Hope for the Future?

Efforts and ideas to improve the current economic predicament

INTRODUCTION

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In a pessimistic – or realistic – mood, it is hard to deny that the world's future looks rather grim: growing inequality appears difficult to undo; the financial system has hardly become safer since the 2007/2008 crisis; and the rising power of BRICS and other Global South economies tends to rely on conventional economic and ecologically destructive growth models. At the same time, and nurturing a more positive mood, we are increasingly witnessing efforts to turn the tide of the current economic predicament: more inclusive forms of capitalism; ethical consumption; and alternative approaches to economic growth.

In this issue of *Voices from Around the World* we present a number of thoughts on alternatives to current forms of global capitalism, and considerations as to whether and how these may evolve. Increasingly we understand that existing economic orthodoxy does not offer a sufficient understanding of, or solutions to, the challenges we face. Even mainstream thinkers realise that current economic models have a variety of destructive tendencies, particularly regarding inequality, resource depletion, pollution and so forth.

Of course, concerns about the destructive character of capitalism are not new. Nevertheless, these concerns may gain new momentum, for example with the Occupy movement, the rise of politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders in the wake of it, and an IMF that realises that there can be such a thing as 'too much austerity'. At the same time, however, there is still much left to be desired. Wolfgang Streeck, in a recent interview, rightly questions the effectiveness of moral counterfactuals when it remains unexplained why many of these have not long ago become facts. The concerns raised in this issue, then, should also be considered as a plea for more fundamental research into which forces and logics prevent counterfactuals from becoming the norm. A better understanding of this may actually help to improve tactics and strategies aimed at fairer and more sustainable outcomes.

We also have to be realistic about the fact that change takes time. David Graeber refers to the delay that exists between protests and change, which he defines in an interview as the '3.5 years historical lag'. Though the timeframe may differ from situation to situation, his point is of relevance. Beliefs about economics and/or politics may be gradually transformed on the basis of counterfactuals. Five years from now the setup may look rather different from what we currently think is possible – partly as a result of opposition building up at the moment. Hence, corporations cannot singlehandedly ignore the pressure they face, notwithstanding that, as Streeck argues, business may not be intimidated *enough* at the moment to accept constraints on its power.

Why, for example, would a multinational corporation like Coca-Cola care about labour conditions, the environment, 'land grab', and other issues that may be deemed external to its everyday business practices? They may fear consumer boycotts or potentially stricter and binding regulation. Yet, to assume that capitalists are bad guys by definition, are all-powerful, or that they will always use what power they have to protect 'free markets', is ignoring the historical record. Even when change is limited, more detailed investigations are needed into which discourses and actions businesses, multinational corporations and so forth fear, and how they evaluate them. Hence, Jessica Sklair's plea in this issue to seek to understand and analyse those in power is significant. Without this, it may be harder to successfully pressure and/or convince them to work towards more equal and less destructive outcomes.

Nobody believes that this is an easy task – not least because civil society increasingly faces repression around the world. But as most of the contributions in this issue illustrate, hope remains. The various authors do not pretend that they have the solution, or believe that transformation will occur without obstacles, but they hope that their thoughts may help to contribute to solutions to the current challenges. Their contributions range from more general suggestions for systemic change, to illustrating the realities on the ground, which are often rather different from what economic textbooks suggest. Some present personal reflections, while others discuss global capitalist structures. To a certain extent here we are also making use of the power of repetition, as a number of them have been published elsewhere, but sometimes we need a message to be repeated in order to really take it in and act upon it. Taken both together and individually, we hope that the contributions offer insightful analyses of the current predicament, as well as potential solutions.

Contributions

In reflection on the issue's title, Patrick Neveling's discussion of hope provides a relevant starting point. He illustrates that hope is always paradoxical, since it is about both the impossibilities and the possibilities. It is, moreover, on intimate terms with despair. Indeed, while many hope for change – and may actually see change happening – there remains much to despair about. Furthermore, one person's hope may be another's despair, as Neveling illustrates in a more detailed analysis of post-crisis Ireland.

