

# Is Human Progress Inevitable?

Written by Joe Sutcliffe

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JOE SUTCLIFFE, MAY 30 2012

**Evaluate the view expressed by Martin Luther King Jr that “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through tireless efforts and persistent work...Without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation”.**

Current neoliberal orthodoxies enforce the idea that globalisation is synonymous with modernisation, development and progress, and that this progress is inevitable. However, they also advocate the idea that ‘hard work’ is required to achieve progress through encouraging countries to open up properly to globalisation, accepting any short term problems for the sake of the inevitable progress that will follow. Current theories of neoliberal globalisation therefore diverge from Martin Luther King’s argument about the inevitability of progress, but acquiesce to some extent with the idea that a gradual ‘hard work’ is required towards this progress. This essay will assess the claims of neoliberal globalisation in relation to King’s statement, arguing that progress is not inevitable and ‘hard work’ to ensure neoliberal globalisation in the global south has not created progress. As such, King’s view of the lack of inevitability of human progress will be affirmed, but his allusion to progress through hard work will be questioned by problematising the nature of ‘hard work’ in its current neoliberal guise. However, the positive, emancipatory outcome of such a deconstruction posited by post-development/post-colonial scholars will be questioned, with the potential for ‘time itself becoming an ally of social stagnation’ highlighted, before a brief exploration of the kinds of ‘hard work’ required in a world of “post-isms” is offered.

To begin, many have mistakenly identified globalisation as indicative of an ‘inevitable progress’, bringing the world closer together in mutual interdependence and pulling the global south into modernity. These perceptions of globalisation, as evidenced by the self-titled radical globalisation theorist Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1999), are imbued with enduring assumptions of modernisation theory and link closely to the neoliberal project (Kiely 2005). Modernisation theory dictates that all societies are progressing along the same stages towards an inevitable modernity. Globalisation appears to evidence this teleology through the extension of the free market, causing the ‘increasing homogenization of all human societies’ (Fukuyama 1992, p. XIV) and increasing levels of prosperity for all; globalisation is thus spreading modernity. While globalisation is commonly seen as a multi-faceted phenomenon (McGrew 2008), it is the emphasis on economic globalisation through the spread of the free market which reveals the inherent link of much orthodox globalisation theory to neoliberalism. Equally, ideas of development become synonymous with the modernisation achieved through neoliberal economic policies, portrayed as the only way of achieving human progress. This general argument underlies much of the current globalisation and development orthodoxy. While it is unfair to suggest that orthodox scholars and policymakers have uncritically accepted this mantra – certainly many would disassociate themselves from an unsophisticated and largely discredited modernisation theory – it is nevertheless true that assumptions taken from the core narrative explored above are commonly taken to be axiomatic, and reside as implicit dogmas in much globalisation and development analysis (Slater 2004).

In order to explore King’s statement it is necessary to critique such perceptions and, in line with his opening proposition, the idea of globalisation as an inevitable progress can certainly be challenged. Technological progress emanating from the natural sciences, usually emphasised from the early-modern period, is commonly cited as the central driver to the process of globalisation (Fukuyama 1992). Rapid technological progress has shortened communication and travel times and this shrinking of the world has driven the increasingly pervasive expansion of

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capital, creating a global market which ensures a convergence of incomes and prosperity for all in a global modernity. That such an argument is extremely deterministic is self-evident, as by privileging science and technological innovation as the structural drivers of history, the agency of people as actors in history is undermined. Chang (2004) is correct to point out that technology has acted as a facilitator for globalisation, but the actual use of such technology and the way in which it has impacted upon social, political and economic relations in the contemporary world is largely dependent upon 'deliberate policy choices' (2004, p. 28). The current neoliberal guise of globalisation thus stems from the policies of countries in the global north during the late-1970s and 1980s, both domestically and in the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), as reflected in the neoliberal dogmas of the GATT (General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade) and associated agreements (Wade 2003). Neoliberal globalisation is not reflective of an inevitable progress enacted through science and technology, but of political decision making and resultant neoliberal hegemony. There is a need to 'bring politics back in' (Nederveen Pieterse (2002, p. 1036) to the way globalisation and development are understood; a point widely supported in the literature (Nissanke and Thorbecke 2006; Ferguson 1990; Wade 2003).

