

Thoughts about fairness

Andrea Saltelli, Barcelona, January 6, 2017

Is fairness as a moral sentiment (in the sense of Adam Smith)? In relation to the European Union policies we suggested a few years back that “*considerations linked to inequity should not be taken as ‘correctives’ to be applied to an agenda dominated by innovation, competitiveness and growth. Fairness, or better its perceived opposite, prevents at present any meaningful European discourse, a state of affairs that the present crisis can only aggravate.*”ⁱ This was before Piketty, Brexit, the Syrian crisis and much else. How about today?

Today a mapping of Fairness could perhaps include the following questions.

- Are markets fair?
Economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller have treated this in two books. The first discusses Fairness as an Animal Spiritⁱⁱ. The latter (Phishing for Phoolsⁱⁱⁱ) denies that the sum of the collective selfishness generates the common good.
- Is free trade fair?
Economist Erik Reinert has written several books^{iv} on the topic and his vision is lucidly critical of Ricardian economics.
- Is innovation fair?
Technologist Jeron Lanier^v has argued that technology contributes to the hollowing out of the middle class to accumulate wealth at the very top of the distribution, in a blunt warning about innovation’s possible dystopian ends.
- Is inequality fair?
Here Thomas Piketty^{vi} and Antony Atkinson^{vii} have provided useful insights. E.g. Atkinson argues that in order to fight inequality innovation should be oriented toward job-creation ends.
- Is evidence fair?
On both sides of the Atlantic the point has been made that evidence based policy serves better those with the deepest pockets^{viii}. Among the remedies suggested is the rebalancing of power by creating evidence centres at the service of the citizen^{ix}.

These questions suggests that fairness cuts across several possible lenses one might take to look at the world in the Brexit and Trump era. Confucius famously remarked that one can govern without weapons and without food, but not without trust. Without fairness there is no trust.

ⁱ http://www.andreasaltelli.eu/file/repository/Fairness_Saltelli_dHombres.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8967.html>;

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10534.html>

^{iv} <http://www.abebooks.co.uk/Rich-Countries-Got-Why-Poor-Stay/15249275284/bd>

^v <https://www.bol.com/nl/p/who-owns-the-future/9200000007269625/>

^{vi} <https://www.bookdepository.com/Capital-Twenty-First-Century-Thomas-Piketty/9780674430006>;

^{vii} <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/23502970-inequality>

^{viii} <http://agone.org/lordredeschoses/lescourtiersducapitalisme/>

^{ix} <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-business-of-america-is-lobbying-9780190215514?cc=be&lang=en&>