

We need to challenge the hegemonic ‘common sense’ of market relations, of competitive individualism, of private gain, the denigration of ‘the public’, and much else besides

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*The existing economic vocabulary is one of the roots of the elite’s ability to maintain the straitjacket we are in, argues **Doreen Massey**. We need to challenge the current terms of debate and establish a new political terrain.*



One of the things that most frustrates me about the current moment is that while there has been a catastrophic crisis of the dominant, neoliberal economic model, in general public political debate there has been no serious challenge to the political and ideological consensus that supports that model. A whole raft of assumptions, running so deep we forget even that they *are* assumptions, remains stubbornly in place.

There is, in other words, a hegemonic ‘common sense’. It is a common sense of market relations, of competitive individualism, of private gain, the denigration of ‘the public’, and much else besides. It is a common sense that invades our imaginations and moulds our senses of ourselves. It is driven home by constant repetition, reinforced by a powerful media that is either militantly right wing or submissively acquiescent. Above all, it excludes alternatives from political contestation.

If we do not challenge this common sense we shall always be arguing on ‘their’ ground; we end up having to answer *their* questions; in effect, we are always on the defensive. We need to turn the tables.

For instance, instead of constantly having to respond to *their* questions, why don’t we ask some questions of our own? Perhaps we could even ask that most basic (but almost never asked) question: what is an economy for? What is it that we want an economy to provide? There may be disagreements about the answer, but even having a debate would raise some political issues which at the moment don’t make it on to the agenda. I’d suggest something like ‘the enabling of decent lives and the flourishing of human potential for all’. Current economic policy fails on both counts. And while there are a number of good alternative individual policies around, they need to be set within a bigger picture that shifts the vision towards an economy run for everyone. It is this overall vision that could transform the debate from being about policies to being about politics.

Or again, we could challenge head-on some of the terms of the current common sense. We are *not* all just competitive individuals – there is also cooperation, care, solidarity. Without them, the economy, let alone society, could not flourish, and with them our lives are fuller and more nourishing. We also need a clear defence of the public sector not only in terms of the jobs and services that it provides (though they are clearly important) but because of the necessity for a public realm, a sense of ‘the public’ as being part of what helps to build a good society. Or again, I’d love to see a bold defence of taxation. The common-sense assumption is that ‘we all hate paying taxes’. Yet taxation, for the right things, is part of what constructs our collectivity. People lay out money in the market sector, including for things they could perfectly well get through the state, and it doesn’t come in for such opprobrium. Private transactions – OK; taxation for social investment and services – almost universally resented. What is in contestation here is social solidarity. The knee-jerk language reflects, and reinforces, the prioritisation of individual choice over collectivity, over the very notion of (the construction of) a society. Words and oft-repeated phrases carry, and reinforce, understandings that go well beyond them.

We need to challenge this language. The existing vocabulary is one of the roots of the elite’s ability to maintain the straitjacket we are in.

Or again (one final example of how we might turn the tables of economic debate), we need to challenge how we even *think* about the economy. Take that weasel-word 'investment'. When money is advanced for productive activity we call it investment, and that is fine. But money advanced to buy something that already exists (an 'asset'), so that it can be sold later at a higher price, also gets called investment. But it is not; it is speculation. It doesn't produce anything new; what it does do is redistribute existing wealth towards those who already own assets or can afford to buy them. This matters: much of neoliberal economic activity over the last four decades has been based on this. Not on value-creation, but on speculation, in art, property, land, commodity futures. This is one of the things that lies behind the rise in inequality, and the surge in food prices and malnutrition around the world (this is an issue of internationalism too). And it is much of what lies behind the new financial imperialism of the City of London. Cracking open our current deceptive language would be one way into challenging these things.

Trying to change the whole frame of debate on the economy will of course be met with incomprehension if not horror. And it will take time. But we're going to get attacked anyway, so we might as well get attacked for something we believe in and that might actually make a difference. And that means challenging the current terms of debate and establishing a new political terrain. It might even wake people up, tap into their discontents, and convince them that economic policy can be interesting.

*This piece is based on a talk given at the first annual conference of the Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS). The wider project it draws on is [The Kilburn Manifesto](#), especially the first two contributions; see also *Soundings: a journal of politics and culture*, issue numbers 53 and 54.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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