

# Economic Justice in a Postmodern World

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I cannot outline here a full program for the humanist vision of economic justice. I will attempt rather to sketch some of the deep concern we humanists have had for economic justice and to highlight some key issues raised by modernism and postmodernism, pointing to what I believe we can learn from this debate.

I want to begin with our organized humanist history. The 1933 Humanist Manifesto included this as its fourteenth point:

The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls and motives must be instituted. A socialized and co-operative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> American Humanist Association. *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Amherst, New York: AHA, 1973). Humanist Manifesto I originally published in 1933; Humanist Manifesto II originally published in *The Humanist* (September/October 1973).

Forty years later, Humanist Manifesto II also addressed a democratic economic system. The issue is directly addressed with two separate points: the tenth point, part of the section on Democratic Society, reads as follows:

Humane societies should evaluate economic systems not by rhetoric or ideology, but by whether or not they *increase economic well-being* for all individuals and groups, minimize poverty and hardship, increase the sum of human satisfaction, and enhance the quality of life. Hence the door is open to alternative economic systems. We need to democratize the economy and judge it by its responsiveness to human needs, testing results in terms of the common good.<sup>2</sup>

In the section on World Community, point fifteen asserts that, since problems of economic growth and development are no longer resolvable by any single nation, the developed nations have a *moral obligation* to assist the developing nations with technical, medical, agricultural, and economic means. It concludes that "World poverty must cease. Hence, extreme disproportions in wealth, income, and economic growth should be reduced on a worldwide basis."

Humanist Manifesto II addresses, in other sections, other issues of economic justice. There is a reminder that "Purely economic and political viewpoints, whether capitalist or communist, often function as religious and ideological dogma."<sup>3</sup> Commercialization's ability to debase human existence is mentioned,<sup>4</sup> a theme familiar to postmodernists. The commitment to an open

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, second point.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, third point.

and democratic society includes the economy and workplace. Widespread involvement in economic decision-making is a goal.<sup>5</sup>

The call for *moral equality*<sup>6</sup> includes equality of opportunity. Individuals ought to be "encouraged to contribute to their own betterment," but when people are unable to do so, "society should provide means to satisfy their basic economic, health, and cultural needs." Echoing another postmodern issue, concern is expressed for "all who are neglected or ignored by society." This 1973 Manifesto deals with ecological concerns, calling for *cooperative planning* to responsibly guard and create wealth, without exploiting natural resources and with social conscience.<sup>7</sup>

Recounting these ideas from the two *Humanist Manifestos* reminds us that humanists have been thoughtfully concerned with economic justice—in the modern world, or in the postmodern world. But just as the simple statement in Manifesto I of 1933 evolved into the more detailed, integrated economic proposals of Manifesto II in 1973, so, too, if we are to consider today what humanists in the 21st century think about economic justice, we would have even more to say.

Postmodernism describes our current situation as a "post-ideological" period, even the "end of history." The Marxist states have fallen, but free-market capitalism also cannibalizes the very values it sought to promote. Marxist socialism unfortunately linked the humanistic social vision of Marx and Engels to a totalitarian political system. Without communism as a "red herring," perhaps we can seriously discuss again the idea of *democratic socialism*.

5 *ibid.*, eighth point.

6 *ibid.*, eleventh point.

7 *ibid.*, fourteenth point.

A guiding principle in a *humanist* economic system must be, I believe, the *common good*-a phrase used in Manifesto II. This combines the modernist idea of the individual with the idea of the social order, which is perhaps all that there is, really, in postmodernism. Connecting the individual good and the social good reveals the *common good*, recognizing both the multiplicity of individual goods and the intrinsic connections between them.

Let me illustrate with an example.

Chronic unemployment is most clearly a problem for those who are without jobs. When people cannot meet their basic economic needs through their own work, and when the public does not provide adequately for those needs, human dignity is assaulted. Shelter, food, medical care, are inadequately provided in our society .

But chronic unemployment does not only assault the human dignity of those who are caught in its direct web. Those who are employed are more frightened, in direct proportion to the likelihood of unemployment. Rates of unemployment and real wages of employed workers have a clear relationship.<sup>8</sup> People are less likely to exercise the powers they have-whether to organize collectively or to exercise legal protections such as worker safety laws or anti-harassment laws or whistleblower laws-when they fear more the indignities of joblessness and loss of medical insurance and even homelessness.

Chronic unemployment damages the *common good*, not just isolated individuals within the system, and therefore a goal of a humanist economic system should be to eliminate such unemployment.

Postmodernism is helpful in reminding us that *any* aesthetic, philosophical, political, economic, or other

<sup>8</sup> Michael Harrington, *Decade of Decision* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 84-5.

system of human thought is subject to individual bias and interest. While we may *hope* that we can discover which systems are objectively true, we cannot escape our biases. We should be skeptical of systems which claim objectivity, and, further, we should be honest and name and choose our biases deliberately and carefully so they are consonant with our values.

