

BOOK REVIEW

„*Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*”, by Charles Eisenstein, 2011, published by Evolver Editions, distributed by North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California.

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When first reading the title of the book, people may presume that there is a contradiction of terms, because the last thing that “money” usually makes us think about is “sacred”. But each word in the title of this book is in its right place, as Charles Eisenstein, the author of *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*, talks about a new system, conceived as a solution to the current global crisis, that reveals the sacredness of money and economy.

The actual purpose of the book, as explicitly mentioned in the introduction, is to show the sacred face of money and human economy, as an endemic property that involves uniqueness and relatedness – unique for their irreplaceable status and relatedness because they are inseparable from everything else, starting with their history and going up to all that contributed to their build-up.

Besides philosophical underpinning of the economic systems and psychological insights about the effect that money has on human thinking, leading to the illusion of separateness and scarcity, the book has a strong spiritual background, pointed out from the beginning by the word “sacred” in the title and coming near to the permanent idea of treating everything as sacred as a result of the author’s primal formation in Philosophy at Yale University, voraciously reading in multiple domains and spiritual cultivation according to Eastern traditions.

This book is enrolled in the New Economics mainstream that preaches theoretical framework and/or practical models of economic metamorphosis in order to overcome the global crisis, among other proposals designed to solve important economical problems on long term.

Charles Eisenstein has earned his place among the New Economists through his consequent work as an emerging philosopher, professor, speaker, and writer focusing on themes of civilization, consciousness, spirituality, gifting, money, and human cultural evolution.

The author builds a complex work that infers theory, policy, and practice and uses a mix of methods in order to describe the current paradigm and narrate a captivating history of money. Furthermore, he brings arguments to support his statements, articulates root cause and realistic actionable and provides concrete tools regarding the necessary transition from present into future. In this sense, he examines measures like a negative-interest currency that encourages an equitable distribution of wealth, by losing value with time, elimination of economic rents in order to depolarize the wealth, internalization of social and environmental costs – economic disincentives for infractions, paying out the proceeds of the economic rent compensation, pollution taxes etc. to all citizens as a social dividend that aligns the actual work with one person's passion, generosity and art, economic degrowth as an option to decelerate consumption, a gift-based community structures, bringing enough hope and ideas to motivate the reader to join in creating a better world.

With an optimistic approach, the author predicates about the money system's necessity to change, along with the entire economy and real change rarely comes in the absence of crisis.

Similar to the Chinese pictographs for the word crisis, meaning in the same time "danger" and "favorable occasion", the moment of collapse is seen as a great opportunity to transit to a more connected, ecological and sustainable way of being, offering an opportunity to build a new and sacred economy.

The book has 23 chapters, 469 pages eloquently written with additional explanation in the footnotes, split into three parts. The first one is about the old paradigm regarding the current economic system, including a history of money and concluding that capitalism has to be replaced through gradual evolution with a new system proposed in the second part. This shows the way money would look like within a framework that revives nature, culture, and human spirit, instead of perishing it. Finally, the last part is about a genuine guideline of adapting ourselves to the new economy.

The first part describes the core features of the Economics of Separation, in which "more for me is less for you", as fractured communities, relationships, cultures, ecosystems that lead to depersonalization, polarization of wealth (without seeking to abolish property, but to transform it as part of a larger transformation) irremediable crisis and the solution proposed by the author to restore to wholeness is to transform this Economics into one of Reunion.

The author tells us that greed comes from scarcity and he goes on to discuss how the concept of scarcity is contrived, false, and dangerous to all of us.

Moreover, he considers the personal dimensions of this transition, speaking to those concerned with "right livelihood" and how to live according to their ideals in a world seemingly ruled by money.

In the second part of the book, Eisenstein presents a new economic system, a more ecological and humane one that has the purpose to restore to money its sacredness, rewarding generosity, without abandoning the civilization, technology and culture, but by restoring the humanity to a sacred estate, emphasizing cooperation over competition.

The last part talks about the transformation that is needed both on individual and the entire world's level about a new sense of self and a new story of the people—the connected self living in a co-creative partnership with Earth.

Even if the current paradigm taught us to see ourselves as separated from the other human beings and from the Universe, as all the habits and all the current institution are about separation, the new paradigm works with new meanings for the answer to the question "Who am I?", related with what we start now to believe: in a connected self, not separated from other human beings, not separated from the Universe – this is the new consciousness that Eisenstein is talking about.

The gift represents a central theme of the book, starting with an historical overview of the origins of money, continuing with a philosophical approach of our current economic systems and finishing with a practical way to become the basis of a monetary transaction in the future. Thus, the gift is presented by the author as the heart of a sacred economy being the most important aspect of the economic exchanges that has the purpose to restore communities where people didn't compete with each other for higher amounts – someone's bad luck equals another one's good luck. We discover that in a gift society, somebody's bad luck represents for the others one less person that can offer gifts, leading to the fact that people don't gather things. Moreover, in a gift economy, wealth does not represent how much people have, it represents how much they give: the more one gives, the more the others also want to give, the more grateful everybody feels.

In his discourse, Eisenstein makes references both to mythological roots (the Promethean gift of fire, the Apollonian gift of music) and biblical/ religion ones (life itself is seen as a gift that, among other gifts, is given to us for a reason) and declares himself an opponent of the standard evolutionary biology, considering that each organism makes a vital contribution to the totality of life on earth and doesn't need to have a direct benefit for itself.

Later on, the author reveals interesting features about the dynamics of the gift, which is given by the bind between the participants, as if, besides the gift, the giver also gives something of his own and also interesting features about a sort of magical spirit that people from the ancient times thought to be circulating along with the gift, a spirit that this book seeks to awaken.

The bind between participants builds a sort of "circle of the gift" that sustains the basis of community functions as follows: first person gives something to a second person, who will either give the first person something that she will need in the future, or will give something to a third person, who gives to somebody else and eventually to first person.

As communities grow larger, people can't maintain the direct interaction with each other and therefore, money becomes necessary. Although gifts and commercial transactions are well delimited today, in the past the separation between the two was not very well defined, which explains, as the author points out, why some old cultures had a single word to determine buying, selling, lending, and borrowing and why some modern languages still persist in this ambiguity having a single term for borrowing and lending.

In order to actually apply his philosophy presented in the book about the gift economy, Eisenstein made the full text of the book available on an electronic platform without charge, chapter by chapter over a period of about six months. This arrangement, similar to that of

open-source software, is a small sample of the economic system that Eisenstein predicts for the future. This economic system rejects the practice of turning natural resources – in this case, ideas – into commodities and it freely circulates those resources into society, having faith that their full value – social, cultural, spiritual and financial – will be realized and fairly distributed through the power of public gratitude.

In accordance to the same gift-based business model, the author suggests to receive from the reader that manages to "steal" this book, an amount that reflects that reader's gratitude – the value reflected to him, because each person's experience of reading it is unique: for some it may be a waste of time, for others it might be life-changing, being therefore, somehow absurd to receive an identical return gift from everyone.

As a conclusion, I think the ideas of the book are very challenging and full of meaning in an uncertain period that needs a fundamental model of a New Economics with realistic steps to be taken in order to overcome this crisis of culture and civilization and to transit into a new and a better human evolution, into an Age of Reunion that restores to wholeness – as stated by Charles Eisenstein – our fractured communities, relationships, cultures, ecosystems, and planet – very synthetic and poetic expressed by the following quote:

"No man is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. As well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manor of thine own or of thine friend's were. Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

(John Donne)