

## *Covid-19 and the “Return of the Normative” in Economic Policy*

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### I. THE NORMATIVE ELEMENT IN ECONOMIC POLICY: IN “NORMAL” TIMES AND IN CRISES

All economic policy must have objectives, and in this sense is always “normative”<sup>2</sup>. But the need for judgments based on values in order to develop coherent and defensible policies is often buried, causing the role of the normative to be hidden and leading economic debates to focus on truncated questions rather than on the relative significance and role of diverse values.

In “normal” times, questions about *which* values should guide economic policy have often been pushed to the edges of attention, or even treated as the province of malcontents and cranks. Mainstream discussions in a capitalist market economy typically have assumed a consensus in favour of specific goals that are presumed to be shared – for instance, economic growth. Fetishism of the economic and resulting obscurantism in relation to normative ends is a feature of everyday economic policy-making, especially in a “capitalist” system, and in this sense economic policy-making masquerades as “non-normative”. In “normal times,” hard choices” are often obscured or evaded as consensus goals are assumed to accommodate various subsequent possibilities, deferred to some “later” stage of decision-making. For instance, assuming the separability of the policy choices needed to bring about economic “efficiency” and “equity” has allowed output to be taken as a proximate goal, with distributional goals taken to be subsequently implementable through suitable transfers<sup>3</sup>. Even “non-economic” environmental and social goals are taken to be achievable through suitable ex-post expenditures, if they are mentioned at all<sup>4</sup>. The working assumptions of economic policy in “normal times” therefore permit a degree – even a high degree – of deferral or obscurantism concerning what is ultimately to be valued and pursued<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Scitovsky, T. (1941)* and *Bhagwati, Ramaswami and Srinivasan (1969)*.

<sup>4</sup> This premise may help to explain the [famous remark](#) of Peter Mandelson, chief strategist of New Labour, that “I am intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich, as long as they pay their taxes”. This was also the premise behind arguments made by prominent economists and policy makers against including labour and environmental standards considerations in the rules governing the international trading system (on which see Barry and Reddy, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> I recall one memorable - because so unmemorable - occasion in the 1990s when the then Finance Secretary of the Government of India made an after-dinner speech at a major conference on India’s economic reforms, disappointing controversialists, that could be boiled down to the following: “Some say that we can achieve an eight percent growth rate. I too think we can”.

In contrast, crises can bring to fuller visibility the truth that is, however obvious it may seem that it should be, often hidden from view: which economic policy choices “should” be made depends on societal values. As a result, framing an economic policy requires the recognition of the range of possible ends that may be affected by the choices made, including those that are “non-economic”. This imperative requires in turn that economic policy choices must be rooted in democratic legitimacy, facing all of the consequent demands and risks.

## II. THE CRISIS AND THE INELUCTABLE NORMATIVE

Crises generate specific situational dynamics that “bring back” the normative. We consider here three ways in which the normative has been foregrounded in the current crisis<sup>6</sup>.

### II.1 The Economy as a “Sub-System”? The Return of the Repressed.

In “normal times” the economy may be imagined, especially by those inclined toward market-centric thinking, to possess aspects of automaticity, returning to an “equilibrium” path after being subjected to shocks. The features of normality that are imagined to be restored “automatically” through the economy’s built-in stabilizers may be conceived, for instance, in terms of utilization of capacity, full-employment or other features. In contrast, an alternative tradition conceives of non-automaticity of desired conditions as being central to the description of an economy. In this alternative understanding, there are at least two major strands. The first, prominently identified with Keynesianism, sees a need for economic intervention to achieve desired economic outcomes, viewing the solution as being within the same realm as the problem: the economic. The second, associated with classical political economy and traditions as diverse as feminism, Marxism, and ordo-liberalism, sees economic activity as existing in a context, which needs safeguarding and care. Economic activity may even be viewed as actively undermining the social and ecological integument of the “economy”, leading to “contradictions”, for instance between the individualism of the market economy and the shared societal character of its non-market preconditions. In this perspective, the solution is no longer in the same realm as the problem, as the economic possesses non-economic conditions: social, ecological or biological. In a crisis, the idea that the economic is a sub-system with its own sovereign rules and prerogatives is challenged by reality.