It is in this spirit that Vice President Al Gore writes that seemingly "objective" measures like GNP, the Gross National Product, need redefinition.<sup>9</sup> Both unbridled capitalism and unbridled communism have failed to consider the long-term depletion of natural capital, such as natural resources, in their definitions of productivity. Productivity at its simplest means more output for the same input, or the same output with less input. Our current calculations ignore human effects of unemployment and misemployment as well as long-term environmental effects. Measures of productivity ought to factor in human and natural resource depletion or renewal.

Further, the current argument over the financial deficit ignores what Marian Wright Edelman calls the "national human deficit."<sup>10</sup> Failure to invest in the education, health, moral development, and safety of children (and adults) wastes our "human capital" and diminishes not only human dignity, but future economic potential.

Postmodernism includes a profound skepticism of the humanist and modernist idea of the self-regulating and independent individual. Unbridled individualism has created many of the economic problems we face in 1992, and we now understand that such individualism benefits a few far more than it benefits the

9 Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 346.

10 Marian Wright Edelman, *The Measure of Our Success: a letter to my children and yours* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 92.

many, promising false interdependence.<sup>11</sup> More representative of humanist experience than the modernist atomistic individual, and also more representative than the extreme postmodernist view of *no* individuals, is the concept of interdependent individuals, or persons-in-community.<sup>12</sup>

Modern industrial society is giving way, we are told, to a post-industrial society, or an information or knowledge age.<sup>13</sup> While predictions of a service economy providing more jobs at better pay with more meaningful work are proving false, the increasing economic centrality of information and knowledge is having a profound effect.

One result is the multinational corporation, where capital, information and power flow unimpeded across national boundaries. Capital itself becomes more abstract than concrete.<sup>14</sup> If postmodernism can question the reality of unconnected selves, then perhaps we are right to question whether corporations should be treated in the United States as private individuals-with rights like free speech. If it is beyond the ability of the nation-state to control the multinational corporation, then new forms of political organization must evolve to gain more democratic participation in economic decision-making.

This information age also brings the demise of *personal privacy*. With computer networks and databases generally available, and with conveniences like credit cards considered almost necessities, most of our lives

<sup>11</sup> see, John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) for an extended argument along this line.

<sup>12</sup> The latter term is found in Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in Charles Jencks, ed., *The Post-Modern Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), 139.

<sup>14</sup> see, Daly and Cobb for discussion of "misplaced concreteness."

are literally open books to anyone with the energy, creativity, or money to access that information. If you use a charge card to buy your airline ticket, a meal or a gift, virtually anyone who wants to know can discover where you have been. Privacy-that key concept of humanist modernism-is virtually no more. Knowledge about your so-called "private life" is now another economic commodity.

Mass culture, the making of culture into mere commodity, complicates any goals around economic justice. It does so by perverting, or threatening to pervert, the democratic political system required to create and reinforce any economic justice.

Just as the advertising industry is able to turn physical perfection into the modern Holy Grail, manipulating women especially into spending inordinate time and energy on their personal appearance,<sup>15</sup> so politics becomes a game with economic disadvantage an enormous handicap. Politics in the postmodern world is just another commodity. Any multi-billionaire with an ego can buy media time and pay people to circulate petitions in order to run for major political office, including the Presidency. Any humanist attempt at economic justice has to consider the political reforms which must accompany it.

Postmodernism is not particularly helpful in defining political goals. Some post-modernists are neo-conservative types who verge on nihilism in rejecting any notion of truth as valid, critiquing modern society but refusing to allow even their critique enough of a priority to lead to political or ethical action. Others include

<sup>15</sup> see, Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991) and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991) for this and similar arguments about mass culture manipulation of values and aspiration.

the affirmative, active types like many ecofeminists or those working for more inclusion of people who are marginalized racially, by gender, ability or class. With an emphasis on empowering the marginalized, there is a tendency towards the kind of political and economic vision that we need in a twenty-first-century humanist platform.

Pollution and ecological damage, like the multinational corporation, also fail to respect national boundaries. The second Humanist Manifesto began to address this issue, calling for international environmental planning and assistance in development.

Modernist humanists have often accepted economic development and growth without question as promoting human welfare. The postmodern critique often denies that development is ever a positive goal, betraying, perhaps, its roots in academic circles where people may not be wealthy but are at least comfortable.

A more compatible concept, with both the affirmative postmodern view and a humanist view that is truly concerned with the *common* good, is the concept of *sustainable development*. Development which contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction (and that really means the destruction of people, and people's dignity) is not defensible. Yet, this describes both doctrinaire communism and free-market capitalism. Since most of the world's population still lives at a level incompatible with authentic human dignity, some development is necessary to raise the living standard. Development is compatible with a humanist vision only when it is measured by its ability to sustain that development, promoting human dignity for *all* beings involved and promoting long-term renewal and maintenance of the ecosystems involved and the material resources required.



The common good-sustainable development-political reform that can counteract mass culture and multinational corporations-economics that puts people first: these are a few of the elements of humanist economics for the postmodern age.

### Additional Reading

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