

Global Poverty and the Limits of Academic Expertise

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Academics are not a natural kind. They have varied expertise and aims, and most have no expertise that is particularly relevant to problems of poverty and development. This presumably is why the essay in this issue by Thomas Pogge and Louis Cabrera—a virtual “manifesto” of the newly formed Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP)—shifts to and fro between addressing “academics” and addressing “poverty-focused academics.”¹ Even those academics whose work touches on poverty and development—a quite small minority—are mostly expert in some but not in other aspects of these topics. Some are expert in international law, but not in economics; others know about international trade, but not about aid; some study corruption, but know nothing about nutrition—and so on. A few know a lot about normative argument, but their credentials are sketchy when it comes to empirical evidence. Many more are interested in empirical evidence, usually of a specific sort, but are uncritical of or confused about normative argument. (I suspect that many suffer from a lingering positivist hangover, which suggests that there is no intellectually respectable way to support normative claims, and indeed that this fear may lie behind the appeals to the importance of academic neutrality that Pogge and Cabrera discuss.)

Looking at another essay in this group of ASAP papers, I fear that many parallel things can be said about the persons Keith Horton labels “aid specialists.”² They, too, are not a natural kind. Some are expert in government aid policies, others in NGO aid efforts—much of it funded indirectly under government policies, via grants and contracts. Some are expert in particular regions, and some in specific objectives: women’s health, nutritional standards, support to agriculture, emergency aid, and many others.

It seems to me that any attempt to specify which sorts of people a group with the name Academics Stand Against Poverty strives to address raises many

questions, and that it might be better to aim such advocacy not at academics but at the more indeterminate class of persons with some expertise relevant to some aspect of poverty and development. I think Pogge and Cabrera in fact move in this direction when they make the claim: “When there are public debates that turn on matters of academic expertise, then the public expects academics to contribute this expertise.” This point could be rephrased as a claim that “when there are public debates that turn on matters of expertise, then the public expects experts to contribute their expertise,” and so treat the question as one addressing the civic obligations of experts.

There will then be points to be made about contrasts between experts who hold positions that limit what they can say or do (for example, official or corporate roles) and others who are not limited in these ways (for example, some academics), but who may face other hurdles, including lack of influence or power. There will also be points, but quite different points, to be made about the differences between those who are publicly funded and those who are not. These, of course, are long-discussed problems: think of *la trahison des clercs*,³ clean hands, and whistle-blowing; think of problems of professional confidentiality and compliance.

In short, I suspect that any obligations that we can identify will be the civic obligations of those with relevant expertise, and their incidence will not be coterminous with the civic obligations of any professional group. So while Academics Stand Against Poverty *considered as a campaigning group* may wish to focus on academics, I doubt very much that academics are the relevant audience; and they are certainly not the entire relevant audience. Indeed, I disagree with Pogge and Cabrera that “[academics’] substantive knowledge may be equal to or even exceed that of the policy-makers, journalists, and others who do the lion’s share of issue-framing salient to poverty alleviation.” Alas, too many academics know a lot about a little and little about a lot of relevant matters. In particular, many of the academics among us are short on knowledge that is needed for making realistic judgments of policy process, program costs, or political feasibility.

INFORMATIONAL PROBLEMS

I now move on to consider a few of these pervasive informational problems. One quite specific problem, which Keith Horton calls “the epistemic question” (in fact,

it is one of many epistemic questions), is that it is hard to judge which NGOs are effective and which are not.⁴ So if one seeks to help alleviate poverty by giving funds or support, it is hard to know where they would be best directed. Horton notes how poor the data often is and the pervasive difficulty of determining whether particular projects are efficient, effective, or sustainable. He quotes Kees Fowler and Alan Biekart's view that "a consumer's guide to agencies, produced by an independent entity, is long overdue,"⁵ but points out how difficult it would be to provide one. I note, however, that for any individual who wishes to make a financial contribution, it may be enough to spot *some* NGOs that deliver what they purport to deliver: a complete ranking is more than is needed.

But this is just one of many informational problems, and not the most important one. The even greater parallel problem is to identify which *publicly funded* aid programs are efficient, effective, or sustainable, and in what respects. Given the far greater expenditure of public programs, this second informational problem is surely more important than the problem of evaluating NGOs that seek to reduce poverty.⁶ Moreover, if the public programs go down, so will many of the NGO programs, since many are funded in whole or in part under public policies. Further, the relative concentration of decision-making power over the size and direction of public spending of any state also suggests that it is politically more important to obtain evidence for the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of publicly funded programs than of NGOs. Obviously, if taxpayers conclude that a publicly funded program is ineffective or wasteful, they will be less likely to continue to support it.

