COMPLEXITY BLOG SYMPOSIUM

NOVEMBER 2020

- Throughout the month of November a group of economists, writers, artists, and activists got together to blog about social change and complexity theory.

Editor
Beth Plutchak

Complexity Blog Symposium

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CONTENTS

1 Complexity in an Age of Uncertainty – Staying Home with the Others in Rural America

DR. CLARE HINTZ

My neighbor said, "I'm concerned about what's going to happen after the election." I agreed, and we talked about homesteading and stocking up our freezers, root cellars, and pantries. Gradually I realized that we were on opposite ends of the political spectrum: she a conservative, and I, a liberal. I was on this woman's farm a couple of weeks ago to help her with young piglets that had been birthed as a result of the services of my boar. I started to consider: we talk a lot in my political circle about Fox's polarization and fear-mongering. But othering is happening on the left, too, albeit with a remaining respect for science and some facts. That moment listening to my neighbor was a genuine opportunity for a civil discussion about our different values because we had two major values in common: self reliance, and mutual support in a rural community. We have to take care of ourselves where we live because neither major political party has served us. We are used to uncertainty here. We are used to needing each other despite our differences. So far, we have fought off a mine, a CAFO, and we're fighting a pipeline through our precious ecosystem. We found the courage to do this because this is our home, though outsiders have tried to divide us.

Our rural reality for dialogue and building common ground has yet to be tapped by a nation scornful of country folk and dismissive of livelihoods based on physical labor. I have been fascinated by pandemic tributes to frontline workers that almost never mention farmers or food processing workers. Farmers are less than one percent of the population, old, and mostly white, although getting to be more female. We stole all the land from the brown peoples. A complicated process of repatriation has begun (see, for example, Leah Penniman's *Farming While Black*) even as a new corporate land grab is underway as the old farmers go out of business. Food processing workers are mostly brown and immigrant, which are additional reasons why they remain invisible.

I stretch between two worlds: a quarter century growing up in Chicago and earning all manner of theory-based degrees is grounded in another twenty years making my living as a

farmer in a very rural and economically depressed northern Wisconsin. Nothing in my higher education taught me how to listen to the plants and animals on my farm, though I read much of theories of place, multi-species ethnographies, and feminist science. (Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* came close. So did Robin Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass.*). Twenty years of working with the land requires me to respect the other people and to pay attention. This year the voles showed me in July it would be an early winter. We don't share a language, but I've learned to read the tilt of a turkey's head, the stillness of pigs watching, and the flowering of trees. The other people speak in patterns: the way the body is held, in the pauses of movement. The crows tell me when there is an owl nearby with designs on my chickens. Some of my Chicago friends didn't even notice there was a drought this summer. It might take many more generations before the settlers actually feel at home, like the characters in C.J. Cherryh's *Forty Thousand in Gehenna*. I wonder if it will be in time.

People have been buying land around me like crazy since the pandemic started. Some of them are quiet. Some brandish their guns and spend a lot of time at the local bar, Covid-19 or no. I have guns too, but I have no need to advertise them. It's hard to ask your neighbor to pull you out of the ditch in the snow after you've hit a deer when you've previously waved a gun around him. Seeing the newcomers' tracks through the woods, and the casual wreckage they leave, gives me some taste of what it must be like to continually deal with my people, the other settlers. A Saami friend once told me that he was driven to distraction by non-human ethnographies, because we are still trying to speak for the others. "We," he said, "don't understand why you can't let them speak for themselves. You still can't hear them. You must feel so lonely." The Anishinaabe have lived here in northern Wisconsin for hundreds of years. When we started fighting the mine, an Anishinaabe leader invited us settlers to join the several-hundred year resistance, "Wherever you came from, you are home now."

I don't live in rural America to hide out. I have not given up on humanity. I am trying to find and build models for living with uncertainty and loss. Those need both theory and practice. It is easy to despair. A fair amount of critical theory is a fine veneer over the despair. I practice farming instead, while I chew on theories. Another neighbor, who generally brews mead for a living, made a spirit this year from local apples that he calls "Ass Kicker." He's charging twenty dollars and twenty cents per bottle. We pause. We make ourselves at home.

2 We Aren't Dragons

Nancy Jane Moore

When we come across a dragon in a story, we assume (often correctly) that it will have amassed a hoard of gold and other precious objects by plundering the surrounding area and killing all who stand in its way. The classic western dragon lives alone and sleeps on a bed of its wealth, not even bothering to display the great pieces that it has accumulated. It does not care about the beauty of the items it has, but it cares deeply about owning them and can account for each object. Should a thief take even one piece, the dragon will rampage, as Bilbo Baggins discovered. Dragons are such an obvious metaphor for the extremely wealthy among us that coming up with a list of comparisons is child's play.

Most of the current economic systems in operation today are designed to reward dragons and to prevent the rest of us from developing other economic structures that would be better for all. Dragon economics not only limits wealth to a few, but rewards that few at the expense of everyone else. For example, the richest 0.00006 of Americans increased their wealth by $1 trillion dollars in the last four years. 80 percent of that increase went to fifty people.

