

**Reframing the Discourse:
From Restricted to Open Migration¹**

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Abstract: The planet-wide effects of climate change cry out for a changed discourse. Economics, with its customary simplifying assumptions, such as *ceteris paribus* and *pari passu*, is ill-prepared to meet the emerging challenges. The cross border movement of people is one of those challenges where fresh thinking is essential. I reflect here on the desirability for the opening of all borders to migratory flows and extending rights to a social protection floor and basic income for all. To not do so is likely to lead to human suffering of an unparalleled extent. Designing and negotiating such initiatives should start now to head off humanitarian disasters.

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In addressing the topic of migration, migrant labor and refugees I take a one-world perspective. In looking ahead I take inspiration from Alexis de Tocqueville who said that in writing *Democracy in America* (1835): “I did not intend to serve or to combat any party; I have tried to see not differently but further than any party; while they were busy with tomorrow, I have wished to consider the whole future” (de Tocqueville, 1969: 20).

The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has it wrong when Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) says “Context is all.” Context is not all! Discourse is all. As discourse goes, so go our perceptions and our sense of the possible. Discourse can empower, but it can also paralyze. It can serve as blinders as effective as those that are fitted on horses to keep them on a well-marked path. Like the emperor’s new clothes, it can lead us to be blind to the obvious.

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In the realm of science, reigning paradigms, as Thomas Kuhn taught us, are at the heart of normal science (Kuhn, 1970). Science is said to progress as long as practitioners endeavor to solve problems by staying within established boundaries. This is an approach which can be summed up as “believing is seeing”. Anomalies are either unrecognized or essentially ignored. Paradigms have remarkable staying power, as scientists tend to band together and erect barriers to doubters. That we have not had a lasting paradigm shift in economics is consistent with the hard sociology of knowledge hypothesis. That perspective, developed by Steve Fuller (2003), contends that those who stand to gain most from the practical consequences of a theory are tireless in their efforts to sustain the life of that theory. Vested interests find it quite profitable to generously support theory with a strong ‘free market’ bias which bears handsome financial rewards to them. Moreover, if one can cloak a theory with a mantle of complexity, its staying power can be extended for as long as possible, if not indefinitely.

The Anthropocene: The Human Age

A question can be raised as to whether NAFTA is obsolete. I would argue that institutions and policies firmly rooted in national sovereignty are not merely obsolete, but are growing more dangerously so with each passing day. Today most scientists hold that we live in the Anthropocene Era (*The Economist*, 2011), as evidenced by major planetary changes, including what appears to be the onset of the Sixth Mass Extinction (Kolbert, 2014). The 17th century Westphalian system centered on state sovereignty may have been reasonably suited to the now eclipsed Holocene Epoch. Today the fate of communities and the future of the planet and its life forms may hinge on the adoption of a significantly changed discourse and a reconfiguring of our systems for governing human activity on the Earth.

As complex natural processes have long and unpredictable lead times, the Precautionary Principle takes on particular importance. Were we to abruptly stop the use of all fossil fuels tomorrow, we might at best be able only to slow somewhat the pace of planet-wide change, but not the direction. To give but one example, unpredictable extreme weather events are already occurring, as was anticipated by Alfred Russel Wallace in 1903:

Some . . . storms are so violent that no human structures can resist them . . . If our atmosphere [received] a somewhat greater amount of sun heat . . . these tempests might be so increased in

frequency and violence as to render considerable portions of the globe uninhabitable (cited by Flannery, 2005: 135).

The World as an Optimum Policy Area

We increasingly recognize that we now live in a world that is interconnected in almost every imaginable sense and growing more so daily. Today financial flows truly know few limits, ideas freely flow and trade in goods is largely free of obstacles. As most nations try to achieve a cost advantage, the absence of either world level policy and/or generalized policy harmonization leaves the people of the world to be pawns of the Vested Interests. The burden of maintaining the pretense of sovereignty in the context of a generalized race to the bottom falls heavily on the common people. The response to the possibility of jobs and production moving offshore is often to cut taxes, cut wages, and/or divert public funds to subsidies to the firms that have one foot out of the door. These rear guard actions are misguided *sauve qui peut* responses to a global collective action challenge.

The other side of the coin is the skewing of gains. Concentrations of income and wealth are nothing new, but the magnitude and the ease of accumulating and the acceptance of enduring inequality is new (Piketty, 2014). Still popular rhetoric denies the extent to which entire societies can be destabilized by inequalities of income and power. Governments everywhere reduce tax rates, not having learned the importance of not breaking ranks, a lesson well known to self-interested oligopolists. Among the effects of inevitably reduced government revenues are the eroding of welfare programs, social solidarity and political integrity. The time has long since come for world level initiatives that aim at convergence rather than competition (Frankman, 2004).

