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Powers, John & Vikram Khanna. The Future of the Economy. East-West Perspectives on Pathways through Disruption. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

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Powers, John & Vikram Khanna. *The Future of the Economy. East-West Perspectives on Pathways through Disruption*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

The Future of the Economy. East-West Perspectives on Pathways through Disruption is the result of the research project “The Future of Cities,” launched in 2014 by the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities of Singapore University of Technology and Design. The volume summarizes and develops the results of an international roundtable organized by the Centre in January 2017 that brought together international experts, high-level Singapore government officers, leading companies, academics, and World Bank officers. On that occasion, the participants discussed issues concerning labor, productivity, infrastructure development, growth, and the role of governments in drawing the future of the world’s economy. The volume develops the outputs of that conversation and offers a brief but comprehensive summary able to introduce the reader to the most important socio-economic emergent trends of the global economy.

The volume is structured in six chapters that lead the reader from a reflection on the relationship between employment and automation (chapter 1) to an analysis of the links between economic growth and new technologies (chapter 2), social inclusion (chapter 3), infrastructure development (chapter 4), and government regulation (chapter 5). The book closes focusing on Asia and, in particular, Singapore, highlighting the main assets and opportunities for the region to boost its development (chapter 6). In their examination, the authors assert that the future of Singapore’s economy lies in the future of its labor market, which is marked, on the one hand, by the massive implementation of labor-saving technologies and, on the other, the emergence of alternative work arrangements, such as online gig work or offline alternative work driven by staffing agencies.

Over the past decade, the authors explain, despite its survival in the face of economic crisis, the future and sustainability of Singapore’s labor market has become increasingly precarious—due largely to the attempts of market actors to sharpen their competitive advantages in face of the post-2008 global economic crisis by reducing their production costs. As a result of such efforts, while new automation has been introduced, the role of the traditional labor force has been reduced, as human resources strategies have been increasingly based on the use of temporary workers hired through staffing agencies. While in the short run, this strategy has resulted in the survival of many market actors, it raises questions about efficacy and sustainability. The authors point out the necessity of reconsidering this strategy—which is limited in its ability to foster lifelong learning within the labor force—and suggest a reframing of the relationship between human labor and automation in terms of an alliance rather than contraposition. They argue such an alignment requires a fundamental reconsideration and reform of education curricula in order to overcome the skills gap between labor market demands and the actual education received by students during their studies. This need is particularly urgent considering the fact that “many economies in the years ahead will be reliant on greater proportions of older workers ...; the ability [to] upgrade workers’ skills with a strong focus on capability development will be an imperative for economics to remain competitive in a global environment characterized by a tightening supply of skilled labor supply” (p. 14). In this future scenario, as the role of the state shifts “from being less of a resource distributor and decision maker to that of risk manager” (p. 16), the role of innovation itself becomes key (in terms of new technological development) to creating new opportunities for employment and opening new markets and perspectives of growth. In this regard, the volume mostly points out the positive contribution technology and automation can have in transforming the market and labor market, dealing only marginally with other aspects and externalities of technological development such as

environmental impact. Significant attention is, however, given to the possible social costs of this shift, in terms of social marginalization.

The authors examine the crisis the middle class is internationally experiencing and the increasing polarization of society. Specifically, they highlight the role of economic redistribution, actualized through taxation and transfers, which are “the single most important factor in buffering vulnerable population[s] against even more welfare-compromising outcomes” (p. 26). Thus, despite the work’s focus on the importance of market development, the authors do not overlook or minimize the importance of the public sector. Rather, they reconsider it and point out its crucial contribution to social inclusion and infrastructure building. The latter is a key sector needed to sustain future development, and the state, the volume suggests, plays a pivotal role in promoting the development of new infrastructure in the fields of transportation and communications. In this regard, the authors suggest a move from the present short-term planning—an approach shared by most of the developed countries’ governments—to long-term planning, as long-range infrastructural design is the only approach that can offer ultimate resilience, in so far as it is not only forward-thinking and influential (both for policy and strategy) but also people-centric (pp. 37-38, 41-42). This reasoning leads to a critical analysis and an appreciation of the role of cities as the key geographical level at which to promote and foster innovation in terms of culture, production, and entrepreneurial practices and products. In its entire length, the book presents these theses, offering examples from Western and Far-Eastern countries.

The contents of the book should be considered in relation to the limited length of the volume. Overall, the volume is a functional and effective introduction to the theme of economic progress. It develops the theme by considering the link between education, social growth, and technological development, although it marginalizes other aspects of the ongoing debate, such as the relationship between economic and social growth and environmental conservation or the global socio-economic imbalance between developed and developing countries and its repercussions. Thus, it is an introductory reading that can be useful especially for students interested in the social aspects of economic development. Thanks to its attention to Far-Eastern countries, such as China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, the volume offers examples not always addressed in other similar readings. Therefore, it may be a stimulating resource with which European or North American readers can begin their broader researches aimed at exploring the economic development of Far-Eastern nations and the possible social effects associated with such development.

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