

Planet Economics



“My Mis-education in 3 Graphics,”
 Directed by Mary Filippo (Mary
 Filippo Films, 2020)

BY TIM KOECHLIN

“My Mis-education in 3 Graphics” is a terrific film. When I am done writing this review, I am going to send a thank-you note to Mary Filippo (the film’s director). She deserves it.

“In 2004 when I began auditing economics courses,” Filippo writes on the film’s website, “I actually thought I’d learn something about globalization. Does it really help people in developing countries? What are its downsides? What I found in these courses was instead a difficult-to-understand presentation of the economy through graphic models. These models ignored what is most important to be able to understand economics: that ‘the economy’ is political, and that it relies absolutely on nature.”

In response to her confusing and exasperating experience in introductory economics courses, Filippo made this 58-minute film, which captures the shortcomings, untruths, and erasures of mainstream economics with clarity, insight, and humor. It’s a devastating—and accessible—takedown. With the help of an extensive and excellent cast of heterodox economists (Herman

Daly, Julie Nelson, Robert Pollin, Kate Raworth, Richard D. Wolff, and many more) and a few smug mainstream economists to boot (including Gregory Mankiw, the author of the top-selling introductory economics textbook), this film exposes the absurdities and dangers of the mainstream model—while validating the reactions that so many of us had to our first encounter with mainstream economics. *Are we discussing the same economic system? Are we even occupying the same planet?*

This very rich film covers a lot of ground. On the one hand, Filippo manages—with help from her many capable, incisive friends—to expose with clarity and considerable depth many of the specific failures, deceptions, and silences of the mainstream model. On the other hand, the film doesn’t allow the viewer to lose sight of mainstream economics’ grand (and grandiose) claims, or its gaping silences. “In this film,” Filippo, who narrates the film, tells the viewer early on, “we’ll see how mainstream economists use these models to hide the forces of inequality and environmental destruction.” Indeed!

Evidence of capitalism’s inequalities, failures, and brutal indifference is, of course, everywhere. And yet the economics establishment insists, with a pretense of “scientific” authority, that capitalism is amazing. “The market

economy,” the story goes, brings us efficiency, growth, equilibrium, mutually beneficial exchange, opportunity, choice, utility maximization, innovation, fairness, and more. Whether we understand its magic or not, the invisible hand of the market gives us what we want and pays us what we deserve. In the words of one of Filippo’s economics professors, market equilibrium is “a happy thing.” Indeed, it is “optimal.”

The film is divided into three segments, each of which corresponds to a section of a typical introductory economics course. The first segment sheds light on several important problems with the “simple” supply-and-demand diagram, which is so central to the story that mainstream economics tells. The second segment focuses on the mainstream story’s notion of “the firm”—which, with its perplexing (and crucial) declaration that economic profits tend toward zero, obscures the centrality of profits in capitalism. (In the film, John Bellamy Foster notes that “the model doesn’t have profits as its central feature, even though that’s the goal of all business. It’s not really part of the model. I know this is hard to believe.”) The final segment focuses on macro-economics.

The film deconstructs the mainstream story and its (often hidden) assumptions bit by bit. People are not inherently or completely selfish. Our “preferences” are not “given,” they are, rather, socially constructed. The demand curve does not reflect our “needs and desires” per se, it reflects effective demand (“wants” only count when they are backed by purchasing power). The market is not reliably self-correcting (“Forget . . . supply and demand,” Kate Raworth tells the viewer, “Anything in life that spirals up, up, up, or spirals down, down, down, is dominated by reinforcing feedback.”) There is no coherent mainstream theory of economic crisis. Herman Daly shows—with devastating clarity—the essential ways in which mainstream economics



ignores the environment. Several heterodox economists articulate essential ways that capitalist production, growth, and exploitation require an active state. Others provide powerful, accessible critiques of free trade and let-it-rip labor markets. And much more. There is a lot here.