The current pandemic has enforced a recognition of the empirical interdependence between two “spheres” in particular - the economic and the epidemiological – and as a result demanded the intervention of a third sphere, the political. The presumed ethic of care underlying political interventions to manage disease risk, even at the cost of the “economy”, concedes the normative priority of the human which is otherwise often overlooked, especially when the human is viewed primarily in instrumental terms as an economic actor (e.g. a worker possessing “human capital”, manager, or “entrepreneur”). This brings out a truth that is otherwise

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<sup>6</sup> See also Reddy (2020a).

contested: what is good for the “economy” is simply what is good for human beings<sup>7</sup>. The response to the pandemic falsifies the idea of the economic as a subsystem, and therefore also undermines the separatist presumption underlying the typical discourses of “everyday” economics in capitalist societies<sup>8</sup>.

The crisis has brought to the fore expressly normative considerations originating in the non-economic sphere – centered on the protection of public health –but has also raised questions of the scope of legitimate political authority and of what economic and social consequences of policies, often distributed in a highly unequal fashion, can be reasonably accepted. Since unprecedented governmental intrusions into everyday life have been involved, and massive economic and social consequences with unequal distributional impact have resulted, the crisis has made it simply untenable to form policies without recognizing their effects in these dimensions. But this in turn has meant pushing aside the “truncated normativity” of the economic sphere, at least temporarily, in favour of an “expanded normativity” that recognizes the central role of normative commitments in offering justification for policies and guiding their design. Sen (2020) has argued that the often used simile that likens fighting a pandemic to fighting a war is misleading. But a pandemic *is* like war in at least one respect: in both cases the imperative to achieve specific non-economic objectives gives a persuasive basis for the subordination or at least the moderation of the economic - disenthroning it from its customary position of priority in a capitalist society.

## II.2 Hard Choices: Valuation’s Complex and Plural Landscape

The crisis has brought to the fore the need to overthrow the “normal rules” of economic policy making in capitalist societies in more than one sense. One way in which it has done so is by leading to the disavowal of constraints previously thought of as sacrosanct – with previous guardians of fiscal probity urging increases in spending to achieve more urgent societal ends<sup>9</sup>. This has underlined that a “constraint” in the social world is in fact a consequence of a specific causal theory or order of priority, which can be revised when these are revised<sup>10</sup>. Another way in which the crisis has caused the “normal rules” to be overthrown is by underlining that all of the available choices favour the interests of some persons over others, and that policy making cannot therefore shirk from comparing them. Of course, this is always true to some degree, but is often obscured in everyday policy talk (or in its journalistic counterparts, which focus on what is good for the “economy”, as if that meant one thing). In particular, mainstream economic policy analysis typically sidesteps such comparisons to focus instead on guidance as to how to achieve “efficiency”, presumptively benefitting all. Famously, Robbins (1932) derided such choices as involving balancing “Thy Blood or Mine” and unsuitable for a scientific economics to address – even if unavoidable in public life. But, contrary to Robbins, policy choice that is not a

<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, the point of view of the human development approach, and related criticisms of income-centric societal evaluation: see e.g. United Nations Development Programme (1990), Sen (1999) or Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (2009).

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Godelier (1972), Polanyi (1944), Tribe (1978).

<sup>9</sup> “[Spend as Much as You Can, IMF Head Urges Governments Worldwide](#)”, Reuters, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Reddy (2005).

mere exercise of power requires arriving at choices through a disciplined weighing of concerns based on the application of principles. This process of thought must be reasoned and reflective, whether or not it qualifies as “scientific”.

In the context of Covid-19, policy choices have been made around the world that have favoured the interests of some at the expense of others. Consider for instance government actions that have sought especially to protect the old, who face very much higher mortality risks from contracting Covid-19, but have used instruments toward that end which have caused sizable harms to the young (specifically, undifferentiated “lockdowns” which have caused massive disruption of economic security, schooling, social relationships, personal mobility, and mental or physical health). Those who argue that these measures have had justification undertake implicit (or explicit) interpersonal comparisons. Those who argue against these policies argue, contrarily, that the harms to some, whether conceived in terms of outcomes or loss of liberties, outweigh the benefits to others. The weighing that is involved involves persons in different circumstances (e.g. the young and the old) facing harms and benefits of diverse kinds. This weighing is therefore intra-personal as well as inter-personal, bringing in diverse values which have distinct and irreducible significance in a life (e.g. education vs. health, or the opportunity to live a normal life vs. the opportunity to live a longer life).

