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PRIORITIES OF GLOBAL JUSTICE

THOMAS POGGE

ABSTRACT: One-third of all human deaths are due to poverty-related causes, to malnutrition and to diseases that can be prevented or cured cheaply. Yet our politicians, academics, and mass media show little concern for how such poverty might be reduced. They are more interested in possible military interventions to stop human rights violations in developing countries, even though such interventions – at best – produce smaller benefits at greater cost. This Western priority may be rooted in self-interest. But it engenders, and is sustained by, a deeply flawed moral presentation of global economic cooperation. The new global economic order we impose aggravates global inequality and reproduces severe poverty on a massive scale. On any plausible understanding of our moral values, the prevention of such poverty is our foremost responsibility.

Keywords: borrowing privilege, bribery, development, foreign aid, human rights, hunger, inequality, negative duty, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, poverty, John Rawls, resource privilege, World Bank, World Food Summit, World Trade Organization.

As I look back on the post-Cold War period, the greatest surprise for me is that the affluent states have done so very little toward eradicating global poverty. This is surprising because the conditions for a major effort seemed exceptionally favorable. The fading of the Soviet bloc gave the developed states greatly enhanced opportunities to incorporate their moral values and concerns into their foreign policy and into the rapidly developing international institutional order. It also enabled these high-income countries to cut their military expenditures as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) by about 46 percent, from 4.1 percent of GDP in 1985 to 2.2 percent of GDP in 1998, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 1998, 197; UNDP 2000, 217), and thereby to reap an annual peace dividend of currently roughly \$420 billion.¹ Maintaining healthy economic and technological growth throughout the period, the developed states thus had both the power and the funds to make a major effort toward poverty eradication.

¹ This is 1.9 percent of their current aggregate GDP of over \$22 trillion (UNDP 2000, 209).

However, no such effort took place. The developed states, during the same period, actually cut their official development assistance (ODA) as a share of gross national product (GNP) by about 27 percent.² They have also reduced their allocations to multilateral development efforts, revised Part XI of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to the disadvantage of developing countries, and imposed onerous terms of trade on the latter in the context of the Uruguay Round.

To be sure, developed states have been more willing to appeal to moral values and to use such appeals in justification of initiatives – such as the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia – that would have been unthinkable during the Cold War. But these appeals only heighten the puzzle. If it makes sense to spend billions and to endanger thousands of lives in order to rescue a million people from Serb oppression, would it not make more sense to spend similar sums, without endangering any lives, on leading many millions out of life-threatening poverty?

To appreciate the force of this question about priorities, one must know some of the salient facts about global poverty. About one-quarter of all human beings alive today, 1.5 billion, subsist below the international poverty line,³ “that income or expenditure level below which a minimum, nutritionally adequate diet plus essential non-food requirements are not affordable” (UNDP 1996, 222). This level is specified in terms of one 1985 U.S. dollar per person per day at purchasing power parity (PPP).⁴ Due to inflation in the intervening years, this level now (year 2000) corresponds to an annual per capita income of \$581 PPP or to an annual per capita

² From 0.33 percent of GNP in 1987/88 to 0.24 percent of GNP in 1998 (UNDP 2000, 218).

³ World Bank 1999, 25. Because life expectancy among the very poor is much lower than average, far more than a quarter of all human lives – and deaths – occur within the poorest quartile. Conventional methods of measuring the extent of poverty may thus distort what is morally significant by assigning lower weight to the poor in proportion to their lower life expectancy. Suppose, for example, as is approximately true, that the poor live, on average, half as long as the nonpoor. The number of lives and deaths in the poorest quarter would then be twice the average number of lives and deaths in the other three quarters: two-fifths versus three-fifths. Forty percent of all human lives and deaths would occur among the poor, even while these poor, at any given time, make up only 25 percent of the world’s population. This distortion affects most conventional statistics I cite in this essay, though not of course the statement that one-third of all human deaths are due to poverty-related causes.

⁴ World Bank 1999, 276. The international poverty line is being newly specified this year by replacing the purchasing power of \$1 in the United States in 1985 with the purchasing power of \$1.08 in the United States in 1993 (World Bank 2000, 17). But inflation between 1985 and 1993 in the United States was not 8 percent, but over 34.3 percent (<<http://stats.bls.gov/cpihome.htm>>). The revision thus lowers the international poverty line by 19.6 percent and thereby conveniently reduces the widely publicized number of global poor without cost to anyone. (In response to my inquiry about this, the World Bank has written me that this revision is justified by the fact that the prices of what the poor consume, and especially of basic foodstuffs, have risen more slowly than other prices.) Still, even after the revision, this number is still 1.2 billion (World Bank 2000, 17 and 23; UNDP 2000, 4).

income of \$145 at current exchange rates.⁵ So households in the poorest quartile cannot afford, per person per year, whatever basic necessities can be bought for \$581 in the United States or for \$145 in the average poor country. Such severe poverty has consequences: 790 million persons are not adequately nourished, while one billion are without safe water and 2.4 billion without basic sanitation (UNDP 2000, 30); more than 880 million lack access to basic health services (UNDP 1999, 22); about one billion are without adequate shelter and two billion without electricity (UNDP 1998, 49). “Two out of five children in the developing world are stunted, one in three is underweight and one in ten is wasted.”⁶ One-quarter of all children between the ages of five and fourteen, 250 million in all, work outside their family for wages, often under harsh conditions, in agriculture, construction, textile or carpet production, for instance, or as soldiers, prostitutes, or domestic servants.⁷ These children do not receive much of an education, and most of them, if they survive long enough, are likely to join the currently one billion illiterate adults (UNDP 2000, 30).