Some of these critiques are clearer than others and of course none of them is comprehensive. It's a 58-minute film; many of us have spent decades elaborating the dangerous shortcomings of the mainstream model. But in nearly every case, these critiques capture the essence of what is missing and what is at stake. I also appreciate that several interviewees provide directions to viewers who want to go deeper. Stephen Marglin, for example, notes that neoclassical economics is "...crafted to argue against the notion that capitalism exploits people... You won't find Marx directly addressed but he's a ghost who's sort of hovering."

The film does a particularly good job of capturing and demystifying mainstream economists' insistence that their approach is simply apolitical

"science." Mankiw declares that "economists tend to move toward math, because math forces one to be rigorous." Filippo sees through this—all of this math and scientific pretense obscures the essential ways in which the economy is political. They're blinding us with "science." The math is precisely what makes an introductory economics course an unnecessarily "difficult-to-understand presentation of the economy." It is a crucial part of the apparatus that "hides the sources of inequality and the devastation of the planet."

Along with all of this detail, the film regularly reminds us of the big issues. The film reassures us that our suspicions of the mainstream model were exactly right. Max Wolff notes that in introductory economics courses "there is no exploitation, there's no injustice." Gilles Raveaud declares that "the mainstream theory is not a theory of capitalism, at all." And Ric McIntyre has a suggestion: "Let's talk about how a system is reproduced that enables people who do nothing socially useful to earn billions of dollars. That's a more interesting discussion, don't you think?" I agree.

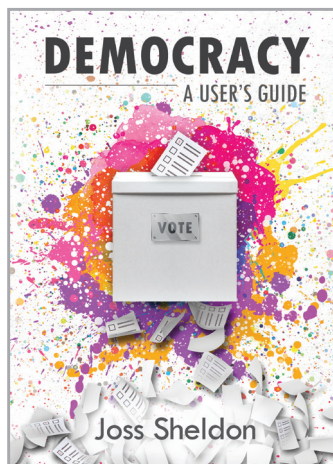
This fine film has its limits, for sure. Perhaps most notably, this: although the film sketches the logic and spirit of the mainstream model with a good deal of clarity, it is hard to imagine that this (necessarily) rushed presentation of mainstream economics (and thus much of the film's critical analysis) would make complete sense to a viewer who has never taken an economics course.

That said, I conclude as I started. "My Mis-education in 3 Graphics" is a terrific film. If you have ever taken an economics course and thought "what is going on?"—you should watch this movie. If you have ever taken an economics course and thought "Aha! So that's how it works!"—you should watch this movie. And if you teach economics, you should share this film with your students.

Meanwhile, I've got a thank-you note to write. **D&S**

TIM KOEHLIN, an economist, teaches International Studies and Urban Studies at Vassar College. He is director of Vassar's International Studies Program.

Messy Democracy



Democracy: A User's Guide,
by Joss Sheldon (Unicorn Publishing
Group, 2020)

BY ASEEM HASNAIN

The United States is among the world's oldest democracies, and home to some of the world's top experts on democratization. While democratic institutions have grown deep roots in the United States, they have remained a work in progress with women, racial minorities, and the working class struggling to harness their true promise. Nevertheless, prior to November 8, 2016, few people would have imagined that this illustrious institution could come so close to being upended in just 48 months. This unpredictability tells us something important about democracy. Instead

of a goal, it is a work in progress. Rather than a one-way expressway, it is a maze of streets and back alleys. It does not just grow, it ebbs and flows. Democracy is complex—and messy.

Joss Sheldon, a novelist with a degree in economics, confesses that he may have bit off more than he could chew when he wrote his first nonfiction book, *Democracy: A User's Guide*. At first read, that seems true. There is indeed a great variety of themes and snippets packed into 16 chapters organized across four sections. They include examples from the animal kingdom, democratic experiments from famous as well as lesser-known places across the globe, conflict management scenarios from

indigenous cultures, governance initiatives based on information and communication technology, and the list goes on. The text is messy. And that makes it a fitting book about democracy.

