

The Global Felicific Calculus?

Political Economy, Social Reproduction & Public Health as Ethical Dimensions of The Globalisation Question.

Stephen Gill

Distinguished Research Professor
Political Science York University
4700 Keele St, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3
CANADA Tel (direct): 416-736-2100 ext 88824;
Tel: office reception 416-736-5265
Fax: 416-736-5686
sgill@yorku.ca

Abstract:

This paper explores a series of hypotheses concerning political economy, ethics and public health in an era of intensified globalization.

Disciplinary neo-liberalism is the globally dominant discourse of political economy and global development: one reflected in many of the prevailing rules and institutions of globalization. It seeks to promote the power of capital through the extension and deepening of market values and disciplines in social life, under a regime of free enterprise, so that private interests come to predominate in the constitution of our societies. It is commensurate with the world-view of big corporate capital and the dominant social forces in the G7 states, especially in the USA, indeed it is the perspective of relatively affluent social forces which tend benefit most from the unequal frameworks of distribution, regulation and justice which govern the globalisation process.

Indeed, despite unprecedented advances in science, technology and medical care and spectacular growth in the global economy in the past 50 years, the benefits of globalization and development are predominantly enjoyed by 15-20 % of the world's population who consume over 80% of the annual global economic output. Almost 3 billion people (44% of the world's population) live miserable lives on less than \$2 per day and benefit little if at all from progress in science and medicine and the globalization process more generally.

In this way, disciplinary-neo-liberalism, and its formal system of justice (which I call new constitutionalism) tends to promote a kind of Benthamite felicific calculus on a world scale, with public policy aimed predominantly at providing the greatest happiness to the greatest number (of consumers), who, of course constitute a relatively small minority of the world's population. Indeed, even within the ranks of the affluent parts of society that benefit most from neo-liberal globalization happiness should properly be defined in a negative sense: that is to say the social, economic and health situation of the beneficiaries of globalization is less unhappy than that which pertains to the vast majority of the world's population. Their situation was captured in J K Galbraith's, The Culture of Contentment (1992): about half of the population in each OECD country is relatively contented, whilst the general condition of the rest of the population deteriorates in relative (and in many cases in absolute) terms. Indeed one reason why the felicity of even the most privileged of workers in the OECD countries might be doubted is not just the roll-back in work conditions, benefits and wages, but also the growing sense of precariousness in matters of personal security. There has been an intensification of discipline and surveillance in

the workplace and in society more generally. This creates anxiety, stress and depression. For example in the USA, where a sizeable minority have no health care, and where a much larger number have coverage which is of limited quality (despite the fact that health care consumes 14-15 per cent of the US GNP), general social and health problems are increasingly individualized, pathologized and dealt with either by means of drug therapies or strategies of incarceration in what for the majority of Americans is an increasingly panoptic social order.

The situation described with respect to United States does not necessarily speak to that in many other societies, where basic social conditions of course may be either better or in many cases very much worse. Nevertheless globalisation connects distant places in a process of time-space compression in complex ways, e.g. threatening global public health and/or undermining the broad human right to development and security. Thus, in the context of apparently inexorable and widening disparities in wealth and health a major threat to human life and security in the 21st century lies in the renaissance of infectious diseases once thought conquered, and as well as new diseases and epidemics that are becoming dominant health threats. Such threats signify a dimension of global instability, and call for reflection on the nature and current trajectory of "progress" and its dominant discourses of development and "market civilization".

So what is to be done? I offer a few propositions for discussion at this conference. First, there is a need for more widespread understanding of how inequality reflects and is over-determined by political and social relations. Second, much more needs to be widely known about how geopolitics and transnational economic rules and treaties serve to entrench extraction of resources from the poor by the rich and thus serve as obstacles that impair the social reproduction of public goods essential for human development. Third, we need to focus more acutely on the basic social and human needs that must be met if we wish to call our world civilized. Finally, new attitudes and policies must be developed and resources allocated to promote public and population health, premised upon principles of justice that are globally plausible to a majority of the world's population.