Severe poverty causes not only massive underfulfillment of social and economic human rights, such as the “right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of oneself and one’s family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care.”⁸ Severe poverty and economic inequality also contribute significantly to the underfulfillment of civil and political human rights associated with democratic government and the rule of law. Desperately poor people, often stunted from infancy, illiterate, and heavily preoccupied with the struggle to survive, can do little by way of either resisting or rewarding their local and national rulers, who are therefore likely to rule them oppressively while catering to the interests of other (often foreign) agents more capable of reciprocation. The income and staying power of such rulers often depend less on their poor subjects than on a small local elite or on a few foreign companies and governments, to whom they can sell the country’s natural resources and from whom they can obtain grants and loans and weapons. Such rulers have little need for popular support, and many of them use torture, restrict freedom of expression, and perpetuate their rule by force.

Severe poverty is by far the greatest source of human misery today.

⁵ This last figure takes account of the fact that in the poor countries only about twenty-five cents, on average, are said to be needed to buy local currency that has as much purchasing power as one dollar has in the United States. Thus, the World Bank converts China’s GNP per capita of \$780 to \$3,291 PPP, India’s \$450 to \$2,149 PPP, Indonesia’s \$580 to \$2,439 PPP, Nigeria’s \$310 to \$744 PPP, and so on (World Bank 2000, 274–75).

⁶ U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), at <<http://www.fao.org/focus/e/sofi/child-e.htm>>.

⁷ World Bank 1999, 62. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that “at least 120 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work full time. The number is 250 million, or more than twice as many, if we include those for whom work is a secondary activity” (<<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/270asie/feature/child.htm>>).

⁸ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, §25.

Deaths and harms from direct violence around the world – in Chechnya, East Timor, Congo, Bosnia, Kosovo, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia, Iraq, and so on – provoke more publicity and hand-wringing. But they are vastly outnumbered by deaths and harms due to poverty. In 1998, some 588,000 deaths were due to war; other homicides and violence caused some 736,000 more. Starvation and preventable diseases, by contrast, claimed about 18 million human lives, thus causing about one-third of all human deaths.⁹ The few years since the end of the Cold War have seen over 200 million deaths due to poverty-related causes.

Reducing severe poverty abroad is not easy, of course, but it is generally much easier than reducing violence abroad. Attempts to stop violence often involve violent means (as in the bombing of Iraq and Yugoslavia), often provoke violence (as in Kosovo), and may also serve as precedents that encourage further and perhaps dubious violent interventions. Such attempts are therefore often associated with significant moral and economic costs, which are difficult to measure even *ex post*, let alone to predict *ex ante*. Inaction in the face of violence abroad is thus often the right choice or at least a choice that has strong and morally significant reasons in its favor. Attempts to reduce poverty do not face such problems. There is so much severe poverty in so many different countries that one can find plenty of places where money can be effectively spent, especially on local goods and services: on enabling poor people to afford more and better foodstuffs and shelter, on financing more and better schools and basic health services, or on improving the local infrastructure (safe water, sanitation, electricity, road and rail links). When such projects are undertaken with the genuine aim of effecting enduring progress in the world's poorest regions – rather than with the aim of buying political support from their rulers or from domestic exporters – they are generally far more cost-effective at saving and improving human lives than so-called humanitarian interventions are. And they do not, in any case, run substantial risks of worsening the situation. Many have thought Western inaction in the face of the Rwandan genocide a clear-cut indication that we simply do not care about the victims we are abandoning to their fates. In that case, however, one might still adduce the complexities and time pressures of a rapidly developing situation as a (weak) excuse. No such excuse is available for our long-standing decision to tolerate the massive death toll from starvation and preventable diseases, the reduction of which would involve lower costs and much lower risks to ourselves.¹⁰

⁹ World Health Organization 1999, Table 2. The total number of human deaths in 1998 was 54 million, or 148,000 per day. Among these, “worldwide 34,000 children under age five die daily from hunger and preventable diseases” (United States Department of Agriculture 1999, iii).

¹⁰ There used to be the argument that eradicating hunger now would lead to more widespread hunger in the future. But this argument is now thoroughly discredited by the realization that eradication of poverty tends to entail an often dramatic decline in birth rates.