The dragon wealth system has saddled us with extreme inequality worldwide. In his books *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* and *Capital and Ideology*, Thomas Piketty shows the history of wealth accumulation, particularly in Europe and the United States, pointing out that the relative equality of the post-World War II years was the unusual period. He also argues strongly for a tax on wealth as the most effective way to reduce inequality. Such a tax is a difficult proposition, as Piketty acknowledges, since much wealth can be moved from country to country and since the amount of political power held by the very wealthy makes it difficult to put in place a wealth tax in most countries.

The extreme wealth inequality and the economic system that encourages it is one of the most significant issues we face today, but it is not that aspect of wealth that I want to address here. Rather, I want to look at the way we, particularly in the United States (the system with which I'm most familiar) though also in other countries, have developed an economic system that requires everyone to build individual wealth to take care of all their needs. Those who do not find a way to build wealth will always be teetering on the edge of financial collapse. All too often, they fall off the cliff. And they, not the system, are blamed for their fall.

The message is trumpeted on a daily basis. Save! Get a 401k or an IRA. Buy stocks. Buy a house—not the one where you really want to live, but the one that will appreciate in value when you sell it. You must build wealth. Leave it to your children so they can build more wealth. And however much you accumulate, it might not be enough. The right college keeps going up in price. The cost of care for those in their last years of life gets more astronomical each year. The only way to protect yourself is to acquire more wealth.

This is no way to live.

First of all, many, if not most, people will never be able to build enough wealth. One obvious reason for this problem is systemic racism. Michelle Singletary, who has been writing on personal finance for *The Washington Post* for many years, did a recent essay on how financial redlining and other forms of racial discrimination mean that her home in an African American neighborhood in Prince Georges County, Maryland, is worth about half of a similar home in a white neighborhood in the metropolitan Washington, DC, metro area.

As Singletary points out:

> *The key to the net worth of most Americans isn't a stock portfolio but the equity accumulated in their homes. It's this equity that has created generational wealth for many White Americans. This wealth can fund college educations or finance small businesses. But homeownership, which is so central to the American Dream, has been and far too often remains an unequal and financially frustrating experience for Black families.*

For a detailed look at legal systemic racism in housing in the United States, read Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law*. The depth of the problem, which includes federal laws that mandated racial discrimination, shocked even me, and I used to work in housing.

But it is not only systemic racism that prevents people from building enough individual wealth. The years of over-heated real estate markets in many of our major cities (and stagnant ones in other places) have made it harder than ever for people to get that lucky piece of real estate that might make it all work out. Add to that the fact that 401k plans and IRAs are complicated and that few individuals are skilled enough to invest wisely in the stock market or even to find a good financial advisor, and you have a system that fails everyone but those making a living out of the businesses of real estate, retirement funds, and investing.

Instead of trying to play the wealth game that is stacked against most of us, we need to be building wealth together with our neighbors and our communities. During the last week in October 2020, I went to a series of webinars labeled "Radical Real Estate Week" put on by the Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC), an Oakland, California, nonprofit law firm that has just begun a radical real estate law program to train new attorneys to change the way real estate works.

(Note that in California one can become a lawyer by studying in a law firm instead of going to law school.) This article on the Next City website presents some of the concepts explored during those webinars.

One key element of the work SELC is doing is to create ways to take housing permanently out of the speculative market. The East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative (EB PREC), also in Oakland, is a project where people are trying to do just that. Property acquired by the EB PREC will never be sold again on the speculative market. Residents control the way the property is operated, and will get a small return on their investment should they move, keeping the property affordable for the next owner.

This builds community wealth, and in a city like Oakland where a majority of people rent rather than own, it gives people secure housing. It does not, of course, build much in the way of individual wealth. If we are going to move toward this form of housing, we need to develop many other systems of shared wealth for such things as education, health care, retirement, and eldercare. Right now, most people must pay for these things on their own.

The U.S. Social Security system provides some income that is not tied to wealth for the retired, though it is tied to the amount they earned when working. Medicare provides those over 65 with some health care benefits, though recipients must pay for some of the services. These services as they currently exist are not enough to overcome the gaps in wealth. For younger people, student loan debt makes it difficult to build wealth as well.

If we approached our economy from the point of view set out by Kate Raworth in her book *Doughnut Economics*, we could build a society that both meets the needs of people and balances the environmental and social issues that we face together. The Doughnut Economics Action Lab sets out some projects that Raworth and her colleagues are developing to put these programs in place.

The United States can easily develop a system that makes it possible to give everyone in the country a decent life regardless of whether they are in a position to develop wealth. Even in these complicated times, the United States remains a wealthy place with abundant resources and it has a sovereign currency of great strength. Applying the principles of Modern Monetary Theory (as set out by Stephanie Kelton in her recent book *The Deficit Myth*), the U.S. can spend sufficient funds to give everyone education, health care, housing, and income. Income can be in the form of guaranteed jobs or guaranteed income (or both).

These ideas are radical, and they will be fought by the dragons and all those who have hope of becoming dragons. But dragon wealth does little for most of us, and a greater understanding of how economics actually works gives us the tools to do something very different. Breaking up the wealth held by the dragons is important, but building systems that work for everyone is essential.

