Mobilizing in the Interest of Others

Margaret Levi & Zachary Ugolnik

A new moral political economy will revise capitalist democracy to ensure flourishing for all. Its principles derive from the recognition that humans are social animals who benefit from reciprocity and cooperation. We argue for attention to mobilizing strategies and governance arrangements that facilitate prosocial behavior and overcome the divisions – racial, political, and otherwise – that block awareness of common interests. We advocate for an expanded and inclusive community of fate whose members see their interests and destines as intertwined.

The world is living through a transition. The political and economic structures of both capitalism and democracy are fraying under the pressure of transformations in technology, the economy, and the forms and possibilities for work and well-being. People who feel they are losing out are mobilizing to make their voices heard. Since the dawn of the nineteenth century – with the founding of the American democracy, the French Revolution, and the rise of modern capitalism and colonialism – there have been multiple moments of rethinking and renewing the systems under which we live. We are in another such moment now.

And it could go either way. Reactionary governments and fascism are possible, but there is still the possibility of change that makes the populace better off, preserves our planet and our ability to live on it, and establishes a more equitable, just, and effective democracy.

The goal of this issue of *Dædalus* is to highlight some important ideas about how to create a better world. Our collective task is the establishment of a political economic framework that offers a revised form of capitalist democracy, one that ensures the flourishing of all, whose morality truly represents commonly held and cherished values, and yet recognizes and respects difference. The development of such a framework is the purpose of the Moral Political Economy program at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University, from which this volume draws. The program crowdsources ideas and wisdom from diverse thinkers. One of the principles of our collective effort is that something as important as remodeling capitalist democracy must be a cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral effort. It has in the past been left almost solely in the hands of economists, important contributors but not the sole authorities.

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We are, of course, not the first to argue for a *moral* political economy.[1] Nor are we alone in the effort to provide a roadmap to a fairer and more inclusive political economy. There is growing awareness of the need for such change, and projects in addition to this one, and others funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, are emerging.[2]

In their book *A Moral Political Economy*, Margaret Levi and Federica Carugati summarize some of the thinking to date and attempt to create guidelines for further work.[3] The argument is simple. First, political economic frameworks change over time in response to technological, political, economic, demographic, and ideological transformations. This means the current political economic framework, often clumsily labeled neoliberalism, is neither natural nor immutable.

Second, the creation of a new moral political economy requires theorists to set aside assumptions that are no longer valid scientifically, such as *homo economicus*, and substitute for them a model of human behavior that recognizes humans as social animals. Humans are intentional and boundedly rational animals, yes, but they are also enmeshed in social connections that inform their thinking and actions.

Third, a new moral political economy means rethinking the collective goals of a society and its measurements of success. It means moving away from an ideology of individual achievement that neglects structural constraints and away from measurements such as GDP that ignore unequal wealth and well-being. It means moving toward an approach that emphasizes flourishing, as Jenna Bednar elaborates in this volume, and relational equality across race, gender, religion, nationality, and whatever other status has historically conferred unequal citizenship in the polity, marketplace, and workplace.[4] It means, as Grieve Chelwa, Darrick Hamilton, and Avi Green argue in this collection, going beyond the traditional political economic focus on class and including identity stratification in the very formulation of the framework.[5]

The fourth component involves the redesign of institutions – political, economic, social – so they support common values and goals, facilitate mutuality, and generate expanded and inclusive communities of fate. A redesign also requires a rethinking of traditional hierarchy, what it means to be democratic, and who holds power and on what basis.

To achieve a moral political economy involves finding means to leverage power by those who seek the betterment of all, against those who are resisting change or seek protection only of particular interests. Not small questions or tasks. It also requires "being ready," what one of us has called the Frances Perkins theory of change.[6] Proponents of a new moral political economy must have at the ready ideas for new policies, practices, and rules of the game so as to be able to take advantage of the opportune – but often unpredictable – moments when change is possible. The Biden administration absorbed participants in the moral political

economy program at CASBS, for example, Heather Boushey, Jennifer Harris, and Joseph Kennedy III, and it is seeking advice from others, for example, Darrick Hamilton. It has tried to implement some of their proposals, but as is evident in today's American politics and policies (at least as of this writing), a new way of thinking about the economy is not yet widely adopted, and the social movement that might help make that happen not yet fully realized.

