

Reader Response by Howard Richards
to
Mahapatra, Debidatta Aurobinda (Ed.) (2013).
Conflict and peace in Eurasia.
New York: Routledge.

November 28, 2017

Dear Aurobinda,

I have now finished reading your book on conflicts in Eurasia. I have started reading your article in Geopolitics about the role of the UN Security Council.

When I started reading the book I had the feeling that it was going to challenge my usual habits of thought. In the first place, it was rather intimidating to be introduced to so many things I knew nothing about. There were many complicated conflicts going on in places I could not locate on a map, although regarding Kashmir and Afghanistan and Kosovo I had a little previous knowledge. It seemed like the moral to be drawn would be that everything is complicated and unique. The underlying unspoken assumption would be that now that we know what socialism does not work, the moral is that

the liberal ideas about democracy and human rights now prevailing in the world are right and true, while the problems are caused by violent and irrational people who have not yet learned to seize economic opportunities so they too, like the enlightened people of –where? The United States? France? Sweden? -- can come on board. They can follow the liberal formulas to peace and prosperity that have presumably worked so well for the developed world. The book seemed to be a post-ideological account of the plain facts of misery and suffering, complicated by corruption and pre-modern ideas that justify violence, with the unspoken premise that there are places in the world where the path to peace and prosperity has been found and followed.

My question about positive peace in my previous letter to you came from my view that there is as yet no economic model that works. I should have explained more about what I mean by “works.” A social and economic system that works meets the needs of the people in a sustainable relationship to the environment. Levels of inequality are acceptable if not ideal. Inflation is not out of control. There is employment with decent wages and working conditions, and a social safety net for those who for whatever reason need it. It is stable –not

liable to periodic crashes; it does not depend on physical violence to keep itself going, and it is not threatened by nuclear catastrophe. This would be positive peace. It would be an economy that works. It would comply with international treaties and conventions that define human rights.

My view is that there is no such economy, and never has been. The formula for creating one has not been found, although I think the little-known formulas of “dignity economy” and “unbounded organization” would work if they were tried.

Being a philosopher, I am something of a specialist in generalizations. I take the view (argued in my book *Letters from Quebec*) that generalizations play essential roles in human life. They may be fictions, but even if they are fictions, they are indispensable. They govern the lives of even the most hard headed hard scientists. Some generalizations I believe are that the universe began with a Big Bang, that it slowly evolved until under the unusual conditions of planet earth life emerged, that life evolved through a Darwinian process of adaptation although there is still some room for different views on what exactly adaptation consists of, that the ecological niche of the human species is culture, that culture is the

instrument of adaptation par excellence, that all the cultures that exist must be doing something right since otherwise they would not have survived and would not exist, and that the presently dominant culture is unsustainable. Among all the cultures humans have invented it is the only one –albeit due to its success in material terms—capable of destroying the biosphere and likely to do it. So, change is not an option, but a necessity, Culture needs to adopt to physical reality. Further, our presently dominant economic form cannot possibly function in a world where the value of labour in the market is near or at zero—a condition which is fast approaching. It has already been reached in parts of South Africa where I work with public employment programmes trying to solve the problem.

So, I am not used to thinking about a series of hot spots in the world where there is conflict that turns violent sometimes, where the problem is to cool off the hot spots and restore normality. Normality is the problem not the solution.

All of this I brought to the book. As it turned out, I found the style of the writing refreshing. There was little attempt to mould the facts to make them fit a theoretical model. There was no editor compelling the writers to

define their independent variables their dependent variables, and their hypotheses. Instead there were a series of windows on real life as it actually happens, making occasional use of models found in the literature when and if they seemed to be helpful.

What I mostly missed was hope, except for the part about the Kurds trading with the Iranians, and the part about the untapped economic opportunities of Kashmir. But the lack of hope confirmed my views rather than challenged them, since I already believed that without a dignity or unbounded approach the presently dominant social structure offers only false hopes, flashes of success like the Swedish welfare state of the 1960s that prove to be unsustainable. Another example would be the unsustainable promises of the New Deal in the United States. Much has to do with methodology. With one methodology one can prove that India since 1991 has been a great success, and that if it continues on the same path it will be a greater success. With another one can show that the economic rise of India started in 1975 as a consequence of the New International Division of Labour, and that poverty actually increased after the privatizations imposed by the necessity of paying foreign creditors, only to resume its previous positive trend a bit

after 1991 –but all at the expense of the de-industrialization of Europe and the USA. One can agree with the Brazilian economist Paul Singer that what first world workers lose third world workers do not gain, or one can agree with what Jeffrey Sachs was saying until recently that world poverty has declined and the absolute end of poverty –and with it war—is now within reach. It is all very complicated, and there are many theories, and many facts –most of the facts being disputed and subject to varying interpretations.

Your book is refreshing because it mostly just tells it like it is, without pretending to have any new explanations, or sure-fire solutions.

However, the very absence of alternative economic thinking is itself a cause for discouragement. If Putin can think of no better solution for the Caucasus than trying to attract investors with government subsidies, and if even in India nobody remembers Gandhi's views on economics, then what hope is there? If there is a common pattern in the book it is that poverty and misery tend to lead to ethnic conflict, as people revert to tribal ways that include violence when they find so little solace in what the modern world system is offering them. Neither the actors on the ground, nor the governments,

nor the academic writers documenting the facts envision a dignity economy or unbounded organization.

All of this has led me to a project, if it is possible to add yet another project to the many I already have. My new project, inspired by your book, is to show that Colombia can be an exception. Colombia can be a peace process that really works, as distinct from Northern Ireland or Palestine or many others recounted in your book that drag on for years simmering with no real solution. One reason is that the peace process already includes an extensive land reform. Another is that *economía solidaria* is well known there. It is taught in universities, it is practiced on the ground. And even before *economía solidaria* Orlando Fals Borda and his school of sociology were already learning from indigenous cultures and promoting alternative economics, as was Father Lebret with his many disciples practicing what he called integrative economics. And, finally, our dear Alicia Cabezudo is working virtually full time on the peace process in Colombia.

No certainty but a chance. Colombia might be a place where decades of violence can come to an end, and where positive peace might happen, finally, some place. Another candidate is Kashmir, where as your book shows

considerable progress has already been made and there is hope for economic development. The difference is that the hope in Kashmir, as far as it appears in your book, is based on orthodox normal economics, while the hope in Colombia is based on alternative new and not-so-new ways of adjusting human livelihoods to physical realities.

Peace and all good,

Howard R.