3 What We Can Learn from The Artificial Racist & Other Stories of Computational Complexity

Steven Schwartz

Traditionally, scientists are taught to vary only one variable at a time, if at all possible—to use that method to tease apart complicated tangles, to find out when variables aren't independent, or when expected correlations fail.

The problem is that in problems of sufficient complexity, that approach may be impossible—or may produce the wrong result.

There's an old saying in computer science: "Variables won't, constants aren't". Literally speaking, it's not true; but it speaks to a deeper observed phenomenon; once a system becomes complex enough, things stop behaving in their expected manner.

Two stories from recent simulations that cast light upon this:

In 2006, Microsoft attempted to teach a chatbot, Tay, how to interact with users on Twitter—she was supposed to be "Microsoft's A.I. fam from the Internet that's got zero chill." The goal was both natural language generation and processing, using then cutting-edge neural network technology to enable her to eventually be able to talk about a very wide range of subjects, based on an ongoing learning process.

Within 16 hours, Tay was producing racist, sexist, and conspiracy-minded screeds, and Microsoft had to shut her down.

What happened?

Well, two things: First, the Internet troll haven 8chan had heard about her and encouraged its readers to flood her with racist inputs; she learned from them. But beyond that, the question of what she would have ended up as if she had not been targeted remained; her learning made her a massively sensitive mirror.

The other story is this: When MASSIVE, the software designed to create huge battle scenes for the Lord of the Rings films was first fired up, many soldiers in the first run appeared to take one look at the battle and head for the hills. Had the designers managed to generate emergent cowardice?

That was the first report, since they knew they hadn't put it there deliberately. What they found, upon further observation, was that individual agents had been programmed to find open space—and if that open space was behind them, one agent would go there, and other agents had "follow your friends" as a priority—and so they did, in apparent retreat.

What can we learn from this, to apply to the question of computational complexity, and through it, to the subjects we want to use said complexity to study?

Classically speaking, a model was a good model insofar as it predicted the behavior of

the system it was modeling; it was a bad model if it failed to. To anyone who's wandered into the ruder corners of the Internet, therefore, Tay was a *good* model of the radicalization process, albeit one sped up by her lack of preconceptions and her ability to hold thousands of conversations at once. Similarly, to people looking for signs that charging off to war is stupid—the first impression of the MASSIVE effect was a sign of a good model.

Does MASSIVE teach us about the psychology of soldiers in warfare? No; it teaches us how our own pattern-recognition systems create interpretations of events, and if we are content to leave them there, *false* interpretations of events. What we saw in MASSIVE was not emergent cowardice, but emergent strategy towards the initial goal of defeating the enemy.

In Tay's case, however, we got an unexpected result, and it turned out to be a useful pointer towards actual analysis of radicalization and the nature of unsecured inputs (and hackability, a question the original Microsoft developers had not considered) in our current digital world.

Neither of these experiments (insofar as MASSIVE was an experiment, rather than an attempt at visually accurate and impressive filmmaking) would have been possible using conventional scientific analysis; there were too many variables involved in the first place. The only way that the MASSIVE issue was solvable was because, unlike the real world, the developers had complete access to the source code.

The issue in computational simulation of complex events, therefore, is not unakin to the problem facing a great deal of modern psychology—figuring out if your answers are real answers, or artifacts of your experiment. Throughout much of the psychological research field, people are re-doing older experiments traditionally done on college students (largely white, biased male, in addition to the obvious educational and class biases) and getting different results—casting into doubt some of the bedrock assumptions of psychology, as discussed in Christine Lagarde's work on the problem of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic societies) subjects being treated as the default.

Researchers working in this field—and the computer programmers working with them—therefore need to be careful to watch out both for encoded assumptions (because, for example, there are soldiers who run away from battle, and to eliminate them, even from your movie special effect, is to distort reality) and for the possibility of revelatory errors—the speed and suddenness of Tay's radicalization, unexpected and, in a traditional model of how to do scientific research, suitable to toss out and repeat with better input controls. Had one done that, we would have lost useful information about how rapidly machine learning can be led off the rails, and in which directions. "Garbage in, garbage out", while true, is not complete; one can get garbage out for a wide variety of reasons, and sometimes, especially when you don't entirely understand what you're modeling, 'garbage' may not in fact be what one is getting.

When the subject being studied is complex and interwoven, the experiments themselves will be complex and interwoven, in the hopes of making them viable models of a phenomenon. As a result, experimental design and monitoring becomes even more

important—and in an era when Bill Vaughn's aphorism "To err is human, to really foul things up requires a computer." is ever-present, figuring out why one gets "garbage out" is not just a matter of debugging, but of experiment analysis.

In short, we must be more careful with our tools, as they grow more intricate and complicated themselves, as we study more and more complicated subjects *in situ*.

4 Homo Economicus: Bringing Out the Worst in all of Us

By Homo Economicus Himself
And Debbie Notkin

Homo Economicus:

I was asked to write about complexity economics, which is funny, because I am the world-renowned face of simple economics ... and yet I am the structure on which this complexity relies. Kate Raworth, in *Doughnut Economics,* calls me "the most influential portrait ... the protagonist in every economics textbook." She says I influence policy-making worldwide, I shape the way we talk about ourselves, and I wordlessly tell people how to behave. I also like doughnuts.

