

Book Review

Buddhist Economics for Pandemic Times

A review of

Buddhist Economics. An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science

By Clair Brown. New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2017. xx + 204 pages, ISBN 978-1-63286-366-9, hardcover, \$18.64; ISBN 978-1-63286-366-6, ePub, \$14.58.

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Clair Brown's *Buddhist Economics* is a book that meets a desire, a longing among many of its readers “who seek peace, fairness and environmental sustainability,” to quote Jeffrey Sachs' cover blurb. It has been a well-selling, well-endorsed book, with spinoffs in different formats and media (e.g., Lewis 2018). This is a really *nice* book that wants all the right things, sometimes even more as a tract than a scholarly work. Brown's focus on a better world, ecologically but also regarding human life and society, has been horrifically validated by COVID-19 and its effects in two important ways. First, arguably, in a “Brown world,” the pandemic would conceivably not have happened, or at least not in such a form, regarding its outbreak, spread, and response. Second, although at the time of writing, the moment to seriously reconsider more thoroughly—even in mainstream global-Northern circles—how we want to live and what our priorities should be seems to have already passed, this debate is still more prominent than it was before March 2020. Brown's is a significant outline for such an alternative and the way thither. So, this is a very valuable contribution, as are works of Buddhist economics generally, to forming a response and an alternative to the old normal.

It might be worth addressing some more problematic aspects of this book, however, especially because it is presented as a general introduction to Buddhist economics—and [reader reviews have been mixed](#), if still largely positive. Since Brown sees her book as a contribution to, and call for, dialogue, rather than as a last word (171), and since its goal is “to expand the dialogue among people around the world who seek meaningful lives for all, on a planet with

thriving ecosystems” (7), it will be helpful to highlight some aspects of *Buddhist Economics* that are at least worthy of debate.

This is all the more important because the book’s immediate success has assured it an important position in what may be the early mainstreaming of Buddhist economics, which since 2017 has seen a sharp increase in important new publications, as well as in suggestions of new, expanded, or switched agendas. For instance, the publications by King (2016), Shields (2018), and a [Special Focus in this journal](#) (see Williams-Oerberg 2019), which all have very strong personal takes on the matter, could be mentioned here. More recently, a Buddhist economics textbook (Ng 2020) was even published, closely related to Brown and her approach, in a new Palgrave book series on the same subject, which Brown and Zsolnay co-edit.

The house of the Buddha has many rooms, to use an expression from a different religious tradition, and *Buddhist Economics* makes ample sense in one or two of them. I reread this book at the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay, leaning against a pillar, facing the Buddha image, among the never-ending stream of worshippers and devotees. Burma (now Myanmar) was arguably the birthplace of modern Buddhist economics in the 1950s, both in practice and in theory. E.F. Schumacher both conceived and based his concept of Buddhist economics here (Leonard 2019). While little of that economy remains (Myanmar today suffers from Australian neoliberal economic advice), the people, their Buddhism, and if you will the legacy of “real,” lived Buddhist economics, with all its flaws and glories, is still there.

It is therefore striking that this room does not exist in Clair Brown’s book. Rather, *Buddhist Economics* is a global-Western (or global-Northern) take, almost a textbook case illustrating the perennial debate around global Buddhism regarding issues of context, borrowing, and takeover of the global South/East by the North/West. Buddhist countries, the *sangha*, native Buddhists, and actual Buddhist economics in a Buddhist context exist only marginally at best here—especially the Theravada tradition, which has dominated the kind of institutionalized Buddhist economics under discussion. Thailand and its Sufficiency Economy are not discussed; Bhutan is mentioned in passing and only as regards measuring, without examining Gross National Happiness as perhaps the main example of Buddhist economics today (see Drechsler 2019a & 2020). Concrete traditional, partially resurging, institutional practices in non-Buddhist countries (such as the Nepalese *guthis*, see Shakya & Drechsler 2019), are likewise missing.

In other words, this is a book primarily for non-poor, global-Western people who would like to scale down, who recognize the problems of the planet and themselves, and who appreciate a unifying theme for that impulse, which in this case is a version of global Buddhism. It is quite obvious that they are the target audience; almost all the book’s endorsements come from this group as well. Very late, almost halfway through the generously paginated book (on page 84 of 178 text pages), “the poor” enter, but they quickly leave the stage again. This is not to say at all that Brown doesn’t care about them or about inequality in general, and non-poor global-Western people have their *dukkha*, too. Their contribution to earth’s problems is very high, and so addressing them surely is beneficial. But for an introduction to Buddhist

economics, readers may wonder whether it is acceptable to implicitly define and delineate Buddhism in such a way.

