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978-0-521-15246-4 - *Civilizing the Economy: A New Economics of Provision*

Marvin T. Brown

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## Civilizing the Economy

When a handful of people thrive while whole industries implode and millions suffer, it is clear that something is wrong with our economy. The wealth of the few is disconnected from the misery of the many. In *Civilizing the Economy*, Marvin T. Brown traces the origin of this economics of dissociation to early capitalism, showing how this is illustrated in Adam Smith's denial of the central role of slavery in wealth creation. In place of the Smithian economics of property, Brown proposes that we turn to the original meaning of economics as household management. He presents a new framework for the global economy that reframes its purpose as the making of provisions instead of the accumulation of property. This bold new vision establishes the civic sphere as the platform for organizing an inclusive economy and as the focus of a move toward a more just and sustainable world.

MARVIN T. BROWN teaches business and organizational ethics in the Philosophy Department at the University of San Francisco and in the Organizational Systems program at Saybrook University in San Francisco. His previous books include *Working Ethics* (1990), *The Ethical Process* (2003), and *Corporate Integrity* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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## A New Economics of Provision

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## Preface

This is not a book I had been waiting to write. At least I didn't think so. Now that it is finished, I can see that it belongs to a particular personal story that began with my participation in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, surfaced again years later with my work in the ethics and diversity training programs at Levi Strauss and Company, and now continues with a tale of slavery and economics. That is my story. It is not, however, the primary story of this book. The book sets up a contest between two economic frameworks: One is based on property relations and focuses on the accumulation of property; the other is based on civic relations and focuses on the making of provisions. The first one treats the planet and people as commodities and values them by the price they can fetch in the market. The second one treats the planet and human communities as living providers and protects them for this and future generations. In this book, the second framework wins. If it doesn't win, we all lose.

This contest is not between capitalism and socialism or between government control and private control. It is a contest between an uncivilized and a civilized economy. In a civilized economy, economic transactions are based on civic norms and people in these transactions are treated as citizens. An uncivilized economy, on the other hand, ignores the civic rights of persons and measures only what can be priced. It is based on property relations rather than civic relations. This is not a new contest. Since the eighteenth century, we have been slowly replacing property ownership with civic membership as the basis for our life together. This book brings this evolution of civic consciousness to the workplace and to the economy.

And what is the connection between the book's primary story about a contest between two economic frameworks, and my story

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about a white male writer and teacher involved in the history and legacy of slavery? It turns out that slavery was an integral part of the creation of wealth in early capitalism, and yet the economic framework we have inherited from such works as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* never acknowledges this pivotal part of its beginnings. Why the disconnect? I don't know. I do know Smith saw slaves as property rather than as laborers. They were bought and sold. Smith, however, remains silent about all of this in his account of wealth creation. We live with the legacy of this silence, focusing on the accumulation of property without much regard for those who provide it.

The crux of the matter is whether we exclude or include the real providers of wealth in our economic models. It is also about how we interpret land, labor, and money. Are they properties or providers? It is about how we interpret property. Is it a private or a government institution? It is about how we divide up the economy. Should we think of different economic sectors or of different systems of provision? It is about who should organize the economy. Should it be property owners or all citizens? It is a highly charged contest. Obviously, this book will not settle it. Not at all. I hope the book brings the contest to the classroom, to the boardroom, to the workplace, and to city councils, where it can be refined, corrected, and expanded.

In some ways the contest is more about ethics than about economics. If ethics were about how we should live together, then economics would be a dimension of ethics. In any case, I would like to see this book included in conversations about justice and sustainability, about corporate responsibility, about poverty, about human rights, about viable communities, and about the process of making good decisions. There are literally millions of people involved in these conversations in a multitude of projects and programs in an untold number of daily activities and practices. They are working to provide, to protect, and to fulfill the purposes of their communities, and in such practices one finds the management of making provisions or economics.

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This brings me to a central assumption of my work: Words make a difference. Not always, of course, but in some cases they make all the difference in the world. If we were to share our understanding of how we use the word “wife,” for example, we would probably have a fairly good idea of whether we operate in an economics of property, which defines wives as property, or an economics of provision, which honors what wives and husbands provide for each other. In a sense, the contest between an economics of property and an economics of provision is a contest over words and more specifically the meaning of words. From this angle, the book belongs to the practice of loving wisdom – to philosophy.

For some of us, philosophy begins with Socrates. He said that the unexamined life is not worth living. That seems to be true. He also said that he saw himself as a midwife. A midwife? What about the “economic man” or “rational behavior based on self-interest”? How could a man see himself as a midwife? Easy. Wisdom is not gender specific. Socrates loved wisdom, not because he possessed it – it was not self-love – but because he sought to bring it out in conversations with others. Above all else, Socrates was a dialogical philosopher. If we are to have a wise economy, we will need to engage in similar processes of dialogue – asking questions, examining answers, going deeper – so we can examine our life together and make it truly worth living. As you will see, the heart of an economics of provision is the idea of civic conversations, where citizens engage in deliberations that shape their common future. Maybe that is what economic midwives do.

Countless conversations with other people have helped birth this book. Many of the ideas and even words have been borrowed. Because the book draws on knowledge from multiple disciplines, I have had to rely on others. Sometimes I was lucky to find a book or article that answered a question I had just asked. At other times, colleagues suggested I do more reading or look at some literature if I was to venture into a particular field. I think the result is a book that sets an agenda for future thinking more than it provides conclusions to the arguments in which it engages. So there are many colleagues and

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As you will see, an economics of provision begins with the recognition of the actual providers of wealth. It breaks the silence about who really provides for us – the members of our households, the workers who suffer from the misery of exploitation and exclusion, and our planet whose life is now threatened by our consumer culture. Many people have provided for those of us who read and write books, and they have not always been recognized. If we are to civilize the economy, all providers must become visible and their contributions adequately recognized. I would like to dedicate this book to all providers.