

This policy forum is the brain child of the Political Economy department, and I think it's useful to take a moment to discuss what this odd name for a department means and why we are informally calling this forum, the Good conference.

Political Economy is not quite political science nor is it economics. It has features of both of these disciplines but it is actually quite distinct from them. Our contention is that political science and economics, as they are traditionally practiced, are not really helping us to understand our unique historical moment, and are not as suitable for a liberal arts college. Without getting into the nitty gritty and esoteric details that I do in my classes, these disciplines focus on creating abstract models, highly mathematical, that center around rational individuals. Those starting premises alone strip the world of its dynamic complexity, creating a one-dimensional representation, and provide no space for thinking about hidden and disturbing logics, like the irrational.

But more importantly, they are not interested in understanding what a good society consists of. Leave that for the philosophers, they would say. They are against defining the good because they believe themselves to be scientists who can't bias their study with preconceived notions of good. So they expunge thinking about goodness, justice, and the like entirely.

Political science began as a discipline trying to make the world a better place. But how do you do that if you won't engage in asking what is better?

By contrast, there's a strong history of political economists like John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx running through today who did and still do ask these kinds of questions. Political economy was birthed in not just describing what is, but also asking the big questions of what ought, as this modern, capitalist liberal democratic society emerged. It asked what a good political economy is? What standards do we use to determine whether the society is good? Who should be engaged in the determining what a Good society is?

My personal academic interests have led me to ask in my research and in my classrooms, what is a democracy? If we do value a democracy, what would it take to sustain it? What should citizens do if they want to have a democracy? What we are doing in political economy is precisely in line with these classic thinkers. Like them, we study politics and economics in their interconnections, and we connect this to the wider social features of our world. And like them, we are asking the big questions, as you'll see here today when we talk about taxes, education, housing, and reproductive rights.

Most importantly, The College of Idaho is uniquely positioned in this state to ask the big questions. Because other academic institutions are either unwilling or unable to do this.

The University of Idaho made national news recently. Staff and faculty were warned to remain neutral on abortion or face possible criminal charges under Idaho's abortion law. Boise State University recently cancelled 52 diversity-related courses after the state legislature cut \$409,000 from the BSU budget and threatened millions of dollars in more cuts. All of this because these public universities are reliant on government funds, which the legislature has interpreted as giving them authority to decide what happens in the classroom

This is dangerous territory for academic freedom, which permits the classroom space to be free to discuss any and all topics, no matter how controversial.

The fear of retributions and sanctions is enough to shut down any serious engagement with the most pressing issues facing Idaho today. But, at a liberal arts college, these kinds of conversations must be protected and had. The College of Idaho is not beholden to the same restrictions and fear because we are not sustained through public funds. So this is a space we want to own, where we want to tackle the big issues and we intend to do so through this forum every two years during the elections. And we believe this is vital for a democratic society.

We are putting this forum on because we think a healthy democracy needs to have space for non-partisan information and reasoned dialogue.

The College of Idaho has hosted political and election events in the past, but not like this. My esteemed predecessor Jasper Licalzi hosted many candidate debates on this campus. But with his retirement and my hiring, the political economy department wanted to do something different and move beyond the traditional debate style. We've seen these debates unfold on TV as media spectacles and vapid rituals where candidates answer the questions they want; not the ones they are asked. Where they promote themselves but not discuss the substantive issues.

We think that it's more important for citizens to be informed about what's happening in their lives and their community but we know that's hard because people today are too busy just living and trying to survive than keep up with the constant twists and turns of politics and what's happening behind the scenes. So we are here with a wide range of experts to talk about Idaho's most pressing political, economic and social issues with the only goal of informing you.

This is not some partisan and ideological space of indoctrination. Far from it, we have aimed to have balanced panels of accomplished experts in their fields. Before you can have a discussion of what is good and what one should do, you need to be informed with reliable knowledge. This is the intention today.

The other side of this is dialogue. The point is not so much to derive solutions to any of these issues today but to generate vibrant engagement, to get people talking in productive ways. We are living in a particular historical moment where we are losing a necessary ingredient in the recipe for a healthy democracy - the ability to talk to each other. In the era of social media, the skills of dialogue are eroding beneath the memes, tweets, and likes that reduce communication to visuals, sound-bites and polarizing rhetoric. In addition, our online experiences are intentionally crafted behind the scenes by algorithms that curate our digital feeds and news consumption and engender echo chambers. The public sphere today does exist online, but it's not really a great way to have conversations about tough topics.

Compounding this is our polarized landscape with heightened party disagreements. We talk past each other, or over each other but we don't listen to each other. We don't seek common ground but instead we just want to win.

These circumstances have created an immense amount of apathy and disengagement from discussing politics because many see this as not worth their time nor effort, without any tangible gains. Instead of apathy, we are encouraging engagement. Instead of echo chambers, we want to create new interactions that cross ideological and identity barriers.

To have a democracy we have to actually be able to listen to each other, especially to the people who are not like ourselves. This must be intentional listening, not just listening to talk, as is often the case. In many ways, listening is far more important and difficult than talking. It's the precondition for dialogue.

So, we want The College of Idaho to be the place in Idaho to tackle the significant and tough issues, to ask the big questions, and create a space of deliberative engagement. We want to model civil dialogue on these tough issues. We want our students involved but also the wider Idaho community, you all in attendance today.

- *Dr. Stelios Panageotou's opening remarks prior to the Idaho Policy & Politics Forum on October 27, 2022.*