It is not necessarily difficult to decide whose hope to favour, though. Fair and democratic societies should favour the wishes of the majority while respecting the lives and hopes of minorities. With the 2007/2008 financial crisis still fresh in mind, Bill Freund provides a general analysis of how global finance should be tamed. Only by nationalising large parts of the banking system, ensuring better-regulated stock markets, and dismantling tax havens can we work towards an economic system that serves society instead of the other way around.

Also, speaking for the African context, Keith Hart argues that African people should finally receive what they are due. To obtain this, he argues, the African countries should defend their interests collectively, instead of being subjected to a racist world order that only allows foreign entities and a small number of Africans to reap the benefits of the continent's wealth. The precipitous increase of the continent's population alone may actually facilitate this, he argues. It is the numbers that count and, reflecting on Frantz Fanon, Hart discusses the potential for a new African revolution. Hence, at the same time as the growth of the world population appears as a major concern, he presents an account of the emancipatory power of numerical preponderance. To succeed in turning the global system in their favour, however, an openness to collaborate with existing powers is required; David Graeber equally makes a plea in the above-mentioned interview for the radical left to collaborate with the institutional left in order to really come to meaningful change.

The hope, of course, is that the growth of populations of the Global South does not go hand in hand with the same destructive growth that has been witnessed in the long-established economies of the Global North. This, however, is often rightly perceived as not allowing the Global South to enjoy the same privileges as many people of the Global North. Instead, Jason Hickel, in a discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), suggests that the most prosperous countries should 'de-develop'. This, as Hickel realises, requires some constructive thinking about what terminology to apply. Economic growth tends to have a positive connotation, while de-developing appears too negative to sell. Yet, as he points out, many people in prosperous countries have embraced trends that represent alternative approaches to economic growth. If this can be framed in much more positive terms, current beliefs in economic, yet often destructive, growth models may be turned around. Resonating with Neveling's contribution, this should convey a sense of hope. Hope for lifestyles that embrace many of the joys of life, yet without continuing further along the one-way path towards destruction.

Lorenzo Fioramonti, who also discusses the SDGs, sees them as a good starting point for radical change. He does not deny the limits of the SDGs, yet they also contain a number of leads that substantially differ from the past. There is an increasing acknowledgement of how different concerns are interrelated and can therefore only be solved by adopting an integrated approach. To make use of them strategically, Fioramonti provides a number of tangible solutions for how to work towards more sustainable outcomes – and shed many of the destructive economic convictions, policies and performance metrics we currently rely on along the way. This all comes together in his Republic of Wellbeing, a metaphor for policy changes that is not only about hope but, according to him, also pragmatic and within reach.

The integrated approach, as Paul Robert Gilbert illustrates in his contribution, should also be extended to the economic curricula. Both Hickel's and Fioramonti's suggestions for change will probably have most success when economic curricula are fundamentally changed. Gilbert, who is a member of the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics, argues that only a pluralist understanding of economics provides us with the tools to organise economies to the benefit of all. Especially policymakers should take stock of the limits of beliefs in market rationality for organising societies – after all, societies are more than just markets. This, Tijo Salverda argues, should be accompanied by increasing pressure on the state. As examples of pressure on corporations illustrate, opposing certain practices is not necessarily futile. Yet, he argues, we cannot rely on pressuring economic enterprises alone, since they can never offer an integrated approach for society's needs. The state, with all its shortcomings, is required as a partner in mobilising change. When policymakers and other state actors start rethinking economic orthodoxy (voluntarily or under pressure) the Republic of Wellbeing may indeed be within reach.

A good dose of realism is still required, however. In his analysis of solidarity movements in Greece, Theodoros Rakopoulos illustrates that these movements are certainly of relevance to overcoming some of the consequences of EU enforced austerity. Yet, contrary to what some may wish for, Rakopoulos illustrates that they are not sufficient for a generalised paradigm shift of the country's political economy. Hence, in our wish for change, vigilance about what is actually happening is required.