It is the aforementioned political choices that underlie neoliberal globalisation, yet they are commonly mistaken as necessary efforts to 'get out of the way' of globalisation. Despite their inevitable progress assumptions, the proponents of neoliberal globalisation do seem to believe that 'tireless efforts and persistent work' are necessary to achieve human progress. King's 'hard work' simply alludes to the need for countries to liberalise and open-up their economies to the unstoppable tide of globalisation. As Martin (1999) and Wade (2003) have noted, this requires political action both to pressurise other governments into changes and to create "regulations for de-regulation" so to speak through international agreements. Thus the 'process' of neoliberal globalisation is clearly politically driven and not inevitable, yet this perception of 'hard work' to 'get out of the way' of globalisation further underlies the neutral and "technicised" perception of development projects witnessed amongst the IFIs. Ferguson (1990) critiques the way Lesotho came to be perceived as both 'aboriginal' and 'agricultural' (1990, p. 71) in the development discourse so as to neatly fit into the modernisation assumptions of the development "experts" in the IFIs, enabling them to reduce poverty to a technical problem which required modernisation through neoliberal economic doctrines. This understanding of 'hard work' thus acts as an 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson 1990) manipulating the realities of countries in the global south to fit to modernisation assumptions, thereby concurrently acting to reify the perception of human progress being achieved through 'hard work'. The apoliticisation of neoliberal globalisation is thus ubiquitous amongst its proponents, both in the way they perceive the 'process' occurring and in the 'hard work' deemed necessary to make way for it.

King's opening proposition therefore provides a pertinent critique to neoliberal perceptions of globalisation and progress, yet the perception of 'hard work' discussed is commonly argued to be vindicated in World Bank poverty figures, which supposedly evidence a steady reduction in global poverty. Whilst the overtly neoliberal prescriptions of structural adjustment have been reassessed by the IFIs, the World Bank (2002) maintains that global poverty is gradually being defeated and attributes this success to the economic growth gained from effective integration into a global, neoliberal market. Whilst orthodox policymakers and scholars do admit to the potentially negative impact of globalisation (Basu 2006), particularly during the period immediately following economic adjustment, this is seen as a necessary, short term pain which will give way to growth and progress in poverty reduction. As such, the assumption that 'increased trade generally goes hand-in-hand with improvements in the well-being of the poor' (Dollar and Kraay 2004, p. 29) remains. The inevitability of neoliberal globalisation can be effectively deconstructed, but it is also necessary to consider whether these related ideals of 'hard work' are nevertheless achieving human progress and development.

To begin, the vindication of neoliberal ideas in achieving human progress, especially in the reduction of poverty cited by the World Bank, can be easily refuted. In a critique of Dollar and Kraay (2004), Rodrik (2000, p. 5) charges that many commentators have used 'inappropriate indicators of trade policy, selected to systematically bias the results in favor of showing a...significant link between trade liberalization and growth'. Neoliberal economic prescriptions are a long way from ensuring development, as revealed by the growth figures of those countries adopting these ideas (Rodrik 2000). Indeed, Reddy and Pogge (2002) have questioned the World Bank's poverty figures, suggesting that the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) calculation used has underestimated the numbers living in poverty, as it is skewed by cheaper commodities in the services industry, meaning the estimated poverty line has dropped while the

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price of essential commodities such as food remains the same. Related concerns about the World Bank's figures (Chen and Ravallion 2004; Kiely 2005) reveal that current poverty rates are inconclusive at best; there is certainly no strong trend towards reduction. It is worth noting that Nissanke and Thorbecke (2006) suggest any noticeable decrease in poverty figures is largely accounted for by the development of China, while poverty may well be increasing in other regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, which has witnessed economic contraction during the neoliberal era (Chang and Grabel 2004). In an ironic twist, it appears the World Bank's poverty figures may only be supported through the economic growth of a country which has followed a distinctly non-neoliberal set of economic policies, including strong state interference (Arrighi and Lu 2010). This trend can be found elsewhere, with Chang and Grabel (2004) highlighting the interventionist nature of the East Asian developmental states in ensuring their rapid economic growth; a strategy now made extremely difficult if not impossible under WTO regulations. On a conservative judgement of the current evidence, it is not at all apparent that neoliberalism has ensured either growth or poverty reduction.

The misleading assumptions of current orthodox development policies are equally evidenced in the conceptual portrayal offered by proponents of how globalisation is currently affecting the world. These scholars highlight the speed and frequency of global communications and the reality of a truly global market, marked by transnational corporations and the free movement of capital across borders. However this portrayal, which chimes with assumptions of the inevitable progress through modernisation, proffers a misleading perception of the global economy. When considering Africa, it is apparent that capital does not flow across the globe contiguously in the way suggested but hops across it, leaving large spaces untouched (Ferguson 2005). Neoliberal globalisation remains a highly uneven phenomenon (Chang and Grabel 2004), and some have considered this unevenness as the cause of global inequality, suggesting a more accurate term to be 'asymmetrical globalisation' (McGrew 2008, p. 22). The growing inequality seen between the global north and south since the late-1970s – the neoliberal era – is certainly a well documented trend (Chang and Grabel 2004; Milanovic 2003; Nederveen Pieterse 2002).

