

# Descartes was wrong: economics is not a class war machi...

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The suggestion has been made in response to posts that I have written here that if you are on the left, you are either on the side of the working class in a struggle for power or you are, apparently, a technocrat fiddling with economic plumbing that might keep capitalism working. You cannot, they imply, be both.

The implication is binary. You can either focus on action or thinking out solutions, but not both.

You can overthrow the system, or support the existing system, but you cannot, apparently, radically improve what we have to ensure it delivers what people need.

One or the other is the order of the day, apparently.

That worldview is grounded in an old philosophical error. René Descartes divided the mind and body: thought versus matter, power versus substance. That Enlightenment dualism has long since been discredited. Yet many on the left are putting it on view again, resurrecting it in a crude economic form, suggesting that the class struggle is all that matters and nothing else does.

That suggestion is based on three profoundly mistaken assumptions.

The first is the idea that understanding how an economy works is irrelevant to changing it.

But, if that were true, why study exploitation, ownership or rent extraction at all?

And why understand interest rates, or inflation, or the mechanisms that allow capital to dominate labour?

To pretend that power floats free of institutions, whether monetary, fiscal, or regulatory, is to hand those institutions to the right.

To use what I think to be a helpful analogy, a plumber who refuses to understand how

pipes leak is not a revolutionary. They are incompetent.

The second claim is that technocracy always serves capital. Now, of course, we know that expertise can be captured by elite interests. We know that much of it is. But that is precisely why those who care about labour, the politics of care, the planet and democracy must understand the tools that shape economic life. Knowledge is not the enemy in that case. Ignorance is. The possibility really does exist that someone who knows how money works can choose to use that knowledge in the service of working people, even if the left denies it.

Modern monetary theory is a good example: it describes the pipes, valves and flows of the system. Whether that knowledge is used for austerity or for the public good depends not on the theory, but on politics.

The third false assumption is that the economy is a battlefield for class warfare, and not a servant of society and everyone in it. The truth is that we do, of course, live in relationships. Every economic action connects to others.

The result is that you can worry about ownership and still care about how tax administration functions.

You can fight for higher wages and also understand bond issuance.

You can support class struggle while rejecting the idea that “hammers and sickles are the only tools that matter”.

To insist otherwise is to deny human complexity. People are not single-issue creatures. We are caring, calculating, emotional, strategic, anxious and hopeful , and often all at the same time.

In that case, Descartes was wrong. So too is any politics that revives his dualisms. Economics is not a choice between:

- \* Power or plumbing
- \* Struggle or structure
- \* Class or competence

It is all of those at once, and any pretence that it is otherwise is wrong, and the left will only change the world when it recognises this truth.

We do not, in that case, need less understanding of how economies actually function. We need more, directed toward the public good, aligned with workers' and communities' interests, and used to hold the powerful to account.

Liberation is not just about class struggle. It is also about skills with spanners, calculators, and even spreadsheets, and the willingness to see the whole system as a living set of relationships, capable of serving us all.

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