangle from the air we breathe² – are based on at least three unexamined assumptions (p. 168):

- (1) That value equals price (“that the value of a farm, for example, is whatever it would bring on sale”).
- (2) That all relations are mechanical (“that a farm, for example, can be used like a factory”).
- (3) That the sufficient and definitive human motivation is competitiveness (“that a community, for example, can be treated like a resource or a market”).

Together these assumptions, and the kind of economy they inform, are inimical to the family farm and the pattern to which it belongs. The reason is simple: they exclude from consideration the natural and cultural sources which sustain the pattern of the family farm. By being excluded from consideration, these sources, both natural and cultural, are not valued; and by being devalued, they may be destroyed at no noticeable cost. Berry writes, “[T]he thing that troubles us about the industrial economy is exactly that it is not comprehensive enough, that, moreover, it tends to destroy what it does not comprehend, and that it is *dependent* upon much that it does not comprehend” (p. 55, see also p. 45). In this way, Berry’s position is not susceptible to the charge of sentimentalism or nostalgia – a potential danger that he himself recognizes (p. 184). He argues, rather, that in the long run industrial values undermine the economy itself. They exclude from consideration the sources on which *any* “little human economy” (p. 64) depends for its existence and health.

Berry’s critique of industrial values, in the context of the economy, thus harmonizes with Patrick Deneen’s critique of liberalism in the context of politics.³ Namely, the success of the liberal political experiment depends on pre-liberal or non-liberal institutions, like marriage and family, but the practice of liberalism tends to undermine these institutions, due to its anthropology of individualism, and its notion that human beings are separate from and opposed to nature. Liberalism thus contradicts itself, inevitably defeating the achievements it seeks to secure. One could replace the word liberal with “industrial” in the sentence above, and Deneen’s argument would be at home in *Home Economics*.

² In *Home Economics*, Berry does not blame the family farm’s failure on the greed or avarice of any one person, or even group. This may contrast with the apparent thrust of his 2012 Jefferson Lecture, in regard to “boomers” versus “stickers” (available online here: <http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture>).

³ Patrick Deneen, “Unsustainable Liberalism,” in *First Things*, Aug/Sep 2012 (available online here: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/07/unsustainable-liberalism>).

For this reason, a student of economic history cannot but wonder if Berry goes back far enough in naming the culprit for the collapse of the pattern he loves. Eventually, of course, we go back to Adam (in the Garden, not Smith); but the industrial economy is historically and logically linked to liberalism. In *Home Economics*, Berry even acknowledges that industrialism is not the original source of disintegration. “Sometime between”, he writes, “[Alexander] Pope’s Chain of Being in ‘An Essay on Man’ and [William] Blake’s ‘London’ the dominant minds had begun to see the human race, not as a part or member of Creation, but as outside it and opposed to it. The industrial revolution was only part of this change” (p. 70). In raising these questions, one cannot but look behind industrialism to the ascendancy of liberalism and, at least in “the dominant minds” of the Anglo-speaking world, the Lockean view of human relationships as contractual, self-constituted, and, thereby, disposable. Might these characteristics of liberalism be a deeper source of the collapse of the family farm and its pattern?

The Loving Economy

“At some point, late in the conference proceedings, they asked David [an Amish farmer] what community meant to him. He said that when he and his son were plowing in the spring he could look around him and see seventeen teams at work on the neighboring farms. He knew those teams and the men driving them, and he knew that if he were hurt or sick, those men and those teams would be at work on his farm.

Conditioned as we all are now by industrial assumptions, we must be careful not to miss or to underestimate the point of David’s reply: It is a practical description of a spiritual condition. ... [E]conomy is not merely a function of community; the community and the economy are virtually the same. We might, indeed, call an Amish community a loving economy, for it is based on the love of neighbors, of creatures, and of places” (p. 189).

When using a term like “loving economy,” the temptation to sentimentalism is always before the author. Berry avoids this trap by assiduously staying close to the world he has seen. He neither idealizes the community of the pre-industrial farm, nor takes up the technocratic fallacy (common among economists) that the right economic tinkering can provide our nation with constant material growth and social harmony, and each of us with good looks and above-average children.

