

Biology and Society

Unit Eight: Ethics and Equity in the 21st Century

**We won't stop making war on the environment,
until we stop making war on each other.**

Murry Bookchin from his book *Remaking Society* (1990)

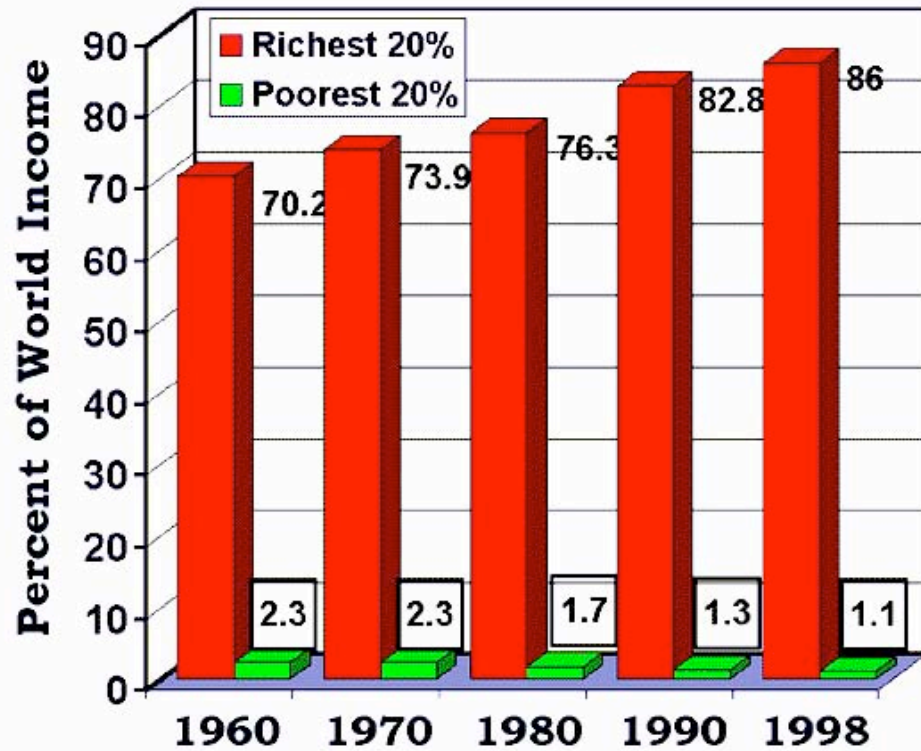
Topic One: The Haves and the Have Nots

The Wealth and Poverty of Nations and People

The widening gap between the rich and the poor

Despite unprecedented economic growth during the last part of the 20th century, the gap between rich and poor nations and people widened significantly.

Global Income Distribution 1960 -1998



Compiled from UNDP Human Development Reports
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- In 1998, the richest 20 percent of the world's population controlled 86 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 20 percent controlled only 1.1 percent.
- This is a gap of nearly 80-1, up from a 30-1 gap in 1960.
- The middle 60% of people also saw their share of world income decline during this period.
- Average global per capita income has now passed \$5000U.S.per year but more than 1.2 billion people still live on less than \$1U.S. per day.
- The United Nations Development Program estimated in 1999 that more than 80 nations have lower per capita incomes than 10 or more years ago. In 55 countries per capita incomes are still going down.
- The richest 225 people controlled as much wealth as the poorest 2.5 billion people.
- And the richest three people controlled more wealth than all the least developed nations and their 600 million people.

| Country | Gross National Income per capita (US\$) | Gross National Income in Purchasing Power Parity per capita (US\$) |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brazil | 4,350 | 6,840 |
| China | 780 | 3,550 |
| Ethiopia | 100 | 620 |
| India | 440 | 2,230 |
| Indonesia | 600 | 2,660 |
| Japan | 32,030 | 25,170 |
| Nigeria | 260 | 770 |
| Russia | 2,250 | 6,990 |
| Switzerland | 38,380 | 28,760 |
| United States | 31,910 | 31,910 |

One other key trend is personal income and economic equity. This is especially important because, as societies become more developed and urbanized, people must purchase essentials such as food, water, and shelter rather than producing their own. Like trends in food security and water availability, trends in economic equity are in decline.

America the Haves

Americans are at the head of a chain of consumption that has left the planet in a state in which its richest 20 percent of people own 87 percent of all vehicles and consume 84 percent of all paper, 58 percent of all energy and 45 percent of all meat and fish, according to the United Nations.