Drawing on a vast network of thinkers, this issue of *Dædalus* focuses on questions for which there seem to be helpful ideas. The volume contains eleven lead essays, including this one, each accompanied by two shorter responses. The emphasis is less on policy per se than on ways to think about a problem and its solutions in some essential domains. Even so, there are suggestions for what economists Samuel Bowles and Wendy Carlin label "emblematic policies," a necessary feature for a new moral political economy.[7]

All of those involved in this volume evoke some form of sociality and cooperation as linchpins of their arguments. They draw on evolutionary theory, psychology, network theory, and findings from research on care. They experiment with different terminology, for example, *homo reciprocans* developed by Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis, or *sapiens integra* advocated by Anne-Marie Slaughter and Hilary Cottam.[8]

The starting place of a moral political economy is the twofold assumption that, first, humans are social animals albeit intentional, boundedly rational, and individuated, and, second, they benefit from reciprocity and cooperation. The first assumption is incontrovertible, even if the sociality of humans has not yet been absorbed into orthodox economics or all choice models.[9] The second is the one we will explore in this essay, and that others in this volume also explore, and attempt to scale beyond the bounds of the small group and into the realm of the larger political economy. And we are not alone. Some very significant arguments are beginning to emerge that draw on these assumptions.[10]

To make the case for the societal benefits of reciprocity and cooperation requires more than reference to what we know from observations of success stories or the findings of field and lab experiments. It demands attention to the governance arrangements that facilitate, even generate, prosocial behavior – that is, behavior in the interests of others – and that work in the opposite direction, promoting the divisions – racial, political, and otherwise – that block awareness of common interests. Research and thinking have largely focused on the second.[11] The first informs the moral political economy program.

Prosocial behavior derives from mutuality and cooperation and from the imagination – and construction – of alternative ways to organize lives and engage in collective actions on behalf of widely shared common goods.[12] One form this can take is an expanded and inclusive community of fate, the perception of

interdependence with a wide range of others, well beyond one's family, friends, neighbors, and subgroup.[13] The acknowledgment that one's destiny and one's descendants' destinies are entwined with others can motivate solidarity with and action, sometimes costly personal actions, on behalf of peoples who are likely to be strangers and unlikely to reciprocate directly.

But how to go about generating such a community of fate in a world so riven by factions and misinformation and veto points? And how to ensure it is in fact inclusive? The term *community* has traditionally suggested boundaries: there are those who are in and those who are out.[14] But it is also a concept that captures solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence. The trick is to ensure the community is encompassing enough to overcome the factions and the boundaries. Certainly, this happened during the world wars by creating common ground based on a common enemy. Today's enemies are equally threatening, but they are not countries. Pandemics, climate disasters, and economic insecurity mobilize mutual aid. They could also form the foundations for building expanded and inclusive communities of fate.

An expanded and inclusive community of fate is not an idealistic portrait but a dynamic model based on the best social and scientific research. It requires neither direct reciprocity nor ubiquitous love for all members. But it does require action on behalf of a common future – one of the simplest and most fundamental things all humans share. If one reflects on relatives, neighbors, and others in the communities of fate one currently occupies, it is apparent that people need not *like* those they love or with whom they cooperate.

But they may need to develop empathy with and respect for others, especially those outside their in-group.[15] Such connections can be grounded in the recognition that what is happening to them could happen to you, or it could have sources in religious or political ideologies. The very act of caring for others may produce emotional bonding, as psychologist Alison Gopnik argues.[16] And a prosocial and costly action can be a reward in itself. For example, political scientist Elisabeth Jean Wood reveals how engagement in a social movement or revolution can provide the "pleasure of agency" and thus help motivate further commitments.[17] So can democratic engagement itself.[18]

Individual acts of care or risk-taking can increase solidarity and civic engagement, but they are most likely to do so when embedded in organizations and movements whose governance arrangements facilitate collective actions on behalf of strangers. This was the case for the labor unions John Ahlquist and Margaret Levi studied.[19] The rules and the culture of these democratic organizations ensure that the economic security of members is the first priority. But it had a larger impact. The solidarity built by that effort could then be used in support of those not connected to the unions by creating an engaged democratic debate and decision-

making process about when to take costly individual and collective actions on behalf of others. Going from the local to the global is part of what Federica Carugati and Nathan Schneider address in their essay in this volume, and it is the subject of many current analyses of social movements.[20]