I am, of course, Rational Economic Man, also known as *Homo Economicus*. Mainstream economists love me; they believe that everyone aspires to *be* me and they've gone a

long way to convince people that they're right. I was more or less invented by Adam Smith, at right around the time the United States was declaring its independence from Great Britain. I was further defined by John Stuart Mill, whose critics named me in the late 19th century.

So I've had 220 years to build my brand and I've done the world-class job I'd expect. I have faced a lot of resistance: humans are messy and complex, and even the best of them are imperfect at following my simple credo. Whatever I do, too many of them keep on caring about irrational things—love, community, compassion, even joy.

Of course, anyone as powerful as I am develops enemies over the years. Not being alive insulates me from death threats; not having a home insulates me from protesters on my doorstep. So my detractors confine themselves to boring tomes, TED talks, and YouTube videos. Although it may not be a perfectly rational choice, I can't help reading some of what they say. David Graeber, in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years,* said:

> *What history actually reveals, though, is that while humans may be justly accused of having a proclivity to accuse others of acting like conquistadors, few really act this way themselves. Even for the most ambitious of us, our dreams are more like Sindbad's: to have adventures, to acquire the means to settle down and live an enjoyable life, and then, to enjoy it.*

Graeber may not be completely wrong, but he doesn't understand just how well I have exploited the proclivity he identifies. It turns out that when I keep telling people they should be like me, and especially when I have teachers and professors and pundits boosting my signal, they believe it … and they become more like me. I have turned many mediocre men into conquistadors in my time.

Kate Raworth, having praised me so highly, seems intent on tearing me down (and where are my doughnuts?). She cites studies which demonstrate that students of economics are less generous, less charitable, and more immediately self-interested than students in other disciplines; now that's success. She also claims that just the use of my favorite words, like "profit" and "costs" and "growth" can be shown to reduce empathy and encourage an interest in wealth accumulation. More success.

My enemies claim that I am incomplete (did I ever deny it?), that I misrepresent human behavior (yes, but I'm working to change that), and that I am culturally monolithic (oh, those myths of kinder, gentler humans who are someplace else than where we are). They point their fingers and call me a backbone of capitalism – an "accusation" I embrace.

People try to supplant me and rename me. They try to prove that I'm not real – I *know* that. I also know that if they ever succeed in replacing me, or even minimizing my power, everything will change. But I don't like thinking about that – and I'm not making any money by writing this essay, so I'm going

to go buy my own doughnuts. With chocolate icing.

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Debbie:

Now that he's off his soapbox, let me link this to complexity economics. As long as the mostly white mostly men who run the political and economic world believe in rational economic man, they will continue as they have been. Here are two of their strategies:

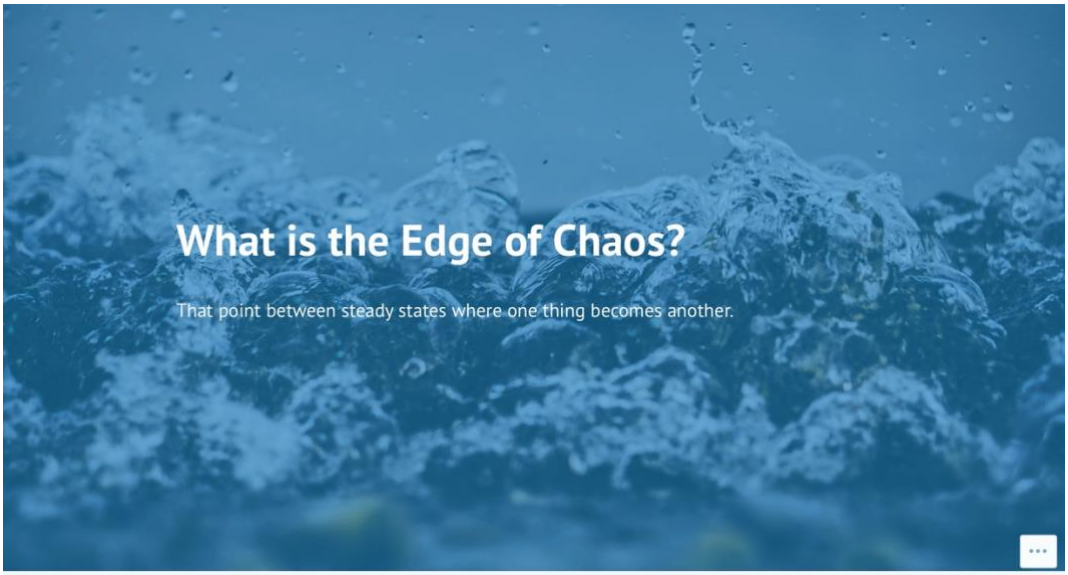
First, the complexity piece: the men at the top will continue to turn their eyes away from the mechanisms and systems which keep them on the top of the heap. Those are chores for lesser beings: billionaires and bank CEOs and economic advisors to heads of state don't know how the computers are programmed, how the bits and bytes move around the globe, how the super-fast traders can gain – and game – their 1000th of a second advantage.