The United States is home to 54 percent of the world's individuals with ultra-high net worth, persons with investable assets exceeding \$30 million, according to Merrill Lynch and Gemini Consulting.

Yet the United States is the most skinflint of industrialized nations. While Norway, for instance, gives out \$285 per capita in development assistance, the United States gives out only \$30, according to the United Nations.

Africa the Have Nots

- Africa is the only continent on which poverty is expected to rise during the next century.
- An estimated 500 million hectares of land have been affected by soil degradation since about 1950, including as much as 65 per cent of agricultural land.
- As a result of declining food security, the number of undernourished people in Africa nearly doubled from 100 million in the late 1960s to nearly 200 million in 1995.
- Africa lost 39 million hectares of tropical forest during the 1980s, and another 10 million hectares by 1995.
- Fourteen African countries are subject to water stress or water scarcity, and a further 11 will join them by 2025.
- A tenfold reduction in resource consumption in the industrialized countries is a necessary long-term target if adequate resources are to be released for the needs of developing countries in Africa and elsewhere.

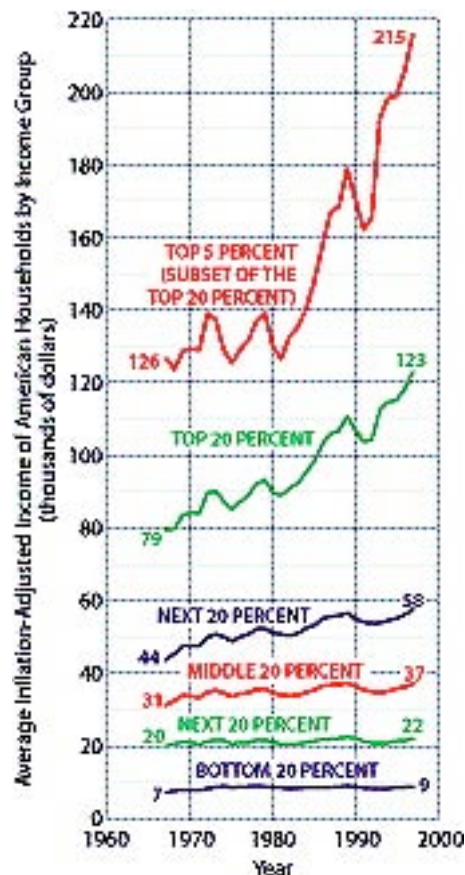
Income Inequality in the U.S.

by Rodger Doyle (Scientific American June 1999)

“For about three decades--roughly the period from the early 1940s to the early 1970s--the U.S. became progressively more egalitarian. This was a time of rapidly rising productivity and rising real wages. But by the early 1970s, productivity growth slowed and real wages declined, at least for the unskilled. Although average household income in real dollars rose by 41 percent from 1967 to 1997, those with low incomes--the two lowest groups on the chart--benefited little.

Another reason for rising inequality was the dramatic surge, beginning in the early 1980s, in the share of income going to the top 5 percent of households. Lower tax rates introduced by the Reagan administration probably also contributed to inequality.”

Today the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans control about 38 percent of America's wealth. The bottom 80 percent control 17 percent of America's wealth.



Even in the richest country in the world the trend is toward greater inequity. Consider the following facts...

If the minimum wage had risen at the same pace as American productivity since 1968, it would be \$13.80 an hour.

If the minimum wage had risen at the same level pace as executive pay since 1990, it would be \$25.50 an hour, not \$5.15.

Twenty-nine percent of American families make less than what the Economic Policy Institute estimates is needed to meet basic needs - a national median of \$33,551.

The median wage of child-care workers is \$6.91 an hour. The median wage of parking lot attendants is \$6.89. Preschool teachers average \$9.43. Animal trainers average \$12.39.

In 1978, 70 percent of workers in the private sector were covered by employer-provided health insurance. By 1998, the figure had dropped to 62.9 percent.

In 1979, 40.7 percent of the lowest-income workers in the private sector were covered by employer-provided health insurance. By 1998, the figure had dropped to 29.6 percent.

Reciprocity — the principle of equal consideration of the interests of all.

Ethical cooperation between rational like-kinds can be based on the logical assumption that the desires an individual has are the same as others like themselves.

