

TOWARDS GLOBAL REDISTRIBUTION

Introduction

Today's global economy is marked by astounding inequalities. It means offshore finance, airport boutiques, and high-speed Internet for some people, but dollar-a-day wages, used t-shirts, and illiteracy for others. Recent research suggests that the richest 1 per cent of world population own 48.2 per cent of all assets, while the bottom half own less than 1 per cent of economic wealth (Crédit Suisse 2014). How do these highly skewed distributions happen, and what can be done to counter them?

To answer this question requires three steps of diagnosis, prescription and process. Diagnosis asks how current circumstances of global political economy generate highly skewed distributions of world resources. Prescription asks how alternative principles and rules of global governance could yield progressive redistributions of world resources. Process asks what opportunities and obstacles for implementation face these proposals for change. In short: how did we get here; where do we want to go instead; and how do we get there?

In line with these questions, the next section describes the nature and extent of material inequalities in today's global economy, thereby summarising the problem under investigation. Thereafter the second section identifies broad circumstances that give rise to these resource gaps, noting in particular the role of rules and policies. The third section reviews general types of prescriptions for global redistribution. The fourth section surveys process, assessing key possibilities and challenges in the politics of global redistribution.

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Problem: Global Inequalities

Recent research indicates that, as of 2008, the top 5 per cent of households worldwide obtained two hundred and forty-five times more income than the bottom 25 per cent (Milanovic 2013). Yes, that is an astounding ratio of 245:1.

Moreover, this calculation only covers income and excludes assets. The Cr dit Suisse research cited above shows how much higher still the ratio rises if the value of private property is also brought into the equation.

Economic inequality across today's global population is larger than inequality within just about every country in the world. The global-scale Gini coefficient is reckoned to be as high as 70 (Milanovic 2012; also Nissanke and Thorbecke 2007). This number is equivalent to the highest country-based Gini coefficient (namely, for South Africa). A global Gini of 70 makes Brazil at 55 and USA at 48 look egalitarian by comparison, not to mention Slovakia at 26 and Sweden at 25 (Gini 2014).

The focus in the present discussion is deliberately on *global* material inequality. Researchers have typically calculated resource distributions in relation to country units (cf. Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Ostry *et al.* 2014; Piketty 2014). Yet with heightened globalisation over the past half-century it increasingly makes sense to assess economic inequality also on a planetary basis. Of course world-scale inequality is not new to recent decades, with economic disparities between continents growing particularly after the early nineteenth century (Maddison 2001; Bourguignon and Morrison 2002). However, contemporary globalisation has hugely increased the amounts, types, frequencies, speeds, intensities and impacts of transplanetary transactions and interdependencies (Scholte 2005: chs 2, 3). Thus material inequalities are now more deeply entwined in global relations (Weiss 2005; Therborn 2006). Resource gaps have become that much more a function of the ways that people are connected on a planetary scale – and by implication those gaps could be reduced if global relations were organised differently.

Global inequality is complex (Holton 2014). It is not merely, or even

primarily, a question of rich countries and poor countries. Nor is it simply a question of wealthy classes and deprived classes. Nor are the cleavages only between western and non-western cultures, or between men and women, or between whites and coloureds, or between middle-aged and youth. These various axes of inequality intersect with each other in intricate ways. Global economic gaps tend to become particularly large and entrenched when several structures of privilege intersect (e.g. rich country and wealthy class) and when several structural disadvantages converge (e.g. female gender and black race).

Enormously skewed distributions in today's global economy fail pretty well every test of equity. Hundreds of millions lack access to resources which could substantially improve their life chances (Collier 2008). Oases of concentrated plenty amidst sweeping deserts of deprivation offend most moral sensibilities (Caney 2005; Pogge 2008). Huge resource inequalities easily subvert democracy as the wealthy capture regulatory processes. Consequent feelings of injustice can weaken social solidarity and fuel (violent) social conflict. In addition, overconsumption by the very rich and resource exhaustion by the desperately poor inflict major environmental damage. In sum, large inequalities undermine a good society: economically, morally, politically, ecologically (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Therborn 2013).

