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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



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Introduction

The world is changing rapidly and many of us no longer have a clear gestalt as to what is happening. The pandemic has shown us that some jobs can be performed almost anywhere; however, two-thirds of the jobs in the US cannot be performed online. Ro Khanna offers us interesting insights and proposes many programs to make those changes fit with our society's democratic values. Khanna is an impressive individual. Born in Pennsylvania to Indian immigrants, he obtained his undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago and his law degree from Yale. He taught at Stanford before being elected to the House of Representatives, representing the only Asian-majority district in the continental US, Silicon Valley. He is one of the few Representatives who does not take money from political action committees.

The three aspects of Silicon Valley that attracted him (aspects that he largely finds lacking in DC) are these: 1) people are encouraged to take risks and are not penalized for failure, 2) people think big, and 3) those who are unconventional are not shunned. I believe that good academe offers those aspects as well. Khanna, however, later (p. 24) noted a serious weakness of many in academe: "Scientists are too often content to talk to other scientists in prestigious journals with insufficient consideration for communicating with the public." While we know exceptions to this statement, many of us in academia are, no doubt, well described by it.

Khanna is critical of many institutions in the US, including the Congress. He does not delve into the political perspectives of the two parties, but rather notes many Capitol Hill staffers resist change as they have been captured by decades of status quo interests and thinking. This criticism reminds us of what civil servants did when Jimmy Carter tried to introduce zero-based budgeting that had worked in Georgia but fell flat when he tried to implement it nationally.

Khanna is also critical of the tech giants, several of which are headquartered in his district. During the pandemic from March 2019 to April 2021, America's 719 billionaires saw their wealth increase by more than 50%. Most of the tech billionaires are aware that considerable amount of tech-generated wealth is shared and distributed to good causes by organizations like the Gates Foundation. Khanna, however, accuses the tech giants of satisfying "their consciences by depositing monthly checks

indefinitely to their fellow citizens in the rest of the country” (p. 9). He justifies this criticism by noting that people do not simply want to be taken care of. Rather, they wish to be agents of their own lives and productive members of society. Further, he notes that the gap between the incomes of those at the top and workers are unconscionable. For example, the minimum wage rose with productivity from 1938 to 1968, but not since. Had it risen with productivity, it would be \$24 an hour.

The failure to monitor social media well is another of Khanna’s criticism. The government can only prohibit speech if it is directed to inciting lawless action and is likely to produce such action. Yet, Facebook reported in a two-month period that there were 59,853 messages about public officials, messages mentioning intent to inflict injury. Our culture generally finds racist behavior unacceptable and the major social media platforms appear to be restricting such behavior, but newer startups provide opportunities to express values seen to be unacceptable by most people in the culture (see Dholakia, Ozgun and Atik (2022) for an interpretive probe of ‘misinformation’). A study conducted at MIT found that falsehoods on social media spread six times faster than true statements and are 70% more likely to be shared. Those of us who are retired may not be big users of social media; today’s young however people are big users. Over 75% of children under 13 use YouTube daily, 45% use Facebook daily, and 40% use Instagram. Parents across the US are trying to have certain books removed from school libraries; they should pay as much attention to what their children are processing on social media.

Khanna’s strongest criticisms are directed to government funding, especially that for the Department of Defense. Khanna serves on the House’s Armed Services Committee, making him privy to a lot of numbers. The committee has 56 members. I agree with the definition of a committee that says it is one in which a group of people take minutes and waste hours. And even the worst academic committees do not have 56 members. The US was spending half of its budget of \$700 billion on defense when the book was being written, compared to \$40 billion on National Institute of Health (NIH), \$8 billion on Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and \$70 billion on education. The US has been spending about \$200 million on at-home virus test and new vaccines, which is less than a quarter of what the Pentagon spends on its musical bands each year. A *New York Times* columnist wrote that the US ranks 97th in access to quality health and 91st in access to quality education. Khanna suggests that the government support of the defense budget is due in part to the defense industry having spread employment to almost every congressional district.

Importance of Stakeholders

Having become a macro-marketer over my career, I was pleased to see that Khanna considered a wide range of stakeholders in his analyses. Since I was primarily a consumer behaviorist, I will focus on consumer stakeholders.

One major split we see in the US today is the urban/rural split. Since 2008, 72% of the US population growth has taken place in cities with more than one million people. Much of Khanna's proposed solution to the urban/rural split involves geographic movement in the other direction. What we learned about working remotely during the pandemic makes the possibility of seeing growth in digital geographic diversity a real one. At this point in time, more than 21 million Americans lack affordable internet access, with more than 25% of them in rural areas. The availability of internet access will improve greatly under Biden's programs. Khanna argues that many digital jobs do not require a college degree, and gives examples of how out-of-work adults in small towns have been trained to perform those jobs. He suggests that efforts should focus on training younger people to perform tech jobs: "in towns of a few thousand, training even 25 young residents a year can be a game changer and turn the local economy around" (p. 37). He argues that jobs can give Americans pride in restoring their communities with many important customs intact.