Consider foreign aid. Net ODA provided by the United States was under \$9 billion in 1998. This amount is less than half a percent of the federal budget,¹¹ \$32 per U.S. citizen.¹² It corresponds to 0.10 percent of U.S. GNP (versus 0.21 percent under Ronald Reagan in 1987/88) – the lowest among members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which, in the same period, have reduced their aggregate net ODA from 0.33 percent of their combined GNPs to 0.24 percent or \$52 billion (UNDP 2000, 218). The allocation of such funds is, moreover, governed by political considerations: Only 21 percent goes to the forty-three least-developed countries (UNDP 2000, 218), and only 8.3 percent is spent on meeting basic needs.¹³ The OECD countries together thus spend \$4.3 billion annually toward meeting basic needs abroad – 0.02 percent of their combined GNP, or 0.8 cents per day for each person in the poorest quartile.

One might think that these low and shrinking ODA allocations are due to the recently ascendant belief that poverty reduction is best achieved through private investment and free markets. But this is not how our governments themselves explain their policies – most elaborately, perhaps, in connection with the World Food Summit in Rome, organized by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in November 1996. Its principal achievement was this pledge by the 186 participating governments:

We, the Heads of State and Government, or our representatives, gathered at the World Food Summit . . . reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger. We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an on-going effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015. We consider it intolerable that more than 800 million people throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, do not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. This situation is unacceptable.¹⁴

¹¹ “The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) administers America’s foreign assistance programs, which account for less than one-half of 1% of the federal budget” (<<http://www.info.usaid.gov/pubs/cp98/progrprview.htm>>).

¹² The United States has sharply reduced its contributions to other international antipoverty programs as well (<www.brown.edu/Departments/World_Hunger_Program/hungerweb/HN/Articles/WFS/EDIT2.html>), though not to the World Food Program.

¹³ UNDP 2000, 79. In this regard, the developed states fall far short of the “20:20 compact” made within the OECD, which prescribes that they and multilateral donors allocate at least 20 percent of their foreign aid, and developing states at least 20 percent of their national budgets, to meeting basic needs.

¹⁴ Rome Declaration on World Food Security (<<http://www.fao.org/wfs/policy/english/96-3eng.htm>>).

Having joined this pledge, the U.S. government then published its own interpretation of it: “The attainment of any ‘right to adequate food’ or ‘fundamental right to be free from hunger’ is a goal or aspiration to be realized progressively that does not give rise to any international obligations.”¹⁵ The United States also challenged the FAO’s claim that fulfilling the pledge would require all developed states combined to increase their ODA in agriculture by \$6 billion annually (Alexandratos 1995): “As part of the *U.S. Action Plan on Food Security*, USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] commissioned a separate study of the projected cost of meeting the World Food Summit target and a strategy for reaching this goal. The study, completed in mid 1998, focused on a potential framework for ODA investments and estimated that the target could be reached with additional global ODA of \$2.6 billion annually, as compared to the FAO’s estimate of \$6 billion annually” (United States Department of Agriculture 1999, Appendix A). So the study proposes that the developed states should back their pledge by adding only \$3.30 rather than \$7.60 annually for each malnourished person. The hunger reduction plan adopted in Rome implicitly envisions well over 200 million deaths from hunger and preventable diseases over the 1997–2015 plan period. One might have thought that, even if the FAO’s proposed annual increase of \$6 billion were to reduce hunger faster than planned, this should be no cause for regret. Halving world hunger in nineteen years, after all, is glacial progress. And an extra \$6 billion is not much to ask from the high-income countries, whose combined GNP in 1998 was \$22,599 billion (World Bank 1999, 231).

The official position articulated by the United States and practiced by the developed countries can then be characterized by these three elements: We are able to reduce severe poverty and the hunger and diseases associated therewith at modest cost, we are willing to spend a tiny fraction of our national income toward such a reduction, but we are not legally or morally obligated to give any weight at all to this goal.

One may think that this position, though not explicitly conditioned on the belief that poverty reduction is best achieved through private investment and free markets, is nonetheless rendered more acceptable by the truth of this belief. Our denial of any obligation to reduce global poverty would be rendered more acceptable if the invisible hand of the new global economy were effectively doing the job on its own. But is it? The best evidence we have on this question derives from our actual experience with the freer, more global markets created after the end of the Cold War. During this period the developed states, which were led by the United States and which were dominant within the International Monetary Fund

¹⁵ “Interpretive Statement” filed by the U.S. government in reference to the first paragraph of the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (<<http://www.fas.usda.gov:80/icd/summit/interpre.html>>).

(IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), had unprecedented power to shape the global economic order. So how did this “new economic architecture” affect global poverty? According to the World Bank, this period of globalization has brought healthy economic growth in aggregate – as well as a 25 percent *increase* in the number of people living below a constant 1985 U.S. dollar per day. The number of persons who are poor by this absolute measure “rose from 1.2 billion in 1987 to 1.5 billion today and, if recent trends persist, will reach 1.9 billion by 2015” (World Bank 1999, 25).¹⁶