And yet so little is done to reverse global economic inequality with proactive progressive global redistribution. 'Aid' and 'development cooperation' have a redistributive motivation, but their flows are paltry relative to global resource gaps. 'Fair trade' constitutes but a tiny fraction of overall world commerce. Transactions in alternative currencies amount to seconds of turnover on global financial markets. Global justice campaigns for *inter alia* debt cancellation and access to essential medicines usually take years to achieve limited results. Meanwhile a more comprehensive systematic programme of global is not in sight.

Certainly there has been periodic collective resistance against global inequality. Already 150 years ago labour movements urged international action to counter class inequalities (van Holthoorn and van der Linden 1988). In the 1970s

governments of the so-called 'Third World' jointly campaigned for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that would reduce resource inequalities between rich and poor countries (Murphy 1984). Around the turn of the millennium a so-called 'anti-globalization movement' (AGM) attacked neoliberal capitalism for producing unacceptable material inequalities worldwide (Starr 2001). Similar arguments were revived during 2011-12 in Occupy and related protests on behalf of 'the 99%' (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014).

Class-based mobilisations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century achieved some significant progressive redistribution of resources on a national scale. Welfare states developed in certain countries, and anti-capitalist regimes emerged in communist-ruled countries. On the whole national inequalities came down considerably during this period, particularly in the first and second worlds, albeit that they have widened again in many countries since the 1980s (Roine and Waldenström 2014).

Thus far initiatives of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have not achieved similar progressive redistribution on a global scale. The NIEO, the AGM and Occupy have each subsided without advancing a global welfare state or other significant global redistributive policies. However, experience from the era of nationalised capitalism suggests that such outcomes take time. The current moment in the mid-2010s may be a waystation in a long-term struggle for global reallocation. On this reading the need for fresh creative proposals remains great.

Diagnosis: Governance Matters

Struggles for global redistribution can be greatly strengthened when actors understand the dynamics that generate the large inequalities. Strivings for change can be more effective when the sources of the problem are clearly identified, so that campaigners know what to target. To be sure, multiple and at some points conflicting explanations for global inequality are available.

Nevertheless, several broad points can be advanced regarding the causes of global resource gaps.

One such point is that today's global inequalities have not developed purely by accident. To be sure, accidents of birth substantially determine whether individual persons land in one or the other household, country, class, gender, race, etc. – and have their life chances affected accordingly. However, the material inequalities into which people are born have not come from thin air. They are a product of particular historically located social forces. Global economic gaps are not random, but result from certain kinds of social relations.

A second key point regarding causes of global inequality is that the huge scale of current gaps is not required in order to incentivise economic innovation and effort. Wealthy people do not need to earn several hundred times as much as poor people before they will work energetically and creatively. Conversely, impoverished people arguably would increase outputs if they obtained more than tiny fractions of overall wealth. Indeed, countries with lower Gini coefficients do not ipso facto have lower efficiency and reduced standards of living. The opposite can as well be the case, as comparisons between low-Gini Europe and high-Gini Africa indicate. Perhaps deeper egalitarianism can somewhat weaken personal work incentive, as certain evidence from the most progressively redistributive social democracies suggests (Lundberg 1985; Andersen 2008). However, global-scale egalitarianism is hardly on the horizon, and lowering the global Gini coefficient from 70 would, one could safely surmise, sooner raise economic productivity than reduce it.

A third general point of explanation is that large global inequalities can be encouraged when capitalism combines with individualism. Capitalism gears economic activity towards the accumulation of surplus, so that people produce ever greater resources beyond their subsistence needs. The question then arises how to divide those surpluses across society. Approaching allocation in a collectivist fashion – where surplus is seen to belong to the population as a whole – tends to yield more even distributions. Approaching allocation in an individualist

fashion – where surplus is assigned to personal ownership – tends to produce more skewed distributions. To this extent liberal capitalism – with its emphasis on competition among utility-maximising individuals – can be a major force driving (global) material inequalities.