The exercise of valuation which is necessary to arrive at or defend policies involving such interpersonal comparisons is both plural and complex: it involves multiple dimensions – bringing in train ethical considerations that are diverse in nature - *and* multiple, unequally situated, persons. While there is some evidence of public authorities and politicians justifying the choices made in terms of the sacrifices which are appropriate to ask of some in order to benefit others, it does not seem that there have been many efforts to undertake a disciplined exercise of evaluative judgment based on a comprehensive accounting. The problem of “management” of the response to the pandemic seems often to have been handed instead to subsidiary authorities (e.g. of public health) obscuring the wide scope of the evaluation involved.

In order to make headway in a problem of this kind, it is necessary to adopt an evaluative framework that encompasses both freedom and outcome concerns. But concerns of each of these kinds can also be internally complex. For instance, positive freedoms - freedoms effectively to attain valuable ends<sup>11</sup> - might, in some causal circumstances – be expanded through limitations on negative freedoms (freedoms from obstruction). If the causal premise is satisfied, the control of a contagious disease through limitations on personal movement or interaction provides an example. In such a case, the argument for limited restrictions on freedom can also be viewed as being “freedom-based” -- accepting necessary restraints on freedom to expand freedoms *in toto*. This can be either because the freedoms lost (e.g. freedom of association) are accompanied by - presumptively “greater” - gains in other freedoms (e.g. freedoms to live healthily) for the very same persons, or because losses of freedom of some are deemed to be adequately compensated by gains of freedom by others

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<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Sen (1995) and prior literature, most famously Berlin (1958).

(freedom being the same “currency” in both cases)<sup>12</sup>. The complex and plural nature of the exercise – determining the acceptability of tradeoffs between freedoms of different kinds and as experienced by different persons -- is again unavoidable. The conclusions derived will depend on diverse values and the weights attached to them, as well as on the facts of the case.

While freedom and outcome arguments (e.g. liberty and efficiency) are often run together in “neoliberal”, even if not in “neoclassical”, economics, where market economies are seen as advancing both together<sup>13</sup> it is quite clear that in the context of a pandemic there *may* be inescapable tradeoffs.

All told, it is quite clear that a narrowly consequentialist framework of evaluation is not adequate. Process and outcome considerations must be integrated together, while also recognizing the internal complexity present in each of these categories.<sup>14</sup> The resulting complex and plural exercise requires weighing of objectives, and therefore, normative policy making. The hard choices involved have not always been made explicit, as might be demanded in a context of democratic justification. How to provide adequate processes for such justification, in “real time”, as required in a crisis, is both a theoretical and a practical challenge, which by any measure has not been met during the current crisis.

### II.3 Dilemmas of Expertise

The crisis has given rise to heavy reliance on expertise for guidance and for legitimation, in a historical moment in which claims to expertise are already severely challenged, and with some good reason<sup>15</sup>. In the case of epidemiology, legitimate questions have been raised about the evidence basis and modeling framework employed in the frameworks most frequently applied as a basis for policy advice<sup>16</sup>. What is the *form* of expertise adequate to such a crisis?

First, the available expertise must be suitable to the purpose at hand. This requires that its predictive or explanatory capacities must be oriented toward providing the contribution required from it to underpinning effective public decisions. Second, the available expertise must illuminate what choices there are and their implications. The role of expertise is to provide the knowledge necessary to achieve desired goals - making transparent both what alternatives exist, and the practical as well as value judgments which are needed to select among them. This requires, *inter alia*, describing what tradeoffs may exist, what uncertainties are present, and how they may be delimited (e.g. by even roughly characterizing the likelihoods of outcomes). Expertise is a tool for public decision-making, but not a substitute for it.

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<sup>12</sup> Liberals and even libertarians have at times accepted arguments along these lines in favour of public health based restrictions on liberties. See e.g. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/publichealth-ethics/>

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Friedman and Friedman (1980).

<sup>14</sup> Sen (1982) presents, under the heading of “goal-rights systems” one way of integrating such diverse values.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Babones (2018).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Collier (2020).

All of this seems exceedingly obvious, and yet it, apparently, isn't. Consider, for instance, that few countries in the world appear to have anticipated, or integrated into their decisions as to how to respond to the pandemic, the various spillover consequences that quite predictably resulted. These include tradeoffs between the health outcomes being safeguarded through societal "lockdowns" and *other* health consequences<sup>17</sup> as well as between health and non-health concerns (e.g. education, or employment and income security). There is little evidence that pandemic planning extended to such causal linkages, or that they were taken into account in emergency decision-making (for instance, by making provisions to address these knock-on consequences, even if the public health measures taken remained the same).