The examples of loving economies put forth in *Home Economics* are several: the pre-World-War-II rural communities of Kentucky (pp. 152-61, 180-2), the Amish (pp. 177-8), and the legacy of the medieval economy, enduring but waning, on the Irish landscape of 1982 (pp. 21-48, esp. 33-4, 40-1, 46-7 *inter alia*). Yet more important for Berry are the never-to-be-official institutions of “marriage, family, household, friendship, [and] neighborhood,” which serve as a kind of paradigm for a loving economy, each in its own way. In each of these “human enclosures,” we live first as members, not simply competitors, and “escape the tyrannical doctrine of the interchangeability of parts” (pp. 121-2). And for marriage, at least, its true term mirrors that of the Great Economy as far as humanly possible: “to the edge of doom” (p. 122, quoting Shakespeare).

Certainly, Berry at times describes these loving economies in contrast to the industrial one. The value of mothering and fathering in a household, like the value of topsoil in a farm, is not the same as its market price (pp. 62, 135); relations are based on “membership” not mechanics (pp. 122, 123); and competition is not considered the sufficient and definitive economic motivation (pp. 116, 126-7). But Berry goes further than describing the photographic negative. He is able to open fields of questions not normally asked, or said to count, in the

industrial (liberal) economy. Some of these questions regard the proper scale of economic enterprise (pp. 33-4, 150) and the appropriate balance of technology with human skill (pp. 16-17). Others regard the significance of the Sabbath (p. 66) and bodily work (pp. 131-2) for a sound economy. Still others regard the just distribution of ownership, not just income, in a democratic society (p. 165). In raising these questions, Berry shares many of the premises and concerns that animate the “Small is Beautiful” economist E.F. Schumacher, as well as English Distributists like Chesterton and Belloc. As Berry writes, “The question of the survival of the family farm and the farm family is one version of the question of who will own the country... Shall the usable property of our country be democratically divided or not?” (p. 165).

For Berry, a loving economy is at bottom incarnational. It is founded on the unshakeable (and unshakeably Christian) conviction that for human beings the spiritual and the practical are, and should be, inseparable. That is, the “private” goods of God, worship, and community are neither private nor optional, but are insistently practical – “[S]piritual values that are now so inconsequentially associated with the idea of community [are] economic assets...and they [produce] economic results” (p. 187). Spiritual goods are practical. But the Incarnation means that the reverse is also always true: matter contains meaning. The economy is one part of a spiritual whole, and denying this entails a type of dismemberment. “A culture disintegrates”, Berry writes, “when its economy disconnects from its government, morality, and religion. If we are dismembered in our economic life, how can we be members in our communal and spiritual life?” (p. 169). A truly practical economy is not abstracted from its spiritual life, but culminates in the corporate worship of the community (pp. 180, 182). Similarly, if the highest principles and standards of a community are not to be “reduced merely to talk” (p. 169) the spiritual life of a community is and must be expressed in the economy.

The Great Economy

The most important thing for Berry about any human economy – industrial, incarnational, or somewhere in between – is that, in the long run, its success will be measured not merely by its own accounting, but by the accounting of the Great Economy (God’s Kingdom), whose balance sheet is more comprehensive, whose memory is longer, and whose proposition for the future is to endure forever (pp. 59-60). Thus, for students or professors of economics, the significance of *Home Economics* lies not in any particular theory derivable from Berry’s work (as to the valuation of natural or cultural “resources,” etc.), but rather in its premises, and the questions it is then able to ask: what economically counts, what constitutes economic health, and what can human beings really do to achieve it? Berry knows that these are unavoidably religious questions.

“[I]nvariably, at some point, the reach of human comprehension becomes too short, and at that point the work of the human economy must end in absolute deference to the working of the Great Economy. This, I take it, is the practical significance of the idea of the Sabbath” (p. 66).

Berry’s *Home Economics* promises no technocratic solutions to our nation’s economic problems. But in contrast to the frenetic activity of an economy that exists for the end of growing itself, Berry gives us an economy at the service of the person and the human community – which is to say an economy subordinate to “the real business of life, which is salvation,”⁴ the health and holiness of the whole human being.

⁴ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 31.

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