In light of this evidence, it is then astonishing that the IMF accuses those who question the prevailing global economic order of harming the poor.¹⁷ The protestors of Seattle and Washington are clearly right to demand that this order be rethought, as it is evident now that it alone will not eradicate poverty within anything like an acceptable time span. This failure is not surprising. The new global economic architecture is an extremely complex network of agreements and treaties about trade, investments, loans, patents, copyrights, trademarks, taxation, labor standards, environmental protection, use of seabed resources, and much else. As the details of this architecture were being negotiated, the interests of the affluent societies, which tend to be closely aligned on many issues, were bound to be dominant. These societies, containing about one-seventh of humankind, control most of the global product as well as access to the world’s most lucrative markets and thus have a huge advantage over the rest in terms of bargaining power, information, and expertise. They were able successfully to push for open markets that are to their advantage and equally successfully to resist open markets that are not.¹⁸

¹⁶ This growth in the number of poor is slightly faster than the growth of world population. The successor report, using the new poverty line, gives a dramatically different picture: People living on less than \$1 a day numbered 1.1832 billion in 1987 and 1.1989 billion in 1998 (World Bank 2000, 23).

¹⁷ This accusation was made after the Seattle protests against the WTO and was endorsed by *The Economist* (December 11, 1999, 15), whose cover that week showed an Indian child in rags with the heading “The real losers of Seattle.” See also “The Case for Globalisation” in *The Economist* (September 23 2000, 19–20 and 85–87). The next note provides additional factual background, as reported by *The Economist* itself.

¹⁸ “Rich countries cut their tariffs by less in the Uruguay Round than poor ones did. Since then, they have found new ways to close their markets, notably by imposing anti-dumping duties on imports they deem ‘unfairly cheap’. Rich countries are particularly protectionist in many of the sectors where developing countries are best able to compete, such as agriculture, textiles, and clothing. As a result, according to a new study by Thomas Hertel, of Purdue University, and Will Martin, of the World Bank, rich countries’ average tariffs on manufacturing imports from poor countries are four times higher than those on imports from other rich countries. This imposes a big burden on poor countries. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that they could export \$700 billion more a year by 2005 if rich countries did more to open their markets. Poor countries are also hobbled by a lack of know-how. Many had little understanding of what they signed up to in the Uruguay Round. That ignorance is now costing them dear. Michael Finger of the World Bank and Philip Schuler of the University of Maryland estimate that implementing commitments

To be sure, global markets are more open on the whole, and private investment is much more mobile than before. But such capital mobility has, on the whole, brought little progress to the world's poorest populations. This is due not only to the protectionism of the developed states (UNDP 1999, 3). Even truly free markets would probably not bring rapid economic growth to areas where basic infrastructure is lacking and where the physical and mental development of prospective employees has been irreparably impaired through disease, malnutrition, and illiteracy. In such areas a special effort, not purely market driven, is needed to jump-start development. It is only after people there have access to adequate food and shelter, vaccines, safe water, basic sanitation, basic health services, and primary education that these poorest areas will attract significant private investment, which may then be sufficient to sustain and continue the advance on its own. This is not an argument against globalization. But it does show that the developed states must remove their protectionist barriers and make a considerable non-market-driven effort to get the poorest quartile to the point where they, too, can benefit from globalization. Failing that, the new economic architecture will further increase global economic inequality and perpetuate or even aggravate the horrendous conditions among the poorest quartile.

The trend of ever increasing global economic inequality has been persisting for quite a long time, reaching far back into the colonial era. "The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was 74 to 1 in 1997, up from 60 to 1 in 1990 and 30 to 1 in 1960." Earlier estimates are 11 to 1 for 1913, 7 to 1 for 1870, and 3 to 1 for 1820 (UNDP 1999, 3). In this regard, the post-Cold War period has merely continued a long-established trend. What is quite new with this period, however, is the capacity of the affluent states to effect massive and rapid reductions in severe poverty. The figure of 1.5 billion human beings in dire poverty may be daunting. But global inequality has now increased to such an extreme that this poorest quartile of humankind – with annual income of \$100 per capita and thus collectively about \$150 billion¹⁹ – accounts for merely half a percent of the global

to improve trade procedures and establish technical and intellectual-property standards can cost more than a year's development budget for the poorest countries. Moreover, in those areas where poor countries could benefit from world trade rules, they are often unable to do so. . . . Of the WTO's 134 members, 29 do not even have missions at its headquarters in Geneva. Many more can barely afford to bring cases to the WTO" (*The Economist*, September 25, 1999, 89). The full texts of both studies are available on the Internet as, respectively, Working Paper 7 at <<http://www.agecon.purdue.edu/gtap/wkpapr/index.htm>> and Working Paper 2215 at <<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/research/workpapers.nsf/12e6920265e1e0d3852567e50050df1f>>.

¹⁹ These figures are derived from the average value of the (old) international poverty line, which above I have estimated at \$145 per year (note 5 and surrounding text), and the fact that the poor, on average, live 31 percent below this poverty line (Ravallion and Chen 1997, 376).

product. Reforms that would double or even triple the income of this group would have no serious impact on high-income countries' GNP, which summed to \$22,921 billion in 1999 (\$25,730 per capita).²⁰ For the first time in human history it is quite feasible, economically, to wipe out hunger and preventable diseases worldwide without real inconvenience to anyone – all the more so because the high-income countries no longer face any serious military threat.

