

Review Essay

An Innovation Overlooked, yet Vital: The Institutional Arrangements of Democracy in Thought and Practice

Paul Krugman.

Arguing with Zombies. Economics, Politics, and the Fight for a Better Future.

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Paul Krugman's collection of newspaper columns published between 2004 and 2019 (2020) is worthy and important reading, because it reminds of the two greatest innovations in the past two centuries in the history of human civilization and government. First, the creation of a government where politics is pursued as policy for people. Second, a democratic government where insights of Keynesian economists vaulted entire populations into unprecedented social mobility.

He compiles his efforts to bring common sense to people about economics and politics in the covers of one book and in a language that is understandable for the layperson. I will show that his ideas, no offense, are not new, but need to be repeated, again and again because of the onslaught of misinformation about government's position and role in society and about the 'blessings' and perversions of the 'free market.' In fact, they not only need repeating, they need to be taught as part of a civics curriculum that starts in middle schools and continues in high school and college. But that is, I realize, a tangent, and I should focus on Krugman's ideas.

Why? Well, when people think about 'innovation' the words that most likely come to mind are 'technology,' 'communication,' 'industry,' and perhaps 'finance.' People will not think of innovations in the institutional arrangements for governing, or of innovations in policy areas, but they are actually far more important than is generally appreciated. What Krugman shows is that in Western democracies the *politics as policy for people*, which was so successful during the three decades following the Second World War, has been replaced since the 1970s by *politicians prostituting their principles for raw power* (my characterization, not his). This has certainly happened in the United States where the seams of democracy have been stretched to the limits in recent years. The emergence of populist and extreme-right politicians in Western European countries has shown that the US is not alone in this, but it is not as bad in the old continent as in the USA. Krugman writes common sense, based on facts, and, time and again, calls out to those who say one thing but do another. In this review essay, Krugman's economists' perspective upon politics, will be augmented by the perspective of a scholar of public administration and history. As you will learn, his ideas have deeper roots than is generally known.

Brief Outline of the Book

Krugman's collection is divided into 18 sections, each with an introduction. It contains 90 columns (this includes some blogs) published in the *New York Times* between 2004 and 2019, one longer article that appeared in the *NY-Times Magazine* (about how economists got it so wrong), and one 1992-article in *The American Prospect* on the income distribution debate. The various texts are a delight to read, very insightful, very enlightening (nota bene: the page numbers in the text are to Krugman's book).

Krugman is not just an economist, he is a public intellectual who marshals his extensive knowledge of the economy and of economics to instruct the people. What audience does he reach? His ideas certainly resonate with anyone who understands that democracy can only survive when people are prepared to accept facts, not ideology, people who acknowledge that science is the best we have when it comes to factual information, and who are willing to suspend disbelief. These are likely people at the center and into the left of the political spectrum, i.e., those who are called liberals¹ in the USA. Given that, as he writes, a second generation of people have grown up in a right-wing bubble (p.307) where knowledge and understanding are shoved under the carpet by, as he calls it, movement conservatism. He defines *movement conservatism* as an "interlocking set of institutions and alliances that won elections by stoking cultural and racial anxiety but used these victories mainly to push an elitist economic agenda, meanwhile providing a support network for political and ideological loyalists." (p.302) This started in the 1970s and has resulted in political polarization (p. 297), especially fueled by a new generation of GOP politicians and wannabes that was less and less willing to compromise (Turchin, 2013). This, I think, has not been as vehement in the USA since the Civil War. I could be wrong.

In his 2007-book Krugman describes movement conservatism as relying upon the specific ways that concepts are defined (e.g. socialism, deep state) or twisted (e.g. trickle-down economics, free market), upon deep connections with business, upon the development of right-wing think tanks, and upon populism. Central to the collection of columns that prompted this essay is the concept of *zombie*. While in folklore a zombie is a mythological undead person in corporal appearance, Krugman uses it more freely as *zombie ideas*, which are ideas where truth and fact are so twisted and manipulated that many cannot make heads or tails of it. These 'many' have often been believed to be the lesser educated and lower income population that only prefers to believe what their party, their church, their neighbors, and their media say (Hochschild, 2016). What actually is truly astonishing, though, is that movement conservatism is led by people with advanced degrees in law, political science, medicine, etc., who have betrayed their intellectual and professional integrity for the sheer lust and lure of power, prestige, privilege, and wealth. A lot of this stuff has been on my mind since I was a member of the Dutch labor party in the 1970s, and, to avoid ranting and raving, I need to take a step back from the emotional responses that Krugman's concerns generated and seek refuge in background information and facts. To be sure, read Krugman, but then read more and more, because only knowledge, dialogue, and self-restraint will cradle democracy.