Among those common institutions that would complement and go well beyond labor or worker rights, would be citizen rights for all: a social protection floor combined with a basic income. The 2011 report *Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization* of an ILO-WHO Advisory Group chaired by Michelle Bachelet declared that social support provided by the state is a right (ILO, 2011: xxiv). This is a critical affirmation in a world in which benefits derived from work and/or the state are not widely available or even adequate. Add to the current context the continuing displacement of labor associated with neoliberal globalization and unknowable effects as the Anthropocene Age advances and the need for a radical review and vast shift in the nature of the conversation about citizen rights becomes urgent.

Migration and “Real Freedom For All”

Economists raise their voices in unison to support free markets, free trade and free movement of capital, but very few speak up to support free movement of either labor or, more generally, human beings. As climate changes flora and fauna are on the move in the direction of what they sense to be a promising new home. Humans, too, are on the move, but are increasingly blocked. If humanitarian catastrophes are to be avoided, people must be given the same freedom open to flora and fauna to migrate in search of a supportive environment. While South Africa’s apartheid restrictions on internal migration were almost universally denounced, few are the voices that oppose our world-wide apartheid. Look no further than the overflowing refugee camps for confirmation that entry is closed to the majority of those most in need of a new home.

A social protection floor and a basic income may be sufficient to provide the freedom to remain in one’s country of origin. Nonetheless, all should be free to stay, leave and/or return, if they choose to do so or are forced to migrate. All borders should be open. In a world in which privacy has disappeared and even text messages are being intercepted, keeping track of where in the world any person is located will soon be instantly searchable by biometrics linked to a population database, rendering obsolete passports and visas. Crossing a border could, in principle, be no more complicated than paying tolls with an E-Z pass on the New York Thruway or IAVE on Mexican toll roads.

The promise of automation and robotics is nothing less than the emancipation of each and every one of us to be truly human: that is to give full expression to our empathic selves, to be exposed to possibilities which we may pursue as our inclinations dictate. The shift should be from labor market policy to a human fulfillment strategy to support for all the fullest expression of our humanity. Shaping true world citizens with rights and obligations that span national boundaries is one of the key challenges of our times.

It is time to recognize that we live in one world and not merely one world market. Like it or not, we are bound together in a myriad of ways that leave no country independent of others. There are, of course, local idiosyncrasies that should be protected as part of our human heritage, but our circumstances cry out for mutually reinforcing responses that narrow the differences in well-being and opportunity between jurisdictions.

Labor is a subset of our common humanity and quest for well-being. In the extension of rights as in scientific principles, parsimony should be a basic principle. Arrangements should be

shaped that provide a maximum of freedom, that enhance life chances, that in a real sense leave none behind by recognizing and accommodating human diversity. We all have a place on this planet and all merit an entitlement, insofar as no one is a self-made person. We are all products of our environments, of our socialization, of the panoply of our experiences. The path for all is to the full expression of humanity and a right to acquire competence.

Citizens of the World: Stand and Be Recognized

The paradigm for the Anthropocene is that of ever-changing, ever-incompletely understood complex interdependence. The trust that is invested in each of us by that paradigm is that we are each the keepers of our planet and of our planetary siblings. The 21st Century must be about the federated citizen, in his/her multiple associations in one's immediate entourage(s), to the neighborhood through the many levels of the global hierarchy, to the level of world citizen with portable rights, some immutable and some reflecting the values of a particular jurisdiction or organization, consistent with the issue specific, ever shifting, principle of subsidiarity.

It is in the Global South where responses to the challenge of the Anthropocene are occurring. The UNDP's *Human Development Report 2013: The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World* makes the point specifically about the new dynamics in the 'South':

The rise of the South demonstrates that the world has become more diffuse and cross-connected. One consequence is that rather than looking to the North for inspiration, developing countries are looking to their peers in the South for appropriate development models. Here, rather than seeing a sterile menu of ideological options, they can examine what has worked, under what circumstances, and choose the most appropriate tools. (UNDP, 2013: 119)

Community engagement and restraining excess are two sides of the coin of our very survival in the Anthropocene. The overwhelming scientific consensus has not yet been able to unite the world in undertaking concerted, coordinated, comprehensive responses. That is the supreme challenge for us all. A future where growth is predominantly non-material and where innate human needs are nurtured may well be the only path to sustainable development which addresses the social, the environmental and much transformed 'economic' ends.

There has been an outpouring of recent books celebrating empathy and altruism not just as a philosophical or religious option, but as an innate trait (de Waal, 2009). That empathy should be nurtured and promoted, rather than stifled and distorted. “No one left behind” should be the solemn commitment, from the local through to the global. We need to heed the counsel of Alexis de Tocqueville: “The first duty imposed on those who now direct society is to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs . . .” (de Tocqueville, 1969: 12).

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