The moral upshot of all this seems obvious: We should provide a path out of poverty to that great majority of all poor people whom we can reach without the use of force. When we can save so many millions from hunger, disease, and premature death, wealthy states should not haggle over \$3.4 billion, as the United States did in the aftermath of the World Food Summit. We should instead be willing to spend 1 percent of our GNP (\$229 billion annually) specifically on poverty eradication, even 2 percent if we can do so effectively. We should spend this money so as to ensure that the poor, especially poor children, have secure access to food and shelter, vaccines, safe water, basic health services and sanitation, primary education, electricity, and road or rail links, and will thus be able to fend for themselves in the new global economy. If we can make so huge a difference to hundreds of millions at so little cost to ourselves, we must not refuse to make this effort.

While this call for greater solidarity is plausible in what it directs us to do, it is misleading in the grounds it suggests for this directive. The account appeals to a positive duty to protect persons from great harms and risks if one can do so at little cost.²¹ I have no doubt that we have such a moral duty and that this duty requires us to make a serious effort toward poverty reduction. And yet it would be misleading to characterize our present and (quite predictable) future failure to make such an effort as a lack of beneficence. We are not bystanders who find ourselves confronted with foreign deprivations whose origins are wholly unconnected to ourselves. In fact, there are at least three morally significant connections between us and the global poor. First, their social starting positions and ours have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by massive grievous wrongs. The same historical injustices, including genocide, colonialism, and slavery, play a role in explaining both their poverty

²⁰ The thirty-four high-income countries represent 14.9 percent of world population and 78.4 percent of the sum of GNPs (World Bank 2000, 275). Consider also that “the world’s 200 richest people more than doubled their net worth in the four years to 1998, to more than \$1 trillion. The assets of the top three billionaires are more than the combined GNP of all least developed countries and their 600 million people” (UNDP 1999, 3). “The additional cost of achieving and maintaining universal access to basic education for all, basic health care for all, reproductive health care for all women, adequate food for all and safe water and sanitation for all is . . . less than 4% of the combined wealth of the 225 richest people in the world” (UNDP 1998, 30).

²¹ The problem of world hunger has often been addressed in these terms, for example, in Singer 1972 and in Unger 1996.

and our affluence. Second, they and we depend on a single natural resource base, from the benefits of which they are largely, and without compensation, excluded. The affluent countries and the elites of the developing world divide these resources on mutually agreeable terms without leaving “enough and as good” for the remaining majority of humankind. Third, they and we coexist within a single global economic order that has a strong tendency to perpetuate and even to aggravate global economic inequality.²²

Given these connections, our failure to make a serious effort toward poverty reduction may constitute not merely a lack of beneficence, but our active impoverishing, starving, and killing of millions of innocent people by economic means. To be sure, we do not intend these harms, and we are thus not on a par with Stalin, who used economic policies and institutions specifically in order to impoverish and kill segments of the population he deemed hostile to the Soviet regime. We may not even have foreseen these harms when we constructed the new global economic architecture beginning in the late 1980s. Now that we do know, our moral situation is more akin to that of Mao Tse-Tung in 1959. Mao did not foresee that his Great Leap Forward, begun in 1958, would acutely aggravate poverty in China. But when the catastrophic effects of these policies became evident in the great famine of 1959–62, he continued his policies and declined foreign help. Twenty to thirty million Chinese perished as a direct consequence of this moral failure. Continuing our current global economic structures and policies unmodified would manifest a similar moral failure. Perhaps we had reason to believe our own persistent pronouncements that the new global economic architecture would cease the reproduction of poverty. So perhaps we just made an innocent and blameless mistake. But it is *our* mistake nonetheless, and we must not allow it to kill yet further tens of millions in the developing world.

The call for greater beneficence in the face of world hunger is one that politicians, diplomats, international bankers, and economists are willing to entertain. Most of them will even agree with it, blaming our failure to do more on other politicians, diplomats, bankers, economists, or the voting public. The idea that our economic policies and the global economic institutions we impose make us causally and morally responsible for the perpetuation – even aggravation – of world hunger, by contrast, is an idea rarely taken seriously by established intellectuals and politicians in the developed world. But this subversive idea nonetheless plays an important role in that theorists of poverty and justice, consciously and unconsciously, expend much intellectual energy on making invisible this idea and the three connections that support it. Focusing on the third of these connections, I would like to indicate briefly some of the distortions arising from our interest in obscuring the role that the design of the global economic order plays in the perpetuation and aggravation of poverty.

²² For detailed explication of these three connections, see Pogge 1998.

A good example of such distortion in philosophical work is provided by John Rawls. When discussing the economic order of a single society, Rawls pays great attention to the fact that economic cooperation can be structured in many ways and that such structural alternatives have diverse distributional tendencies (cf. Rawls 1996, 265–67). In response to this fact, he not only insists that the shaping and reshaping of a national economic order should be controlled by all adult participants through a democratic political process. He also argues that justice requires citizens to aim for a national economic order that satisfies the difference principle, that is, that allows social and economic inequalities to arise only insofar as they tend to optimize the lowest socioeconomic position (Rawls 1999b, §§11, 12, 17).

