

Our Perverse Economy

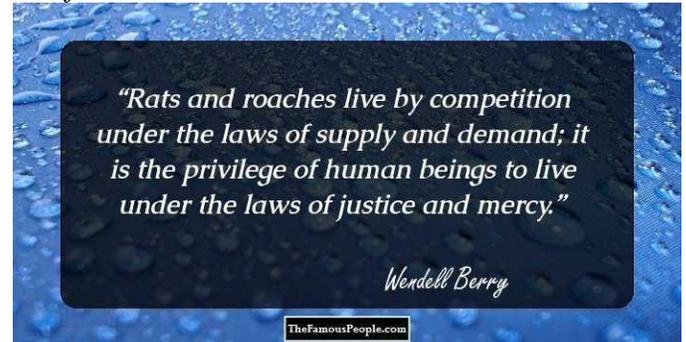
Recently I heard a commentator on the radio program suggest to the host that the word be put out to the American people that they should go shopping and spend money because many jobs will depend on it. One has to wonder what, specifically, the commentator wants us to buy: Does he mean that we should continue to shop for what we actually need, or is he suggesting shopping sprees for all sorts of extra and superfluous stuff . . . conspicuous consumption.

When mentioned by actual economists, the “consumer spending” aspect of the economy seems rather perverse to me. It is as if we have a duty to buy and spend without regard to actual need and, clearly, without reference to other values like ecological impacts, effects on the social fabric, morality, etc. It is as if the noble conservation efforts of the World War II generation have been replaced by this perverse caricature of patriotic duty called “shop till you drop.”

This is not the only perversion I perceive: On a recent hike in the woods with the dogs, my brother-in-law and I were discussing a variety of matters. He is the leader of a multi-million dollar sales team for a huge technology company and I asked him about the logic of the company requiring him and his associates to come back each quarter of the year with better sales numbers than the last. How is such a demand sustainable? Is this merely a motivational tool designed to squeeze out every last drop of effort from employees to reach numbers which may be impossible? He did not answer my question, but simply noted that his team had, indeed, exceeded expectations last quarter. On the inside, I fret for him as he turns 50 years old: Will he be one of those guys who gets replaced by a twenty-something getting paid one-quarter the salary?

A great American essayist by the name of Wendell Berry asserts that the way out of these sorts of cruelties and irresponsible practices is the acknowledgment of the Kingdom of God as the “Great Economy” within which to situate our practical economy, which he calls “the little economy.” He quotes Jesus story of the rich man in Luke 12 who tore down his barns and built larger ones in which to store up his wealth “for many years,” such that he could “eat, drink and be merry.” The offense of the rich man “seems to be

that he has stored up too much and in the process has belittled the future, for he has reduced it to the size of his own hopes and expectations. . . . By laying up ‘much goods’ in the present—and, in the process, using up such goods as topsoil, fossil fuel, and fossil water—we incur debt to the future that we cannot repay. That is, we diminish the future by deeds we call “use” but that the future will call “theft.”



Berry says that “we participate in our little economy to a considerable extent, that is, by factual knowledge, calculation, and manipulation; our participation in the Great Economy also requires those things, but requires as well humility, sympathy, forbearance, generosity, imagination. [Consider that] though a human economy can evaluate, distribute, use and preserve things of value, **it cannot make value.** Value can originate only in the Great Economy . . . a good human economy would recognize that it was dealing all along with materials and powers that it did not make. It did not make the trees, and it did not make the intelligence and talents of the human workers. When humans presume to originate value, they make value that is first abstract and then false, tyrannical, and destructive of real value. Money value, for instance, can be said to be true only when it justly and stably represents the value of necessary goods such as clothing, food and shelter, with originate, ultimately, in the Great Economy.”

And, one last critique of his to note is the value of “control,” (“control of inflation,” “controlled growth,” “controlled development,” “self-control.”) “Because we are always setting out to control something that we refuse to limit, we have made control a permanent and a helpless enterprise. If we will not limit causes, there can be no controlling of effects. What is to be the fate of self-control in an economy that encourages and rewards unlimited selfishness?”

[Excerpts from “The Art of the Commonplace,” Wendell Berry, 2002, Shoemaker & Hoard]