

Globalisation, population, ecology and conflict

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Introduction: Health promotion, Keynesianism and neo-liberalism

The roots of health promotion lie in the effort to improve the social and environmental determinants of global health. This paper focuses on the recent economic and political history that underlies those determinants, rather than fully describing the implications of these changes for health (see Figure 1). Although the analysis in this paper is mainly at the global level, an understanding of these arguments provides insight into the evolution and situation of health, economy and environmental issues in Australia.

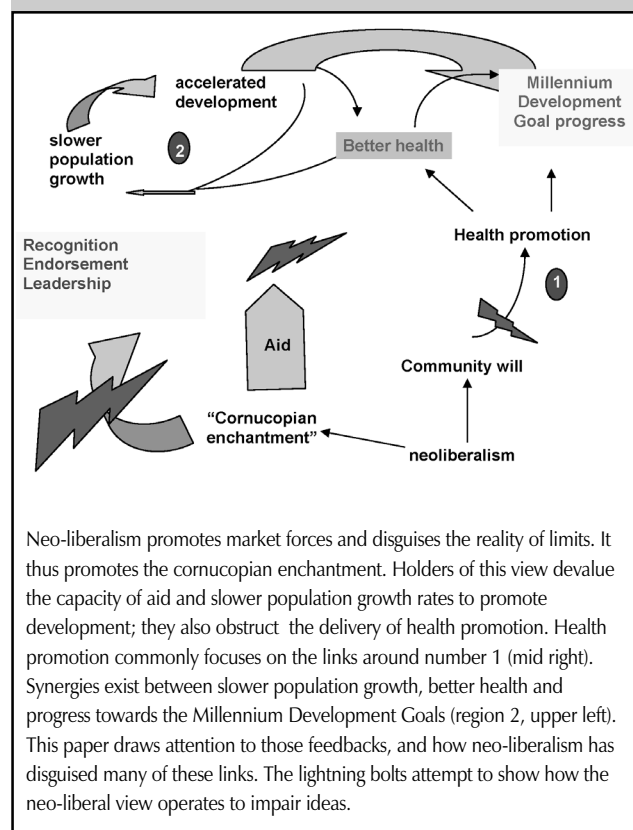
The challenge for health promotion has steepened in recent decades due in large part to the recent ascendancy of neo-liberalism and globalisation. These forces have rendered 'health for all' a faded mirage. Although globalisation has contested meanings and dimensions, there is widespread agreement that its most recent phase is characterised by a resurgence of faith in the benefits of market deregulation and smaller governance. An important aspect of deregulation is the selective removal of trade barriers, such as tariffs and subsidies. This is justified by the claim that the specialisation by nations in the manufacture and growing of products in which they have a comparative advantage will benefit all countries. However, like many of the claims about globalisation, these benefits are systematically exaggerated.

Advocates for trade deregulation claim that an 'invisible hand' – a systemic, emergent force beyond the control of any individual or section of the economy – will produce benefits that will enlarge the total 'cake' of the economy, allowing a trickle-down effect that reduces poverty and improves health. Earlier versions of this theory were known as *laissez-faire* capitalism. At its extreme, this can be considered as government by market forces. This form of capitalism – especially on its now-global scale – is seductive to many because it enhances material production while simultaneously shielding, muting and distancing the vast number of people who are disadvantaged by it. In reality, too, market deregulation has never been applied uncritically. Numerous subsidies and tariffs have been selectively retained (especially by developed countries) in ways that distort the free market and which enable the retention and even magnification of pre-existing inequalities.

The economic doctrine known as Keynesianism became dominant in the Anglosphere following World War II. It can be considered to have evolved and to have been accepted in reaction to the excesses of deregulated capitalism of earlier times.¹ Its founder, the British economist J. M. Keynes, had developed his theories between the world wars. This was a time of enormous economic and social turmoil, culminating in the Great Depression and the rise of European fascism. Keynes rejected socialism, but held that market forces must be reined by progressive taxation, cross subsidies, safety nets and good governance. Keynes was clearly opposed to excessive inequality. Indeed, as a young man Keynes appears to have foreseen the harm that grew from the excessively harsh terms the Allies imposed on Germany at the close of the Great War.² Showing foresight again at the end of his life, Keynes is thought to have sensed that the World Bank, an institution he had been instrumental in creating as a means to genuinely advance global equity, was instead to be misused by the United States (US) as a primary instrument of its foreign and trade policy.³ Of relevance for this paper, Keynes was a Malthusianist who recognised the existence of limits.