Scaling is one problem, but the equally tough challenge is ensuring inclusiveness. Nazism and apartheid (both in the United States and South Africa) offered membership in a cross-class community of fate, but they were grounded in the superiority of one part of the population and in enmity, even violence, toward those branded as inferior. The current debate involves finding the appropriate balance among those making demands on their societies based on their identities or status. Acknowledgment of the long history of marginalization of certain racial, ethnic, and religious groups means correcting long-denied rights and access to opportunities. But given zero-sum thinking – where one's gain is considered another's loss – this is producing a politics of resentment by those who feel others are getting something at their expense.[21] Their thinking is arguably wrong, but their beliefs are strongly held and hard, though not impossible, to change.

In considering how best to create an inclusive and expanded community of fate, there are lessons from the history of religions as well as social movements. Some religions and social movements succeed in crafting a common identity among diverse groups, cultures, and publics. In their very formation is the recognition of humans as social beings seeking connections and as ethical beings seeking higher purpose. Such inclusive and expansive communities of fate develop spiritual and moral incentives, but the most successful also develop governance arrangements that facilitate the common cause while attending to individual needs, both material and nonmaterial.

Communities of solidarity require shared spaces, physical or digital, that encourage prosocial behavior. Jenna Bednar's essay in this volume provides a roadmap for prioritizing place-making as a strategy for community building.[22] Sociologist Eric Klinenberg also advocates for increased investment in physical infrastructure that promotes "social infrastructure" such as libraries, parks, and promenades.[23] These physical spaces not only serve the needs of the individuals in their communities, with a book or a place to walk the dog, but also shape how people interact with each other. Increased and sustained interaction can be embedded in their design. When possible, these public spaces can also be made more "biophilic," to use Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe's conception, by understanding that social communities are also ecological communities.[24]

Equity advocate Heather McGhee reminds us, however, that shared physical space may be necessary but insufficient: the white leadership of local governments in the United States filled public pools with concrete rather than have whites and

blacks mingle.[25] Such instances make clear the need for an inclusive moral ethic that correlates the flourishing of different groups across racial and other divides. It means reframing public discourse from a zero-sum politics to an emphasis on mutual benefit from cooperation.

As remote work and automation begin to reach more sectors of the labor market and regions of the country, more people will occupy digital and physical space simultaneously. Communities will increasingly need to rely on digital as well as physical opportunities for relationship building. The reimagination and design of digital and social media platforms to ensure democratic engagement in service of a shared future will become a prerequisite of an expanded and inclusive community of fate.[26] But this needs to occur within a context of understanding how technology affects our thinking and our actions, a problem addressed in this volume by Henry Farrell and Marion Fourcade.[27]

Communities of fate also need to address and enhance multigenerational solidarity. It is common wisdom that seniors are less likely to support spending on education in states where they perceive the beneficiaries as not only young but of a different race. However, instead of accepting the divides and boundaries created by the diverse and divergent needs among subgroups of the population, programs and policies could bridge generational, racial, and wealth gaps. As an example, "baby bonds," proposed by Darrick Hamilton and William Darity, link future returns to children with small investments by all in the present.[28] Alison Gopnik's essay in this volume also addresses how to bridge the generations in her focus on care for both the very young and the needy elderly.[29]

The climate crisis exemplifies an existential challenge that cannot be solved with the best intentions of one generation or region. Any solution requires not simply shifting from short- to long-term returns, but an entire rethinking of how to connect an uncertain future with present, purpose-oriented action. Studies have demonstrated the degree to which adherence to values considered "sacred" often outweigh material rewards regardless of their distance in time or across space.[30] When something is considered sacred (not necessarily religious), its protection can outweigh the benefits of compensation for an alternative action. Indigenous people worldwide mobilize to protect sacred sites even when the costs to them are high in terms of foregone cash flows. In other instances, the defense of the sacred leads to action sometimes in the interest of strangers, sometimes through violence against a hated group, sometimes both.

The same logic applies to the local effects of climate change. For many of those affected, their local landscape is integral, even sacred, to their identity and economic livelihood. But the status quo threatens the fundamental character of these lands and the entire planet. Environmental disasters do not abide by the boundaries of politics or social circles. Forest fires on the West Coast blanket the upper

atmosphere of the states in the Northeast. Warming ocean temperatures induce severe storms that batter inland states in the Southeast. "Think globally, act locally," can now be inverted when extreme weather occurrences, consistent high temperatures, and infectious diseases make the connection between the two so close to home.

