

# Talking About Economy

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**There are no serious 'theoretical foundations for any of the versions of globalization, including the investor-rights versions. The international economy is far too poorly understood for there to be systematic 'theories' in any serious sense.\***  
**Noam Chomsky**

Thinking and talking about economy is increasingly becoming the exclusive territory of political-professional 'experts'. Through this the question is gradually losing its philosophical aspect and becoming alienated from everyday life. As a consequence of the propaganda generated by the 'experts', economy is largely perceived of as a complex entity that stands for itself, which the outside public are unable to comprehend or control, and about which there is only space for a reactive attitude. The project 'Talking about Economy' is intended to challenge this position.

In the process, taking the above quote from Noam Chomsky as a starting point, we asked 10 economic players from Dunaujváros, an economically troubled industrial 'new town' in Hungary, each of whom represented different spheres of economic life, to share their thoughts on economy. We posed them the following questions: What is economy's role in society? How would they describe a good economy? How would they describe a bad economy? What is your personal relationship to work? The same questions were then put to workers in the same jobs in Berlin, most of whom have already experienced a fast track economic adaptation during the process of reunification.

Two wall paintings and video installations documenting the first part of these two investigations have been exhibited in concurrent exhibitions at the ICA in Dunaujváros and at Sparwasser HQ in Berlin. This publication documents the first step of an ongoing investigation. It collates edited comments made by participants and has been produced as part of the 'Unoccupied Territories' exhibition at Galerie K&S in Berlin, which is in turn part of the 'Hin and Her' artist exchange programme between East European and Berlin based artists and curators.

The often banal, often unsure, and also often very strong statements given by the participants, strengthen notions of independence and personal resistance and are an attempt to empower participants to engage with conceptual territory from which they currently alienated.

\*Noam Chomsky, interviewed by Toni Gabric, 'The Croatian Federal Tribune', 7 May 2002.

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## What is economy's role in society?



Economy is the leading concept; without it there isn't a real social context among the actors of economic life. Society defines itself through economy. If we think about it, the archaic communities dissolved because economy started to gain bigger dimensions. As soon as it's not about mere survival, it gives it a certain basis to life.



In the past this place used to be totally packed, people used to queue in rows of three, it was noisy and people talked about sex and cars, but today all they go on about is the economy, and how hard up they all are.



From my point of view if economy is good then it's good for my boss and then it's good for me - I can't measure it otherwise. It's that simple. At the moment with low salaries and high prices, it's difficult to live.



If you imagine that German history experienced the accident of the Third Reich, because of the economy, an economy that did not work before, then I would have to say that you cannot underestimate the role of the economy. The economy is important, but it is not the only important area of your life and I believe that for your general state of mind, work plays a part, but not the only part and, I'd tend to say, not the most important part.



If the economy's well, humans are well. But the economy itself is important for the general population. Come to think of it, if there was no economy we'd still be sitting here bartering with stones or something.



Well, the purpose of it would be, to ensure wealth to those living in the country. In my opinion, here it works such that whoever lives well, can thank themselves for it and not the economy generated by the State because, to be honest, in this country there's such a big mess that all the values, all the money that there would be here, go in too few pockets. Though two years ago I said that this shameless stealing can't get any worse - now it seems it could. Well, on a simplistic level I could say that social life has three levels: an economic, a political and a cultural level.



Economy has a very important role by creating the conditions so that a social or a political system can be formed. Economy decides how much people can spend on culture, for example. This is a simplification and might also be the influence of a Marxist way of thinking but it's clear that economy has a fundamental role.



How I would answer that, I'd say, how the economy works, that's hard to say.



I think definitely a big role, especially the unemployment statistics, a lot of that is to do with the economy. If economy consists of the industry, of the foreign currency, you can't really say. I don't think we have to have the ideas for it and well, you think about it, how it might work but I couldn't explain it to you off the top of my head. I think in today's society, work plays enormous, an enormous if not even the foremost role, because if you work, you have a flat, you can afford a few things, you're respected and the manpower is needed.



You can see that the economy is relatively important if you have been to other countries, if you've been to an Asian country, be it India, Indonesia, even Russia, where they have at least 5 extra people for the same job. Where on a bus, for example, you don't only get the driver, but also two assistants that stamp the tickets or sell them and in every museum you have one person sitting in every room, you don't get that here. Everything here is done from the perspective of what makes money.



Maybe the only thing of Marxist ideology which is still valid, is that being defines consciousness. And it is especially decisive to consider in what circumstances Hungarians are living, and this then influences everything. Here where we are, in Dunaujváros the forecasts aren't positive and this'll surely have an effect on the culture, on our living standard, on everything we are connected with.



An important one, but not an end in itself. A means for people, that's what it should be and not something that determines people's fate, not vice versa - first people, then the economy.



Do you remember the archaic communities from your studies? Well, that must have been a good thing.

There must have been problems, there too, but everyone had their small area of responsibility. You see, in a Brazilian rain forest, the members of that tribe won't die of a heart attack at forty, because they don't have any reason to do so. They go to hunt, kill the animal, cook it, eat it, bring up the children then they teach them how to hunt, that's it. Everybody does their duty in their own field and that's it. The whole thing around economy is overcomplicated now.

## How would you describe a good economy?



Well, what's a good economy. I guess that everybody benefits from it, let's put it like that. That is not like what we have today.



Naively speaking, I am not an economist, I would describe a good economy as such that it makes a high percentage, effectively almost everyone, in this country economically content. That is, the incomes are sufficiently high, and people's self-image or their feeling of self-worth is being satisfied through work.



I think that the people who can manage a good economy, haven't been born yet. Because here I think such a big change in attitudes is needed - but those currently in the network, won't change their attitude. For example, the notion of live and let live would be important.



The only common interest is that the quality of life improves. But if you look at the current economic figures... I think over the last forty years which were marked by socialism, we have lost the continuity with those things that had been working well in the economy in the thirties. Those threads were cut. After the regime change, wild capitalism entered here and created such a catastrophic situation that you couldn't see through it. Some people gained incredible fortunes, but the biggest part simply disappeared. Under socialism people had a certain social safety net, this is undeniable, but in certain circumstances, that can't be called human,

because without freedom of expression, even though the bread was cheap, that can't be considered a very good period. But still things could somehow work, people had some money, they had some possibilities, they had their jobs.



A good economy is one that carries people along with it, doesn't select by differentiating between people it can use and worthless people and one that helps people to take care of the central aspects of their lives and to enable people, according to the principles of the American Declaration of Independence, to practice their right to live, their right to freedom, their right to strive for happiness, I think this is of crucial importance.



In my opinion the continuous rotation of power, the rotation of politics are not really good for simpler social strata, including myself and my family. At least for two terms there should be one party in power and then maybe they could do something. In a good economy there's no arguing, like 'it's my mistake, it's your mistake'. Everything works, from raw material supply, through organisation to production.



It has to give work to people, so that each member of a given population can participate in the division of labour. It has to give goods, commodities, so that people can have food to eat and a place to live in. It has to provide services and, this is an important factor, economy has to be in harmony with nature because it's possible that today I can exploit nature and can make a lot of money in a short term, but economy has to have a long term aspect, too. If it doesn't respect it's resources, how it can renew them? To sum up, economy has to provide jobs, and whoever is outside of the division of labour; the elderly, the ill, children, economy has to maintain them and the third thing is that economy has to be sustainable, it mustn't exploit nature.



If I imagine a good economy, as that which Marx wrote about in 'the Capital', which was nice and good, it should really work in a way that everybody can meet their expectations through their own jobs - I'm not really speaking about money because as they say, 'money doesn't make you happy'.