What is true of a domestic economic order is clearly true of the international economic order as well: Alternative ways of organizing global economic cooperation have diverse distributional tendencies and differ, in particular, in how supportive or obstructive they are of economic development in the poorest countries and areas. In his recent treatment of international justice, Rawls seems briefly to acknowledge this point when he calls for correction of any “unjustified distributive effects” of cooperative organizations (Rawls 1999a, 43). But how is this vague demand to be specified? Rawls endorses “fair standards of trade to keep the market free and competitive” (Rawls 1999a, 43) – but, as he stresses himself (Rawls 1996, 267), free and competitive markets are quite compatible with huge and ever increasing inequality. What is needed is a principle that assesses alternative global economic orders in terms of their distributive effects, just as his difference principle assesses alternative ways of structuring a national economy. Yet in the international case Rawls specifically rejects any such principle that does not have “a target and a cutoff point” (Rawls 1999a, 115–19). He also rejects any international analogue to a democratic process which, at least in theory, allows a majority of citizens in a liberal society to restructure its economic order if it favors the rich too much.

Like the existing global economic order, that of Rawls’s Society of Peoples is then shaped by free bargaining.²³ There is one crucial constraint, however, as Rawls insists on a universal minimum: “Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime” (Rawls 1999a, 37). This duty is unobjectionable and hugely important: If existing affluent societies honored it, malnutrition and preventable diseases would be much less common. Yet making this duty the only distributive constraint on global economic institutions is nonetheless implausible. If affluent and powerful societies impose a skewed global economic order that hampers the economic growth of poor societies and further weakens their bargaining

²³ His second and third laws state that “Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings” and “Peoples are equal and are parties to the agreements that bind them” (Rawls 1999a, 37).

power, such imposition is not made right by the fact that the former societies also keep the latter from falling below the minimum. Moreover, making this duty the only distributive constraint also misleads us to perceive the injustice of the status quo as insufficient assistance to the poorer societies, when it really consists in the imposition of a skewed global order that aggravates international inequalities and makes it exceedingly hard for the weaker and poorer populations to secure a proportional share of global economic growth. Rawls obscures, then, the important causal role that the global economic order plays in the reproduction of poverty and inequality, suggesting that each society bears sole responsibility for its own place in the economic rank-order: "The causes of the wealth of a people and the forms it takes lie in their political culture and in the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions that support the basic structure, as well as in the industriousness and cooperative talents of its members, all supported by their political virtues. . . . Crucial also is the country's population policy" (Rawls 1999a, 108). Thus, he goes on, a society may be poor because of high population growth or low investment (Rawls 1999a, 117–18), and in any case, "if it is not satisfied, it can continue to increase savings, or, if this is not feasible, borrow from other members of the Society of Peoples" (Rawls 1999a, 114). In these ways, Rawls's account of international justice renders all but invisible the question of whether the global economic order we currently impose is harming the poor by creating a headwind against economic development in the poorest areas and is therefore unjust.

We find similar distortions in economic work. Our international bankers and economists tell us that our global economic order is fine and that protests against it (in Seattle and Washington) are actually harming the poor. The same bankers and economists also dutifully tell us about the horrendous conditions among the poor and about the lack of progress, lest anyone suspect them of not knowing or not caring enough.²⁴ So why does a global economic order designed with so much tender loving concern for the global poor not improve their condition? The official answer in unison: because their own governments in the developing countries are not pursuing optimal policies. Our bankers and economists differ on what the optimal policies are and hence on how their common claim should be elaborated. The more libertarian types on the right tell the story of the "Asian tigers" – Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea – as an example of how misery disappears under governments that allow free enterprise to flourish with a minimum in taxes and regulations. The more social-democratic types tell the story of Kerala, a state in India with a traditionally socialist government, as an example of how misery can be abol-

²⁴ The World Bank recently interviewed sixty thousand poor people in the developing countries and published snippets of their responses, "Voices of the Poor," on its Web site. As we have seen (n. 4), the same World Bank also keeps the number of poor in check by quietly lowering the international poverty line.

ished even at low income levels if only governments make a serious effort to this end.²⁵ The stories vary, but the lesson is the same: With the right policies, any poor state can over time meet the basic needs of its people; therefore, nothing is wrong with the global economic order as it is.

These stories have the familiar ring of the Horatio Alger stories often appealed to in celebration of the unbridled American capitalism before the New Deal: In America, even a farm boy can become rich.²⁶ Left aside in such celebrations is the crucial question of why nearly all the relevant agents fail even though (supposedly) they can succeed. Once this question is asked, there are two obvious and complementary answers. First, what is possible for each may not be possible for all. Even if each farm boy could have become a millionaire in the world of Alger's stories, it was still quite impossible for more than a few to succeed. So we can indeed say that each farm boy who failed had himself to blame, for he could have succeeded. But we cannot blame the fact that over 99 percent failed on the farm boys themselves. In the system as it was, they could not have changed this fact, either individually or collectively. Similarly with unemployment: It does not follow from the fact that *each* person willing to work can find work that *all* such persons can. The situation is similar for poor countries as well. There was indeed a profitable niche in the world economy (better technology than other poor countries and lower labor costs than more affluent countries), which the Asian tigers exploited, but this niche would not have been profitable if many poor states had scrambled to occupy it all at once.

