

Envisioning Provisioning:

Forgiveness and the Possibility of Peace

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As an enthusiastic heterodox economist, I often close a class presentation of seemingly insurmountable economic, environmental, or social challenges faced by civilizations and our species, with words of encouragement prompting students to actively engage in the social provisioning process (Lee and Jo 2010; Powers 2004). I argue that a critical part of engaging is “envisioning the provisioning” of resources that fit their interpretation of a good life for the individual and for society as a whole (Forstater 2004). And, if their vision does not exist, then they can become active in building that vision. Noting the words of Margaret Mead, “never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has” (Taylor 2010).

However, over the past few days and weeks, I must admit fear and an anxiety about the future that I have not experienced since the horror of 9-11 temporarily dampened my confidence in our ability as a species to progress. But as quickly as these fears rushed in, my students have rescued my optimism and inspired my own envisioning of provisioning. The provisioning I envision applies the power of sovereign currency issue to wage peace not war and to simultaneously expand the healing dialogue that thousands of brave American students have initiated across this country. The desire to heal the social scars left by slavery’s violent roots is a catalyst for change with the power to reach well beyond our borders and address the dull pain of racialization’s lasting legacy of discrimination.

My provisioning policy begins by heeding the call of Rep. Paul Ryan for us “to pause for a moment.” Of course, I am not asking for a review or expansion of the refugee vetting process, but asking all to “pause” and consider, where are all these men, women and children going to live during the vetting process? While taking this into consideration, we must also collectively assess the role of U.S. foreign policy in creating the global refugee crisis. In an effort to encourage thoughtful examination of these issues, I provided my students with an experiment in revisionist history from Margaret Atwood’s 2008 *Payback Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. In this passage, she asks the reader to imagine what the world would look like today if the President of the United States had not given the Axis of Evil speech, but had delivered these worlds to the global community:

We have suffered a grievous loss – a blow has been struck at us that was motivated by a obsessive desire to harm us. We realize that this was the work of a small group of fanatics. Other nations might bomb the stuffing out of the civilian population where those fanatics are at present located, but we recognize the futility of such action. Nor will we accuse any bystander nation of having been involved. We realize that acts of vengeance recoil upon the heads of the inventors, and we do not wish to perpetuate a chain reaction of revenge. Therefore we will forgive (Atwood 2008, 161).

While reflecting upon these words and the power of forgiveness, it occurred to me that the United States is in need of forgiveness. Regardless of intentions, it is important to take ownership of the human devastation created by the war on terror. A crisis in human compassion is upon us, and it is not vengeance and violence that will bring peace and stability to the Middle East or here at home.

As one of only a few sovereign issuers of its currency, and given its central role in Middle Eastern and global turmoil, the United States is uniquely equipped and obligated to transform this crisis of compassion into a process designed to support lasting peace. We have witnessed the policy space and power of sovereign issue for wielding the forces of war. It is time for an approach that seeks to create peace. Peace begins by ending aggression and working to build a new vision of the future. To begin this process and show sincerity in wanting forgiveness, a future for those lives destroyed by the war on terror need some basic questions answered and action taken. What is needed to take care of the Syrian refugees and all others displaced by war and violence? How can we expedite and expand the current vetting process? Where are open arms and safe places? Who can lead and lend support now and in the future? Why would we allow fear to prevent what is right? When can we get started? At the heart of all the answers to these questions is our most powerful “social technology”— money (Ingham 2001). As swiftly as we have moved aircraft carriers, built bases, and dropped bombs, we need to discontinue acts of war and begin moving the needed resources to expedite vetting, construct supportive environments for our new neighbors, and lay the foundation for lives to be lived in peace and with prosperity.

First, we must expand the number of people working on the vetting process. This will require, not boots on the ground, but people on the new frontlines of building bridges to peace. This frontline will work to clear workers through security protocols and supply proper training. Thus, this should be a first priority initiated at the federal level. Second, there are nine non-profit organizations that currently work to place refugee families in the United States. If we are to increase both the number and speed of refugee acceptance and placement, we will also need to expand the capabilities of these organizations. In addition to increased federal support, expansion must include the cooperation of communities that want to lead the effort to provide welcoming homes. One way to ensure that those in need are met with open arms and not fear is to begin educating our communities about Syria, Islam, and each other.

To this end, our university communities appear to be ideal. Rather than tearing down mosques or building giant walls, as suggested by Donald J. Trump and many of his colleagues, we need to build or repurpose spaces to celebrate religious freedom, embrace cultural heritage, and acknowledge our past. The design of these community hubs will be guided by grassroots discussions and address a wide spectrum of problems, from the practical to the philosophical. Moving to a new community is never seamless. Refugees will need to know how to sign up for healthcare, get their children enrolled in schools, and begin to adjust to everyday life. On top of these logistical challenges, they will face the emotions of leaving their homelands and entering a foreign country as a minority. Thus the community hubs will need to support complex emotional, political, religious, and cultural discussions. Currently, university students are demanding such safe places, where productive dialogue can promote institutional change on campuses and beyond. The construction of these spaces is an opportunity to do more than talk. This is an opportunity to build and rebuild communities in the image of forgiveness, inclusiveness, and what the City of Sanctuary movement calls a “culture of hospitality” (cityofsanctuary.org).

