Conversation with Ayomide Fatunde
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself?

Ayomide Fatunde: My name is Ayomide Fatunde. I am a bit of an alchemical anarchist. I'm someone who's classically trained as a chemical engineer, worked in the energy industries in climate and development in both Kenya, with solar microgrids, and Germany, with electric vehicles at Mercedes Benz. Recently culminated all my disciplinary study in looking at the economy. And I currently serve on the Global Council of the Well-being Economy Alliance. I'm the youngest member, and I think the only one without institutional backing. I work independently on designing holistic, new technologies and participatory economic models. One of the ways that we govern our lives towards ensuring a healthy life and wellbeing.

Ashley Hopkinson: What role would you say wellbeing plays in the work you do now? And do you feel like it played any role in the 'traditional structures' that you were in when you were in chemical engineering work?

Ayomide Fatunde: Wellbeing has given me some sort of north star about where I want society to be. (Through) a more practical lens, there's a type of political economy that I envision. I think the desire for eventually a global referendum where we propose a new type of economic system that goes beyond GDP, beyond profit, cares deeply for the individual and the community and the ecosystem. As people, (we say) always treat others with the golden rule but has that been reflected in our governmental structures?

That filters into everything I do. I'm writing right now, I'm thinking a lot about science fiction. If I'm writing that work, I write it with the idea that I want the people that will eventually watch it to learn a lot about those values that I just spoke about. I'm writing in the lens that it's being produced to not cut

corners with wages and not exploit the land while we're shooting and not exploit any community's culture. It filters into just my entire morality at this point.

In the past, I think I've always been 'moral' or had a sense of justice, but I wouldn't say it was well reflected in the industries that I was in because a lot of the value in those industries is go fast or be 'efficient', make as much money as possible, which usually means extract as much as possible. There was almost no clear vision for the future.

Even when working within CO2 strategy and thinking a lot about these electric vehicles and the transition for Mercedes, it was always in the context of this company has to stay profitable and at the top and competitive with all these other people.

In that, you disregard the fact that electric vehicles and the creation that's required for them is not the sustainable solution. We can't have everyone replace their combustion cars with electrical ones. We need to go more to the public transportation model. We need to have a whole different type of transportation system. The single car model does not work. And the way that these machines are made and the types of labor required in the cobalt mining model, child's labor, there's all these conversations that need to be had. And even in the creation of the new designs and the new types of engines, there's the lack of talking, there's the silent organization because everyone is competing.

So there's so much to be said about open source technology and models of creating things that were just not present in the conversation then because the idea wasn't for wellbeing. It was for let's maintain the status quo as long as possible and just adjust ever so slightly so that the UN and the EU doesn't get mad at us with their regulations.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's valuable to hear because I think we have sweeping narratives that will come in, that will say, "This is the problem solve," without sometimes an examination of, does "this solution," create any ripple effects that will actually be extractive in a new way?

Ayomide Fatunde: Right. Right.

Ashley Hopkinson: Has there been any initiative or platform or program…anything that you have encountered at a community or large scale level that shows promise? And when I say promise, something that is an intervention along the lines of what we've been talking about, something that gets us just a little bit closer to that world where you're like, "Okay, this has potential to show up better for us in this environment."

Ayomide Fatunde: I'm going to start just by saying I'm usually uninspired. I know that in a lot of these calls, especially the ones (about wellbeing economics) everyone's always in the comment section, "Oh, this is so inspiring." Just want to be clear.

But there are these pockets. I think that I do find a lot of promise in Cooperation Jackson — I'm not sure if you're familiar with Cooperation Jackson and the work they're doing in Mississippi. It's basically an economy with worker owned cooperatives all over the city of Jackson. It's largely to uplift the Black community there; it's being done almost in a way similar to the way the Black Panther Party went about things in terms of political education and relationship building within the ecosystem, and then creating alternative structures for meeting needs.

They have a bunch of community owned land that they all farm together, create value-added products from the land, the things that they grow. They also have services, local service people that they all work within (it).

I find these to be the most promising examples because, one— they teach people how to care for one another on a community level. Two, they return power back to the people. And three, they reduce dependency. A lot of exploitation begins because of dependency. We grow dependent on certain systems because we are experiencing enclosure.

You used to be able to pick fruit and eat by the work of your hands. Now if you don't have a grocery store near you, what will you eat? The land was enclosed by privatization so we grew dependent on unjust systems. It happens also in colonial ways where now you can only get your food from the grocery store or a lot of people who once lived in villages now find they can only access economic survival means by moving to the cities. Most "formerly" colonized countries are very import-heavy with highly skewed trade deficits. They haven't fully learned to make their own things. This dependency makes them ripe for exploitation. And that's the problem.

So thinking of solutions… Cooperation Jackson works at the local level. But when you look at the multinational, when you think about Cuba and South Africa when they were heavily embargoed and having to create their own industries, their own medical industry, such that when COVID-19 came on, they were much more prepared to make their own vaccines and do all these things than a lot of other countries. Right? Because they had moved past dependency on their development as a nation.

So Cooperation Jackson is looking at how to do things like that on a small scale. I don't know if they've connected yet with the Open Source Ecology Project, because open source ecology is this really

fascinating initiative to create a global village construction set. So open source blueprints for everything you would need to create a village, everything from laser cutters to bulldozers.

We need to know how to build things and we need to restore productive capacity in these regions, right? We've outsourced all manufacturing. People don't know how they eat…how it even comes to be. If the imports stopped, where would they be?

So definitely Open Source Ecology (Project)…and then another one that's deeply inspiring to me is the Grassroots Economics Project in Kenya. They've pioneered this really powerful community inclusion currency called Sarafu. They started off by working mostly in the slums and the more rural villages. And whenever there was a decrease, like the currency deflated, you would find that the people in these areas would feel it the most because all of a sudden, there was no inflow of cash.

So you have people that technically, they had capacity to do labor, but no one was there to pay them. So it's like you had tomatoes to sell, but no one had cash to buy your tomatoes. Right? Which is crazy. So then they say, "Okay, well, why don't we have our own currency for these situations?" It's backed..and they have gone through all the legal ramifications of getting it cleared by the Kenyan government. But in these times of major downturn, I have tomatoes. Well, you do your motorcycle taxi thing, right? And then this other person, they're the school teacher. We can make sure that we all get fed, we all have our needs met, and we use this currency to make those exchanges fair.

Cooperation Jackson and this group, they recently just had a series of meetings. Will Ruddick, the founder of Sarafu, flew out to Mississippi, Kali Akuno, the spokesperson for Cooperation Jackson; he went out to Kenya to just observe and (they) learn from each other. That cross-pollination is very exciting to me, that they're like, "Let's work together. Let's learn how to do this. Let's learn how to build in these communities. Are we making them self-sustaining? And what are the best practices that we could employ so that we can bring these things all over the world?" That side looks promising.

I think we should share the wealth. It makes sense to me. But a lot of people get very scared about that because of all the authoritarianism. It's a very different thing to say, "Not only are we sharing the wealth, but we're sharing decision-making power as a people." Right? That's very different than saying, "The party's going to make all the decisions about production and consumption."

So I think CLTs are really powerful because they enable safeguards around how we share the land together and how we decide what is done with it. And with the currency project, I want to just touch back on this, Grassroots Economics, I think they've also really recently been exploring a digital level with the Blockchain. And there are a lot of really fascinating web projects that I do find somewhat

promising, that try to capture this ethos of centralized, participatory, equal access and equal governance rights. And they're not the mainstream ones. Those are NFTs.

There's something called Holochain that I think is really worth looking into because they're all about freeing our data in some ways. So instead of them having the monopoly we have right now with the internet, treating public utility, for one, and then treating our data, returning ownership of our data back to the person. So again, because wellbeing is part of the frame in everything, there are these pockets of new technologies where if we implement them in our current model, they will be extractive and destructive. It takes so much energy, so much power to mine Bitcoin. And people were like, "This is the future." And I'm like, "On what planet? We're out of oil. Stop playing." But there are other technologies that came from that same thread of digital currency, alternative currency, and (are) spinning it more regenerative.

Ashley Hopkinson: I know you're not inside of these projects, but what do you think specifically makes the ones that are working, work? Is it that people are participating? You feel like the power is democratized? What is it that makes these things gain traction?

Ayomide Fatunde: Well, there's the system and then there's the people, because a lot of the tools and techniques that we need already exist, but we seem to lack the psychological capacity to implement them. It's like a culture of evolution is needed on some level because you know that saying, "We rise to the level of our system, but fall to the level of our habits?"

So it's like you can create these really gorgeous things. It's participatory, it's super non-hierarchical, you do all these things, but we, as people, we grew up in a certain culture that was very dominance-based, and was very competition-based. And we carry that baggage.

If you think about childhood, how many times, when you were growing up, could you say no to a decision your parents made? Probably never right? Were you ever even allowed to be involved in decision-making? Were the reasons for the rules explained to you or were you just expected to follow them? Did you get to give feedback?

Authoritarianism begins in the household. It's in our everyday lives and it shows up even as we try to organize. There's just certain traumas that we haven't healed. There's certain ways our egos get in the way. I would say the projects that end up being successful are the ones where people dedicate themselves to being their best selves first.

I think it's why so many of the old movements that worked, they were spiritual movements. You think about Gandhi. Think about MLK being a preacher.

At least, for me, the thing that I've been most personally involved in is my own healing and how I change the way I show up. People change the way they show up. And it's easier to coordinate and to be in a group when I'm not living from fear or anxiety all the time, when my moods don't fluctuate and I don't know how to regulate them. There's all this work. All this work involved in being human. And so many of these tools and techniques that we're trying to bring into the world, they require us to upgrade our entire psyches and our entire culture around how we interact with each other. And I think that's the hardest part, the part that we don't have any good literature on yet.

Ashley Hopkinson: No, I understand that. It's like you're bringing in all these new practices, but we have default settings. What would you say is a challenge that people are facing in this work? What is the gap that you would like to see filled in this space?

Ayomide Fatunde: Information. There's information overload and very little knowledge. It's very loud. Well, maybe it's because I'm someone who's removed myself a lot from society. So when I re-enter and there's 50 billion webinars and then everyone has published a new article, and there's this conference to go to and this one is launching this paper, and there's another study, it's just a lot. And I really feel like maybe it's true for all industries.

We just need to streamline better. We need to talk to each other more. (There are) a lot of silos. So it's a lot of double work as well because so many things are siloed. "We're just not very efficient" and I think we lack communication between each other.

My second point of feedback is I don't think there's a clear enough vision. I understand the reason for that because a lot of people in this movement, they try to maintain visions and they're trying to make sure that they don't go in and say, "This is what we're doing." Right? But in some ways, that lends to the chaos a little bit because there's so much movement in so many different directions. And the most efficient way is to go straight. It might be one of the unavoidable things.

The north star not really being clear, actually maybe it can be solved as well, because I think this is the role of fiction writers, science fiction writers, fantasy writers.

It's like, we don't dream about Utopia anymore. Thomas Moore wrote the book all those years ago and we had The Jetsons for a bit. But now we have more Black Mirror. The movement needs a more compelling vision, but as a society, our entire global collective, we need a more compelling vision for the future.

Ashley Hopkinson: What will it take to demonstrate the value of wellbeing economics? What have you found has been helpful for the spaces that you're in, to help people find value in this model and this frame of thinking?

Ayomide Fatunde: Industries, specifically, I would say the data. We just have data that shows that disasters are expensive. Even insurance agencies, right? The insurance agencies are backing out of Florida. They're backing out of the California wildfire areas. It's really hard to get home insurance in some parts of California now.

Within the industry world especially, you just have to show them the data and the projections, and make it very clear that if you want to be profitable in 30 years, you need to do something now. And I think a lot of people are catching on. That's why all the oil companies are now talking about green. But they're still mostly focused on their profits. They're not fully grasping the other aspect of this, like how caring about people is profitable.

And I think that's where I'm really interested in putting together some of the data, to show how when you educate a population instead of just have them work menial labor and menial wage in sweatshops, when you educate a population, we can derive more value from their contribution because these are incredibly smart people, incredibly creative people that we just left behind.

If we are all good, we can all be great. There's a much brighter world for us if we actually invest in nurturing the land, invest in nurturing your people. We can have a golden age. We've reached this point in our society. We have the technology, but we're not optimizing our productivity in many ways. There's all these externalities.

It's like a classic economics problem, honestly, because we're supplying more than we demand, demanding things that we don't need. There's just all these inefficiencies. If we invested correctly, we could all have abundance. Right? A lot of people think that all these movements, it's very much austerity, austerity, austerity, like we'll never be able to have a lobster ever again. (But) we can still have nice things in moderation, in sustainable ways. We can guarantee a good life for everyone. And yes, you might not have three yachts.

Ashley Hopkinson: I can see what you're saying Ayo. Given the right support, and when I say right support, I mean the funding is there, the people are in the room, what would you like to see prioritized, replicated, scaled?

Ayomide Fatunde: Prioritized. This might be a pipe dream, but I would really like to see cash handouts to the poor. So much of poverty reduction actions are very deserving/hierarchy-based, where you have

to meet certain requirements and you have to show up in certain check-ins, and you have to spend the money on a certain thing. And a lot of people, even people that are not necessarily working for no wage, but are working two jobs and haven't had a vacation in years. I'm just like, "Take a cash handout and go on vacation, sis… I just want everyone who's been broke and struggling for a long time to be prioritized and to be given a break."

There's all these things you can do with bioremediation and cleaning up the oil spills, the fungi, and there's so much we can do about hemi-culture and wilding the land. I think those (things) are happening. Those are great, but personally, what I would love to see prioritized is cash handouts for the poor, with no strings attached, no questions asked, because a lot of times, these people are seen as disposable by society. There's very little care.

Ashley Hopkinson: It's tough. Thank you Ayo for your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.