

BOTH ARE STILL RELEVANT

Bradley W. Bateman | Editorial

Why is the debate between Hayek and Keynes still of interest to us? Why are these two economists, whose greatest works were published over 75 years ago, still so compelling to us?

Perhaps the first answer to these questions is that capitalism is a complex, unkempt way to run an economy. No one ever designed capitalism, so we cannot return to its original blueprint to discover how to improve its performance. Such a messy system may appropriately be open to different interpretations.

Yet another answer points to the individual brilliance of our two economists. As the content of this special issue of *Kritika & Kontext* makes clear, many thoughtful analysts still believe that one (or the other) of these two thinkers has provided an analysis of capitalism that remains not just relevant, but important. Many commentators believe that either Hayek or Keynes had unusual insights that should not be lost.

Despite the complexity of a capitalist economy, or perhaps because of that complexity, it seems only natural that we would want to understand more clearly how to make capitalism work better. One argument is that capitalism should be relatively unfettered, “run” by entrepreneurs and capitalists; another argument is that it requires some kind of intervention from the government to work effectively. Thus, as the persistence of the debate between our two great economists makes clear, there is little agreement about what an effective capitalism requires. In other words, we seem saddled with capitalism, but we fundamentally disagree about how it operates and what is needed to make it work well.

Thus, while both of these two economists may have been wise, the more fundamental fact is that we feel we live in an economic system from which we want better outcomes. We want a better, or different, capitalism.

Some, of course, still long for a better, different socialism, but these are not the people who keep the Keynes-Hayek debate alive. The debate is kept alive mostly by people who feel capitalism is the desirable (if imperfect) alternative.

But despite whatever puzzlement and frustration we might feel at the persistence of the Keynes-Hayek debate, we must also, in the present moment, feel some hope at the ongoing disagreement between the devotees of the two economists. After all, across the globe, various forms of authoritarianism, fuelled by populist movements, threaten democratic society. Freedom of expression and freedom of political disagreement are under threat virtually everywhere.

In the midst of these widespread threats to democratic life, the fact that adherents of different positions about the nature of capitalism continue to debate openly is a sign that civil civic discourse still exists. Should the debate ever cease it will most likely be because dissent has been stifled, rather than because we have come to a new, “truer” understanding of capitalism.

So by all means, we welcome the debate and acknowledge its existence as something to be celebrated.