¹ In Continental Europe, liberals are those who identify with the right wing of politics, while in the USA they are considered to be leftists. I did not know this until I moved to the US in 1998. It is not weird to think Krugman is a social democrat, but it is to think that I am a liberal.

Three Ages of Government

Last year I published a study that had the title of this paragraph, and was based in a wide-ranging literature from which knowledge was drawn about the origins and development of government in society (Raadschelders, 2020). For most of the existence on this globe of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the species lived in small bands of 50, perhaps up to a 150, members, scattered across the earth's landmasses. They were hunter-gatherers, members of a *physical community of people* where everyone knew everybody else. In such communities it would be very difficult to hide misbehavior, to cheat, or to engage in actions that could harm the survival of the troop. For the purposes of this essay, it is not necessary to be precise with chronology, but once (a) people managed to domesticate certain grains and livestock, (b) found it was possible to produce a surplus, and (c) shifted to a sedentary lifestyle, populations began to grow (on a side note: in some parts of the world the agricultural revolution preceded sedentarization, in other parts it was the other way around). All this started perhaps as far as 20,000 years ago, but was in full swing at around 11,000 BCE and happened independently in various parts of the globe. As populations grew beyond that number of 150 people, and they no longer could know everyone else, they started living in, as Bertrand Russell called it (1962), artificial societies or, to use Benedict Anderson's more commonly known phrase (2006), *imagined communities*. It is then that government becomes necessary.

There have been three ages of government. The first age was one of self-government *among* people and that lasted for some 4,000 years. These self-governing societies were close to being as egalitarian as the hunter-gatherers of prehistory had been. To be honest, we cannot be sure, but there is some archaeological evidence to suggest a desire to preserve some degree of equality in these early settlements. The best example is that of the small settlement of Džejtun which is near the capital of present-day Turkmenistan, where residential units of a one-room type were found (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2016, 76). Note: there were no multi-room dwellings (like palaces). It is entirely conceivable that there was some social stratification, but it must have been limited.

The second age of government was one *above* society. This started with the first city-states, about 6,000 years ago. It was a society governed by a small political, religious, economic, and military elite, with the bulk of the population treated as subjects, expected to do whatever they were told. This type of government was the instrument in the hands of an elite that aimed at acquiring and holding on to power. One could call these authoritarian governments, and this situation still exists in many parts of the world.

The third age of government is one *in* a society and *with* people as citizens and is of only recent origin. The foundations for this were laid at the time of the American and French Revolutions, establishing a set of institutional arrangements for which there was no historical precedent. A set of institutional arrangements to which people, elite and commoners alike, are still adjusting; a situation where democracy is "tried out" at large scale, a political system that encompasses everybody, high and low, rich and poor, and – most importantly – where no one is above the law and where we are – at least in terms of political theory – all equal under the law. A political system where the law is developed by the people through their elected representatives, a people who assume that their legislators will act in accordance with the need of the collective and not be bought by special interests.

What is so intriguing is that the institutional arrangements for democracy were laid in a span of mere decades, roughly between 1780 and 1820. This was possible because of changing ideas about the nature of the state and about the role of government in society in the two preceding centuries.

Historical Roots of Krugman's Ideas

Paul Krugman writes about a society where government looks after those who cannot take care of themselves. A society where everyone has a shot at improving their lot in life. A society where people can trust their representatives to work for them, and where people are informed by facts and not by ideology. A society where government is no longer an instrument of the elite but an enabler of the peoples' needs and wishes. A society where social and economic inequalities are accepted, but only when it is clear that some are not much more equal than others (free after George Orwell's "Some pigs are more equal than others" in *Animal Farm*).