A fourth broad point on causes of global inequality is that positions along the collectivist-individualist spectrum are substantially influenced by policy choice. Neither capitalism nor the way that resulting surpluses are distributed is a ‘natural’ process. So-called ‘market forces’ do not exist outside society and politics. Instead, it is socially constructed rules that bring order and direction to an economy, and these rules substantially shape distributional outcomes. This principle – that governance matters – is as valid for a global economy as it is for any national or local economy.

To take some concrete examples, it matters hugely for the nature and scale of global inequalities when rules governing money determine that certain currencies such as the euro will circulate across the planet, while others such as the kwacha will not. Likewise, it matters substantially for the distribution of global resources when intellectual property regimes divide benefits between inventors and users in particular ways rather than others. It also matters enormously for the division of global wealth when rules of taxation determine who pays how much to which public authority. It furthermore greatly matters how rules of social policy set minimum wages, pension arrangements, access to health care, etc. And it matters considerably for global resource distribution when migration rules allow some people to move with relative ease across the planet, while others are locked into (usually highly disadvantaged) places.

Hence huge global inequalities prevail in good part because existing governance arrangements create and sustain those gaps. By the same token, alternative rules and regulatory institutions for the global economy could significantly reallocate resources more evenly across humanity. Indeed, major progressive redistribution of global resources *requires* major changes in global economic governance.

Prescription: New Rules

How could rules and regulatory institutions of the global economy be reshaped to generate a more even and equitable distribution of resources? The changes can be made in relation to specific regulatory measures as well as through transformations in underlying principles of political-economic organisation. Change in institutional policies would involve, say, a new law or a new tax, while change in deeper structures would involve, for example, a reconfiguration or transcendence of capitalism.

In terms of general policy orientation, prescriptions for global redistribution can be distinguished along conformist, reformist and transformist lines. Of course, like any analytical distinction, this three-way division is overly neat. In practice there is much diversity within each category and some overlap between them. Nevertheless, it is conceptually useful and politically important to highlight broad qualitative differences regarding the degree of change in governance that various proposals seek.

Conformist perspectives hold that existing governance arrangements of the global economy are generally adequate to deliver a suitable distribution of resources (Wolf 2004; Bhagwati 2007). Such analyses suggest that, to achieve sufficient global equity, nothing is needed beyond fine tuning of established rules and regulatory institutions of neoliberal market capitalism (on neoliberalism, see Harvey 2005). Possibly certain philanthropic interventions (à la Gates Foundation) are wanted to alleviate the deepest poverty. Several neoliberal economists have also made equity (alongside efficiency) arguments for the removal of immigration restrictions (Caplan 2012). However, conformist perspectives generally hold that no substantial policy reconstruction is required to obtain a just global distribution.

In contrast to conformism, reformist perspectives regard existing policies as a major force behind unacceptable global inequalities. Reformists argue that altered rules and regulatory institutions within global capitalism can generate more even and equitable resource distributions. The phrase '*within* global capitalism' is key here. For reformists, unacceptable global inequality is not intrinsic to capitalism

itself, but a function of the kind of capitalism that policy choices produce. Examples of reformist changes include the development of a supranational global reserve system and a levy on international currency transactions.

In contrast to reformism, transformist perspectives maintain that unacceptable global material inequalities are inherent to contemporary surplus accumulation. On this premise, governance alterations which remain within a deeper structure of global capitalism can never generate a sufficiently even and equitable distribution of resources. For transformists, maldistribution can only be overcome by abandoning globalisation or capitalism, or both. In a transformist vein, some might argue that imperialist inequalities can be countered when peripheral countries decouple from global capitalism and local communities resist commodification. Other contemporary transformist proposals include so-called 'food sovereignty' and 'climate justice'.

In addition to variation along the reformism-transformism spectrum, prescriptions of new rules for global redistribution also hold different views on the suitable spatial scale for the pursuit of positive change. For instance, the food sovereignty movement takes a localist position that distributive justice is best achieved through small communities living within restricted territorial places. Other 'de-globalisation' strategies for equitable redistribution suggest combining local action with a reassertion of the nation-state. In contrast, other proposals emphasise global-scale interventions to counter global inequalities. Meanwhile others suggest a local-to-global transscalar approach that blends grassroots mobilisation, state policy, regional vision and global transactions.