Sustaining communities of fate depends on governance arrangements, as we have discussed, but also on successful appeals to multiple dimensions of the person, including their ethics and their senses. This often involves rituals.[31] Ramadan, for example, in the Islamic tradition, offers the shared experience of fasting during the day often ending with a communal breaking of the fast in the evening. Many other religious and national holidays involve sharing a meal – famously, Thanksgiving in the United States – and the fellowship that often accompanies it. Prayer, meditation, and hymns provide ways to mentally align strangers separated by great distances. The sit-ins and marches of the civil rights movement were punctuated by ballads, spirituals, and freedom songs. Rituals and other references to common values link physical action with the shared beliefs that inform those practices, mutually reinforcing each other. They connect individuals across time and space and, potentially, across nationalities, ethnicities, and ages.

Participation in synchronized activities or rituals can increase cooperation within the group.[32] The holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr. is one example. The activities surrounding this holiday, from the national speeches to city parades to neighborhood community service, cultivate the values that Dr. King advocated. As "a day on, not a day off," these events recognize that the fight for racial equity continues, looking to the future as much to the past.

Some rituals, of course, cultivate groupthink, lack of creativity, and aggression toward outsiders, such as when nationalist and religious practices have the effect of celebrating one group over another rather than in the creation of a shared identity. Moreover, which group these practices encompass changes over time. For example, many in the United States have now come to realize that Thanksgiving and Columbus Day denigrate Indigenous people in the United States in the effort to celebrate those who settled the continent.

Scaling, inclusiveness, appropriate spaces for interaction, multigenerational solidarity, and engagement through rituals and action are all critical to the development of an encompassing community of fate. Of equal importance, however, is the ability of the society based on such a community to provide what its constituents need and want. An expanded and inclusive community of fate contributes to changes in belief that make it possible for people to recognize commonalities in those needs and demands and, also, to overcome the zero-sum thinking that often divides one subpopulation from another.

However, beliefs and empathy cannot buy bread or ensure decent housing, jobs, or schooling. As Debra Satz argues in her essay in this volume, markets that embody the values of the society are equally essential, inhibiting their noxious elements, preventing failures, but also distributing goods and services relatively equitably and without exploitation.[33] Rebecca Henderson, in her essay, emphasizes the importance of purposeful corporations that serve both their shareholders and the wider community.[34] John Ahlquist considers what is required to ensure decent jobs, Alison Gopnik what is necessary for caregiving, and Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe what makes for an Earth-friendly political economy by means of biophilic institutions.[35] Grieve Chelwa, Derek Hamilton, and Avi Green alert us to the need to rearrange our governance and other structures to ensure racial justice while Henry Farrell and Marion Fourcade warn us of the dangers of the power embodied in new technologies.[36] Federica Carugati and Nathan Schneider introduce a process for reimagining democracy itself.[37]

But it is not only which goods and services are supplied, but also that they are supplied. Richard Locke, Ben Armstrong, Samantha Schaab-Rozbicki, and Geordie Young thus explore ways to improve our supply chains domestically and globally.[38] Outside the bounds of this volume, but from within the community of the moral political economy program, Steven M. Teles and coauthors consider reform of government regulations that inhibit affordable and sufficient supply that depend not on supply chains, but private firm and governmental capacity.[39] In their ongoing work, John Seely Brown and Ann Pendleton-Jullian push us to redesign our institutions for the future by transforming our ways of seeing and thinking and engaging those affected in a wholly different way.[40]

A new moral political economy may require the formation of an expanded and inclusive community of fate, but it also requires a reconstitution of how our governments, businesses, technologies, and religious and civic organizations organize work and life. Their goal should be to achieve commonly held values, such as the well-being of both humans and the planet, the achievement of relational equality, a significant reduction in economic inequality, and a fair distribution of goods and services. The essays collected here identify obstacles in the path of a new moral political economy, but also provide reasons to believe in both its necessity and possibility.

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ENDNOTES

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[2] William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, "Economy and Society," https://hewlett.org/strategy/economy-and-society (accessed December 14, 2022). In addition to the Hewlett Foundation, the Berggruen Institute and the Omidyar Network are also funding such work.