During the second age of government, those at the apex of power saw themselves literally as the embodiment of the state, and this is no better expressed than in the words of two rulers. James VI, as king of Scotland (1567-1603) and as king of England (1603-1625) observed: "I am the husband and the whole Isle is my lawful wife. I am the head and it is my body." (Cohen, 1994: 30). Louis XIII, king of France (1601-1643) said "l'État c'est moi", a phrase generally attributed to his son (Dyson, 1980, 137). However, already in their time the winds were changing as some scholars came to think of the state as an abstraction, and where rulers were merely servants of that state. When James and Louis ruled, Italian political economist *avant-la-lettre* Antonio Serra wrote a treatise (1613) in which he argued that governments should take care of infrastructure so as to improve the connectivity between communities (in his day: for trade), for education so that all could advance in life, and for technology. In the course of the eighteenth century, several scholars and social commentators wrote that the state and its government should also take responsibility to help those in need, the orphaned children, the sick and the handicapped, and the elderly—among them the German scholar of *Kameralistik* Christian von Wolf, the Scottish scholar and economist Adam Smith, and the French aristocrat, philosopher and mathematician Nicolas de Condorcet. Their ideas came not immediately to fruition, because it took the Atlantic Revolutions to establish institutional arrangements for democracy: separation of politics from administration, separation of church and state, separation of public (government) and private (economy, market) sectors, development of constitutions, and separation of office from officeholder (so that public office could not be sold, could not be inherited). Upon that basis it was possible for governments to respond to the highly increasing citizen demand for public services (especially locally) in the slipstream of widespread industrialization, urbanization, and rapid population growth from the second half of the nineteenth century on. This formed the basis for what came to be called the welfare state.

Adam Smith, the father of contemporary economics (p. 132) is known for his *laissez-faire, laissez-passer* and allegedly embracing, what Krugman calls, the "efficient-market hypothesis." (p. 135). Smith's ideas have been popularized, stereotyped and narrowed in a direction he would have found horrific. Why? Well, Smith wrote *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1759, and he carried some of the ideas in it into his famed, and truly seminal, *The Wealth of*

Nations (1776). How many people have taken the trouble to read it, or at least leaf through it? Not too many, I gather, because then they would have also read that Smith warned against, as he called it, the “tribe of monopolists,” (Smith, 2010: 239), warned against those who seek to keep the market as deregulated as possible and thus secure control of the economy. I must allow Smith to speak in his own words. He writes that the businessman is only after:

his own security; and by directing [...] industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an *invisible hand* to promote an end that was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interests, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (2010: 230; emphasis added)

In Book IV, chapter 2, he warns about the “tribes of monopolists” mentioned above and especially about the dangers of what is nowadays known as rent-seeking, the effort to first secure wealth, and then secure property in land and/or real estate that others are wanting to rent. How lovely to get and have wealth and not having to work for it!

As Krugman notes, a variety of micro-economists have not only been “seduced by the vision of a perfect, frictionless market system.” (p. 145) but also mistook the beauty of impressive-looking math for truth (p. 131). Micro-economists believe in utility maximization, in equilibrium not only existing in financial markets but in the economy at large, and in perfect competition (p. 402). They emphasize that the invisible hand generally leads to desirable outcomes for all (p. 407). By contrast, macro-economists such as Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and Bradford DeLong hammer on the fact that a totally free-market economy can lead to trouble (p. 408), such as price gouging (jacking up prices of drugs when being the monopoly provider), negative externalities of industrial production (such as air, soil, and water pollution), and rent-seeking that require policy intervention. In my view, the macro-economists walk in the shoes of Adam Smith and of John Maynard Keynes, the English economist who advocated extensive government intervention, through employment programs and fiscal incentives for business, as the way to get out of a severe depression. Keep in mind, one cannot blame business owners for looking after their own interests, but we must be vigilant and remember Smith. I quote him again:

The interest of the dealers (i.e. stock owners, manufacturers, and merchants; JR), however, in any particular branch of trade or manufacture, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public. *To widen the market and to narrow the competition, is always in the interest of the dealers.* To widen the market may frequently be agreeable enough to the interest of the public; but to narrow the competition must always be against it, and can serve only to enable the dealers, by raising their profits above what they naturally would be, to levy, for their own benefit, an absurd tax upon the rest of their fellow-citizens. (Smith, 2010: 132; emphasis added).

Smith’s insightful words not only apply to business owners, as we have seen in the USA since the 1970s, but also to those politicians who seek to control, manipulate, and monopolize their avenues to power and exploit whatever means to stay in power. To be in bed with business owners and to pander to populist emotions has become the way to do it, at least in some countries.

Politics Prostituting for Power or Politics as Policy for People?