Second, there may be systemic reasons why many of the relevant agents do not make the necessary effort. Most farm boys may have lacked stamina and initiative because, having grown up in grinding poverty, they were suffering the lasting effects of childhood malnutrition and disease or primitive schools that stifled ambition. With the governments of poor countries, the problem most often is not merely inability, but also unwillingness, to reduce domestic poverty. Yet this unwillingness, the corruption endemic to many of these governments, does not show that such poverty cannot be traced back to the existing global economic order. On the contrary, the prevalence of official corruption may itself be a consequence of our economic policies, of the global economic order we impose, and of the extreme international inequalities that have accumulated over two centuries. Let me develop this point a bit further.

A paradigm case of corruption is bribery. Bribes are a major factor in the awarding of public contracts in the developing countries, which suffer staggering losses as a result. These losses arise in part from the fact that bribes are "priced in": Bidders on contracts must raise their price in order to get paid enough to pay the bribes. Additional losses arise as bidders can

²⁵ Amartya Sen has mentioned Kerala in many of his writings, and references to this state are now common in the literature (e.g., Rawls 1999a, 110).

²⁶ Horatio Alger (1832–99) was a highly successful U.S. writer of stories about the rise to prosperity of boys from poor backgrounds.

afford to be noncompetitive, knowing that the success of their bid will depend on their bribes more than on the price they offer. The greatest losses probably arise from the fact that officials focused on bribes pay little attention to whether the goods and services they purchase in their country's behalf are of good quality or even needed at all. Much of what developing countries have imported over the years has been of no use to them – or even harmful, by promoting environmental degradation or violence (bribery is especially pervasive in the arms trade). May we then conclude that poverty in developing societies is the fault of their own tolerance of corruption and of their own leaders' venality?

This comfortable conclusion is upset by the fact that the developed states have permitted their companies not merely to pay bribes, but even to deduct these from their taxes. By providing financial inducements and moral support, these states have made a vital contribution to promoting and entrenching a culture of corruption in developing societies. Fortunately, this contribution is now being phased out. The first major step was the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977, enacted after the Lockheed Corporation was found to have paid a \$2 million bribe not to a Third World potentate, but to Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka. It took another twenty years until thirty-two affluent states, under OECD auspices and under public pressure generated by a new nongovernmental organization (Transparency International), signed a Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Officials in International Business Transactions, which requires them to criminalize the bribery of foreign officials.²⁷ It remains to be seen whether this convention will produce serious enforcement efforts and will thus reduce bribery and undermine the now deeply entrenched culture of corruption in many developing countries.

Surveying the ruling elites of many developing countries, one may well surmise that they would have done their best to enrich themselves, and done little for the eradication of poverty in their countries, even if they had not been bribed by foreigners. Many of these countries have not managed to become genuinely democratic, and their rulers can therefore hang on by force even if opposed by the vast majority of the population. Does this support the view that poverty in the developing societies is their own fault after all?

To see how this conclusion is problematic, consider a very central feature of the current global institutional order: Any group controlling a preponderance of the means of coercion within a country is internationally recognized as the legitimate government of this country's territory and people – regardless of how that group came to power, of how it exercises

²⁷ The convention went into effect in February 1999, and at last count twenty-six states have ratified it (<<http://www.oecd.org/daf/nocorruption/annex2.htm>>; cf. <<http://www.oecd.org/daf/nocorruption/links1.htm>>). Among those still missing are Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Portugal.

power, and of the extent to which it may be supported or opposed by the population it rules. That such a group exercising effective power receives international recognition means not merely that we engage it in negotiations. It means also that we accept this group's right to act for the people it rules, that we, most significantly, confer upon it the privileges freely to borrow in the country's name (international borrowing privilege) and freely to dispose of the country's natural resources (international resource privilege).

The international borrowing privilege includes the power to impose internationally valid legal obligations upon the country at large. Any successor government that refuses to honor debts incurred by a corrupt, brutal, undemocratic, unconstitutional, repressive, unpopular predecessor will be severely punished by the banks and governments of other countries; at minimum it will lose its own borrowing privilege by being excluded from the international financial markets. Such refusals are therefore quite rare, as governments, even when newly elected after a dramatic break with the past, are compelled to pay the debts of their ever so awful predecessors.

The international borrowing privilege has three important negative effects on human rights fulfillment in the developing countries. First, this privilege facilitates borrowing by destructive governments. Such governments can borrow more money and can do so more cheaply than they could do if they alone, rather than the entire country, were obliged to repay. In this way, the borrowing privilege helps such governments stay in power even against near-universal popular discontent and opposition. Second, the international borrowing privilege imposes upon democratic successor regimes the often huge debts of their corrupt predecessors. It thereby saps the capacity of such democratic governments to implement structural reforms and other political programs, thus rendering such governments less successful and less stable than they would otherwise be.²⁸ Third, the international borrowing privilege provides incentives toward coup attempts: Whoever succeeds in bringing a preponderance of the means of coercion under his control gets the borrowing privilege as an additional reward.