In conjunction with these efforts, homes must be found. Homes and safe places are the starting blocks for building new lives. These starting blocks are needed not just for refugees, but also for our veterans. While this policy is strongly anti-war and is calling for an end to the violence. It is not anti-veteran, many of whom went into the service because of a lack of opportunity to build a life in the neoliberal economy. It is time to create opportunities at home and provide spaces to heal and engage with life in the civilian world. Veterans, refugees, and university communities can organize, and coordinate work efforts to build new lives, mend deep wounds and old scars created by war and hate.

The construction of these new lives can draw upon the resources and the infrastructure already existing in college towns. Research to understand food sheds, mental illness, history and social change, and the arts and culture are just a sampling of potential areas for supporting meaningful work and knowledge creation. How much can we learn from those forced from their countries by war? How much richer can our understanding of religion, culture, and history become? Can we unlock some of the mysteries of the brain and prevent suicides and violence upon others? Do these benefits outweigh the costs envisioned by the fear mongers? If we can build quality lives and supply a positive future to those made vulnerable by war and violence, then will those we help not feel a sense of community and solidarity with those who have opened their homes, hearts and lives? Should we choose to believe that it is possible to reverse the cycle of violence and the thirst for blood by giving of ourselves, asking forgiveness, and provisioning lives with hope and meaning?

To review, this is a policy to promote peace, not only abroad but here at home where the desire to address our own ugly history is bubbling to the surface and demanding attention. A significant step towards peace expands the capacity for refugee vetting and placement procedures. Simultaneously, resources to build safe spaces and a culture of hospitality must begin across our country. University towns appear to be ready to go

beyond a dialogue of acceptance and start taking action to reverse racialization and systematic discrimination. Furthermore, as examples, towns like Ithaca and Cortland, New York, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Lawrence, Kansas (all places of personal experience) seem well suited, from an environmental and cultural basis, for life transitions. Military veterans are invited to participate and encouraged to share their experiences and guide the development of spaces designed to support those wounded by war and violence. Cooperation and the coordination of socially and environmentally friendly organizations are needed to help create good jobs and develop opportunities for understanding an expanded value structure for money issue. To promote such understanding, university faculty and artists from all disciplines and genres are needed to produce interdisciplinary reports to share both the progress and areas of need as these programs evolve. These reports will communicate planning, vision, perspectives, and build a body of knowledge from which other communities can draw upon.

Without communication, this policy is nothing more than words on a page. A substantial amount of energy, effort, and political will is necessary. Letters must be written. Town hall meetings held. This crisis supplies the social movement initiated by students across this country with an objective and specific course of action for peace. The movement must expand its vision beyond the campus and cultivate solidarity to remove any bite from the toothless critiques of political correctness and the need for students to get ready for “the real world.” What we can envision and work toward is a new world, one where we no longer accept the existence of ignorance as an excuse for insensitivity and discrimination. Students must engage their leadership: presidents, provosts, deans, faculty and go beyond their institutions to their members of congress, state senators, mayors, and community leaders. Service learning and policy design opportunities abound for classrooms and students. Learning by doing productive and meaningful work in communities is needed to get such a massive program off computer screens and into action.

And let there be no doubt that action is required; as *The Guardian* has called this the “crisis of our times” and argues that “how we respond is a test of our values, our spirit, our ingenuity, our generosity” (Viner 2015). From this heterodox economist’s perspective, this is an opportunity to refresh and renew a meaningful discussion of value, through exploration of the uncharted policy space of sovereign currency issue. We do not need to envision what will happen with further escalation of war. The refugee crisis is the result of foreign policy driven by capital’s incentives. Through the camouflage of optimization and rationality, we find greed, individualism, and racism. These are the values that continue to devastate lives, countries, and generate chaos in the Middle East and at home. Neoliberalism has squeezed the dollar into the narrow realm of exchange value theory. This limited sphere of value based on the assumed criterion of efficiency is failing humanity and our planet. Where does value come from? Is it labor? Does money’s hierarchy limit what has value (Brakken 2012; Kelton 2001)? Through democratically organized demands and actions for change, money can be applied to display to the world that we the people of the United States of America still maintain and declare our values of independence, that all human beings are created equal and that we

are not afraid to take in your sick, your poor, and your huddled masses yearning to breathe free!

This is an opportunity to execute a large-scale project in functional finance (Lerner 1943). It is a program of such size and scope that it requires sovereign currency issue. As Americans, questions of affordability are rarely the primary issue when it comes to national security and military might. This is a national security program. It is designed to defuse some of the anger and hatred the U.S. continues to foster across the globe with its imperialist and violent policies. It supports our troops and is a strategic adjustment in our fight against terror. The U.S. dollar needs to be issued to settle the debts created by war. The functional application of dollars to directly address the external costs created by the devastating actions of war, slavery, and racialization initiate the healing process. Begging the question; can money bring peace? The vision created by a continued adherence to neoliberalism is before us in the form of mass shootings, drone executions, and continued violence. Can we ever see peace from such action? In contrast, can we envision a better future in which we ask for forgiveness and offer a helping hand in rebuilding what the war on terror has destroyed? The refugee and humanitarian crisis, created by misguided values, is now an opportunity to work together in solidarity to envision provisioning and achieve a peaceful future. If the dollar can be applied to solve this crisis, then what else is it capable of, maybe full employment and reversing climate change? Let the world be introduced to the power of sovereign currency issue and the possibilities for change stored within our most powerful social technology.

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