

Re: Economics (Was: the free software paradigm)

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Don Geddis wrote:

"Duncan Rose" <duncan.rose@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote on 26 Jul 2006 03:3:

(if I had to choose, I'd say it was bad; I think we should structure society in such a way that the poorer get richer faster than the rich get richer)

This is, of course, easily possible simply by making a tax system that removes all the excess wealth of the rich. In other words, it's trivial to drag all the rich down to the same level as the poor, and then they'd all be equal. Are you sure you'd prefer such a society?

I'm sure I wouldn't; and I don't believe I ever said I would. Are you saying that the only way to narrow the gap is to legislate 'a loss' on the richest couple of percent? I'm not interested in making the wealthy poorer, only the poor wealthier.

(It's much, MUCH harder to raise the poor up to the same level as the current rich.)

I always enjoy a challenge! But even so, it's unnecessary to raise the poor to the SAME level as the current rich — I'm not sure where the 'tipping point' is where the poor are 'rich enough' and it's more than possible no such point even exists. I like to hope though that there is indeed a point where the material needs and wants of a sufficiently large proportion of the (world) population are met in such a way that people will be able to mark it on their calendars and point to it and say "this is when the world went from being generally an unhappy and unjust place to a generally happy and just place".

I agree this is a naive view (I forget who it was when asked how they managed to develop a piece of software in a year (IIRC it was windowing

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software) said "I didn't know it was hard"; I like to cling to the idea that if problems are tackled rather than being put off because they're hard, they might indeed be solved).

I am concerned with the gap between rich and poor and 'relative wealth' in so far as the weakest in society are not really benefitting by being 'better off' (since in terms of overall spending ability, they are actually not better off since they fall lower and lower down the 'wealth' curve).

These are not the same things, though. I agree that just counting dollars doesn't help much, for inflation if no other reason. We really need to track "spending power" of some kind.

But the world really is becoming wealthier over time. Poor people in the US typically have a roof over their heads, aren't in danger of starvation or random neighborhood violence, can watch free TV all day long, etc. Far, far better off than the poor in many other countries, much less the poor centuries or millennia ago.

In my opinion the jury is still out on that one. We seem to be ripping through our natural resources at a fair old rate; I wonder how 'wealthy' the world will appear in another 100 years. Hopefully the current trend will continue (which in the main I'd have to say is a good trend) but there's no guarantee it's going to (invest in stocks! the market never crashes!)

I agree that in objective terms even the poorest in our societies are far wealthier than they were a few years ago even (ever watch those '70s cop shows? How depressed the areas they were filmed in look...). I'm not sure it's really possible for the very poor to be 'happy' (maybe it is -- certainly some people seem to be able to be happy whatever circumstances they find themselves in), and it would be difficult to measure too, but I wonder whether today's poor are happier or less happy than the poor that went before...

Of course the rich are even better off than that. But the truth is that the poor are objectively better off today "in terms of overall spending ability", than they were in the distant past.

Agreed. But are they happier for it?

I suspect that until relatively recently the bulk of humans lived on a reasonably equal basis (impoverished by modern standards for sure, but

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relative to the wealth (by any definition) available at the time, not impoverished. Poverty is after all a relative measure — at least it is when *I* define it ;-).

Ah, you've defined poverty to be relative. Well then of course you make statements that others won't agree with, since nobody else means the same thing by that word.

Typically poverty is about things like being able to provide shelter, worrying about where your next meal is coming from, threats of death from disease or violence, infant mortality rates, etc.

So all species other than our own is impoverished? I suspect if every human on the planet had to deal with these problems, we wouldn't consider ourselves to be impoverished. That would just be the way our lives were. These things are a measure of poverty, but they are I think still relative to our current situation.

As an example, if we assume mortality is the only measure of poverty we use, and the life expectancy of a human male 150 years ago was 40, would we call somebody who lived to 45 back then impoverished? Would we call somebody who lived to 45 now impoverished, with life expectancy in general up around the 70s?

I'm sure by the poverty metrics of 50 years ago (assuming such existed) the people of 50 years ago did not have a significantly different percentage of impoverished people than we do now; on the other hand, by today's metrics we'd probably consider a significantly higher percentage of people 50 years ago impoverished. This sounds relative to me. I think poverty can only have meaning as a comparison against some calculated (or measured) 'norm'.

(However, I'm sure the official definition of poverty is not the same as the ad-hoc, bug ridden construct that I'm using.)

I'm glad that in this at least economics does not appear to take into consideration a level of monetary liquidity in order to define poverty which seems to be what the UK government at least does (there was a piece in one of our newspapers a couple of years ago pointing out that as far as the government was concerned, you are below the poverty line if you don't go on an overseas holiday once per year — what can I say?).

Even given your definition above however I would argue there are far, far more people in the world now who are unable to provide themselves with shelter, food, and live under far more immediate threats of death from disease or violence, infant mortality rates, etc. than there were a couple of hundred years ago. Not in Europe or the US surely, but the

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world's a big place.

Note that none of these things are relative. If your ancestors often starved to death due to lack of food, but you have reliable access to enough calories to sustain life, most people (but not you, apparently) would say that you are less poor than your ancestors were.

Indeed, I would agree with the majority; my question is would my *ancestors* consider themselves to be poor? Certainly *we* consider them to be poor (which is why I consider ideas of poverty to be relative).

Regardless of what happened to the fate of the ultra-rich during that same period.

In order for *my* economy to work, there must be population control. I don't have a problem with that although I think the very concept makes many uncomfortable. I think if we don't PLAN to control our population, it will be controlled on our behalf at some point in a manner we'll all find far less comfortable

Ah. I don't disagree with you actually, but I suspect you'll find that you don't get much sympathy from other folks who are ostensibly on "your side" (at least in the economic part of the discussion).

A socially just (Marxist?) economy, combined with radical population control. Intriguing! An unusual combination.

I see no inherent reason why a capitalist economy cannot be socially just. I have only a very vague idea of what Marxism is, so I can't say whether my ideas are in line with his or not.

You should look into China's economy. The bulk of the population consists of lots and lots of poor peasants living off the land, plus draconian population control imposed by the government. Perhaps China is your utopia!

I'm not looking for an overall reduction in wealth, or a return to an agriculture-based economy. China is not my ideal because I fail to see how 'wealth' (back to my definition, sorry) is possible without freedom. Sure, in economic terms, a totally controlled national economy

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might lead to a very rapid increase in societal wealth (economic's wealth) — that doesn't cut it in my world view though.

I have no desire to return to a pre-industrial society, or to dispose of technical and scientific advances (if I were I'd just turn Amish I guess). Unlike many (I suspect) however I don't see a direct link between a 'greedy' society and a society that is able to innovate.

As a thought experiment, perhaps we could consider where we'll be assuming that AI is a solved problem, and robots with capabilities exceeding our own actually exist — who then will own the wealth? It'll probably be the people that own the robots, but the robots are likely to be horrendously expensive initially, so I doubt it will be the current poor. Will we have the will and the ability to change the way we distribute and measure wealth in our societies at such a time, once all 'work' is performed by automatons?

—Duncan

ps. Hrm. I'm sure I was trying to make a point with that robot thing at the end, but on rereading prior to posting it seems out of place. Oh well, I'll leave it in and hope whatever it was comes back to me later on...

— Don

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"I think," said Christopher Robin, "that we ought to eat all our provisions now, so we won't have so much to carry." — A. A. Milne