This global-Westernism relates to theory as well as practice. The two classic approaches to Buddhist studies are philological and socio-anthropological, although both are legitimate, and within Buddhism, “reality...is one” (Coedès 1990: *4). Along these lines, I would argue that texts by themselves do not “mean” anything, and in the realm of economics, actual application is the most important interpretation that conveys such meaning (Gadamer 1990; Drechsler 2019a). Hence, Buddhist countries with Buddhist economic systems or policies matter so much. (This is one of the main problems of both fundamentalist-reformist attempts to recreate an original Buddhism, and of attempts to distill a secular, religion-free Buddhism from scripture, which Buddhism’s systematic and philosophical dimensions seem to facilitate, as Habermas has recently underlined (2019: 371). Even if one does not agree with the argument that practice is what makes Buddhist economics real, at least this approach gives us “Buddhism, not simply as a normative doctrinal system, but as a historically and culturally contextualized religious tradition, or to put it another way, Buddhism as a lived tradition” (Swearer 2010: ix).

As the front flap of the dust cover asserts, “In the tradition of E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful*, renowned economist Clair Brown argues persuasively for a new economics built upon equality, sustainability, and right living.” It is, indeed, true that especially the link of Buddhist economics with sustainability, which is at the heart of Brown’s book, is largely Schumacherian. Brown’s sole dealing with Schumacher, however, is a twelve-line section in the introduction, a summary of his main points flanked by these statements: “The term ‘Buddhist economics’ was first coined by E.F. Schumacher in his 1973 book, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*” and “My approach expands on Schumacher’s notion...to accommodate a world that couldn’t have been envisioned in 1973” (xiii). In the interest of Buddhist economics as an emerging field, and seeing the relevance of Schumacher, now literally more than ever, it may be worth pointing out the following three points.

First, Schumacher did not merely “coin” this term, he really created the concept for modern, Western-led discourse. While his is already a particular choice of what Buddhist economics could be, that interpretation—based in and on the Burmese context and his work there—has dominated the field since, efforts to dismiss, deconstruct, or at least debate (t)his approach (recently, e.g., King 2016; with more nuance, Shields 2018), usually from a purely theoretical or scriptural perspective, notwithstanding. It also ricocheted back to Asia, to which it was originally addressed, and I would argue that all forms of Buddhist economics existing in practice today, as well as most Asian theory, are at least somewhat indebted to him (see Drechsler 2019a: 528. I have come to appreciate more both Schumacher’s importance and quality over the years, though that does not mean his work is without flaws).

Second, Schumacher conceived his concept, and began publishing about it, already in the 1950s and 1960s (Schumacher 1959 [1955], 1967 [1965]. The latter is the basis for, but not identical with, the famous chapter in Schumacher 1977 [1973]: 44-51). A recent, excellent essay by Leonard (2019), based on archival sources, establishes this publication history in a very

helpful way. This is important, as Schumacher's two earlier essays, and especially the first, make the direct links with Asia and Asian economic policy, and thus the non-Western and policy-relevant aspects, much more obvious than *Small is Beautiful* does.

Finally, Brown's statement that her "approach expands on Schumacher's notion...to accommodate a world that couldn't have been envisioned in 1973" may ring intuitively true, but surprisingly enough, even in matters that Brown might refer to here, Schumacher is conceptually not behind her—if anything, to the contrary. This is the case as far as sustainability and ecology are concerned, as already mentioned (Schumacher 1959: 115-116; 1967: 699-700; 1977: 49-50), but also regarding technology, which he touches on very nicely in the 1965 essay (1967: 700-701. Brown is surprisingly cryptic on this topic, although she is actually an expert; see, e.g., Brown and Campbell 2004). Given Schumacher's direct relevance to our pandemic times, it is really important to give him his due in this context.

Regarding that current discourse, the book unfortunately doesn't fully deliver on its claim to draw "upon the best economic thinking and Buddhist teachings being done today" (6). Cooperative economics, based, for instance, on Commons-Based Peer Production (Bauwens et al. 2019), are not mentioned at all, despite being strongly linked to the reasoning of Buddhist economics. Nor is the currently very prominent discussion around degrowth (Kallis 2020), for which Buddhist economics is one of the main sources. The degrowth question—whether green growth is enough to attain ecological sustainability (Hickel & Kallis 2019)—is one of the main challenges to the kind of economics advocated by Brown, and it would have been very helpful to have this debate addressed in her book.