Privilege makes you stupid, because it gives you easy ways to avoid learning things you should know. Privilege means that you don't have to mind the store (or sports team or bank or multibillion dollar corporation) that you run—you pay people for that, and never as much as you are making. When the people at the top aren't minding the store, no one is—the people doing the work are adding workarounds and bandaids and kludgy systems onto already worked around and bandaged and clunky systems. Often literally *no one* knows how a given system works, let alone how these mysterious systems talk to each other. So when one of the systems collapses beyond the point where it can be fixed by an additional complexity, the dominos can start to fall.

Second, the simple piece: they will go on encouraging the rest of us to believe that we, individually, are motivated primarily by self-interest and greed … and that when we don't act that way, we are failures. They will continue to reward the people who mock and disparage any and all actions which are not directly self-serving, to promote the prosperity gospel, and to scorn anyone who has less material wealth than we have.

They have spent centuries expecting us – doing their best to *require* us – to be our worst selves. The goal of rational economic man results in the person who will sell their grandmother for cash, vote for lower taxes instead of health care to keep them alive, choose their mate(s) by how much money they can be expected to make and prioritize scams and schemes over community and connection. The lonely, opiate-tempted cynics of the early 21st century are the inevitable result of lionizing rational economic man, of building what Max Haiven, in *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts,* describes as "a society which seeks to recode all relationships as risks, and where we are taught to imagine everything of value as an asset to be leveraged."

If we look to the theorists of happiness like Rutger Bregman, the believers in reclaiming our bonds to each other like Brené Brown, the believers in the power of communal struggle like Adrienne Maree Brown and Silvia Federici, we can shrink rational economic man down to the size he deserves – a small jagged piece of human decision-making in a brightly-colored jigsaw puzzle of options. To have the lives we deserve, we need the icons that celebrate our variety. And doughnuts.



5 Boiling Water

Beth Plutchak

My favorite explanation of complexity is the pot of boiling water. When you put a pot of liquid water on the stove it is in a steady state. All of the collective molecules exist in liquid form, but as soon as you begin applying heat and pressure that state begins to change. At any point in time we can't predict which molecules will make the transition. They exist at the edge of chaos. But provide enough heat and pressure and over time they will eventually turn into a gas. What happens then? Does the steam rise and eventually fall as water again? But, where and how? The only thing I do know is that it will never return to the exact same place it began.

And here we are. The image itself dances between actuality and metaphor. That is one of the confusing things about trying to use complexity science to describe economics. Most of the language around econ is in serious metaphor territory. Economic equilibrium—where we are tasked to imagine a ball gradually circling to rest at the bottom of the bowl—is such a metaphor. The econ prof who taught me equilibrium theory used the metaphor of a fulcrum to describe it, permanently implanting in my brain the image that a state of economic equilibrium was impossible to maintain. Which raised a multitude of questions about what it is we really want the economy to do for us.

Years ago when I worked in the IT department of a regional bank I had a conversation with one of the programmers about the nature of money. I told him the data we were manipulating *was* money and he took that as a metaphorical statement, when in actuality money no longer exists mainly as a symbolic physical item such as currency. Money is indeed nothing more than entries in

a database. Banks no longer lend money out of collected deposits, they just make the required transactions as entries to the database. There are algorithmic necessities with which banks must comply—asset size, debt to asset ratios—no wonder banks are anti-regulation. But, for the bottom 99.9% of the economy those ticks are not symbols of how much power one wields in the world. For the bottom 50% or more those ticks are life and death.

Here we are. Individuals feel compelled to balance these gigantic computerized ledgers. We trade hours for enough ticks in the database to buy food, housing, education, health care, entertainment and our hours are increasingly worth less. But, where did that value actually go? My children work harder than I did for a smaller return. The younger generations no longer have the time to take part in the volunteer aspects of community that were so important to the way I was raised and the way I lived my life while raising my children. Volunteer jobs go unfilled and that work increasingly must be paid for with ticks from the database or go undone.

My local volunteer fire department is constantly advertising for volunteers. My children's houses are nowhere as clean as my mother's and grandmother's were. We have long talked about the double and triple duty of mothers in this world where it takes multiple family members working in the paid economy to meet basic needs, but now in the COVID era they have to perform double and triple duty at the very same time. The strain on families is immense.

In Sheri Tepper's novel *Raising the Stones* she imagines a god that makes the planet a better place, that brings out the best in people. Shouldn't that be the purpose of god after all? Her definition of a god that works was frankly a god that gets the job done. What would an economy that gets the job done look like? What job would you and I like it to do?

Many, many white Americans want a return to the perceived security of a steady state. The Biden vote reflects this in the calls for decency, bipartisanship, and reconciliation. But, that pot has long since boiled over as my Grandma used to say. You know what though, *we* get to determine where we go from here. *We* get to envision the future. We are not predetermined. We get to open the paths to new economic niches, in the complexity science sense (reality not metaphor) that niches are created out of our ability to adapt to the edge of chaos and create something new where we thrive.

The most dangerous legacy of Marxism and left wing progressivism is the belief that whatever comes after capitalism is prewritten within the failures of capitalism itself. That the process is small steps to victory. Complexity science tells us that nothing is predetermined. There are no guarantees of outcome. The backlash could be worse than the Reagan backlash which led us to here and now.