The politics that prostitutes for power pushes the bulk of the population back into the kind of dependencies that existed throughout the second age of government. There is a theme running through Krugman's contemplations about and concerns of some Republican ideologies about, e.g., social security, health care, Medicare and Medicaid, the economy, financial innovations, and trickle-down economics, is that it is built upon a conservative movement that sucks the life out of everyone below those in the top income brackets. He provides so many examples of hideous politics that harm the Republican (-leaning) common folk, whose perspectives have been captured in Hochschild's *Great Paradox* (2016), that I find it hard to pick and choose.

I'll choose nonetheless and pick two issues: the myth of austerity and the myth that privatization and contracting-out saves us all. In the USA and in the European Union, austerity politics has been hailed as the solution to economic crisis. Lower taxes, cut public budgets and services, and all will come right! Yeah, Right!!! In reality, austerity politics has deepened economic depression everywhere (p. 96; see also Stiglitz, 2013, 2016). It has become an austerity mania (p.164), inspired by the desire of political officeholders and pundits across the Western world to use economic crisis as an excuse to slash social insurance and health programs. In the process, they departed from the plight of the laboring classes and hollowed-out the middle class. They snubbed their noses at those "below them" in a misery of politician-pundit making. I use that term, politician-pundit, because it is no longer clear, at least not for some officeholders, where the politician ends and the pundit begins. Right-wing politics has prostituted principles for power almost everywhere in the democratic world. The rise of right-wing political parties in Austria, France, and the Netherlands, to name a few, and the rise of very right-wing Republicans in the USA, may have been in part a response to substantial immigration of foreigners (Raadschelders et al., 2019) and the fear of "losing my country" was sure put to "good" use by the politician-pundit.

And what about privatization and contracting-out? It is upon blind faith in the free market that people came to believe that government is "evil" and stands in the way of prosperity. As with austerity politics, the facts bear out very differently. I will not present facts here, Krugman and many other economists (such as Piketty, 2014) can do that far better than me. But the reader can simply, with a wink to Adam Smith, ask herself: Who benefits from privatization or contracting out? Does the 'marketization' of prisons, education, health care, housing, social security, and public utilities, etc., etc., serve the clientele (people, not as citizens) or does it serve the owner/proprietor of these services? Just think of it. Private prisons and private hospitals thrive upon a profit-motive, that is, by maximum occupancy! Is that what we want? The market-based provision of collective services is advocated with a view to short-term profits. By contrast, government engages in the provision, production and governance of collective services with an eye on longer-term objectives that are difficult to monetize. As for contracting-out ... well, who is going to supervise the contractors? In the USA the government-contractor ratio was 10:1, ten government officials to one contractor right after the Second World War, but since the beginning of the twenty-first century this became a 1:1 ratio? Again, can government be expected to adequately and responsibly supervise so many contractors when it has trimmed-down its own personnel? It has been argued that privatization and contracting-out actually pull out the foundations of democracy (Freeman and Minow, 2009; Verkuil, 2007, 2017).

Right-wing Republicans feared “Obama-care” because it might (and did) show that it made the lives of many people better (p. 72). Politician-pundits and some policymakers do not talk about the universal, integrated health care system of the Veterans Health Administration, because it shows that government can run ‘things’ well (p. 42). Does government regulation and involvement lead to totalitarianism and dictatorship as Reagan claimed (p.45)? Well, the facts bear out differently. As French demographer Louis Fourastié pointed out in his 1979 slim study, the thirty years following the Second World War were one of unparalleled prosperity, a *Trente Glorieuses*, where income inequalities, the gap between the rich and the poor, declined significantly for the first time in history. Krugman observes that the humanitarian dream of a society offering decent lives to all came close to realization in the six decades after WWII (p. 187). I don’t know, for it seems that the departure from Fourastié’s glorious decades actually did start in the 1970s. No matter. More important is the question of what was the basis of that miracle? It was government policy and intervention, operating upon the ideas of Serra, Von Wolf, Smith, Condorcet, and Keynes. But, let us make sure we understand, it was not a government policy and intervention *above* the people; instead, it was one *in, for* and *with* the people.

Is a government in, for, and with the people akin to socialism as the American very-right seeks to scare people with? Krugman notes that the classic definition of socialism is government ownership of the means of production (p. 313). It seems to me that this is more an economically-focused definition of communism. However, Krugman then defines social democracy, as a market economy with a strong public safety net and with regulations that limit the range of actions that business can take in the pursuit of profit (p. 313 and 323). And, Krugman reminds us of the Danish example: a social democratic country where government mitigates the downsides of raw and naked capitalism (p. 320). Reading those pages, it was almost as if I heard Adam Smith speak. Can it be that the socialism I knew as a teenager and young adult is like a politics of policy for people? I did not know that I was born (1955) in those glorious thirty years. Nor, I’m pretty sure, did Paul Krugman (1953). But I do know that both of us, and many, many others benefitted from the kind of government in democratic political systems, that, through its policy and intervention lifted up entire populations. Benefitted from government policy and intervention pursued for the people by true politicians who had risen beyond the raw lust for power and were driven by something larger than themselves: the care for a community of people that is imagined, no longer physical.

