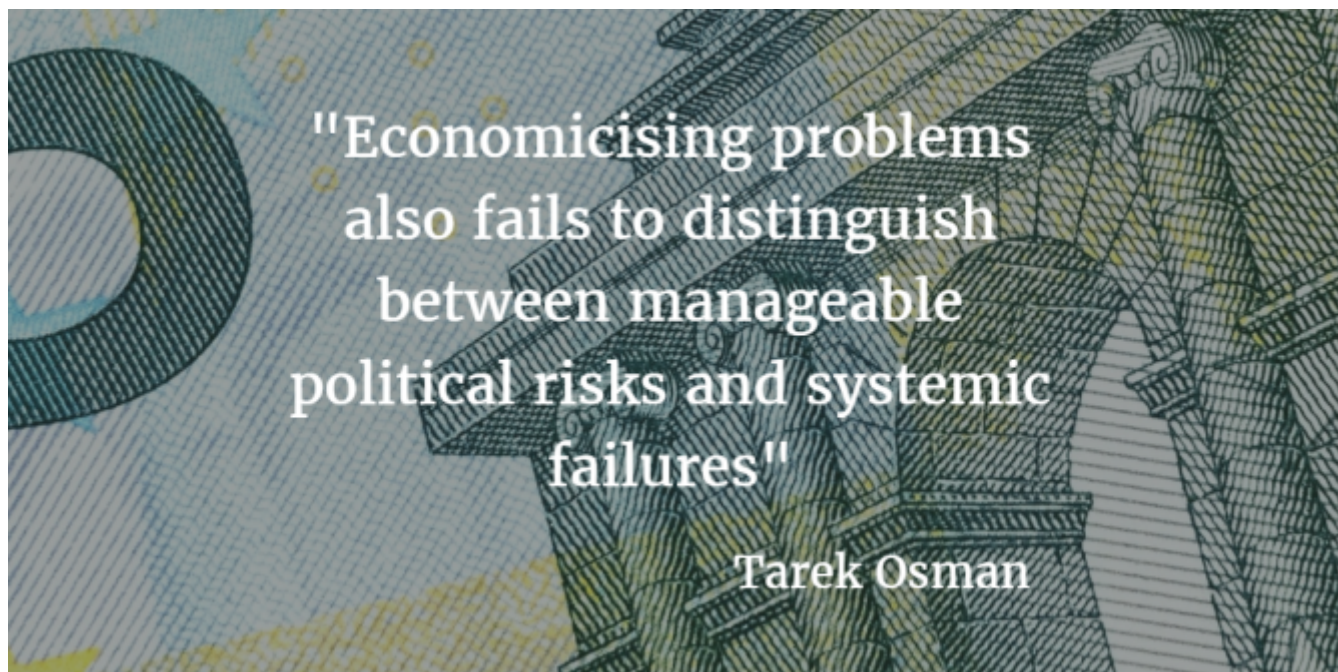



The Importance of Being Political

Physicists complain that their academic departments discourage them from contemplating the philosophical implications of the theories they study. Instead, they are told to mathematise: just solve the equations. The same approach bedevils policy making.

There's a tendency to economicise social problems. For example, the waves of migration by young Europeans from central, eastern, and southern Europe to the north west, and especially Britain and Germany, are framed as a response to richer job markets. This scoping correctly leads policy makers to emphasise the need for structural economic reforms in the countries unable to create jobs. But it ignores the social consequences of these waves of migration. For example, that few European societies receive dynamism that is manifested in various domains, from business to art, while most lose that natural source of rejuvenation. Economicising also fails to acknowledge the cultural dimension here: the subtle hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic worldviews. Narrow scoping leads to partial responses (such as the focus on reforms), and fails to shed light on the necessity of political and cultural ones, for example, to attend to the rise of resentment among many Europeans of what they perceive to be a dilution of their heritages.

Inequality is another example. It is one thing to understand it economically or see it as a consequence of globalisation; it is quite another to reflect on its socio-political meaning. For example, the sense that economic inequality is a consequence of political inequality, and that the elite's getting away with causing colossal socio-economic pains that the rest – the masses – endure, erode trust in the prevailing social order which lends credence to those who advocate its complete overhaul. Here, narrow economic scoping misses the links between inequality and nativism, and in turn savagism.



Economicising problems also fails to distinguish between manageable political risks and systemic failures. For example, decision makers in the West saw the uprisings in the Arab world, six years ago, as both: a “spring of democracy” against various forms of dictatorship and a social response to corruption and acute concentrations of economic power. The common denominator of all reactions was a focus on how to address key economic challenges in the region, for example, youth unemployment and declining competitiveness. These responses are valuable. But a wider scoping of the phenomenon would have seen the uprisings as the first waves of a social tsunami, 

carrying decades-old frustrations and an array of social and cultural problems, that is transforming the entire Middle East. In this understanding, the economic responses would be one component of a larger understanding of the challenges that lurk in the region's future.

Often economicising problems is deliberate obfuscation. Political elites prefer narrow, economics-centred scoping and responses. They focus on the technical (say, measures to cut budget deficits) and avoid the political (such as, why a country's political economy, which favours a select group, is the way it is). Economicisation frames social ills as transient phenomena that fiscal and monetary reforms would fix, rather than systemic faults that require political changes. Economicisation also perpetuates the status quo, and so hardly challenges existing concentrations of power. The vast majority of economic reform programs seek substantial bottom-up changes (what the masses are to endure) rather than top-down changes (ejection of governing models that have failed to deliver).

Seven decades ago, reflecting on France at the moment of transformation that followed the Second World War and the retreat from North Africa, Albert Camus described the then prevailing elite's thinking and rhetoric as "falling short of real expression". The words capture the economicising malaise of the past few decades because this economicising fails to express how large groups of people see the acute problems that their societies experience. This failure of thinking or intentional manipulation of expression could doom social contracts, even in established democracies. For it will be like a doctor describing physical symptoms and prescribing tranquillizers, while ignoring the causes and consequences of the lurking anxieties.

Please note this post gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Institute of Public Affairs, nor of the London School of Economics.



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