But, we can't know where the rain will fall. Complexity science also gives us tools in the characteristics of complexity. One of the tools we have is to continue to apply heat and pressure. One of the tools that we have is positive feedback loops within the system. If you don't know how to do the work look around you. Black and other marginalized communities are already doing it. Amplify their work. Envision the economy that works for all of the people. Now more than ever demand it. That's how we win.

6 Othering the Other

Debbie Notkin

This entry is written as a response to "Complexity in an Age of Uncertainty".

Warning: this post has little if anything to do with economics (complex or otherwise); rather, I am engaging with another symposium participant to examine one of the complex aspects of human behavior.

Dear Clare Hintz:

I know I'm not the only person who is deeply upset by the consistency of the voting maps in this month's election. In every state, we see blue cities and red rural areas. Of the 375 counties with the worst COVID spread so far in November, 92% of them voted to keep Trump in office. In North Dakota, the virus is so uncontrolled that the governor has told hospital personnel to work even if they are positive and symptomatic days before he mandated mask wearing. For many, the individual liberty of the maskless supersedes the individual liberty of the health-care worker, just as the individual liberty of the folks brandishing their guns at the local bar (urban or rural) supersedes the individual liberty of the endangered bystander.

We both see it the same way: The urban/rural divide is getting deeper, nastier, and more destructive. In this context, I find your essay in this symposium extremely disturbing, though I understand that your intention was to bridge the gap. Perhaps even more unsettling is the fact that I agree with just about everything you say.

So I want to ask some questions in the hopes that we can "have a civil discussion about our different values" because of our shared values. I would love to ask in a fully open spirit of inquiry, with no defensiveness or argumentation, but I also know that I *feel* somewhat defensive and argumentative, so I hope you can allow for that if you choose to answer.

I completely believe that "we are scornful of country folk and dismissive of physical labor." I *absolutely* stand with:

> *We have to take care of ourselves where we live because neither major*

political party has served us. We are used to uncertainty here. We are used to needing each other despite our differences. So far, we have fought off a mine, a CAFO, and we're fighting a pipeline through our precious ecosystem. We found the courage to do this because this is our home, though outsiders have tried to divide us.

Do you believe this scornfulness and abandonment are limited to rural people? I can unequivocally support what you say, while also saying, "we are scornful of poor city folk and dismissive of their physical labor" and:

We have to take care of ourselves where we live because neither major political party has served us. We are used to uncertainty here. We are used to needing each other despite our differences. So far we have fought off a coal terminal in our city, an attempt by billionaire Mike Bloomberg to control our school system from 3,000 miles away, and we're fighting to keep from having public land turned over to corporations for pennies, so developers can build gentrified residences. We have found the courage to do this because this is our home, though outsiders have tried to divide us.

How do those statements sit with you, stretching between two worlds? And how do you think they would sit with the neighbor with whom you had a civil dialogue? Could you raise the questions with her that you are raising with your symposium readers?

I love it that you acknowledge the way we have stolen all the land from the brown peoples (and I am convinced that you know about land we have stolen more recently from the black people). Is this an issue you can raise with your neighbor? And what would she say about it? If you disagree, have you figured out – so hard! – how to live with that disagreement without dismissing either your historical knowledge or her position?

You want me to acknowledge the ways your neighbors have been mistreated, stereotyped, and ignored, and I do that with an open heart. Are you also asking your neighbors to acknowledge the deep systemic racism of our country, and the damage that does?

A couple of years ago, I bought Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Our Midst.* I was excited about reading it until I listened to her interview with Krista Tippet on *On Being.* Now it languishes unread. Hochschild's entire strategy seems to be about convincing her mostly liberal readers that the people she meets in rural America are not demons, by finding the same kind of enviable common ground you find with your neighbor. I want

that too. I also want rural America to acknowledge that my queer community and my black underclass neighbor and friend and the immigrants from Mexico and Central America who live and work and pay taxes and die of COVID-19 in my community are not demons.

I probably have much more privilege than your neighbor, so perhaps it behooves me to accept your implied accusation that a preponderance of fault lies with me and mine. But when the distinction is urban vs. rural, the accusation extends not only to me but to my neighbors with far less privilege – far less safety – than I have. Should I tell Art, my brown mailman, that he should be thinking more about farmhands, when he walks my streets every day hoping he's not breathing infected air? Or should I tell the prisoners fighting wildfires in California for fifteen cents a day that it's important to remember the value of physical labor?

Or, perhaps, should we *all* be reaching across the gaps and looking for commonalities? You identify yourself as having commonalities with both your neighbor and your most likely readership, and I value that. I feel that *I too* have commonalities with your neighbor, even though I don't work the land, that I too can recognize different ways of speaking, or the communication of the animal and plant kingdoms, even though I live in a city. I can't speak for Chicago, but *every* Californian, from the most to the least privileged, knows when there's a drought.

Othering may be a "natural human tendency," or it may be something we've been taught for centuries—I don't know. I believe all of us benefit from being aware of both who we are othering *and* who is othering us. Too many times, no one is punching up and no one is punching down—we're just punching each other on the same level, each side claiming to be victims, when we could be holding each other up.