When such spillovers are involved, the resulting inescapable normative demand for weighing makes deference to experts (a policy prominently proclaimed by various leaders a disavowal of responsibility – both because the experts have generally had at best fragmentary knowledge - an effect of the very disciplinary division of labour that makes them experts - and because the weighing of diverse concerns is a public prerogative, that should appropriately be informed by democratic values<sup>18</sup>).

The crisis has underlined that a more adequate framework for tapping expertise ("expertise on tap and not on top"<sup>19</sup>) is greatly needed. Indeed, developing such a framework is a central unaddressed challenge of contemporary democracy, necessary to weave a course between two opposite dangers. The first danger is a focus of "populist" suspicion: that purportedly democratic institutions do not function democratically, because of the influence of alleged "experts" whose opinions substitute for the normative values that should properly govern decisions, and which ought to emerge from a societal context. The second danger is that expertise is not employed even when it ought to be. The avoidance of the first danger requires avoiding the use of expertise as an alibi for the repression of legitimate normative concerns in the decision-making processes of a society. The avoidance of the second danger requires avoiding the use of legitimate normative concerns as an alibi for the repression of expertise in the decision-making processes of a society. In order to avoid both dangers, it is necessary to give normative values their due, and also keep them in their place. What features would a suitable synthesis between the claims of democracy and of expertise have? The Covid-19 pandemic experience suggests that such a synthesis should:

- Bridge Domains: A more adequate framework for policy making requires a more expansive yet disciplined form of thought bridging domains, so as to recognize the relevant causal interlinkages. This is needed both to recognize and face possible tradeoffs (e.g. lockdown impact on output and employment) and what opportunities may exist to avoid them. In addition to hard choices there may be "Paretian" opportunities for mitigating or even avoiding such choices – but arriving at these possibilities (for instance, to ensure the continued delivery of

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<sup>17</sup> On which, see Reddy (2020b).

<sup>18</sup> Ramakrishnan (2020).

<sup>19</sup> Spivak (2021).

other health services, the provision of schooling, or the maintenance of employment while also limiting the transmission of the disease) requires understanding what causal linkages are present, and what enabling supports or incentives may make a difference<sup>20</sup>. The disciplinary division of labor is a device for the production of knowledge, but also of ignorance. An expansive “new science” which seeks to overcome the resulting acquired blindness and to bridge the prevailing gaps is needed.

- Anticipate Scenarios: despite the presence of fundamental uncertainty, it can be possible to sketch and prepare for possible outcomes. Efforts to do so occupy the space between reason and imagination. They represent a form of extended realism, as contrasted with the myopic realism that sees only the “now”. Such scenario building is inherently difficult. It must recognize that a problem such as pandemic management is in the nature of a “wicked problem”, contending with causal complexity, pervasive fundamental uncertainty, and valuational plurality all *together*. Nevertheless, some scenario building is better than none. More often than not, the current pandemic has placed an uncomfortable spotlight on a lack of even obvious precautions, and even the systematic undermining of precautionary efforts. (Consider for instance how the pursuit of short-term efficiency over resilience or stability of supply chains, which has led in a number of countries to international outsourcing and a lack of domestic capacity to produce health commodities that have been needed: tests, drugs and vaccines).
- Enlarge Options. “Expertise” that confines itself to a few preconceived possibilities risks limiting our consideration of the available options. For instance, the policy options were more than merely having on and off generalized “lockdowns” as anticipated in much of the policy literature and focused on by policymakers in many countries, including India. (Indeed, in India, the stringent lockdown adopted early on seems to have had little impact on the subsequent progression of the disease.). The East Asian countries, which have achieved better disease control with less adverse economic impact, show that interventions applied in a focused manner may make generalized lockdowns unnecessary. Under the exigencies of the crisis, there has been considerable innovation in social welfare systems – for instance leading to the adoption of a version of the German “kurtzarbeit” wage subsidy model so as to maintain employment and avoid business closures, in the UK and elsewhere; temporary income supports along the lines of a universal basic income, etc. These innovations also underline the importance of considering the range of possible interventions. The role of “Experts” should be to propose options and not to limit them.