Reciprocity recognizes that all members of a society should have an equal share in the benefits and obligations of their society.

**But the logic of reciprocity applies to more than societies;
it applies to humanity as a whole.**

We cannot expect the people of the underdeveloped nations of the world to indefinitely endure poverty and starvation while more than one billion people in the developed nations of the world are now overweight. In the US 61% of adults are overweight, and 27% are obese.



Given how genetically similar we are, it is a logical assumption that the basic desires we have are the same for all humans. Can we really convince ourselves that this mother from Kenya does not want for her son what we want for our children—health and happiness?

If we do not provide an equal share in the benefits and obligations of this world for all of humanity, we should not be surprised at the outcome.

And that outcome is war.

Myron Wlaznak on War

Excerpt from **U.S. Needs to Assess Role in World Scheme**
by Myron Wlaznak, Bellingham Herald, 9 November 2001, Opinion

I grew up ducking and covering in anticipation of a bright light exploding outside my schoolroom window. The city's civic center was where I was supposed to go to survive a direct nuclear hit—one could stay there until the all clear was given.

Starting in the 1960s, I began watching a dirty little war in a far away unknown jungle. Each night the news would bring me my daily dose of live combat, casualty figures, political proclamations and instant analysis. The television was right there when the action happened. As I grew closer to 18, I developed a detached indifference to the daily dose and headed off to college.

My school was not heavily involved in the demonstrations; perhaps we were apathetic, but the war was always the hot topic of discussion. The nightly news took on special significance when the body bags arrived at our town, when someone I knew came home to full military honors.

When I was inducted, the nightly news assured me that the war was over, just a matter of time now. I spent almost a year in training but some went to war after only 16 weeks of soldiering. I wonder what happened to them. I spent three safe years stateside training troops. I heard all the stories, talked to many who returned, looked into their eyes. Some of those I trained didn't come back from a war that was all but over. As a civilian again, I watched the final tragic episodes on the evening news, listened to the analysts and the political pundits as they told us to get on with our lives.

In my time, I've watched the same Arab-Israeli war several times now. I've watched invasions of Caribbean islands; failed hostage rescue attempts in the desert; the Mother of All Wars in the Middle East; genocide, then peacekeeping in Africa and the Balkans; the religious war in Ireland;

clandestine guerrilla wars in South America; the Gulf War, the war on drugs, the war on poverty, and now the war on terrorism. That is a lot of war in just over 50 years and those are only the ones that made the evening news!

One would hope that humanity learned something from this past 50 years of incessant war. Add in the two great wars and one police action, certainly humanity should have learned something in this past century.

Apparently, sadly, we have not. The new millennium follows in the same calamitous missteps. Despite the dull resignation of so many helpless people to their fate, the utter hopelessness of starving, parentless children, total destruction and devastation seen 24 hours a day, humanity still hasn't found a way to prevent, cure or eliminate the folly of war. Perhaps, after watching war live for an entire lifetime, we never will -- a truly sobering thought.

What is the path out of this dilemma? Is it humanity's fate to repeat this cycle of perpetual war until the end of time? Some would say yes. Certain beliefs condemn us to this accursed fate. There is nothing we can do to change our sorry lot. Other beliefs command us to turn the other cheek, make peace with our enemy. Yet the adherents to these beliefs have a history of violence that rivals this past century. What are your beliefs? Have you thought about it? Sept. 11 should be an awakening for us all.

Perhaps it is time to deliberate our role in the world scheme. Currently we may be the material, economic and military leader but is that enough? Can we achieve peace by having the greatest wealth, exporting our financial acumen to the four corners of the globe, being the world's police force? It hasn't worked so far, I doubt if it ever will.

I certainly don't presume to have the right answers, what I do have are more questions now than I ever had.

Perhaps it is not yet the right moment to consider these kinds of thoughts. Perhaps we need to mourn September 11th a little while longer, but we do need to weigh these questions even as we ponder our response; otherwise the next hundred years will mirror the past.

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Topic Two: The Way Forward

In this course we have looked at many of the social, ethical issues that exist between science, technology, and society in our world. As we did so, it was a goal to provide you with the best information about these issues without making judgments about them.

It would be unfair, however, to leave you without some ideas on how we could move forward in resolving these issues. What follows, then, are suggestions on how we might proceed in dealing with the seemingly intractable problems of our age.

Point Number One:

The problems of population, social and economic inequity, environmental deterioration, and war are completely intertwined.