In the 1970s, several factors coalesced to undermine confidence in Keynesian theory. These factors included large increases in the price of oil and rising unemployment, leading to unprecedented stagflation. Initially, governments in the Anglosphere promised that the reforms of Keynesianism would

Figure 1: head to come



lead to not only greater but to *fairer* economic growth, via the trickle-down effect. Marketed initially to an overly trusting public as a compassionate solution (Szreter calls this “fool’s gold”),⁴ it is now clear that neo-liberalism is problematic for disadvantaged populations. It has led to increases in many forms of inequality, both within and between countries.⁵ These policies have also accelerated the destruction of immense stocks of natural capital.

In addition, as the hardships of the Depression and World Wars faded, parts of the workforce probably over-reached themselves, contributing to inflation and a backlash against both unions and Leftist policies. US President Reagan joined British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and others in the Anglosphere (including the Australian Labor Party) as vigorous promoters of freer markets. Susan George and others have also argued that a coalition of academics and vested interests lobbied with spectacular success to change global economic policy and to usher its most recent phase, often called neo-liberalism.⁶

Neo-liberalism weakens good governance, including by reducing taxes. It encourages the pursuit of private but the neglect of public goods. Consequently, neo-liberalism is bad news for the environment. Public goods, such as a stable climate, free scientific discourse and biodiversity-rich ecosystems, are particularly vulnerable to neo-liberalism because the market accords them no value at all.⁷

Keynes had emphasised the importance of economic redistributive mechanisms and government spending to support public goods and to smooth the economic cycle. Indeed, in the early post World War II period – the heyday of Keynesianism – the income and behaviour of the wealthy were comparatively restrained.^{8,9} Relevant to recent arguments used to justify cuts in taxation, the lack of stratospheric material rewards for corporate leaders at that time did not inhibit economic growth or technological progress. Instead, the era was one of great technological innovation and rapid improvements in global life expectancy. Global life expectancy soared because of the revolution in child survival in developing countries from the introduction of vaccines, antibiotics and oral rehydration.

This period also experienced an unprecedented level of global population growth, peaking at just over 2% a year in the late 1960s. National and global inequalities remained, but inequality was tempered by Keynesian policies and the public norms that underpinned them. These norms included criticism of ostentation, appreciation of comparative fairness and recognition of taxation as essential to supply public goods. Memories of the hardships of the Great Depression enhanced the popularity of these norms. Even in the US, inequality was lessened by social forces that lingered from the New Deal.⁹ Globally, inequality was restrained by the Marshall Plan, decolonisation and the emerging concept of foreign aid.

Rising concern over global population

Prior to the development of the Green Revolution (which fostered large increases in crop yields, especially of grains),¹⁰ the 1960s was a period of intense concern about population growth in developing countries. This decade opened with the great Chinese famine that killed about 30 million people, although it was almost completely unknown at the time in the West.¹¹ In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson shipped one-fifth of the US wheat crop as famine relief to India¹² on condition that that country — then with a population of fewer than 500 million — intensify its family planning campaign. Two years later, Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, one of several books released about that time which predicted millions of famine-related deaths by 2000.¹³

With hindsight, Ehrlich and his supporters under-estimated the success of the Green Revolution. Ehrlich has become an object of ridicule to some people, like Malthus before him (http://www.overpopulation.com/faq/people/paul_ehrlich.html). Yet in the late 1960s, Ehrlich’s views were highly credible. A series of US presidents from Kennedy to Carter accepted that reduced population growth rates were vital for development. For example, the former Republican US President Richard Nixon wrote:

“We must help break the link between spiralling population growth and poverty. ... Countries such as Mozambique, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Somalia will need to maintain real economic growth rates of 3% just to keep their per capita incomes from dropping. Unchecked population growth will put them on an ever-accelerating treadmill that will outpace any potential economic performance.”¹⁴

While Nixon published this in 1992, this view is very similar to the conclusion reached by the US National Academy of Sciences in 1971. It had been charged by his administration with examining the relationship between population growth and economic development. The modern plight of Ethiopia appears to justify Nixon’s concerns. In 1900, the Ethiopian population was five million. By 2006, it had grown to 64 million, of which one-eighth were receiving food aid, greater than its entire population in 1900.¹⁵

Nixon’s views contrasted with pro-natalist views, such as those expressed by Pope Paul VI:

“You must strive to multiply bread so that it suffices for the tables of mankind, and not rather favour an artificial control of birth, which would be irrational, in order to diminish the number of guests at the banquet of life.” (www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/p/popepaulvi116405.html)