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[4] Jenna Bednar, "Governance for Human Social Flourishing," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 31–45; Elizabeth S. Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109 (2) (1999): 287–337, https://doi.org/10.1086/233897; and Debra Satz and Stuart White, *What Is Wrong with Inequality?* (London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021), https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/What-is-wrong-with-inequality.pdf.

[5] Grieve Chelwa, Darrick Hamilton, and Avi Green, "Identity Group Stratification, Political Economy and Inclusive Economic Rights," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 154–167.

[6] Margaret Levi, "Frances Perkins was Ready!" *Social Science Space*, March 31, 2020, https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2020/03/frances-perkins-was-ready.

[7] Samuel Bowles and Wendy Carlin, "Shrinking Capitalism: Components of a New Political Economy Paradigm," *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 37 (4) (2021): 794–810, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grab029.

[8] Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Homo Reciprocans," *Nature* 415 (6868) (2002): 125–127, https://doi.org/10.1038/415125a; Hilary Cottam, *Welfare 5.0: Why We Need a Social Revolution and How to Make It Happen* (London: Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, University College London, 2020), https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/sites/public-purpose/files/iipp_welfare-state-5.0-report_hilary-cottam_wp-2020-10_final.pdf;

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[10] See, for example, Bowles and Carlin, "Shrinking Capitalism"; Chris Benner and Manuel Pastor, *Solidarity Economics: Why Mutuality and Movements Matter* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021); Rebecca Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020); and Danielle S. Allen, "Toward a Connected Society," in *Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society*, ed. Earl Lewis and Nancy Cantor (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 71–105.

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[12] See, for example, the instances provided by Sara Horowitz, *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up* (New York: Random House, 2021).

[13] John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Margaret Levi, "An Expanded Community of Fate," *Noema*, July 7, 2020 https://www.noemamag.com/an-expanded-community-of-fate. However, Ahlquist and Levi were not the first to use the term "community of fate." It has several lineages, but a disturbing variant was the Nazi usage of *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* to evoke an exclusive, racist, nationalist community. When President Obama and his speechwriter Ben Rhodes discovered this historical usage, they decided to take it out of a speech Obama was soon to deliver. See Ben Rhodes, *The World As It Is* (New York: Random House, 2019); and Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020). But Obama and Rhodes seemed unaware of how Germans also used the term in a similar sense as Ahlquist and Levi. See, for example, Hans Kundnani, "Lost in Translation: Communities of Fate," *Berlin Policy Journal*, October 23, 2018, https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/lost-in-translation-communities-of-fate.

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[17] Elisabeth Jean Wood, "The Emotional Benefits of Insurgency in El Salvador," in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 272.

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[19] Ahlquist and Levi, *In the Interest of Others*.

[20] Federica Carugati and Nathan Schneider, "Governance Archeology: Research as Ancestry," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 245–257. See also, for example, Benner and Pastor, *Solidarity Economics*; and Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People: Power and Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

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[22] Bednar, "Governance for Human Social Flourishing."

[23] Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (New York: Crown, 2018).

[24] Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe, "Biophilic Institutions: Building New Solidarities between the Economy and Nature," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 81–93.

[25] McGhee, *The Sum of Us*.

[26] Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore, and Rob Reich, eds., *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[27] Henry Farrell and Marion Fourcade, "The Moral Economy of High-Tech Modernism," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 225–235.

[28] Darrick Hamilton and William Darity, "Can 'Baby Bonds' Eliminate the Racial Wealth Gap in Putative Post-Racial America?" *The Review of Black Political Economy* 37 (3–4) (2010): 207–216, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12114-010-9063-1.

[29] Alison Gopnik, "Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 58–69.

[30] For example, see Clara Pretus, Nafees Hamid, Hammad Sheikh, et al., "Neural and Behavioral Correlates of Sacred Values and Vulnerability to Violent Extremism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2462) (2018), http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02462.

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[34] Rebecca Henderson, "Moral Firms?" *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 198–211.

[35] John S. Ahlquist, "Making Decent Jobs," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 105–118; Gopnik, "Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy"; and Iskander and Lowe, "Biophilic Institutions."

[36] Chelwa, Hamilton, and Green, "Identity Group Stratification, Political Economy and Inclusive Economic Rights"; and Farrell and Fourcade, "The Moral Economy of High-Tech Modernism."

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