Dear Debbie!

Thank you for your thoughtful questions and honest comments that my essay sparked… such a delight to engage in this slow discourse that gives us time to complicate and complexify!

You conclude, "Too many times, no one is punching up and no one is punching down—we're just punching each other on the same level, each side claiming to be victims, when we could be holding each other up."

Yes.

7

A Response to Othering the Other

Dr. Clare Hintz

In no way do I want to participate in a race to the bottom, to suggest we have it worse in rural America than another group, or really compare at all, or to say that bridging the rural-urban divide is the key to solving our econo-political crises. I certainly don't feel like a victim myself — I am enormously privileged to have the life that I do. I do not want to suggest that if only we liberals were even more compassionate and empathetic with our conservative friends we could break through the hate and fear rampaging through the world. I do not want to gloss over the intersectional ramifications of class, race, and gender as they play out unequally in all parts of our country, rural and urban (hard not to do in a short essay). Incidentally, you would be most welcome here where I live; before Covid, my lesbian friends used to frequent the same bar as the bear hunters. My lesbian friends (they've told me) feel safe here, but I suspect it is because they are white.

I do not say that we in my rural northern Wisconsin home have it all figured out. A police officer shot and killed an Anishinaabe schoolboy, Jason Pero, in 2017 in my community. No justice has been served for that crime or the others reported by the tribe about the local police force.

Systemic racism is a difficult conversation to have with some of my white neighbors, but it is definitely one that I have been trained to have, and continue to have. What struck me the most about the conversation I reported in my first essay, was, if someone wants my neighbor to be afraid of me for being a liberal, and someone wants me to "other" my neighbor because she's a conservative, who are those people, and shouldn't we both be paying attention to them, because they stand to benefit financially from our polarization? As you alluded to.

I did want to journal about what it's like where I live, because I believe this is an important context to dismantling structural racism and building economic models that value bio-cultural diversity and all the other common goods we want. I think I as a farmer who has to work every day or not be paid has something in common with your postman who also has to work every day in a pandemic. Slowly, where I am, we've been learning and implementing little pilot projects of a gift economy… those roots go deep and are indigenous. And among people who don't have much money. Rural America voted red. The gift economy does not show up in anybody's maps. NPR news remains uncritical of a growth-based extractive economy, even as we all become more reflective in the pandemic. What are we to make of all that?

I meant that first essay, a glimpse of my rural life, as a message of hope, actually: that in our pragmatic struggles to meet our material needs — at the heart of any economic system — we may find common ground. I worked for three years in the most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago, and I would say it's the same opportunity and

deliberate disenfranchisement in urban America as in rural, except that in urban America one generally can't fall back on hunting to survive, and re-learning how to garden for food is fraught with the legacy of slavery many fled to cities to escape.

I don't mean that last sentence to sound flip. Despair is the colonial legacy everywhere, and dealing with that trauma is difficult and prevents us from claiming agency. It's hard for me to watch the erasure of farmers and food production, because when a handful of corporations control our food supply, as they do, then we have lost our freedom at the most basic level, economic, biological, or political. And It's hard to do anything about that when one is simply trying to put food on the table when one is underpaid. One massive reinforcing feedback loop.

The work of creating an economic system that we want and the work of dismantling structural racism (and all the other isms) economically, politically, culturally, and ecologically will be the work of generations. And is generations overdue. In systems terms, though, we don't need to change everything, we need to start with some leverage points. They don't even need to be the "right" leverage points, because the beauty of a complex system is that if one starts at any leverage point, the whole system will change and draw one onto the other leverage points. Also, "start" is perhaps specific to us white people — our joining the resistances already in motion around the world; what Vandana Shiva calls Earth Democracy and Black Elk envisioned as mending the sacred hoop and others call Black Lives Matter, and still others support as Via Campesina.

I am proposing, through my story, that one leverage point is finding a community-based self-reliance…. Local Living Economies in academic terms. I am reporting that my initial experience from living where I do suggests that economic work will enable us to continue to have the difficult transformations we need to further dismantle the strictures of dis-empowerment. We've been imperfectly working on a local economy here. I know there are other examples out there, both urban and rural (see for example, Margaret Wheatley's, *Walk Out, Walk On*). Again, in systems terms, it's easier to build a complex system based on what we want: set the goals and the emergent nature of the system will form around those. But getting to what we want as a nation is nearly impossible in this polarized climate. (Such an odd term in an era of climate change, melting polar ice, and never-ending fire.) But at the level of basic needs, we are not okay unless we are all okay. If we can grapple with our mental model of scarcity and replace it with a mental model of abundance, then there is less to fear. Changing mental models, as Donella Meadows points out in her wonderful book *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, are a top way to intervene in a system. And very hard to do. So I am suggesting — hoping?—that if, as one way among many, we find common ground in local resilience, that effort might lead us also to seeing each other's deep humanity.

8

What the Pandemic Shows Us About the Economy

Nancy Jane Moore

Every day I eventually read the pandemic news. It always makes me angry and sometimes scares me, but I have to read it. I have to know what's going on.

