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Free Trade and Global Poverty: How Much Freedom?

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Abstract. This article describes some psychological elements linking constructs of free trade and goals and efforts to reduce poverty in today's era of globalization.

Many representatives of the commonly cited, global economic powers (governmental and corporate) pay homage to some notion of free trade as the vehicle through which poverty can be optimally combated and even (at least in rhetoric) eradicated. The idea is that goods and services and the technology, organizational structures, knowledge, and money that support them should be minimally impeded from going where they are needed. Paying implicit--if not explicit--homage to some unseen hand or vitalistic mechanism, representatives of the global economic powers assert that as one approaches some limit of unimpeded mobility, one also approaches some limit of minimal poverty.

However, there are at least three elements of the behavior of the global economic powers that render such professed beliefs suspect. First of all, both governments and corporations at least sporadically advocate for impediments to mobility of all the above through formal and de facto protective devices--e.g., tariffs, duties, quotas, and constraints of health, labor, safety, security, and environment. These protective devices usually conflate significant concerns for profit. Second, the governments most perceived as global economic powers almost always--if not always--effect restrictions on the mobility of labor through immigration laws. Again, these restrictions conflate significant concerns for profits. Third, such impediments to mobility are advocated by and for the global economic powers and yet are attacked by these powers when advanced by the many poor countries.

There should be little wonder, then, that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia stated at the recent Group of 77 summit meeting that if money is capital for the rich, labor is the capital of the poor countries. He went on to state that citizens of the poor countries should be allowed to migrate to the rich countries to compete for the jobs there just as the powerful corporations of the rich must be allowed to compete with their tiny counterparts in the poor countries.

Perhaps, as with United States (US) explanations for the bombing of the People's Republic of China's embassy in Belgrade, there is just too much that is pat and potentially egoistic about global economic powers' prescriptions to combat poverty. In the former case, attributions of a mistake clash with the so convenient (for the US) deaths of Chinese intelligent agents and the destruction of the intelligence and defense areas of the embassy. In the latter case, prescriptions for free trade clash with violations of such prescriptions when in the interests of the global economic powers.

It is because of the confluence of elements of truth-seeking, lie, and fantasy in all communication that we all are free to believe what we like and are often the poorer for this freedom. (See Batson, C. D. (1999). Two threats to the common good: Self-interested egoism and empathy and empathy-induced altruism. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 3-16; Castro denounces lenders at meeting of poor nations. (April 13, 2000). *The New York Times*, p. A 12; Gantt, E. E., & Reber, J. S. (1999). Sociobiological and social constructionist accounts of altruism: A phenomenological critique. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 30, 14-38; Harvey, O. J., Frank, H., Gore, E. J., & Batres, A. R. (1998).

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deviance. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 5, 349-378.) (Keywords: Free Trade, Group of 77, Poverty.)