Mario Schmidt, in reflecting upon the work of Marcel Mauss, presents a critical account of the 'sharing economy'. In the face of concerns about free market capitalism, many believe that inequalities are best confronted by embracing the alternative 'sharing economy'. Yet, as Schmidt illustrates, it is shortsighted to assume that sharing activities are inherently more socialist than the individual purchase of goods, and thus the existence of money. If properly implemented, money may actually offer a better and more democratic entry point to change the world for the better.

Supriya Singh, who contributes with both a personal note and an interview, also points to the qualities of money. In her personal discussion of the role of money in Indian and Australian families, she highlights the fact that money can have positive tendencies, and that it is not necessarily impersonal and immoral as many critics present it to be. Moreover, as she argues in the interview, for many of the world's most disenfranchised, new and creative solutions for being included in monetary exchange may offer most hope. For example, mobile money like M-Pesa offers tremendous emancipatory power to the immense group of the unbankable in the Global South.

Empirical investigations are, in other words, of central importance in understanding change and the potential for it. Resonating with Singh's argument of the emancipatory power of mobile money, Laura Pargen and Peter Dannenberg illustrate that producing for (international) markets, too, is not inherently negative. In the case of small-scale farmers in Kenya, hunger is not necessarily the prospect when producing cash crops for markets – both export and domestic. They illustrate that a combination of producing food and cash crops appears to offer most guarantees of avoiding hunger. More evidence-based economics, their contribution indicates, also requires critical analyses of beliefs that markets, or money, are categorically bad. Just as many of the policies that are deemed neoliberal are grounded more in ideological beliefs about economics than evidence, the same can be said about much of the opposition to the catch-all term 'neoliberalism'. That said, trends indentified as neoliberalist can have real impacts.

Giorgos Poulimenakos and Dimitris Dalakolgou illustrate that the recent terrorist attacks in Europe may partly be explained as being partly rooted in the exclusion of large parts of society due to the increasing marketisation of society – and the depoliticisation that comes with it.

Policymakers and the like should certainly take stock, since, as Gilbert's contribution, already mentioned above, argues, realities on the ground often do not match the content of economic textbooks and abstract discussions in the centres of power. In the case of female entrepreneurs in Lesotho, Sean Maliehe points out that their practices have relatively little to do with dominant ideas about the *homo economicus*. From this reality, he argues, lessons could be drawn for more inclusive economic models. Equally, Mallika Shakya shows in her study of Nepal that neoliberalism can be reversed. She witnesses a humanising drive with, for example, economic transactions that are not necessarily rooted in profit-seeking. Hence, in order to come to a more human idiom in the context of economic transformations, Shakya argues that we have to be more open to studying the empirical realities, rather than relying too strongly on abstract discourses.

In these empirical investigations, we cannot ignore those in power, as the above-mentioned reference to Jessica Sklair's contribution has already indicated. In her analysis of philanthropy in Brazil, Sklair does not consider philanthropy to be a panacea for solving many of the world's problems, despite what some may believe – or hope. After all, much of philanthropists' money results from exploitation and other capitalist excesses. Yet she shows that this should not blind us to the possibility that change may come 'from within'– in her case, from young Brazilian elite philanthropists confronting the role of their elite group in the perpetuation of inequality. She shows, however, that these young philanthropists have to walk a fine line. At the same time as that they want to address their role in the perpetuation of inequality, they also have to avoid alienating their peers. To an outsider this slow pace of change can be frustrating, and additional external pressure and regulation is undoubtedly needed to readdress inequality. Yet, as Sklair argues, top-down efforts should not be dismissed out of hand, in particular because when they are successful their impact may be huge.

Finally, in our empirical analyses we should not neglect historical perspectives. John Bryden, in his insightful comparison of two prosperous societies, Scotland and Norway, argues that long-term trends and forgotten events are often of significance. As he shows, differences between the countries are also influenced by particular events that happened in the past. Though with a focus on two prosperous countries in the Global North, Bryden's argument is of wider relevance to our understandings of current situations – and also with regard to understanding the perpetuation of incorrect economic analyses. In addition, he warns against the dangers of essentialist views. There are often no singular universal causes that explain current conditions. The world we inhabit is often more complex than that, and, echoing Gilbert's plea for a more pluralist economics, we should be much more open to the varieties, and the interplay, of causes and events.