Population revisionism and neo-liberalism

Critiques of neo-liberalism¹ rarely discuss its impact on global population policy. In part, this is because the Left has long had

an aversion to Malthus, instead focusing on distribution as the primary solution to poverty.¹⁶ Yet it is far from coincidental that the promotion of a *laissez-faire* approach to population coincided with the promotion of neo-liberalism.¹⁷ When questioned about population growth, President Reagan is reported to have stated that he considered the problem to have been “vastly exaggerated”.¹⁸ Reagan’s view on population was reflected by major changes in US Government family planning policy, first announced at the 1984 population conference in Mexico City.¹⁸

“Population revisionism” took hold.¹⁹ According to this perspective, theories that had been dominant in the 1950s and 1960s, and which regarded rapid population growth as harmful for development, could safely be abandoned. Eminent and formerly influential demographers such as Ansley Coale were transformed into dissidents, to be marginalised and pensioned off.

Perhaps Reagan’s supporters genuinely believed that *laissez-faire* population growth was the royal road to development in poor countries, as the economist Julian Simon claimed.²⁰ Perhaps there was speculation that millions of additional people in developing countries might one day provide a cheap and abundant labour force, a ‘reserve army’ of the poor, which would have the effect of forcing lower labour costs (for ‘unskilled’ work) in a globalised economy. Or perhaps elites in developed countries didn’t care. After all, according to the simplistic distortion of Adam Smith’s theories that neo-liberalism constituted,²¹ the ‘invisible hand’ of self interest would create the maximum global good.

The influence of neo-liberalism thus helped legitimise further cuts in foreign aid budgets, ushering the 1980s, sometimes called the Lost Decade of Development. It may also be considered the heyday of the “cornucopian enchantment”.²² According to this doctrine,²⁰ natural limits no longer existed in any meaningful sense.

In the 1970s, Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren had coined the formula $I=P*A*T$. Simply put, they argued that environmental impact (I) is a function of population, affluence (or level of consumption) and technology.²³ But cornucopians imagined that technology, ingenuity, trade and the marvels of the market would always substitute for important shortfalls, whether of food, water or charismatic species. In the cornucopian view, the P factor is irrelevant.

Relatedly, the theory of the causes of conflict has increasingly been diverted from resource constraints to a tangle of proximal factors. Thus, dominant opinion has largely attributed violence, including in Rwanda,²⁴ Iraq and Palestine, as having root causes other than resource scarcity (in these cases fertile land, oil and water). Similarly, famine is generally attributed to natural disasters or bad governance, but never to fundamental limits. To do so

risks awakening from the cornucopian enchantment. In reality, war and famine can almost always be analysed as socio-ecological phenomena whose roots are neither entirely social nor material.²⁵

Domestic self-interest, international indifference and security

Neo-liberalism interacts with global population policy in several other ways. First, it attempts to legitimise and even to celebrate individual selfishness. This is shown in the propensity for our culture to transform billionaires who are self-confessed tax minimisers into celebrities rather than objects of ridicule and disdain. ‘Greed is good’ and ‘user pays’ have become commonplace sayings, as has the ‘culture of envy’. This discourse diminishes concern for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, who can then be distanced and relabelled by society as losers who have created and may even deserve their problems.

Second, neo-liberalism has an insidious effect through the operation of a positive feedback mechanism, which ratchets the pursuit of self-interest into ever-increasing inequality. Consider the case of public schools, public transport and neighbourhood safety. As these goods become scarcer and poorer in quality, the attraction for the well-off to live in these areas or to use these services declines, creating positive feedbacks with harmful results. This is particularly the case in the US, where local services such as education and police are provided by local taxes rather than being cross-subsidised as in Australia. The war photographer George Gitthoes has recently described parts of Miami – an area where almost unrestrained market forces rule – as being more violent than a war zone.²⁶

This effect also applies internationally. As living conditions have fallen in many parts of the developing world, especially in Africa, the intra-country gap between rich and poor has increased. This gap limits meaningful exposure and understanding between rich and poor, thus increasing the frequency and perception of violent crime, including murder and carjacking. A combination of fear, alienation, disinterest and embarrassment extends to tourists, who rarely venture, observe or even film deprived neighbourhoods. In turn, indifference and fear drives meaner aid budgets and less compassion and understanding.

