Rejoinder to Bratsis

written by Costas Panayotakis | July 9, 2013

In his review of *Remaking Scarcity* Peter Bratsis raises a number of important issues regarding the relationship between scarcity and economic democracy but does not always offer an accurate account of how the book specifies that relationship. In particular, he claims that my understanding of scarcity follows liberalism's postulate of a fixed human nature, while also attributing to me the view that "the virtue of economic democracy is that it is more efficient than market mechanisms." Neither claim does justice to my argument.

Regarding the first claim, my discussion of scarcity and the configurations of scarcity that social systems, including capitalism, generate offers an explicit critique of the kind of liberal conceptions of a fixed human nature that Bratsis rightly objects to. To be sure, the way I define scarcity is the same as neoclassical economics, namely as any situation in which people's material desires are greater than what the given economic system, at the given level of technological development, makes it possible to satisfy. This means that there is both a demand side to scarcity (people's material desires) and a supply side (the resources available for the satisfaction of people's desires as well as the distribution of these resources between different social groups). *Remaking Scarcity* offers an analysis of how both the demand and the supply side of scarcity are shaped by the structural logics of socio-economic systems, with special emphasis on how this takes place under capitalism. My discussion of the demand-side of scarcity explicitly addresses Bratsis' first concern, since I offer a critique of neoclassical accounts which understand human desires as exogenous to the economic system while also dismissing critiques of consumerist society a la Marcuse and Lefebvre as paternalistic attempts to tell people "what they 'really' want" (*RS*, p. 38 and chapters 2 and 4 more generally).

By contrast to such accounts, I argue that people's material desires have been profoundly shaped by the use, in the last century, of a significant portion of the economic surplus to build a consumerist culture, which fails to satisfy, which undercuts people's well-being and which also contributes to the deepening ecological crisis all around us. Since these flaws are, as I show, directly related to capitalism's undemocratic and profit-driven nature, I argue for a democratization of the economic system.

Unlike what Bratsis claims, therefore, my argument for economic democracy is not primarily an efficiency argument. If *Remaking Scarcity* makes the case for economic democracy, it is because it "identifies economic democracy as the condition for a use of scarce resources that is consistent with ecological sustainability, the elimination of unnecessary human suffering, and a richer life for all human beings on this planet" (*RS* 149). Efficiency, in other words, is not an end-in-itself but only desirable insofar as it facilitates the more complete pursuit of these much more fundamental goals. In fact, to be more precise, efficiency always refers to an underlying goal, since it presupposes as full an attainment of this goal as it is possible given the existing (often material) constraints. Since my book is, in part, a critique of neoclassical economics, it argues against the notion that capitalist markets efficiently serve the wants and needs of consumers. Instead, I argue that the only goal that capitalism can be said to serve efficiently is the pursuit of profit and that this efficient pursuit contradicts, rather than coinciding with, the goals of human well-being and ecological sustainability.

My acknowledgment of the social construction of human needs is as present in my critique of Sahlins' discussion of hunters and gatherers as it is in my discussion of capitalism. As I argue in the book, Sahlins inadvertently shows that the way of life of hunters and gatherers both makes it

necessary for people to move and makes it impossible for some of the members of hunting and gathering communities to keep up with their group's movement. As Sahlins himself admits, hunters and gatherers often recount with sadness the infants and old people who were left behind to perish because they could not transport themselves. This admission is also an admission that hunting and gathering societies did create needs they could not meet. In other words, the fact that human needs and desires were constructed differently in hunting and gathering societies than they are under capitalism did not, as Sahlins implies, mean that hunters and gatherers were impervious to the pressures of material scarcity.

Bratsis also takes issue with my discussion of the literature on how capitalist consumerism undercuts rather than furthering human happiness. Suggesting that "happiness [is] also the goal of liberalism," he questions whether "happiness [is] a revolutionary or, even, democratic goal." In my view, the fact that an ideal is claimed by liberalism should not automatically lead to its rejection. After all, liberals would also include democracy in their goals, but this fact rightly does not lead Bratsis to reject democracy as a desirable goal. It is not always the goals that liberalism embraces that are problematic. What is often problematic is liberalism's refusal to see that the goals it proclaims (human happiness, democracy, and so on) are at odds with the capitalist system it invariably supports. It is this refusal that makes liberalism a capitalist ideology, just as it is *Remaking Scarcity*'s critique of this refusal that makes the book a critique of the ideological role that liberalism plays within capitalist society.

At the same time, Bratsis is right to point out that human beings will not abandon "the possessive individualism of liberalism [s]imply by transforming the power relations within the workplace[.]" This is why *Remaking Scarcity* neither equates economic democracy with democratic workplaces nor conceptualizes it as an economic blueprint. Instead, economic democracy is defined as the normative principle that all human beings should have an equal say over the operation and priorities of the economic system on which their subsistence depends. Far from being economistic, this definition is political through and through. It requires, moreover, the democratization not only of workplaces but also of all other economic sites, including households and the institutions of government.

Just as he contrasts happiness to democracy, Bratsis sets another stark dichotomy when he asks, "How can we produce the type of people who value autonomy over comfort and commodious living?" Personally, I don't think that either of these dichotomies is accurate or politically advisable. After all, such dichotomies can be interpreted as conceding that capitalism stands for happiness and comfort whereas anti-capitalists prefer democracy and autonomy. Instead, *Remaking Scarcity* argues that immense human suffering and unhappiness is the norm for capitalism, not just in the global South but increasingly even in the global North. It also suggests that, given the link between these sad realities and capitalism's undemocratic nature, human happiness and economic security necessitate the pursuit of economic democracy.

Beyond that, I also argue that the achievement of human happiness and economic security does not presuppose the complete elimination of scarcity. My claim is not that it is impossible to ever remove scarcity but that scarcity is not, in itself, a problem. People's material desires can increase not just because of consumerism but also because of an enrichment of human needs (hence my reference, cited by Bratsis, to the possibility that, by increasing people's awareness of the natural beauty and cultural richness of distant lands, a post-capitalist society might actually increase people's desire for airplane travel beyond what is ecologically sustainable). In this sense, my claim that scarcity need not ever be abolished does not, as Bratsis suggests, stem from a belief in a fixed and insatiable human nature but from an understanding that an economically democratic post-capitalist society could enrich human needs and possibly lead to the proliferation of material desires that run against the limits set by technology and ecological sustainability alike. Were this to happen,

people in such a society might not have every single material desire satisfied but they would all still have equal access to the resources needed to ensure a way of life much more fulfilling and consistent with the ecological integrity of the planet than the way of life afforded to the vast majority of the world's population today.

At the same time, it is true that, being more focused on the question of scarcity and the configurations of scarcity that capitalism generates, *Remaking Scarcity* does not explore in detail the kind of human being that an economically democratic society would presuppose. For example, Bratsis rightly points out that the spread of democratically run enterprises may not automatically guarantee that all workers will value the ability to participate in the economic decisions that affect their lives. There is much discussion in the literature on how a market capitalist environment may adversely affect the operation of worker-run enterprises. Bratsis' reference to his experience with some of the workers in Argentina's worker-run enterprises is a reminder that even the workers in such enterprises are not always immune to the effects that capitalism's consumer culture has on all of us. In other words, Bratsis is right to suggest that there is much work to be done on the kind of human subjectivity required both by economic democracy and by the struggle to make economic democracy a reality. I look forward to probing this question further in the future and invite Bratsis and others to do so as well.