Democracy is inherently a swamp with too many variables, both specific and contextual. Sheldon leads the reader deep into this swamp, lets them feel lost, and then shows them the many potential ways in which it can be navigated, thus reminding us that there isn't one definite meaning of democracy, nor one way to reach it, nor a standard formula to preserve it. We are currently witnessing how global democracies are tottering. Recent events in the largest democracy (India) and the oldest (the United States), as well as in places as diverse as Brazil, Japan, Turkey, Germany, and Sweden signal how precarious the current situation is. The fact that democracy is under siege even in Western Europe, including in Scandinavia, disrupts the colonial narrative that it is only in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East where it is at perpetual risk.

More formal works on democracy generally guide the reader toward simplified, often simplistic, requirements and factors that encourage or discourage democratization. This approach leaves out so much of democracy's complexity that it defeats the purpose of creating a nuanced understanding of democracy as a widely adaptable and flexible form of collective self-rule. Sheldon's work does the opposite, by almost refusing to funnel its diverse cases, anecdotes, and incidents toward strong conclusions or arguments. Anecdotes take you to a wide variety of places—an Inuit village in the Arctic, 11th-century Catalonia, an Ikung band in Kalahari, ancient Athens, 13th-century Switzerland, Appalachia, democratic schools in the United States and the United Kingdom—to sample the many ways in which the spirit of democracy can exist. The book also introduces the reader to democratic practices in places where one would not

expect them—in the people-centric decision-making within the communist party structure in contemporary China, among the sailors on Captain Morgan's pirate ships in the Caribbean, and in voluntary groups helping to bring order in Rojava in the middle of the Syrian war.

One of the strengths of the book is the idea that democracy is, and should be, an aspiration even within economic institutions and organiza-

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tions, which are usually imagined outside of the political sphere. In the largest section of the book, which is on economic democracy, Sheldon delves into a range of issues, starting with the democratic control of the workplace. He brings in some impressive cases such as the Semco corporation in Brazil; Happy Computers in the United Kingdom, where top managers introduced a democratic, worker-controlled culture of decision-making and planning; and Gore-Tex in the United States, where workers elect their managers. These experiments have been immensely successful as they treat their workers as responsible, smart adults—just like they are in their real lives where they give advice, make decisions, and choose politicians to represent their interests. The author also shines a spotlight on the fundamentally undemocratic core of the market system where corporations don't just supply stuff demanded by a majority of consumers, but create non-existent demands in the

financial interest of their shareholders. Instead, retail cooperatives offer a democratic alternative where consumers control consumption by letting the demands of members drive the production process. Similarly, Sheldon applies the lens of democracy to spending power, which is invariably concentrated in the hands of the 1% who dictate production, trade, and consumption for the 99%.

As a globally oriented political sociologist invested in decolonizing knowledge, I like this book because it uses neither a Eurocentric nor a bourgeois lens to evaluate political cultures from across the world. It doesn't imagine the seeds of democracy in ancient Greece, but, instead, finds them across time and throughout the world. Another strength of the book lies in its candor in discussing the health of democracy as it exists, especially in the bastions of European-style polities. While the book narrates events big and small—including protests, movements, technological innovations, betrayals by the police, pushback from the state—that have helped democracy progress, stagnate, and falter, the general message is positive. There is hope for democracy, and there are strategies and tools that people across the world have forged. Finally, this book pushes through the general tendency of thinking about democracy only in spaces exclusively reserved for politics. It emphasizes the need to democratize across the board—at schools, in corporations, in the market, among law enforcement organizations, within armies, in media groups, at places of work, and so on. While the lack of dates in the anecdotes sometimes makes the reader unsure of the context, this is an interesting and immensely readable book. **D&S**

ASEEM HASNAIN is a political sociologist and an assistant professor at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts.