



Conversation with Demond Drummer

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell me about yourself and the work you do?

Demond Drummer: Demond Drummer, I currently serve as director of strategy at the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at The New School. I work closely with Professor Darrick Hamilton to advance what we're calling a human rights economy. A north star vision of an economy in which everyone has what we need to thrive and flourish and achieve our human potential...it's all about reframing how we're thinking about our economy and proposing various policies that can be implemented today to begin moving us toward an economy that works for everyone.

Ashley Hopkinson: When we're talking about wellbeing economics, we're also talking about what it means to design systems that work for the betterment of communities without all of the extractions and increases in harm. I'm curious about how you guys came to human rights as the overarching way to describe that and what do you think is distinctive about that framework when it comes to these economic conversations?

Demond Drummer: What got me into embracing this idea of a human rights economy is what it means. Our economy should facilitate and make provision for the enabling goods and services that we all need to thrive and flourish and achieve whatever it is we want to achieve in our life. To do whatever it is that we want to do in our life. It's about agency, having the power to live our lives the way we want to live them. So often that is not even in the conversation.

Our justice (arm) has ceded the word freedom to the folks who don't want freedom for everyone the way we do, right? Or who want freedom at the expense of keeping everyone else bound and in chains. Either bound by a job that doesn't have adequate resources, or bound to have to take three jobs that don't pay enough, or bound to student loan debt, bound to a mortgage. These are all the things that we take as standard fare for a life in the U.S., but it doesn't have to be this way.

What the human rights economy framework did for me was open the door to really embrace that it's not just about an economy that provisions what we all need to thrive, but the goods and services that we need to be free. That's not just some normative goal or vision, but that is intrinsic to what it means to be human, and to do anything that doesn't facilitate that is to be anti-human. So I think that is what this is about.

A human rights economy means that we have an environment, air that we can actually breathe, water that we can actually drink, food that won't poison us and food that has grown in a way that doesn't destroy our environment. It's a very expansive framework that I'm beginning to understand more and more and embrace more and more.

I'm all about our economy asking the question: what will we as a people, as a society, as a country, as a world, decide to make together, build together, grow together, create together, and do together to make sure everybody has what we need? My spiritual tradition tells me that there's more than enough and it's just a question of allocation, not just redistribution, but pre-distribution. Are we fairly and appropriately allocating the abundance of this earth to make sure that everyone has what they need?

Ashley Hopkinson: Have you been a part of or been around any initiatives or programs, pushing back against this status quo of the narrow way that we describe the economy? Is there anything that gives you a glimmer of hope that you would like to see grow and expand and can you share that with us?

Demond Drummer: One thing that I'm excited about most is this framework of industrial policy grounded in this vision of inclusive economic rights that I've been part of developing, when I was at PolicyLink and now here at the Institute.

We have a glimmer of an essay that's out already. Many times our economic justice conversations are entirely too small. We're talking about worker power and economic democracy and this is all fantastic and it's all needed, but these are honestly all components of something that adds up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

I don't want to put this into sports and military terms, but how are we having a fight at the scale of our economy? Is our vision matching the scale of our economy? That's a question I've been sitting with for some time. If we get that vision right, if we get that framing and framework right, if we get that scale and scope and aim of ambition right, we solve the climate crisis. We make sure that we have family care and childcare, not just so people go to work, but because every child deserves high quality early care and education, because that's what's needed to facilitate human development.

It means that we have healthcare and not just healthcare for all, but we have a system of wellbeing where we're not treating diabetes because soda is subsidized in a way that water is not. So are we preparing ourselves? Are we positioning ourselves to (take) action and develop ideas and fights that are at the scale of our economy? And so that's what I'm excited about

It's about what we are deciding to build and do and for what purpose? What we're doing now with these important substantial but clearly insufficient investments in the green energy sector with EV subsidies and chip manufacturing, things like that. Our government has decided that this green transition is important, that building microprocessors in the U.S. is important. And so what else do we consider to be important? Do we see higher education as important? Or are we still saying it's up to you to finance your own path to becoming a doctor?

We're the only industrialized country that believes that and operates like that. Do we believe in having access to the care you need to be healthy and well? Is that important enough for the government to put its full weight behind it? Because we definitely are putting our full weight behind the pharmaceutical industry to develop drugs, but is the government putting equal weight behind people having access to these drugs and medications? So these are the questions, right? All markets are governed by law and policy. It's just a question of to whose benefit are they created by our society.

Ashley Hopkinson: So the idea around in the industrial policy framework is that it'll go further than your traditional economic policy because it will be more of a 360, encompassing all these different areas and taking historical context into play?

Demond Drummer: I might be overstating it. I think it is a field of discourse, research, and frankly conflict, that we need to jump in and engage. There's a lot of folks that we're excited about grabbing ahold of, so the folks we're in conversation with in the care sector, folks in the education sector. I'm like, "Oh wow, I didn't think industrial policy was a thing that I should be thinking about or that this is something that we need to be playing in." But the framework that we're developing is clearly attractive, capacious and powerful, and I think we need to run fully into this lane and be in these conversations.

We saw [The Build Back Better Framework](#). It had all these care investments, child tax credits, childcare subsidies, etc, but somehow that got cut out of the quote, unquote, "Bidenomics agenda." And what didn't get cut out was infrastructure. What didn't get cut out was building microchips. What didn't get cut out was subsidies for electric vehicles, but somehow subsidies for childcare are not considered industrial policy, right? So it was very bizarre, in my mind, this picking and choosing of what is and not deserving of investment.

So in fighting the fight, we should be including the full range of the enabling goods and services and capacities and provisions that we need for everyone to thrive. That is the definition of industrial policy. And we can contest how that concept has been narrowly constrained or selectively expanded either through research or in practice. So I'm excited about us diving into this realm and taking on this flank as an area to battle it out as it were. I don't know why I'm adopting these words. But it is a fight.

Ashley Hopkinson: What role does collaboration and interdependence play in your work? Has it helped you to move work forward in terms of economics? Or do you feel like economics is still this area that is very siloed in terms of research? I ask this because that's what I found fascinating about your work and the people working alongside you; there's an openness to calling out the intersections of economics and justice. How did you break the silos that are naturally built into the way that we do things, at least here in the U.S.?

Demond Drummer: What I love about that question is that you're naming that it is not an accident, that we have siloed some of these various issue areas and even the whole domain and discourse of economics from justice. We didn't do that, but the discipline strategically did that and powerful people who influenced what was and was not included in the discipline (of economics) and what was and was not worthy of economic research did that.

I studied economics in undergrad at Morehouse College. I went to Morehouse College because it was the alma mater of Martin Luther King, and I thought that's where you go if you care about Black people, that's where you go if you care about justice. But the economics I was taught was neoclassical economics, and it was the opposite of a framework that could get you to justice. All the answers, and I'm going to quote King on this one, "I studied economics at Morehouse, and the answers that they gave did not answer."

The questions that I had were dismissed or were not addressed, and I began to abandon economics as a viable field of intellectual inquiry for my purposes. But what I didn't know then was that there were different schools of thought in economics. And it wasn't until the last course that I took that I realized that there was an entire history of economic thought and economics started as moral philosophy. It was not inseparable from politics, it was political economy. This idea of a free market apparently was just an invention that was a few decades old. I was learning all this stuff as if it were science, but really the whole economics discipline was a normative project masquerading as positive science (like physics, but it was more like religion).

I began to see that clearly after I abandoned economics to study religion at the University of Chicago, ironically. I began to see, oh wow, the tools I'm learning to study, belief systems can be applied to the

discipline of economics. There are certain orthodoxies and dogmas embedded in the supply and demand curve, and all the other models that we're taught in the field of economics that are sacred cows that you're not allowed to question or let alone slay... (But) economics has power biases embedded within its own frameworks.

Once you understand that, you're liberated to then critique it; not to abandon it, as I think many folks who care about people and justice are led to economics, but to literally lay claim to it and say we're going to pour our values and our normative commitments into this.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's a part of the question that I have for you. There can be this separateness that the U.S. economy might be doing well on paper, but that the U.S. household might not be feeling it. Why is that?

Demond Drummer: People cannot afford to live in this country. Can't afford to live where they want, can't afford to take time off, can't afford childcare, and you're going to tell them the economy's fine? By what measure? And then when people say, "Oh wow, I'm not doing fine. It must be something I'm doing." And they got us right where we want us, once that's the conclusion. It fully individualizes responsibility for basic things that other rich countries... that are less rich than we are, have already provided. So (there is) this myth that our economy and discourse on our economy is best left to the experts, right? It's very reminiscent of the feudal preliterate days where only the literate priest could read the Bible.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, in other words, can an economics conversation be for the people?

Demond Drummer: That's right. And even the words that are used, right? Have you ever read the Federal Reserve's Statements? The Federal Reserve is one of the most powerful institutions on earth. We have a sovereign monetary entity in (one of the) richest countries on earth. It speaks in this passive voice. A strategically passive voice as if it is not a prime mover in our economy.

When the pandemic hit... there were all these novel interventions and programs to get money flowing to people and money to taxpayers bank accounts... Everything that I was taught in that time period (working on the Green New Deal) was invalidated within a week. And it let me know that the constraints within which we're operating are all manufactured, and it's all about what do we consider to be priority? Do we consider eliminating poverty to be a priority? Apparently not. Do we consider access to high quality healthcare in this country to be a priority? Apparently not. We have the tools. We have the means to get this done. We just don't have the power. One reason why we don't have the

power is because we have been convinced, many of us, that it is not possible. And that is intentional, that's strategic.

All of the economic discourse that I've come across, not that I've come across all of it, but the scholarly discourse of industrial policy, the policy domain of industrial policy, and even the public discourse of industrial policy, all concede as a premise that government plays a fundamental and vital role in our economy. That's the one reason why I'm interested in industrial policy because you don't have to have that debate. It understands that markets are not free and never have been. It's embedded in that discourse; people don't like talking about it.

We have an industrial policy for our financial sectors. We have a robust industrial policy for the fossil fuel sector, which is why it's going to be very difficult to retire it...there are no special tax breaks for certain kinds of industry. It's just a matter of what we're prioritizing and that's a question of power.

Ashley Hopkinson : In a space where power comes up alot; what is a major challenge in this work and how do you overcome those challenges?

Demond Drummer: It's the internecine— these rivalries of competition of what should be our issue priorities in light of scarcity and philanthropy. That's kind of what it comes down to and in light of scarcity of time and bandwidth...I don't want to say aim higher because that's not what I mean, but there's a bigger fight. When I was working on the Green New Deal, I found myself in a conversation where folks and I were trying to construct care work as a green job. And I knew the frame was too small. The Green New Deal frame, I think it's fantastic (but) it doesn't cover the full range of priorities and concerns. We shouldn't have to frame everything as a climate issue... I think aggressive climate action is a fundamental part of human rights and inclusive economic rights. Yes, it's all there. And so it's not just climate, it's something bigger than climate that is inclusive of climate, but also inclusive of all the other priorities and things that we need. That's the North star that we need to be organizing around so that we can all win.

(We need to begin) investing directly in people and finding ways to do that. Unlike the federal government, state, local, territorial and tribal governments are constrained. They're financially constrained. But there's always an opportunity to demonstrate what, at some scale, a direct investment in people can do for the community that you're governing.

We criminalize poverty. It is literally the less money you have, the less resources you have, the more you are open to the full weight and force of our judicial system...Cook County (for example) is resolving medical debt at the county hospital system. So I think there's so many different things that

these local governments can do, within reason, just to signal and improve the model that these types of investments actually work. Ultimately, we have to demand that our federal government get in on this. Again, that's another power conversation.

Ashley Hopkinson: We learn a lot along the way from things that we've done, successes, what we might consider failures. What insight or teachable lessons do you have from the work you do?

Demond Drummer: We have to reserve and conserve. Energy, time, attention. We have to hold some of that back to innovate or take some steps that are not funded. We cannot move forward as a field and as a movement, if we're doing only what we're funded to do. We've got to hold some energy and attention and focus and time and resources, to go out and maybe prove something and bring funding along with us. Bring the movement and field along with us.

...What are we doing, making, building, growing, creating together to make sure that everybody's needs are met? That's a conversation that inspires, that people lean in on, that's a conversation where people can say, you know what? The economy, quote, unquote, "Doesn't work for me now. I don't have what I need." So what do you need?

That's the economic conversation that I want to facilitate with partners and that we are facilitating, and it's very exciting. We can't move so fast as a movement that we're moving away from people. I'm talking about people who aren't part of (traditional) foundations, and that's most people. We've got to lead the funding. We can't just follow.

We've got to branch out and lead and be okay with that. Be okay with some folks pushing the edges and pushing the envelope.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you very much.

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.*