However, it would be mistaken to perceive this inequality as occurring through a simple lack of globalisation, or connection to the global economy, in certain parts of the world. In Africa, capital has been found to concentrate in small enclaves of mineral extraction with surplus capital then hopping straight back out into a "global" market dominated by the north, in a process referred to as capital flight. The political economy of Africa is therefore not marred by abandonment or a lack of connection to the global market; it is in many ways connected due to the vital importance of natural resources. Instead, it is neoliberal globalisation itself which has actively created zones of exclusion alongside those of high intensity integration (Ferguson 2005). This phenomenon is further revealed by the existence of huge shanty towns in Africa's urban centres. Urbanisation is considered a hallmark of the modernisation process, driven by industrialisation and labour migration, but this 'modernisation' has failed to materialise and 'shanty city is by and large the *real* African city' (Pieterse 2011, p. 6). In cities such as Lagos, these shantytowns exist alongside the so called 'modern' realities of global capital, represented by modern skyscrapers. These are not examples of modernity and backwardness sat side by side but interrelated phenomena; shanty cities are as much reflective of neoliberal globalisation as the skyscrapers, they simply reveal the active processes of exclusion involved in neoliberalism alongside sites of integration. The modernising assumptions of neoliberal globalisation are not only misplaced, but are actively creating an unequal world and reproducing poverty. By perceiving globalisation as an inevitable process, and development projects as neutral, technical exercises, the proponents of neoliberal globalisation have ignored the fact that "poverty is a choice the world has made' and 'it is a political choice' (Hedley 1999, p. 86).

At this point, it is apparent that globalisation is not an inevitable process, but it is also evident that the way globalisation is being enforced and the shrinking policy space allowed to the global south is having a hugely negative impact. Post-development/post-colonial scholars have heralded such realisations as marking the end of universalising teleological assumptions of modernisation and neoliberal globalisation and have highlighted how an emphasis on local histories and hybrid subaltern agencies can lead the way to a fairer world without modernising totalities (Escobar 2004; Slater 2004). However, by emphasising the hybrid and adaptive ability of those living in poverty as a "liberation" from western modernisation myths, these 'post' scholars can be found guilty of romanticising poverty (Ferguson 1999), and have further made the mistake of assuming that the end of western modernisation assumptions will simply provide a more equitable world. Such thinking neglects the reality that power hierarchies

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existed before discourses of development and/or colonialism (Ferguson 1999). The deconstruction of these dominant discourses does not ensure a positive future for the global south; the idea of deconstruction without an element of construction is therefore not an appealing one. Indeed, the realisation of the myth of the inevitable progress means that instead of 'developmental stairways', countries in the global south encounter 'exclusionary walls' (Ferguson 2007, p. 189) and 'chronically stricken positions in the global hierarchy' (McClintock 1992, p. 94). A post-neoliberal world may simply reveal 'time itself becoming an ally of the forces of social stagnation'.

Therefore, King's assertion that 'tireless efforts and persistent work' are needed to ensure human progress requires rehabilitating. This new 'hard work' must not seek to reform a universal teleology, with the heterogeneous ways that progress can be both asserted and gained emphasised, but must nevertheless offer an alternative to the continuation of global marginalisation and exclusion, disempowerment and poverty. Alternative policy ideas to neoliberalism, such as that offered by Chang and Grabel (2004), are vital in this regard, although the equally universalising tendencies of some of this kind of work should be treated with caution and properly critiqued. It is necessary to further consider that by connecting neoliberal 'modernity' with the active reproduction of exclusion and poverty, the deconstruction of the 'process' of globalisation/modernisation has also seen the deconstruction of the ends or *telos* of this process. 'Modernity' as a desirable outcome is questioned. After all, it appears that the levels of fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions in the global north are unsustainable as it is (Ferguson 1999), let alone if the whole world was brought to this status of 'modernity'. This is not a Malthusian argument but simply the realisation that if human progress is to be secured, especially amongst those in the global south, then 'modernity', at least as it currently operates, needs to be done away with in favour of a form of society which enables not only a more economically equitable world, but also an environmentally sustainable one. There are no easy answers, but a vital task for now appears to be considering 'new ways of thinking about...progress and responsibility in the aftermath of modernism' (Ferguson 1999, p. 254).

In conclusion, King's opening proposition that human progress 'never rolls in on wheels on inevitability' has been evidenced in the current orthodoxy of neoliberal globalisation, and the apoliticising nature of this discourse has been made apparent. Equally, the understanding of King's 'hard work' suggested amongst the proponents of neoliberal globalisation has also been critiqued, as it has been found to be both ineffective in promoting development and progress and a root cause of the reproduction of global poverty. However, the veneration of the end of modernisation assumptions seen amongst "post-ism" scholars has not been shared, with the potential for such a world to simply evidence further 'social stagnation' exposed. Instead, a brief exploration of the possibilities of a new 'hard work' has been proffered, one that is neither inevitable nor modernising, but nevertheless holds the potential for real human progress. From this understanding, the view of Martin Luther King appears well founded.

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Date written: January 2012*

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