Related to the issue of geographical scale, contemporary prescriptions for global distributive justice need to reflect carefully on the role of the territorial nation-state. For some, the state remains as vital for global redistribution today as it was for national redistribution a century ago. Certainly the state is in most parts of the world still the best resourced and most powerful governance institution. However, other strategies of redistribution place more emphasis on suprastate (regional and global) agencies and policies. These approaches maintain that a

capitalism which has substantially escaped country confines needs to be met with considerable regulation beyond the state. Then again localists argue that even the state is too distant from the everyday lives of marginalised people, so that progressive redistribution in today's more global world is most effectively achieved through local action (Hines 2000).

Finally, it is striking that prescriptions for global redistribution nowadays often have an explicit ecological aspect. Links between social justice and ecological integrity were generally missing in the NIEO movement of the 1970s. They were also generally more subdued in the anti-globalisation movement at the turn of the millennium. However, many today underline that redistribution needs to respect the limits of the Earth's carrying capacities. Thus it may not be ecologically possible to achieve a more equitable global resource allocation through additional 'green growth'. Instead, structural redistribution in today's global economy may require a reallocation of existing levels of output, or possibly even lower levels of overall world production (Elliott *et al.* 2008; Jackson 2009).

Process: Getting There

So far this paper has: (a) described the problem of contemporary global maldistribution; (b) identified the role of governance in generating that problem; and (c) surveyed proposals for new rules as a way to counter the problem. It remains to discuss process, namely, the politics of turning prescriptions into practice. After all, alternative ideas which are not implemented accomplish little for actually lived lives.

A first point regarding implementation is not to underestimate the strength of resistance against progressive redistribution of global resources. Large global corporations, G7 governments, and high net-worth individuals (hinkley) are generally not waiting to cede their entrenched material advantages. Moreover, this opposition to new rules for global redistribution has enormous lobbying capacities and media influence, as well as privileged access to important regulatory institutions. Elites can go far to preserve their economic and political advantages.

On a more optimistic note, the current rise of new actors in global political economy could improve the prospects for new rules with redistributive effects. However, the role of so-called ‘emerging powers’ and ‘BRICS’ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) warrants careful consideration. On the one hand, forces in Brazil have been key drivers of the World Social Forum as a major site for deliberations on global change (Sen and Waterman 2012), and the post-apartheid government in South Africa has strongly promoted Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). On the other hand, Brazil and India have often aligned with the EU and the USA in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and reallocation of votes towards the BRICS at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has not generated substantial policy alteration. Is capital investment in Africa any less imperialistic for coming from China rather than Europe? It remains to be seen whether ‘emerging powers’ will enlarge opportunities for major progressive global redistribution (among social groups as well as among countries) or whether BRICS will simply be new sites for the perpetuation of old structures of global inequality.

Actors involved in the politics of global redistribution have also changed over recent decades with major increases in civil society mobilisation. Relatively few citizen associations rallied to support the NIEO in the 1970s, but today thousands of advocacy groups around the world back a global justice agenda. They include movements for consumer protection, democracy promotion, environmentalism, health access, human rights, indigenous peoples, labour standards, peace, religious faiths, women, youth, etc. Occasions such as the AGM and Occupy have demonstrated the potential breadth of popular support for global economic redistribution.

The challenge is to convert such passing moments of generalised resistance into large, sustained, impactful campaigns that attain substantial lasting global political-economic change. In particular, a successful contemporary struggle for structural redistribution of global resources arguably requires a coalition across multiple movements (consumer, environment, women, etc.). Old strategies to achieve intra-country redistribution focused on labour unions, but this approach is

too narrow today. However, forging wider combinations of a ‘multitude’ can be challenging (Hardt and Negri 2004).