Why can Government Work for People under Democratic Circumstances?

During the time of that second period of government, government and its bureaucracy worked to support those in power. Those at the top of the pinnacle of power were supported by religious, military, economic, and bureaucratic elites. It was an “I scratch your back, you scratch mine” balancing act among these elites. It’s as simple as that. This may sound Marxist, but really, really, it is not. It was a fact of life for 6,000 years, for some 18,000 to 24,000 generations of people. History has left plenty of documentation of elite domination; it has ignored the peoples’ subordination. And, the people accepted being subjects, only rising in revolt when the water had risen not just above the lips, but above the eyeballs. Government in democratic political systems is no longer the instrument of and for the happy few. Instead, it has become the vessel and enabler for the needs of the many, and especially for those who really cannot take care of themselves for good reason (too young, too old, too sick, too mentally or physically incapacitated). But, and that’s the challenge of democracy, it is not a one-way street. It is not that

government can do it all. Government also needs its citizens, to help, to participate, to think, to be informed and to debate the issues. Democracy as political ideal can only survive through the exercise of self-restraint. It is as John Stuart Mill allegedly said: “My freedom to punch you stops at your nose.” That self-restraint of every individual, whether as “ordinary” citizen, as political officeholder, as reporter/journalist, as businesswoman, as public intellectual is what can, and – I firmly believe – will make democracy survive. We can look back on the dreams of Serra, Von Wolff, Smith, Condorcet, and Keynes, as having come true, as having born fruit in the glorious thirty years following the Second World War. We have seen that true and large-scale democracy is possible, and authors such as Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and Thomas Piketty, among many others, remind us of the logic and rationale for a better world. A logic and rationale that emerged four centuries ago.

Read Paul Krugman, not because he is a winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences (2008), but because he is speaking common sense and is deeply concerned for people’s futures. Yes, I confess, his political and economic views (should I say: views about political-economy?) resonate with me. But it is not my beliefs that drive this essay. If I may be so presumptuous, like him, I first and foremost believe in the power of knowledge and of facts, in the power of a scholarship that is not blinded by the beauty of math or succumbs to the lures of a free-market ideology. To be sure, and do understand, I emphatically do not advocate we should embrace the “left” view and disparage the “right.” Nor, I assume, does Krugman. We actually need people on both sides of the political spectrum because the population overwhelmingly straddles around both sides of the political spectrum. Not just around the extremes of the political spectrum. It is the extremes in politics and economics that Krugman rallies against. Does he step out of the role of being a scholar? I don’t think so. A real scholar writes to enlighten the people. A real scholar teaches people on the basis of knowledge, not on the basis of deeply held ideology. His views are for the mainstream of the population, and I hope very much that it will reach the extremes of political conviction.

The skeptic may ask, will it reach the political extremes? How many people are willing to suspend disbelief and be educated about the very different ways in which humans have and do view the world? How many people are willing to engage the thought that government-in-democracy is actually an innovation we cannot live without? How many people are willing to learn about Adam Smith’s warnings about raw and naked capitalism? How many people are willing to read beyond that which they hear from peers and relatives to be true? How many scholars will take the time to read the work of others, and not just pursue publications so as to prop up their citations? What will it take to educate people in such a manner that they know and – perhaps more importantly: feel – that they are not being indoctrinated in an ideology, but are, instead, informed by facts and knowledge imparted by people who do not have a personal agenda? How many people wish to be informed with facts of knowledge and then make up their own minds? How many people can live with the idea that we live in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies where we cannot but learn from facts and knowledge and then seek compromise? Krugman has no personal agenda, he just thinks of, for, and about humanity. So read him, and read more, and that will do it for this fledgling large-scale experiment in democracy that people have struggled with in the past 200+ years. Make no mistake, political democracy with a regulated economy is the major innovation in the institutional arrangements for governing of human civilization. It has been overlooked as an innovation, but it is vital to the future of humanity ... so, ultimately, not just of and for the future of democracy.

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