

Preface

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Environmentally, time is running out for the world as we know it. As we find ourselves in what Paul Crutzen termed the Anthropocene epoch, the earth could be up to seven degrees hotter by the end of the century. But perhaps a name even more apt for our epoch is what in this volume Zack Walsh refers to in his chapter as the Capitalocene, for much of what is currently disruptive environmentally can be traced to the normal functioning of the now worldwide capitalist economic system. From externalized costs to air and water quality that result from ever fiercer capitalist competition to the proliferation of ever more commodities to satisfy a culture of consumption, the capitalist system has become as out of control as, per *The Communist Manifesto*, the conjurings of the sorcerer's apprentice.

Even apart from the environment, things are not well. World capitalism struggles, both north and south, to generate the number of good jobs that could accord everyone a middle-class income. With the newest advances in artificial intelligence, automation will make good job generation even more difficult. And as things stand, the world's richest eight people now enjoy the same wealth as the world's poorest 50%, with executives – at least in the United States – making now hundreds of times the income of average workers.

The effects go beyond the economic to the political and spiritual. Often the jobs that are produced are alienating, done exclusively for extrinsic reward rather than for intrinsic fulfillment. As in a game of musical chairs, each job-holder comes to be in permanent competition with many other job-seekers, making job insecurity an ever-present anxiety. It is hardly surprising therefore that among the economically insecure, suspicions arise across ethnic divides over any special treatments, regardless of the previous disadvantages for which those treatments are supposed to compensate. It is unsurprising as well that those economically insecure would begrudge immigrants and even refugees, whom they judge as threats. Thus, even professed religious values are displaced by perceived threats to economic interests.

In such milieu, it is also unsurprising to find parents regarding higher education principally as a way to enhance their children's employability. While in a market economy self-marketability is an ever-necessary concern that certainly needs to be addressed, too often the students too, sometimes grudgingly but more often with enthusiasm, come to regard their entire being as commodities to be bought and sold on the market, eschewing therefore coursework in the arts or humanities that will not somehow eventuate in cash. The students forget – and are en-

couraged to forget – to feed also their souls as well as their future coffers. They forget and are encouraged to forget that we are meant to be more than just factory products and our education more than just cultural capital inputs to our employability. We are also called and need to learn how to be good citizens, not just of our own countries but of the world. And beyond good citizens, good people. But our institutions of higher learning, themselves increasingly under competitive pressure, increasingly regarding their students as customers, are themselves losing devotion to their greater call.

If ever there were a time calling for good citizenship and good personhood, it is now. Across Europe and the United States, we witness the rise of a mean-spirited – and in the United States certainly a vulgar – populism, motored by resentment, fear, and disrespect. Before now it would have been hard to imagine a movement and a presidency that was intent on building a literal wall across a national border to keep neighbors out. It is a movement, unfortunately, that begets its opposing mirror image: a corresponding resentment; a corresponding fear; and a corresponding contempt. The resulting polarization, perhaps most acute in the United States but apparent elsewhere as well is something from which we all need redress.

Especially in the United States, which paradoxically presents itself as the bastion of democracy, economic inequality distorts both the political process and national cultural consciousness. Against the specter of big money that always threatens to run more conservative candidates against them, U.S. Republican Congress people have been pulled so far to the right that they fear even to acknowledge the human contribution to climate change. It is an alienation as it were from the world and from truth, and it legitimates and encourages similar alienation culturally. Republican constituencies, looking to their leaders, find legitimacy for untenably extreme views. To win votes, even the oppositional Democratic party is likewise obliged to concede ground to politically induced idiocy and move rightward itself. Thus, the land most committed to the freedom of free enterprise must also struggle to find cultural support for the universal health care that is taken for granted in most other advanced industrial societies.

Suffice it to say that the night is dark and we are far from home. And the social sciences have not always been guiding stars. As professions, economics and political science have often served instead to justify the current world order. Just think, as mentioned in this volume, of the *homo economicus* that dominates professional economics, a model of the human actor as what philosopher Harry Frankfurt once termed a *wanton*, that is, a creature who can only want without

moral reflection or prioritization among felt wants. Sociology often has been more critical, but with the exception of anthropology, the whole of the social sciences have generally been tied to a positivist philosophy of science that holds, among other things, to a rigid split between facts and values. The social sciences have accordingly been ambivalent about addressing moral facts that carry an ineluctable value component.

Even more have the social sciences been at pains to distance themselves from anything that smacks of spirituality. Understood perhaps as personal religion sans the organization, even spirituality can seem too other-worldly to fall under the examination of empirical social science. That sentiment too is a legacy of positivism, which sees values as purely subjective rather than anything objective and all matters of an ontological nature as meaningless metaphysics.

But if the social sciences refuse to move from facts to values or toward addressing ontology, then they cannot address, as the papers in this volume do, what the title of Margunn Bjornholt's chapter explicitly refers to as "what really matters." What matters is clearly a question of values, but if we ask what as a matter of fact does happen to matter to people, our question remains entirely empirical, entirely factual, and not particularly evaluative in itself. Conventional sociology thus has no problem with such questions. In different ways, it asks them all the time.

But if we ask what should matter or what matters ultimately, then we are no longer asking empirically what others think matters but as analysts making value judgments ourselves about what ought to matter. It is here that positivistically inclined social sciences would demur, denying that what should matter is a properly scientific question.

Positivistic social sciences are certainly correct that what ought to matter is not strictly or at least not entirely an empirical question. It is a question about values. But the collapse of the fact/value distinction goes both ways. In other words, just as many facts are theory and value-laden, so are values theory and fact-laden.

The theory and fact-laden nature of values is what distinguishes values from brute tastes, like a preference for vanilla over chocolate, about which there is nothing to argue. In contrast, when it comes to values, there is much over which we can argue. One once common argument, for example, to value capitalism over socialism was that capitalism aligns better with human nature, held to be selfish, aggressive, and greedy. That capitalism does align better with human nature is a theory and whether human nature is as described is a matter of fact to be determined empirically. Were humans shown to be more altruistic and social in nature, that determination

would undermine at least this particular rationale for valuing capitalism over socialism and hence call the value itself into rational question.

An evaluative preference for capitalism over socialism could be saved by alternate reasoning, but that is the very point here. The point is that unlike brute tastes, rationally held values depend on some sort of rational reasoning that is in part theoretical and factual. Thus, arguments about theories and facts should affect the values we hold and, if we operate in good faith, lead us to values that are more rationally tenable.

Not to entertain such value-laden questions is to leave important areas of our social life unaddressed. In fact, it is to leave unaddressed what really matters or most matters.

When we ask specifically about what most matters, we are driven to fundamental ontology. Who are we and what are we about? What is most conducive to our collective flourishing?

These questions have a spiritual dimension but they are accessible to reason. Even Karl Marx, the historical materialist, trod in this direction when he spoke of species being. And, indeed, it would be difficult for Marx to speak of alienation without any specification of that which we are alienated from.

The contemplative traditions are likewise a call in this direction, an inspiration to be mindful of who we really are and meant to be. It is especially welcome therefore to have a volume such as this that seeks to reimagine a new economics from a mindful, contemplative perspective. Not only transdisciplinary, the volume is also transnational in character. With both theoretical expositions and practical exemplars of alternative economic forms, the volume offers an important opportunity to think through our way ahead.