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<sup>20</sup> The evolving understanding of whether schools play an important role in transmission of Covid-19, leading to revised guidance, provides an example. See WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF (2020).

- **Make Sense of Motivations:** much of the “expertise” that has been applied has assumed that human beings act nearly mechanically<sup>21</sup>, but a more sophisticated portrait of human motivation is of great importance to enacting successful public interventions and policies. Understanding by agents of why they are being asked to act is essential for motivating them. Moreover, they are likely to be motivated not merely by narrowly “self-interested” instrumental calculations but also by considerations of extended or enlightened self-interest, by procedural regard for “doing the right thing” and by concern for others<sup>22</sup>. Public interventions must be grounded in a recognition of these diverse motivations and their interlinkages. (For instance, it may be easier to do what is right if it is also easy). Alleviating constraints and providing incentives through policies can enable and encourage people to act in pro-social ways, but it is their internal motivation to do so which is tapped. Individual rational agency cannot be detached from nor reduced to moral sensibilities, and responses to public interventions are likely to reflect this complexity. Neither “behavioral insights”<sup>23</sup> nor arbitrary presumptions (e.g. of how long a lockdown is likely to be socially sustainable) since the success of interventions depends ultimately on their acceptance by citizens who act as independent reasoning agents.
- **Span Levels of Action:** The pandemic has shown the limited extent of regional and global cooperation (with some notable exceptions, such as in Africa, where the African Union has played an important role in collective vaccine procurement and in framing the response to Covid-19 generally). “Nationalism” in policy-making has led to a failure to make use of many opportunities for productive international coordination, in relation to disease prevention and control, data sharing, development and production of health commodities such as tests and vaccines, and many other areas. This is a colossal failure of collective rationality that has been inadequately recognized as such<sup>24</sup>. A capacious expertise at the service of democratic values should avoid the explanatory and prescriptive self-limitation of a fetishistic concern with nation-state policy. Expertise gains relevance from a link to the “reason of state” but also risks relevance if it does not confront that link. A democratic form of expertise is at the service of society rather than state.

### III. CONCLUSIONS: DEMOCRACY, EXPERTISE, AND POLICIES

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<sup>21</sup> The influential models of Prof. Neil Ferguson and his Imperial College group are cases in point (See Collier (2020), and Reddy (2020b) op cit).

<sup>22</sup> This might help to explain the finding of higher compliance with public health guidance for Covid-19 than anticipated in prior modelling exercises (Reddy (2020b)).

<sup>23</sup> A “Behavioral Insights Team” played a role in particular in shaping the UK government response. See also <https://www.bi.team/blogs/behavioural-insights-the-who-and-covid-19/> (accessed February 2021)

<sup>24</sup> The formula for a vaccine provides an example of a (global) public good that is best cooperatively produced and freely shared. See Acharya and Reddy (2020).



Normative goals, and principles (e.g. as to what tradeoffs should be made) are a necessary reference point in social choices. Nevertheless, there is pervasive obscurantism about when and how the normative enters policy making – especially economic policy making - in ordinary times. A crisis, such as a pandemic, brings the normative to the fore. The current “moment” of the (relative) foregrounding of the normative may go on for some time, as a result of the many health, social and economic effects of the crisis, and the questions it has raised concerning the appropriate distribution of burdens and benefits. These questions are as diverse as how to respond to the accumulation of debt by firms and countries (as a result of the output contractions brought about by closures), how long and on what scale to pursue stimulus policies to restore output, what to do to ensure universal access to vaccines or other health “commodities”, etc. The dimensions of the crisis in each of these areas raise questions of a fundamental kind concerning the adequacy of existing institutions and norms as well as the priorities and political economy revealed by societal choices.

The Covid-19 crisis has underlined a number of challenges to public decision-making. These have included how to deal with pervasive and profound uncertainty, resulting in part from complex causal relations; what role to give to expertise that is both indispensable and inadequate; how to generate and employ bridging knowledge that takes note of causal spillovers; how best to make sense of the irreducible plurality of evaluative concerns – values of different kinds at stake for distinctly situated people. Our acknowledgment of these difficulties has been at best partial, even as the normative has “come back in”. But the lack in our institutions, procedures, and ways of thinking and speaking - highlighted by the crisis, but not confined to the crisis - points too to the elements of a solution. We must reinvent them, to ensure that the normative stays where it should be – at the centre of public life.

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