Also key to forging significant energies for global redistribution is to combine the forces of professional NGOs and grassroots social movements. Such alliances regrettably have remained largely underdeveloped to date. Part of the problem may be that most NGO activists (and indeed academic researchers) are privileged in the established distribution of global resources. Self-critical reflection is therefore required to think through how NGOs use their positions of advantage to unravel those very advantages. For example, how far will middle-class activists (of the kind who blocked the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement in 2012) go to a deeper reconstruction of economic governance? Relatedly, careful negotiation is needed around collaboration of elites with the subordinated circles who help make elite privilege possible. In this regard, for example, the global peasant movement La Vía Campesina has required that all of its leadership positions are filled by farmers, with elite participants restricted to support roles (Desmarais 2007).

Campaigns for global economic redistribution also face important tactical choices regarding the use of official and/or unofficial channels (Fogarty 2011; Dür and Mateo 2013). Sometimes movements may find it advantageous to engage with formal governance arrangements in efforts to refashion rules of the global economy. That means collaborating with local governments, national states, regional institutions and/or global governance agencies. Going the formal route, change agents might run for office, participate in official task forces, and so on. However, on other occasions mobilisations for global economic change may perceive more advantage in subversive resistance to established rules and regulatory bodies. In this case campaigners could pursue for example illicit trade, boycotts, barricades and occupations. Alternatively, strivings to achieve new rules for the global economy may combine above-ground and under-ground tactics.

Another issue of particular concern to contemporary political struggles for global economic change is the role of new social media (Aday *et al.* 2010; Fuchs 2014). Digital communications such as Internet and mobile telephony provide

today's campaigners with significant new possibilities of virtual mobilisation as well as additional tools for face-to-face advocacy. However, these new technologies may of course also be used to powerful effect by status-quo forces. Moreover, service providers and governments have considerable means to disrupt activists' access to digital networks. For some people the new ICTs can also invite a casual 'slacktivism', where preference clicks, Facebook 'likes' and online petitions displace sustained commitment for change. Thus, like the rise of BRICS, the spread of digital communications should not be automatically and uncritically embraced.

Whatever proponents of global redistribution make of new social media, the content of campaign communications themselves needs to be carefully formulated. In particular, activists must ponder their relationship to prevailing neoliberal talk about 'markets', 'efficiency', 'productivity', 'growth', 'development', and so on. Couching arguments for global justice in such 'commonsense' terms can have the advantage of appeasing elites, or perhaps even winning over elements of established power to the cause of redistribution. However, discourse concerning 'equal opportunity' for 'individual performance' in 'open markets' is arguably also an ideological underpinning of current global maldistributions, so that any appeal to such language could compromise a campaign for change.

An alternative strategy is insistently to invoke counter-discourses which disrupt established conversations, on the argument that a fundamental re-imagination of social reality is crucial to the actual reconstruction of that reality. Thus, for example, ideas of 'climate justice' offer more radical change than 'sustainability'. The challenge is to make such alternative language accessible and appealing to large publics.

Another form of re-imagination that could facilitate global redistribution relates to consciousness of global solidarity. Progressive resource reallocations within countries became politically more possible following the consolidation in the late nineteenth century of national consciousness. Ideas of national identity, community and solidarity – however mythical – provided a mind-set that disposed citizens to share resources more evenly with 'their people'. Humanitarian thinking

(‘we are all human beings’) has provided some mental underpinning for global redistribution, particularly in disaster situations. However, more comprehensive and lasting measures against 48.2%-for-1%, 254:1, and Gini-70 require deeper consciousness of global connections and global solidarities than generally prevail today.

In sum, the challenges facing structural redistribution in the global economy are many and deep. However, history teaches that structural change which initially may seem impracticable can unfold, sometimes with surprising rapidity. For example, the welfare state was hardly imagined in 1914, but it was extensively operational several decades later. Climate change policies have advanced much further than most people imagined twenty years ago.

Hence the possibilities for structural redistribution in the global economy can be greater than sceptics presume. The historical juncture for change may suddenly ripen tomorrow, and at that point it will be vital to have viable ideas ready. Indeed, the formulation and promotion of new ideas – including through our conference in St Petersburg – can also help to create those conditions for change.

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