

V. Economic

Need: To make economics personal, meaningful

Are you surprised to find Economics as a component in our course? Do you feel you don't know much about it? Don't worry. There are many who feel as you do. And yet we would all probably agree, economics is an important component in our lives – as is its correlative, finance. Barfield put it this way (in a passage written in the 1930s), "...economic life today is the real bond of the civilized world. The world is held together not by political or religious harmony, but by economic interdependence". Could Barfield's ideas, his 'way', make a difference in our economic – and financial – lives? Yes, I believe that they can... but first we need to change our perspective.

I submit that we feel ignorant about economics – and sometimes even negative about it – because we view it in the abstract. Barfield confirms this: "Economic theory is bound hand and foot by the static, abstract character of modern thought". So our first task is to 'un-abstract' economics, to make it concrete... personal... and meaningful. The term 'economics' is an abstraction which denotes the way we live. Because we work, we speak of an 'economy', not the other way around. Instead of deriving the worker from his/her economy, we should focus on the worker him/herself and the context in which he/she works. And leave the abstraction – even the word 'economy' itself – aside.*

Now what do we have? We have you and me... and our colleagues at work... and a whole collective (society) of persons who work. Each worker has a consciousness... and the collective has a consciousness. That's where Barfield comes in. That's where his ideas, his 'way', applies. He can work with that. And so can we.

Recall what we learned in the previous components. If Barfield is right, we can change our consciousness, from one that objectifies the world to one that unifies it. We can do this, you'll recall, by affirming – believing – that the world is not made of 'things' that exist "out there" independent of us, but rather is the result of our consciousness, configuring what is presented to our senses into the phenomena we are all familiar with. When we affirm and believe this, we "participate" the phenomenal world and experience a basic unity with it.

Now, we have: you and me... and our colleagues at work... with a participating consciousness! With a participating consciousness, when we look at each other at work, we see not just another worker but a

being not unlike ourselves – indeed, in a sense, we see ourselves! And we see the work environment in the same way – something with which we interpenetrate. With this kind of consciousness, human labor cannot be a commodity. With this kind of consciousness, we can exchange goods "in a way that foregrounds rather than suppresses our humanity".**

To view economics in this way would be to feel almost empathetic toward it, and toward those involved in it. This 'economic empathy', however, will not determine a particular economic principle or policy. Remember, Barfield's ideas are a 'way', not a 'subject'. Instead, it will transform the policy-maker – at the level of his/her consciousness – and thereby provide a basis, a foundation, for making decisions in all areas of economic life. Since a participating consciousness involves interpenetration of subject and object, it would seem to follow that those decisions would involve interdependence and mutual responsibility (labor and management, production and product distribution, corporation and investor, etc.).

One possible application of this can be found in the idea of 'associative economics' by Rudolf Steiner. Steiner, a contemporary of Barfield's, was greatly admired by Barfield. Barfield frequently referred others to Steiner, especially when it came to social, economic and spiritual aspects of communal life. Present day specialists in Steiner's thought have written this, about his idea of 'associative economics':

Since the beginning of the 20th century humanity has entered a new stage of societal development characterized by the appearance of a global economy as distinct from the preceding, but still co-existing, stages of private and national economics.

In his economics course, given in 1922, Rudolf Steiner drew attention to the fact that this then unnoticed development in human affairs would require a new approach to economic science. The appearance of a global economy, that was closed and single, showed the approach described by Adam Smith, in terms of world trade and competing economies, to be anachronistic. The remedy, according to Steiner, would be to undertake economic life on a consciously coordinated associative basis. To do so would not require a program of any kind, but rather a more precise understanding of the actual phenomena themselves. For Steiner saw that the discipline of economics, as it had developed during the 19th century, could not yet be called a science. For that, an entirely new approach was needed, an approach that embraced methodology, history, sociology, accounting and the insight that money is an articulated phenomenon. Above all, Steiner placed an emphasis on the need for the human being to place himself at the centre of economic processes and draw from the experience of his own conduct, rather than the theoretical world of the abstract observer.

Hence the term 'associative economics' describes a way of understanding modern economic life that points to the next step after market economics. It describes a landscape that comes into being as humanity, individually and with one another, takes a

step towards association, which it can only do when economic life is grasped as a whole, not from the point of view of one person only, and also not until the way we do business and manage the economic aspects of our institutions matches the exigencies of a single global economy.

We see from this that Steiner's ideas are very much in line with Barfield's. The emphasis of both is to take a holistic view of economics with the human being at the center, not as abstract observer but as "associative" participant. Or one might say, a "participating associate", i.e. one who "associates" not only with his/her colleagues, but with "the actual phenomena themselves". The phenomena themselves will necessarily be changed, because they will be 'participated'. Money, for example, will become 'currency' once again, and flow through the economic system – like a 'current' – as blood flows through the human body. All this of course would involve everyone working together in a "consciously coordinated" way – a difficult task, to be sure but one that would be well worth the effort.

For our limited purposes here, we might start with a frame of mind offered by Barfield himself – a 'way' to ease ourselves into thinking of economics not abstractly but personally and meaningfully, reflected in activities we engage in every day. In one of his essays (collected in *The Rediscovery of Meaning*), he wrote: "...in modern society, structured as it is upon a more or less universal division of labour, everyone works not for himself but for everyone else, and each relies upon everyone else for what he consumes"... "the mind reels before the task of computing the number of human beings who must have been concerned, in one way or another, in the production and marketing of a single package of cereals: design and manufacture of the agricultural machinery... of the tools for producing that machinery... large scale farming... the manufacture of the packages... the packaging itself... wholesale and retail marketing... and finally the erection and maintenance of the large supermarket". It would serve us, and our society, well if when we purchase our products, we remember those "human beings who must have been concerned" in their production.

From this perspective it is clear that in our everyday lives we are the beneficiaries of an interdependent world, a world which if viewed from the perspective of a participating consciousness will reveal its economics as (in Barfield's words) "all for each and each for all". Personal, meaningful.

* Gratitude to Robert Bolt (Preface to "A Man For All Seasons") for this phrasing

** Gratitude to Dr. Anthony Baker for this phrasing