The international resource privilege enjoyed by a group in power is much more than our mere acquiescence in its effective control over the natural resources of the country in question. This privilege includes the power to effect legally valid transfers of ownership rights in such resources. Thus a corporation that has purchased resources from the Saudi or Suharto families, or from Mobuto or Sani Abacha, has thereby become entitled to be – and actually *is* – recognized anywhere in the world as the legitimate owner of these resources. This is a remarkable feature of our global institutional order. A group that overpowers the guards and takes

²⁸ This effect is somewhat mitigated by authoritarian regimes being likewise held responsible for the debts of their democratic predecessors.

control of a warehouse may be able to give some of the merchandise to others, accepting money in exchange. But the fence who pays them becomes merely the possessor, not the owner, of the loot. Contrast this with a group that overpowers an elected government and takes control of a country. Such a group, too, can give away some of the country's natural resources, accepting money in exchange. In this case, however, the purchaser acquires not merely possession, but all the rights and liberties of ownership, which are supposed to be – and actually *are* – protected and enforced by all other states' courts and police forces. The international resource privilege, then, is the power to confer globally valid ownership rights in the country's resources.

The international resource privilege has disastrous effects in many poor countries, whose resource sector often constitutes a large segment of the national economy. Whoever can take power in such a country by whatever means can maintain his rule, even against widespread popular opposition, by buying the arms and soldiers he needs with revenues from the export of natural resources (and funds borrowed abroad in the country's name). This fact in turn provides a strong incentive toward the undemocratic acquisition and unresponsive exercise of political power in these countries. The international resource privilege also gives foreigners strong incentives to corrupt the officials of such countries, who, no matter how badly they rule, continue to have resources to sell and money to spend. We see here how the local causal chain – persistent poverty caused by corrupt government caused by natural-resource wealth – can itself be traced back to the international resource privilege. Because of that privilege, resource-rich developing countries are more likely to experience coup attempts and civil wars and more likely also to be ruled by corrupt elites, so that – despite considerable natural wealth – poverty in these countries tends to decline only slowly, if at all.²⁹

These brief remarks on bribery and on the international borrowing and resource privileges show at least in outline how the current global order we uphold shapes the national culture and policies of the poorer and weaker

²⁹ Economists have known for some time of the negative correlation between developing countries' resource endowments and their rates of economic growth (the so-called Dutch Disease) – exemplified by the relatively low growth rates, over the past forty years, of resource-rich Nigeria, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, Zaire, Venezuela, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Burma, and the Philippines. The causal connections accounting for this correlation, however, are only now beginning to be fully understood. Cf. Ricky Lam and Leonard Wantchekon, "Dictatorships as a Political Dutch Disease," working paper (Yale University, January 19, 1999). This paper specifically supports the hypothesis that the causal connection between resource wealth and poor economic growth is mediated through reduced chances for democracy: "all petrostates or resource-dependent countries in Africa fail to initiate meaningful political reforms. . . . besides South Africa, transition to democracy has been successful only in resource-poor countries" (31); "a one percentage increase in the size of the natural resource sector generates a decrease by half a percentage point in the probability of survival of democratic regimes" (35).

countries. It does so in four main ways: It crucially affects what sorts of persons exercise political power in these countries, what incentives these persons face, what options they have, and what impact the implementation of any of their options would have on their most-disadvantaged compatriots. In many ways, our global order is disadvantageous to the global poor by sustaining oppression and corruption, and hence poverty, in the developing world. It is hardly surprising that this order reflects the interests of the wealthy and powerful states. Their governments, dependent on our votes and taxes, work hard on shaping the rules for our benefit. To be sure, the global poor have their own governments. But almost all of them are too weak to exert real influence on the organization of the global economy. More important, these governments have little incentive to attend to the needs of their poor compatriots, as their continuation in power depends on the local elite and on foreign governments and corporations. Such rulers – able to sell the country’s resources, to buy arms and soldiers to maintain their rule, and to amass personal fortunes – like the global order just the way it is. As do we: If ownership rights in natural resources could not be acquired from tyrannical rulers, for example, the resources we need to import would be scarcer and hence more expensive.

The conclusion is once again that the underfulfillment of human rights in the developing countries is not a homegrown problem, but one we greatly contribute to through the policies we pursue and the international order we impose. We have then not merely a positive responsibility with regard to global poverty, like Rawls’s “duty of assistance,” but a negative responsibility to stop imposing the existing global order³⁰ and to prevent and mitigate the harms it continually causes for the world’s poorest populations. Because our responsibility is negative and because so much harm can be prevented at so little cost to ourselves, the reduction of severe global poverty should be our foremost moral priority.

*Department of Philosophy
Columbia University
708 Philosophy Hall
New York, NY 10027
USA
tp6@columbia.edu*

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³⁰ This is suggested by §28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.”

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