

Summary

The UK, Europe and the International Economy: A Common Good Approach Roundtable held on 11th September 2017

The objective of this roundtable discussion was to discuss the draft paper by Adrian Pabst from the University of Kent, entitled 'The UK, Europe and the International Economy: A Common Good Approach,' with the view to incorporating any potential improvements into the next draft of the paper, with a particular emphasis on policy recommendations. The ultimate aim is to generate a range of policy proposals that can be effectively injected into wider public debates on these issues.

The event was held under Chatham House rule, which permits participants to use what they learn without attribution to the speaker unless they have the express permission of the speaker.

The first speaker opened the discussion by talking about the four main reasons that inspired the paper's creation:

- i) The various public discussions generated around the elections and referenda that had taken place in the West in the previous year,
- ii) A realisation that the anxieties discussed are partially rooted in issues facing the global economy,
- iii) Public discussions often seem to be based around values; however there has been little scrutiny of those values, and
- iv) This much-needed scrutiny, the speaker believes, must come from intermediary institutions outside of the government and the market, with a 'common good' perspective being vital to any output.

The speaker also expressed the hope that the ideas voiced would link with the more practical aspects of people's lives, with a need for the debate to not become too theoretical and always have an awareness of people's 'lived experience.' Furthermore, there is a need to create a 'third way' framework based on the idea of the 'common good'. This would be an alternative to the current discourse, which seems to be based either around utilitarian ideas of 'the greatest benefit for the greatest number,' or liberal notions of individual rights.

Outside of London

The next speaker gave an overview of the post-Brexit situation from a non-London perspective. She drew attention to the fact that despite Wales attracting few immigrants and receiving an enormous amount of funding from the EU, the country voted for Brexit, with immigration frequently being the reason given by those she spoke to on the streets.

Leaving the EU will most likely have disastrous consequences for Wales, particularly as two-thirds of Welsh exports and about 90% of Welsh agricultural exports go to EU markets. It can therefore be argued that the Welsh consciously voted against their economic self-interest.

More generally among the attendants this prompted the question of where community starts and stops. For instance, if the people who voted for Brexit cannot feel a sense of allegiance with the rest of Europe, then what kind of community is of interest to them? It is noteworthy that despite the investment Wales received from the EU, one third of Welsh children still live in poverty.

A third speaker drew attention to how a sense of solidarity was one of the central principles of the EU, and but the fact that nothing had been done to make EU citizens feel that sense of solidarity has deeply problematic implications for how to define 'community'. The shift from free movement of workers to free movement of people and from European Community to European Union was not explained to those who don't know, and so notions of European citizenship feel abstract and remote, even those that have concrete consequences (including new rights and opportunities).

It was pointed out by the chairman that the debate around such issues will not improve until it moves away from being defined by either hard-nosed utilitarian principles, or arguments based purely around rights and entitlements.

Defining the common good

The next speaker thought that the paper needed more work on what exactly drives a sense of 'the common good'; do we know what it is, and if so, how do we define it? And what might build the conditions that would permit it?

Another important question raised was also that of why people vote against their economic self-interest. If people do not feel they have a stake in the economic and social system, no one should be surprised that when they are given a say, they rebel against whatever the current system is. They may also choose to believe conspiracies exist around decisions made by politicians across Europe. An example was given as the belief among members of the Far Right in Germany that Angela Merkel had been pressured into taking refugees into Germany by Barack Obama in order to make 'natives' a minority.

The chairman acknowledged in turn that this is not an issue only affecting Britain, and that citizens need to feel that the system 'honours their contribution' by providing a clearer sense of balance and obligation. At the moment, many people across Europe do not feel that the structure they pay taxes into guarantees a fair distribution of benefits.

Someone else pointed out that many people were brought into the EU project without fully realising its benefits and opportunities, and that those who did (such as those going on study-abroad programmes) need to be aware that this is not the lived experience of many, especially for those outside of London. Those who didn't benefit felt things were done 'to' them rather than 'for' them – never mind 'with' them. It was pointed out that identity is a fundamental issue, playing an important role in how we relate to other people. Outside of London, Brexit for many voters was clearly concerned with sending a message to the 'elite' about their resentment regarding how few choices they feel they have.

The relevance of the nation-state?

Attention was drawn to the fact that one can't always assume the nation-state is any longer the main unit of measurement for people's sense of belonging. Smaller communities that live in close proximity and know each other are often far greater markers of identity for many people, creating a greater sense of affiliation, and are therefore able to push for changes more effectively. People may affiliate by things that have nothing to do with geographic boundaries, such as language or interests or professions.

It was pointed out that the EU had been attempting to encourage affiliation in Wales by ploughing money into community projects, yet people still rejected it. This may have been because they felt they had little say in how the money was spent.

The EU's lack of connection with ordinary people was emphasised; just having the EU's flag on buildings can feel too much as though people are being taken over or colonised. Symbols can often seem rootless and therefore do little to work as a social adhesive. A lack of consensus over which famous figure to put on the Euro currency was used as an example.

Free movement of labour and capital

The next speaker remarked that the West is capital-rich and labour-short, while the Global South is labour-rich and capital-short. Given the choice, it is best to move capital to people because the opposite is socially and politically more disruptive. China and India have been 'lifted up' in the last 20 years, whereas the median income levels in the USA have stayed the same over the last 20 years. Therefore the anti-globalism connected with the election of Donald Trump is unsurprising.

Another speaker suggested that today's changes are even more fundamental: while the top and the bottom income groups have seen (a lot or at least some) improvement in living standards, the middle has been hollowed out and a growing number of people feel that they are not getting a fair share, which is exacerbated by rapid technological change.

It was pointed out that a key problem with the paper is that free movements of capital and labour might be different issues. This begged the question of how much free movement of labour is actually a problem – is it 'false consciousness' or an issue that we should be genuinely concerned about? In light of this, the question was asked whether the focus of the paper as a whole should be different, such as looking at the issue of inequality.

Keeping the message simple

The 'common good' can seem very holier-than-thou, and too cryptic and not snappy enough to appeal to people. The paper's fundamental message therefore needs to be simplified; otherwise it won't have any wider resonance with policy-makers or the general public. Engaging people's emotions makes them consider things in a way they otherwise might not.

Conclusion

The author talked of the importance of relational factors such as happiness and well-being forming a central part of political debates, although another participant raised the issue of how exactly it might be possible to quantify things like happiness, community, etc.

The final segment of the discussion saw the chairman ask the participants what they felt was missing from the paper. The following answers were given by participants:

- 'the race element' needs to be included in any debates on migration, but the question of 'how' is still open for discussion.
- poor management structures as an item should be included in the paper – the more that control of local resources is taken away from communities and centralised, the more the sense of a 'face-to-face' element between governments and communities is lost.
- the paper should examine how all the ideas put forward could ultimately be translated into action.
- clearer definitions of common good outcomes should be provided, otherwise it will be hard to form policies – eg. 'What's my problem?' needs to link more cogently with 'What's my solution?'

At the conclusion, participants were thanked and told they would be included in the progress of any re-writes of the paper and relevant upcoming events.