About Buddhist teachings, the two go-to thinkers for Brown, as for many Buddhists, are the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. P.A. Payutto, probably the most important contemporary Buddhist economics thinker, is, as far as I can see, mentioned just once in a footnote (181, n7). (Socially) Engaged Buddhism, with its many important protagonists (such as Sulak Sivaraksa [2011]), one of the most relevant links of contemporary Buddhism with economics that is often critical of the powers-that-be, does not even seem to get a nod. Finally, work not available in English is left out as well, although significant contributions exist (for example, regarding Cambodia, the work by Heng Monychenda; see Thaing 2019).

Next to the centering of a Western-Northern perspective, what is perhaps the greatest pity for the reader new to Buddhist economics is that the book never systematically develops the topic from the Buddha's teachings; they are just assumed and then promulgated. There is no summary or synthesis of Buddhism as relevant for economics (or anything else). That it is possible to come up with such a section has been beautifully shown by William J. Long in his recent *Tantric State* (2019), praised by Brown on its dustjacket, which contains precisely such a successful effort (9-69; see Drechsler 2020).

The gaps in Brown's book may be explained by her statement,

My thinking about how to reframe economics from a Buddhist perspective was inspired initially by studying Buddhism with compassionate, knowledgeable

teachers at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley...As I embraced the core Buddhist concepts of interdependence, compassion, and right livelihood, I wondered, ‘How would Buddha teach Introductory Economics?’ (2017: ix).

This suggests that this book is not built directly on the teachings of the Buddha, but on the author’s *practice* and understanding of a specific form of Buddhism. While the book contains many references to and quotes from her teachers and others, they are not presented comprehensively, either. As a result, the book pronounces various things as Buddhist economics, yet we are usually not told why each might be so, i.e., how such a claim derives from Buddhism, even if this would be easily defensible. For example, Brown states that “Buddhist economics is built upon... *asymmetric information...*, *behavioral economics...*, *relative income...*, *altruism...*, *market failures...*, *human capabilities...*, and *moral hazard*” (5). But these are latter-day claims which partially do and partially do not describe what Buddhist economics *is*; this is a very personal list, close to contemporary welfare economics.

Brown’s final, and in itself highly commendable, chapter is about the “Leap to Buddhist economics” (131-171). She argues that it “is time to start a dialogue about how to move to a Buddhist economy. For the planet, and for ourselves, there is no time to lose” (131). This policy orientation is particularly relevant for our current pandemic context, and it is also something that sets Brown’s book positively apart from other, often very self-referential, recent texts on Buddhist economics. However, the first challenge here is, how to include Buddhists who do not agree with this specific agenda. The second is how to enlist those who are not Buddhist. In many developing countries, as well as in catching-up powers like China and India, this agenda is often met with hate and ridicule. Additionally, Buddhists, even in Buddhist-majority countries, often pursue other priorities as well. If we really want to achieve Brown’s goals—barring some sudden mass enlightenment—we may require some “legitimate coercion” (Mansbridge 2014). The Buddha’s political teachings, as well as all extant Buddhist economic systems, provide institutions that can potentially accomplish this, such as the *dharmaraja* (Drechsler 2019b & 2020), even if the latter has always been hard to accept from a contemporary global-Western perspective. This crucial linchpin is, however, not considered by Brown.

“Most likely this book won’t have enough rigor for some economists or enough dharma for some Buddhists” (6), Brown states in a kind of *captatio benevolentiae*, but maybe the issue is *vice versa*. Reinventing the (dharma) wheel is not always wrong, but summing up, one could say that readers of this book should be aware that what is usually meant by Buddhist economics, the actual practice of Buddhist economics as a system today and in history, the foundations of Buddhist economics in the Buddha’s teachings, and most of the discourse among Asian Buddhist economics thinkers, are not what this book is about.

In a later essay, Brown and Zsolnay (2018) actually address several of the points marked as missing in this review—such as the key role of P.A. Payutto, one of Schumacher’s earlier works, Buddhist cooperatives, Bhutanese Gross National Happiness, and the specificity of the non-poor global-Western perspective. This shows that the problem is not with Brown not

knowing about these issues, but rather with her not addressing them in the book under review. Still, missing they remain. The book's strength is that if one agrees with Brown's view of the world, both economically and as regards her school of Buddhism, *Buddhist Economics* gives a comprehensive view of what should be done today. And as COVID-19 has forced such crucial choices upon us, this is a helpful and important book for our times.

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