Introduction

Piotr Dutkiewicz

It is trivial at this point to state that the world is in crisis. The aftereffects of the most recent global financial crisis continue to have major implications for the lives of tens of millions of people around the world, just as they continue to influence the fate of policymakers, political systems, and corporate behavior. Myriad other global crises—of democracy, governance, ecology, and inequality, among others—all contribute to a precarious present. Quite simply, we live in uncertain times—in a sort of ‘inter-regnum’ between old and new ruling paradigms.

This book is about ideas on how to cope with these global uncertainties. This is not a manifesto that presents a single, unified plan of action for moving forward. Rather, this book seeks to draw the contours of the near future, be it political, social, economic, or environmental. Its many eminent contributors propose innovative approaches to better understanding what is needed, to borrow Albert Einstein’s words, to “survive and move to higher levels.” Finally, this book is about ideas that can help to shape policies within and beyond national borders on a global scale.

What unites the contributors of this volume is that we believe that we live in a very fragile world. We need to have new ideas coming from different cultures and intellectual traditions to understand better both the threats that we face and potential solutions to the problems confronting us. We believe that by comparing the experience and ideas of some of the foremost thinkers in the world we can start devising practical advice on what can be done to allow us to achieve some degree of peace and prosperity in the years to come.
This means addressing multiple interconnected economic issues, but also the more broadly interconnected problems of limits to development, poverty alleviation, inequality, ecological crises, regional disparities, new modes of power shaping new structures of global dominations, the future of urbanization, strained multicultural coexistence, and the growing role of religion amid a wave of global postsecularism.

The idea for this book came to me in 2010, after the main blows of the financial turmoil of 2007–9 had already struck. As we lived through shock and deep crisis for almost two years, I was expecting a deep rethinking of the fundamental approaches to development and our expectations of the market and the institutions supporting it. Nothing like that happened. The crisis did not trigger an intellectual renaissance or even a set of more or less comprehensive ideas that could have been innovative enough to prevent similar tragedies in the future. In fact quite the opposite happened. Policymakers either seemed to ignore the substantive aspects of the problem or simply dusted off old cookbooks full of recipes from the 1930s, as if the current crisis were a carbon copy of the Great Depression. We have simply not been able to transcend the barriers of our past knowledge and our accepted paradigms, as if our collective imagination were permanently stunted.

As this project began, it became apparent I was not alone in my concerns. As one of our contributors, Jonathan Nitzan, remarks, “The Great Depression of the 1930s triggered such a revival. That crisis transformed the way we understand and critique society: it gave birth to liberal ‘macro’ economics and anticyclical government policy; it rejuvenated Marxist and other streams of radical thinking in areas ranging from political economy to philosophy to literature; and, by shattering many of the prevailing dogmas, it allowed the mutual insemination of ideologically opposing approaches. One would have expected a revival similar to that which followed the Great Depression in the current crisis, but so far the signs of such a revival are nowhere to be seen.” Ha-Joon Chang laments that for the majority who control capital or wield intellectual influence, “everything is fine. Even if it doesn’t look fine, it’s actually fine because we are all rational and markets are efficient.
So even if it looks chaotic and stupid, it really is the best of all possible worlds.”

My next, obvious question, then, was whether such an evaluation of our collective intellectual quandary was justified. Intuitively my preliminary answer was that there is neither a lack of ideas nor a lack of practical solutions but that most of these were simply not part of the dominant discourse that shaped the public mind. An intervening variable, I believe, is a lack of imagination among the global political class coupled with a very real fear of attempting new (and unproven) solutions. The only way to verify these ideas was to ask prominent thinkers how they saw the prospects of global human well-being and whether those ideas are implementable enough to serve as a guide to policies. In other words, we consulted those willing to speak truth to power. I was very pleasantly surprised and heartened that so many people and organizations were enthusiastic about the central idea and were keen to join me, including the coeditor of this volume, Richard Sakwa, and the project director of this venture, Vladimir Kulikov.

The choice of interlocutors was in a sense quite arbitrary and was based in large part on the perceived novelty of their contributions to our deeper understanding of policy-relevant ideas in key global issue areas. This is, of course, not an exhaustive set of leading thinkers on our uncertain world, and we hope that these conversations spark many more discussions and projects among academics, policymakers, and activists. The result of the fascinating process of digging deep into many great minds follows this introduction and will be subject to your own interpretations and evaluation. But before you delve into the book, I owe you a comment about the initial thesis that served as the take-off point of this volume: it proved to be correct. There are in fact many innovative ideas about how to look at our world and address its many problems. Equally important, there are people who can turn these into viable policy solutions.

We must recognize, however, that there is a multiplicity of reasons that such ideas are not in demand; they are rejected, marginalized, suppressed, or ridiculed. There are groups of people who have built their
career, identity, and wealth on a particular kind of economics and a particular kind of expert advice. They are used by the dominant power structures and by those elites who benefit so much from this economic status quo and indeed from the ongoing crisis.

Thus this book is a challenge to the intellectual status quo by proposing what we state in its title: 22 Ideas to Fix the World. This volume is neither left nor right; it adopts a mostly evolutionary approach to change by proposing concrete solutions to strategic areas of our life that we all treasure.