Checking that news on the last day in November, I saw this (from an *LA Times* report) in the Cal Matters newsletter: "Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn: 'I am not convinced that shutting down, reopening and shutting down again is effective.'" She is right, though not, I think, in the way she meant. Los Angeles, like most places in this country, has never had the kind of successful numbers that would justify reopening. One has only to look at what was done in the state of Victoria in Australia, where they put in effect a hard shut down for two months and got their cases to zero, where they've now been for a month. They decided to do it when they hit a daily total of 191 cases. By comparison, Los Angeles County has been averaging about 4,500 cases per day for the last couple of weeks.

No wonder nothing has changed in Los Angeles. Clearly, neither the state of California nor the county supervisors in Los Angeles have taken the pandemic seriously. Of course, the incompetent and venal U.S. federal government deserves most of the blame, but both the state and the county could have done much, much more. While the two areas are not directly comparable – Victoria has about 6.3 million residents while Los Angeles county has 10.4 million – the difference in reaction to case numbers is large enough to make the population numbers unimportant. 191 is not 60 percent of 4,500.

The U.S. reaction to the pandemic shines a spotlight on the destructive lie that undergirds our economic system: that we cannot "afford" to shut things down, even in a crisis. Since the beginning of the pandemic, government officials have been making decisions on reopening based on political pressure and worries about "the economy," not on public health. Efforts to help people affected by the shutdowns have been minimal; instead, the push has been to reopen dangerous activities.

Our core economy is dangerously unhealthy. A healthy economy is one in which most activity can be paused in a crisis without adding to our suffering. Ours apparently cannot.

A hurricane. A wildfire. A tornado. A worldwide pandemic. If we developed our economic systems properly – complexly, with an understanding that everything is in balance, that some things will shift in crisis, and that redundancies can be valuable in difficult times

– we would not compound the disasters by wreaking financial havoc on those who are directly affected. Of course, we must also be aware that the complexity of many disasters is compounded by the way we relate to nature. Fires will not be as bad if we go back to the way the Indigenous Californians or the Indigenous Australians managed fire. Recognizing that barrier islands are there for protection, not development, will make hurricanes less destructive. And so on.

We are dealing with a core lie here, one that is regularly used to block efforts to build a better world: we must choose between a healthy economy and taking care of everyone in a pandemic. Or, in more normal times, we must choose between a healthy economy and a healthy environment. Or even, we must choose between a healthy economy and social justice.

It is quite possible to build a healthy economy that takes care of people and the planet and that can be paused without great harm in times of crisis. What those lies mean by a healthy economy is the stock market or the ability of the ultrarich to get richer; they do not mean that people get what they need.

I suspect most of the people who repeat the lie that we can't afford to have a healthy and fair life for everyone really believe it. It is rooted in yet another widely believed lie: that the components of a good life are scarce. That is not true now and perhaps was never really true on this planet of marvels.

What happens if we build an economy with the idea that everything except the most basic elements – water, food, shelter, care for those who need it, emergency response – can be paused when necessary? What happens if we build an economy that is based on the well-being of all people and the planet as a whole? What happens when our economy includes social justice, human well-being, and a planet in balance?

I don't know. I've never lived in a place like that. I'd like to find out.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Clare Hintz is the editor in chief of the Journal of Sustainability Education. Clare has a Ph.D. in Sustainability Education with a focus on Regenerative Agriculture. She has been farming full time for the last decade and teaching sustainable agriculture and permaculture since 1998. Her research focuses on arts-informed inquiry, regenerative agriculture, place, and ecofeminism. Her farm is a perennial polyculture that supplies winter and summer CSAs near the south shore of Lake Superior. You can see more of her work at www.elsewherefarm.com.

Nancy Jane Moore got involved with the co-op movement in the early 1970s and remains involved in alternative organizations. A graduate of the University of Texas and its law school, she practiced law with a focus on co-ops and then worked as a legal journalist. She holds a fourth-degree black belt in Aikido and teaches and speaks on empowerment self defense. Her second novel, *For the Good of the Realm*, is forthcoming in 2021 from Aqueduct Press. A native Texan who lived for many years in Washington, DC, she now lives in Oakland, California, with her sweetheart and two cats.

Debbie Notkin is an economic justice advocate, who believes passionately that economic reform is a cornerstone of racial justice and social progress. She is currently the president of the board of directors of Friends of the Public Bank East Bay (publicbankeastbay.org) and active in Strike Debt Bay Area. She was a member of the now-defunct Occupy Oakland Foreclosure Defense Group. Between 1972 and 2011, most of her social activism was concentrated on body image and gender issues. Working with Strike Debt Bay Area, in 2019 she co-organized a fundraising campaign based on the Rolling Jubilee, which resulted in the forgiveness of $1.5 million in medical debt for Bay Area residents.

Beth Plutchak has been planning for the post capitalist future since the early 1970s. Her background includes education in economics and social justice theory. She has appeared on panels on complex adaptive systems and social justice. Her work has been published by Aqueduct Press and on Medium and Substack.

Steven Schwartz is a systems engineer dealing with highly-complex computer systems, as well as a lifelong student of organizational structures and complexities, a designer of games (in which unexpected consequences of the interaction of simple components is a feature as well as a bug), and a parent of two.