An alternative to training locals to handle tech jobs would be to encourage already trained tech workers to move to rural areas. A recent survey of professionals in Silicon Valley, Seattle, and New York City found that two-thirds of them are willing to relocate to less expensive locales. Whether a town of a few thousand would be seen as attractive to them could be an issue. On the other hand, it is not clear how welcome the tech professionals would be, as longtime residents may have concerns about the character of the community when the outsiders arrive (see, for example, Dholakia 2022; for an opinion on a fast-transforming rural county in California). They may foresee rising housing costs, increased traffic, overcrowded schools, and gentrification [I love that word]. This concern about the fit of the new tech professionals may also apply to the young locals trained as tech professionals even if they grew up in the community. What's to keep these young people in the small towns? Family ties no doubt exist, but young people tend to want more excitement in their lives than do older generations. Khanna addresses this issue: "...to convince people to stay [both professionals who have moved in as well as locals with newly acquired job skills], areas must invest in new restaurants, affordable housing, public transport, theaters, music venues, and sports facilities" (p.

46). These improvements will not come cheaply. But as Khanna (p. 50) notes, the Fed's original charter included regional development.

A second group of stakeholders needing attention is the Black and Brown population in the country. To some extent, race concerns overlap with urban/rural concerns. People of color make up nearly 20% of rural America, though its geographical distribution varies by race. For example, only 9% of the Black population is in the West, whereas 60% is in the South. Latino Americans are far more likely to be in the Southwest and California. Racial discrimination is well documented and is covered in the book. For example, the US with 5% of the world's population, has 25% of the world's prison population and a recidivism rate of 50%. The Black and Latino community comprise 56% of those incarcerated. A McKinsey report noted that that Black workers have jobs that are at a higher risk of automation and warned that 4.5 million Black jobs could be eliminated over the next decade. The same report warned that Latino workers are even more at risk, as they are disproportionately in food service roles.

There are indications that minorities are attempting to fit into a digital world, as nearly 20% of computer science graduates are Black or Latino. However, they comprise less than 10% of technical employees at big tech firms. The pandemic has resulted in a wave of startups, but Khanna notes that Black startups have problems getting loans or early investment. This result was also found in a *Journal of Consumer Research* article by Bone, Christiansen, and Williams (2014).

A third stakeholder that Khanna discusses is the tech industry's employees. Some workers are not recognized as employees per se. As long as a company can document that it is not actively managing an employee's payroll or hiring/firing them, they may avoid the responsibility of being an employer. As noted earlier, the minimum wage has failed to rise proportionally with productivity since 1968. The outsourcing of lower level tasks has also reduced costs. Further, the failure to be recognized as employees limits their inputs to the firm about work conditions as well as the availability of some fringe benefits. Khanna relates this phenomenon to the limited amount of savings done by Americans for retirement, as some 60% of workers claim social security benefits before they reach the age of 66.

With the changes in the nature of work performed in the digital age, a major concern will be the need to retrain middle-aged workers. Khanna notes that our government only spends .03% of our GDP on worker training and placement; Germany spends .18% of their GDP on them.

Khanna's Recommendations

Most of the programs recommended by Khanna would require government funding. As discussed earlier, much of that could come from a reduced defense budget. Some of his recommendations are reminiscent of Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign in 2020, such as universal higher education. Another was Medicare for all; he dismissed the argument that it would swamp doctor offices by noting that many of us do not like going to the doctor. He also suggests moving to solar and wind sources of energy, arguing that they would generate more jobs than the fossil fuels industry does. He also supports the movement to electric vehicles, with tax credits given to American manufacturers in the short run and giving consumers a refundable tax credit at the time of purchase until electric vehicles constitute 75% of new car purchases.

He also lauds numerous existing programs. One is Representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's Homework Helpers program, which uses the internet to recruit people to virtually help low-income students with their homework. Another type of program is People Shores in Clarksville, Mississippi, which is training software developers. A third program is the Last Mile program which started at San Quentin prison and is now in several others. The program provides prisoners with two six-month computer-based courses, and then helps the prisoners find jobs when they are released. As of the time when the book was written, 700 prisoners had completed the program, 100 had obtained tech jobs making up to six figures, and not one graduate had returned to jail.

Khanna also offers an Internet Bill of Rights. The first issue is that of privacy and would require the individual's informed consent before personal data are collected, transferred, or used. Another issue is the Right to Repair tech devices locally rather than sending them back to the manufacturer to be fixed. He suggests that this would allow tinkerers across the country to participate in the tech economy. He also advocates that big tech mergers and acquisitions be monitored closely with some being disallowed. In the last three decades, Google has had 234 of them, Microsoft 221, Apple 108, Amazon 83, and Facebook 77. Only one was challenged in federal court. He is also concerned about the downside of social media usage. He advocates a program like that found in Finland, which teaches students about identifying misinformation and fake news (see again Dholakia, Ozgun and Atik 2022).

At many points in the book, Khanna states strongly that efforts to diversify digitally will need the cooperation of the big tech corporations. While computer science training is desired by the vast majority of students and would be supported by a vast majority of teachers, Khanna is not

optimistic that the education system can meet the need. Specifically, he doubts that university faculty are “nimble enough” to meet industry needs without the private sector’s direct participation.

The digital age is upon us, and radical changes are needed in the workforce. Dignity in a Digital Age provides much insight as to how these changes can take place in a democratic manner acceptable to our culture. It is definitely worth the attention of not just academic researchers and the general public, but also of policymakers at the federal and state levels, and of leaders of the tech and other major sectors.

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