

If only protestors would behave (globalisation and health)

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Richard Feachem creates a straw man of the anti-globalisation protestors. For example, he asserts that protestors rarely complain of corrupt and inefficient governments in low income countries. I argue that many such governments form part of the global caste system (a hybrid of class and caste) that acts with reckless disregard to endanger global civilisation.⁽¹⁾ When President Mobutu came to Washington with his entourage did the US government protest? Did not the Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating revere President Suharto as an elder statesman?

Feachem appears to suggest that inequality has not recently increased, both between and within nations. Although the rate of increase in international inequality in exchange adjusted terms has declined in recent years and may have actually reversed in the mid-1990s,⁽¹⁾ does Feachem seriously suggest that global income inequality has improved in the last three decades, the period when economic liberalism has most dominated global economic policy? Some social scientists do suggest that that inequality, in purchasing power parity terms, has improved over this time.² However, all studies that I am aware of support the UNDP's argument that exchange-adjusted inequality has increased substantially since the 1960s, including a review of several such studies.⁽³⁾ The purchasing power parity arguments are also flawed by numerous Eurocentric assumptions.⁽¹⁾

The most comprehensive analysis of trends in intra-country income distribution that I know of ⁽⁴⁾ was analysed by comparing the annual growth in income for the poorest quintile of 60 countries that satisfied pre-defined criteria with the annual growth of the entire national income.⁽⁵⁾ This analysis categorised nations into three groups; in which the share of the poorest quintile was improving (20), static (17), or deteriorating (23). At face value, these figures suggest little change. Yet weighting these nations by population provides compelling evidence of increasing national income inequality.

Unlike many economists who argue that increasing inequality is irrelevant, claiming "a rising tide lifts all boats" Feachem implicitly agrees that increased inequality is problematic. But it is worth examining these tired arguments, because they are repeated so frequently. They usually conclude that continued growth, rather than redistribution, is the only way to solve poverty. Firstly, this ignores psychology. I may be happy to receive a 5% bonus, until I find my neighbour has a 10% bonus (for the same work). Secondly, this argument assumes that global human carrying capacity is still highly elastic, while increasing evidence suggests, in fact, that it is rapidly approaching its limits.⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾ What happens to an over-inflated balloon?

Feachem selects a few examples of how international attention has prolonged the lives of dissidents, and reduced civil conflict. He ignores the countless other cases where such attention has failed. The definition of globalisation is inevitably selective; indeed the term is almost useless because of this.⁽⁹⁾ Feachem suggests that it includes openness to ideas. Where is the evidence that the SLORC, who rule Myanmar are open to ideas? How has this prolonged the life of Aung Sun Suu Kyi?

No analyst of the global economy that I know of disputes the value of technology. Technologies such as the telephone and antibiotics have successfully diffused for many years, including well before the shift to the political right that has occurred in recent decades, my own pet definition of the globalisation that distinguishes today's economic environment from trends that have been evolving for centuries.⁽⁹⁾ The openness to trade that Feachem speaks of may be a good idea, but is yet to be tried, particularly with the entry of agricultural products to high-income countries. Free trade may escape zero-sum games if negotiations are conducted between equal partners, but unequal power is likely to exacerbate inequality. For this reason, the fairer trade Feachem speaks of is unlikely to be attained.

Finally, Feachem cites Lomborg's book as an antidote to alleged public health pessimism. Concerns of planetary overload are held not only among the public health community, but widely by the general scientific community.⁽¹⁰⁾ The reviews that I have read of Lomborg's book suggest that he has selectively chosen indicators of improving environmental change, of which there are many. But no major indicators of global, as opposed to regional environmental change have yet occurred many, such as the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases, will inevitably continue to deteriorate for decades.⁽¹⁾ Regional improvements are unsurprising, because wealthy populations are able to both obtain raw material from poorer, less powerful populations, and to also offshore their pollution to the same populations.

Feachem is right to point out the incoherence of many of the protestors. But his analysis will only increase the polarisation of the debate. The most hopeful analysis of the anti-globalisation movement is that collectively, humanity, a product of evolution, may yet act in time to ensure that evolution continues. Rising international and national inequality, together with the unprecedented conversion of irreplaceable natural capital to transitory baubles is ample cause to explain the inchoate rage of the anti-globalisation movement.

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