Point Number Two:

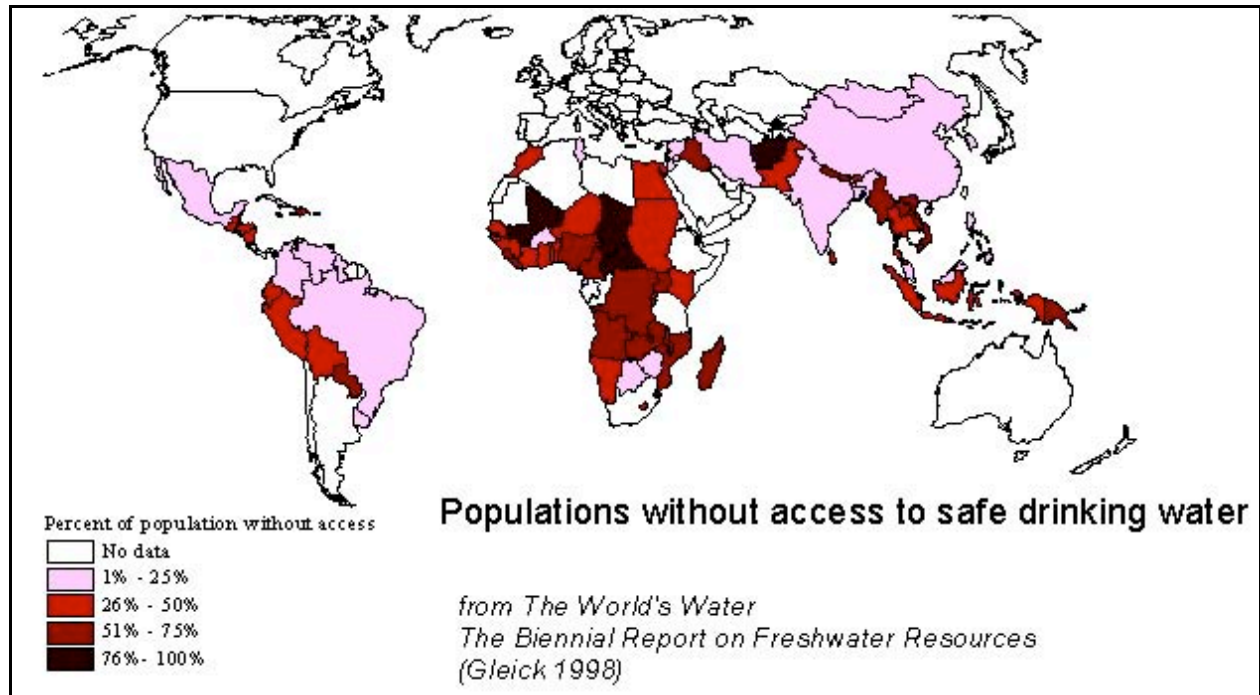
No one gets to pick where they are born.

Point Number Three:

If you want to do what is ethically right, start with the basics.

Basics Number One and Two:

Pure drinking water and adequate sanitation for all of humanity



For many of the world's poorer populations, one of the greatest environmental threats to health remains the continued use of untreated water. While the percentage of people served with improved water supplies increased from 79 per cent (4.1 billion) in 1990 to 82 per cent (4.9 billion) in 2000, 1.1 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion lack access to adequate sanitation. Most of these people are in Africa and Asia. Lack of access to safe water supply and sanitation results in hundreds of millions of cases of water-related diseases, and more than 5 million deaths, every year.

Web Reference <http://www.waterforpeople.org/>

Basic Number Three:

Adequate food for all of humanity

Basic Number Four:

Adequate shelter for all of humanity

Basic Number Five:

Access to basic medical care for all of humanity

Basic Number Six:

Access to basic education for all of humanity

Point Number Four:

Adequate and basic are not mysterious words. They simply mean that which sustains life.

Inadequate shelter is shelter that does not protect you from the elements.

Basic health care is the most cost effective care we have -- the greatest benefit for the greatest number.

Basic education is literacy.

Basic Number Seven:

Equal treatment for all of humanity

No class (economic or social), ethnic group, or gender of human beings should have any rights, obligations, or status other than those possessed by all classes, ethnic groups, or genders.

Point Number Five:

Don't stop until you get the basics done.

Only then should we worry about what else we ethically need to do.

References

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