CAUSES AND REMEDIES

However, the largest informational problems do not, I suggest, arise because we do not know enough about the efficacy of current remedies, but rather because we do not know enough about causes or about potential remedies. Thus, in my view, it would be very useful to focus not only on informational problems that limit our understanding of possible or supposed remedies but on the evidence for the differential persistence of poverty in some *but not all* parts of the world and the ways in which change has been achieved—where it has. Without an understanding of causes and effective remedies we are unlikely to make much progress.

Yet many find themselves in a double bind in addressing questions about development and the persistence of poverty, and this is not merely because of the

absence or low quality of data. Those who seek to support practical interventions often find that they need to emphasize how *ineffective* programs have been to date in order to explain why more effort is needed. In doing so, however, they unwittingly reinforce suspicions that such interventions do not work, and that it is futile to give more money or to increase aid programs. If, on the other hand, they emphasize how *effective* programs have proved, and argue that they work well, they risk encouraging people to think that remedies are under way and that giving even more support is not a high priority. The tension between demonstrating the magnitude of unmet needs and showing the efficacy of interventions to meet them is often close to the surface in the promotional literature of NGOs: the great success of their particular interventions and programs is extolled on the very page that presents their inadequacy and the persistence of the very aspects of poverty they still seek to ameliorate after decades of effort.

I think that this pressure to provide the public with a double message—great success alongside continuing inadequacy—may be one reason why a particularly useful form of expertise in this area is statistical, and in particular the public presentation of statistical evidence in ways that are compelling and easy to understand. I have been impressed with the clarifying work of David Spiegelhalter, the Winton Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk in Cambridge,⁷ and by Hans Rosling's wonderful dynamic graphic representations of the changing profiles of poverty and of the global disease burden.⁸ Work of this sort can raise standards in discussions of poverty by making it clearer what sort of measures are involved and why, where, and to what extent severe poverty persists despite the fact that large numbers have been successfully lifted out of poverty in recent decades. Encouraging the more perspicuous measurement of poverty is, of course, another area in which Thomas Pogge is active.⁹

SOME AMBIGUITIES OF GLOBALIZATION

There is, however, a further double bind that discussions of the selective persistence of poverty repeatedly encounter. This is an unresolved and indeed often undiscussed ambivalence about globalization. On the one hand, the opening of borders to trade, investment, and other flows has provided the context for most discussions about the possibility and importance of action to address persistent poverty. Without institutions and processes that can cross borders, such poverty and injustices seemingly cannot be addressed effectively.

On the other hand, the opening of borders has coincided with and provided the conditions for a previously unimaginable scale of profit making, both by legal and criminal activity. Open borders allow rent-seeking activity and regulatory arbitrage to shield assets from tax and institutions from regulation. They offer new vistas for corrupt practices and shield perpetrators from the remedies that effective states can impose and self-confident cultures can reinforce. The emergence of a multiplicity of offshore jurisdictions has allowed states, corporations, and wealthy individuals to control where they will (or, rather, will not) be regulated, where they will (or will not) be taxed, and where they will (and will not) have their disputes resolved.¹⁰ Globalization thus supports the emergence of what is quite literally an *outlaw* class of economic agents (the individual agents who benefit from this generally live quite comfortably within some well-governed jurisdiction, or flit between such jurisdictions), who are able to cherry-pick their way through the world and avoid the constraints, remedies, and burdens that can be imposed within jurisdictions and that the less affluent have then to shoulder.

In an older world of effective cultural, economic, and political borders (a world that permitted forms of protectionism!) expropriation and corruption could more readily be confined and detected. Of course, this did not always happen, but many jurisdictions could provide some levers to prevent and reduce such activities. It may be that the globalized world is inevitably in considerable part a no-man's-land, and so (unless one improbable day it comes to be run by an all-powerful yet non-corrupt world state) it displaces rather than resolves certain inequities. While regulation has increased in many jurisdictions, and indeed is demanded by the implementation of human rights, and while human rights declarations and conventions have received widespread (if incomplete) ratification, many states lack either the power or the will to construct effective institutions that can and will implement the standards to which they have signed up.¹¹

Globalization, it seems to me, is at present one of the central conditions of contemporary state, business, and other types of corruption, and one of the main reasons why contemporary corruption is so hard to reduce or eliminate. Declining state power has enabled the emergence of new mobile elites—both super-rich and criminal—who successfully avoid the burdens of taxation and regulation, and who take no share in the costs of supporting efforts to alleviate hopeless poverty. Perhaps globalization will eventually provide remedies for these ills, but I think that on this the jury is still out.