Paradoxically, small groups invariably vilify and ostracise ‘free riders’ – people perceived as not pulling their weight.²⁷ While the ‘culture of envy’ could equally be called the ‘culture of fairness’, such re-badging is unlikely to be successful. While the disregard and objectification of other human beings is at least as ancient as slavery, the scale of modern global inequality has never been larger.⁵ One of several possible explanations for the paradox of increasing global inequality, despite the reality that evolutionary forces restrict inequality within groups, is that the peers that people with means identify are increasingly virtual

rather than physical. As globalisation proceeds, more affluent populations are increasingly recognising as their peers those with similar income and consumption patterns, even if physically located on another continent. This seems to be creating a higher tolerance for local inequality and local poverty among the better off. This phenomenon can be analysed as central to the emergence of a global class²⁸ or “claste” system.^{5,28} In this system, people form global alliances based on shared economic interests that over-ride physical, religious and ethnic differences. The coalition between Christian Americans and Sunni Saudi Arabians is one such example. This system helps to generate the ‘winner-takes-all’ phenomenon. Relatedly, the media is disproportionately owned, controlled and reflective of interests loyal to the beneficiaries of this global class system.

No social system can long remain stable in the presence of excessive inequality. Several authors have identified global unfairness as central to anti-Americanism and the 9-11 terrorist attacks.^{5,29,30} Unsurprisingly, mainstream Western opinion rejects this view. Although few winners in the current age of globalisation and neo-liberalism have concern for the state of the poor, the converse is less likely. That is to say, a large number (even if a small proportion) of the poor are likely to be acutely aware of global injustice. Some of these people will develop the motivation to strike back. This population is likely to grow.

History suggests that a small proportion of the second global class or claste will act in sympathy with those whom they identify as oppressed. For example, during the Cold War, many well-placed individuals acted to betray the Allies, in part from an aspiration for greater global equality. More recently, a similar role has been performed by some nuclear engineers.

This mechanism – an effective coalition between activists in the second and third clastes – can be conceptualised as one that aims to reduce extremely high global inequality, triggering a return towards a less extreme mean. The North may think it can generate invulnerability; in fact, the arms race of strategy and hardware between rich and poor is likely to be endless. Global security is instead likely to lie with means that consciously reduce global inequality, such as a truthful attempt to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.^{31,32}

Filling the Millennium Development ‘holes’

From the perspective of the world’s poor, the past few decades have been remarkable for the gulf between promises to reduce poverty and to eliminate subsidies and the funds provided and pledges fulfilled. More than money and goodwill are needed to overcome development failure and to meet the Millennium Development Goals, many of which are relevant to health promotion. An important element missing from most development debates is the interaction between population growth rates and the consequent failure to substantially improve

the well-being, including education, of each generation. In many developing countries this leads to ‘demographic bulges’ of under-employed young men who are potentially violent and easily manipulated.³³ Under-nutrition and consequent cognitive impairment add to the systematic disadvantage and vulnerability of the extremely poor.^{25,34} Resource scarcity, poverty, poor governance and active exploitation by the more powerful compound this.

The roles of high fertility rates and over-population in perpetuating poverty are frequently overlooked by most mainstream demographers, who (with a few exceptions)^{31,35} focus mainly on the problems of migration and *under*-population in wealthy countries, overlooking the problems of developing countries. Solving global poverty is also impeded by profound problems with the measurement of the flows and sums of wealth. Claims that the gross national product of many developing countries continue to increase are flawed. Some eminent economists are extremely critical of the failure of conventional economics to adequately account for the decline in natural capital evident in many countries.³⁶ Despite this body of work, the collective influence of these ‘ecological economists’ is still marginal. Such fundamental re-measuring threatens many vested interests.

Conclusion

This paper has incompletely sketched a large territory. In particular, no space has been found to discuss the linked problems of climate change, food insecurity, sea-level rise and ecosystem degradation. Collectively, these are likely to greatly increase the number of refugees, displace sizeable populations and increase political tension and conflict.²⁵ The climate scientist Mike Hulme has recently cautioned that the language of catastrophe is counterproductive and risks triggering paralysing anxiety and depression.³⁷ He has a point. On the other hand, someone needs to sound an alarm if a theatre is on fire. Our world is not yet burning, but a truly flourishing civilisation in the next century is an immense challenge whose difficulty is proportional to the time we are taking to recognise the problem. We need to wake-up.

Activists need to nurture optimism, despite the immense problems confronting sustainability. Humane routes to a sustainable human future still exist. They need not include contraceptive coercion.^{31,38} Sustainability depends on a reversal of neo-liberalism and on the strengthening of globalisation’s most positive aspects. This would be helped by the emergence of a global consciousness. Such profound changes in consciousness have occurred before, although on a smaller scale. Not every Polynesian settlement went the way of Easter Island.

More efficient means of growing food may slow the relentless process of ecosystem degradation and transformation such as

that witnessed during the annual Indonesian fires. We need technological leapfrogging on a scale that exceeds the Manhattan and Moon landing projects combined,³⁹ but technology alone is insufficient. We need to acknowledge the paramount role of population numbers. All of us, including those in health promotion,⁴⁰ need this appreciation.

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