So I end by asking, where might we look for relevant sources of expertise? Some, but only some, will be found among academics. I have already noted the importance of relying on adequate statistics and clearer representations of the incidence of poverty. To this I would add the importance of economic expertise, but this source of expertise has been brought into question since the crisis of 2008, and urgently needs reworking. Many of the central transformations of globalization have been economic, and they have for the most part been informed and formed by aspects of neoclassical market economics. Behind economic liberalization lies a coherent, if no longer quite so popular, set of economic doctrines, as well as a still highly popular, though very abstract, view of human rights. The multiple sorts of expertise that lie behind the rise of global communications, manufacture, and trade have indeed allowed many to escape poverty, but they have also spread opportunities to evade the rule of law and the payment of taxes, and to disregard cultural norms. It is encouraging that many economists are now working on the question of what went wrong with their discipline and how it became so deeply implicated in a global downturn that, of course, harms the poorest most. But it remains to be seen whether their efforts will put economic theory on a new footing that is both empirically and normatively adequate, and that is helpful for efforts to reduce severe poverty.

If we were merely looking at the bottom line, I think we would conclude that open markets have done a lot to reduce poverty, and judge them on balance a success. But, of course, when we are thinking about the persistence of poverty we are not looking at a balance sheet, and the fantastic fortunes of the new rich and the new criminal classes do not show that the poverty of others is a price that it is right to pay. We need to count the costs as well as the benefits of globalization, and that is far harder.

Another type of expertise that might make some difference would seek a better analysis of the relationship between state institutions and effective law enforcement and taxation. This might require expertise in law, international relations, and political philosophy. If the standards promulgated by the human rights movements (or other accounts of justice) are to be secured and if severe poverty is to be addressed, idealized cosmopolitanism is not enough. States remain the only institutions that (in some cases) enforce law and gather taxes effectively; and support for globalization is gestural if it does not insist that these or other effective institutions be maintained or constructed.

I conclude, with little comfort, that it is hard to make a special case for academics as the bearers of knowledge or capacities that are the key to reducing

poverty. Like others, academics have civic obligations. Like others, they will find the shape of these obligations harder to discern in a globalizing world, and like others they will have to struggle with and need to face the limitations of their own expertise. If they have any specific advantage, it is only that they have a professional commitment to improve their own and others' expertise. One arena in which this commitment could be deployed is in probing and questioning the assumption that extending the depth and range of globalization is always the optimal route to ending severe poverty. Boundaries that are more porous to money, goods, and people may sometimes be part of the solution to poverty; but where they limit or even undermine powers to take effective action, they may also make it harder to remedy poverty, and so may also be part of the problem.

NOTES

- ¹ Thomas Pogge and Luis Cabrera, "Outreach, Impact, Collaboration: Why Academics Should Join to Stand Against Poverty," in this issue of *Ethics & International Affairs*.
- ² See Keith Horton, "How Academics Can Help People Make Better Decisions Concerning Global Poverty," in this issue of *Ethics & International Affairs*.
- ³ Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2006 [1927]). Benda was critical of European intellectuals, whom he saw eschewing dispassionate analysis in favor of nationalist-informed polemic.
- ⁴ See Keith Horton, "Aid Agencies: The Epistemic Question," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28 (2011), pp. 29–43; see also Horton, this issue.
- ⁵ Keith Horton, "An Appeal to Aid Specialists," *Development Policy Review* 28, no. 1 (2010), pp. 27–42, at p. 33.
- ⁶ See also Roger Riddell, "Navigating Between Extremes: Academics Helping to Eradicate Extreme Global Poverty," in this issue of *Ethics & International Affairs*.
- ⁷ See in particular his website, Understanding Uncertainty, understandinguncertainty.org/.
- ⁸ See Rosling's Gapminder website at www.gapminder.org/.
- ⁹ For details, see the Global Justice Program at www.yale.edu/macmillan/globaljustice/FemPov.html.
- ¹⁰ Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure Islands: Tax Havens and the Men Who Stole the World* (New York: The Bodley Head, 2011).
- ¹¹ See Onora O'Neill, "The Dark Side of Human Rights," *International Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2005), pp. 427–39; and Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).