Bill Gates says poverty is decreasing. He couldn't be more wrong

theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal

Jason Hickel   January 29, 2019

Last week, as world leaders and business elites arrived in Davos for the World Economic Forum, Bill Gates tweeted an infographic to his 46 million followers showing that the world has been getting better and better. "This is one of my favourite infographics," he wrote. "A lot of people underestimate just how much life has improved over the past two centuries."

Of the six graphs – developed by Max Roser of Our World in Data – the first has attracted the most attention by far. It shows that the proportion of people living in poverty has declined from 94% in 1820 to only 10% today. The claim is simple and compelling. And it's not just Gates who's grabbed on to it. These figures have been trotted out in the past year by everyone from Steven Pinker to Nick Kristof and much of the rest of the Davos set to argue that the global extension of free-market capitalism has been great for everyone. Pinker and Gates have gone even further, saying we shouldn't complain about rising inequality when the very forces that deliver such immense wealth to the richest are also eradicating poverty before our very eyes.

It's a powerful narrative. And it's completely wrong.

> Bill Gates (@BillGates)
> This is one of my favorite infographics. A lot of people underestimate just how much life has improved over the last two centuries: https://t.co/djavT7MaW9 pic.twitter.com/kuII7j4AuW
>
> January 19, 2019

There are a number of problems with this graph, though. First of all, real data on poverty has only been collected since 1981. Anything before that is extremely sketchy, and to go back as far as 1820 is meaningless. Roser draws on a dataset that was never intended to describe poverty, but rather inequality in the distribution of world GDP – and that for only a limited range of countries. There is no actual research to bolster the claims about long-term poverty. It's not science; it's social media.

What Roser's numbers actually reveal is that the world went from a situation where most of humanity had no need of money at all to one where today most of humanity struggles to survive on extremely small amounts of money. The graph casts this as a

decline in poverty, but in reality what was going on was a process of dispossession that bulldozed people into the capitalist labour system, during the enclosure movements in Europe and the colonisation of the global south.

Prior to colonisation, most people lived in subsistence economies where they enjoyed access to abundant commons – land, water, forests, livestock and robust systems of sharing and reciprocity. They had little if any money, but then they didn't need it in order to live well – so it makes little sense to claim that they were poor. This way of life was violently destroyed by colonisers who forced people off the land and into European-owned mines, factories and plantations, where they were paid paltry wages for work they never wanted to do in the first place.

In other words, Roser's graph illustrates a story of coerced proletarianisation. It is not at all clear that this represents an improvement in people's lives, as in most cases we know that the new income people earned from wages didn't come anywhere close to compensating for their loss of land and resources, which were of course gobbled up by colonisers. Gates's favourite infographic takes the violence of colonisation and repackages it as a happy story of progress.

But that's not all that's wrong here. The trend that the graph depicts is based on a poverty line of $1.90 (£1.44) per day, which is the equivalent of what $1.90 could buy in the US in 2011. It's obscenely low by any standard, and we now have piles of evidence that people living just above this line have terrible levels of malnutrition and mortality. Earning $2 per day doesn't mean that you're somehow suddenly free of extreme poverty. Not by a long shot.

Scholars have been calling for a more reasonable poverty line for many years. Most agree that people need a minimum of about $7.40 per day to achieve basic nutrition and normal human life expectancy, plus a half-decent chance of seeing their kids survive their fifth birthday. And many scholars, including Harvard economist Lant Pritchett, insist that the poverty line should be set even higher, at $10 to $15 per day.

So what happens if we measure global poverty at the low end of this more realistic spectrum – $7.40 per day, to be extra conservative? Well, we see that the number of people living under this line has increased dramatically since measurements began in 1981, reaching some 4.2 billion people today. Suddenly the happy Davos narrative melts away.

Moreover, the few gains that have been made have virtually all happened in one place: China. It is disingenuous, then, for the likes of Gates and Pinker to claim these gains as victories for Washington-consensus neoliberalism. Take China out of the equation, and the numbers look even worse. Over the four decades since 1981, not only has the number of people in poverty gone up, the proportion of people in poverty has remained stagnant at about 60%. It would be difficult to overstate the suffering that these numbers represent.

This is a ringing indictment of our global economic system, which is failing the vast majority of humanity. Our world is richer than ever before, but virtually all of it is being captured by a small elite. Only 5% of all new income from global growth trickles down

to the poorest 60% – and yet they are the people who produce most of the food and goods that the world consumes, toiling away in those factories, plantations and mines to which they were condemned 200 years ago. It is madness – and no amount of mansplaining from billionaires will be adequate to justify it.

• Dr Jason Hickel is an academic at the University of London and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. His most recent book is The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions.

Is the world really getting poorer? A response by Steve Pinker

January 31, 2019

I don't mean to be Pinker's Fanboy, but I've had some recent correspondence with him that I thought would be enlightening to readers, and got his permission to share it. (The first exchange was about Pinker's supposed misuse of quotations in *Enlightenment Now*, which turned out to be a kerfuffle about nothing.)

Now we're on to a *Guardian* piece that claims that Bill Gates—and by extension, Pinker—are wrong to claim that poverty has decreased in the world over the last two centuries. It started with this tweet from Bill Gates, who, on the way to the Davos Summit, summarized in a tweet six indices of improvement that he saw on the *Our World in Data* site. Here's Gates's tweet:
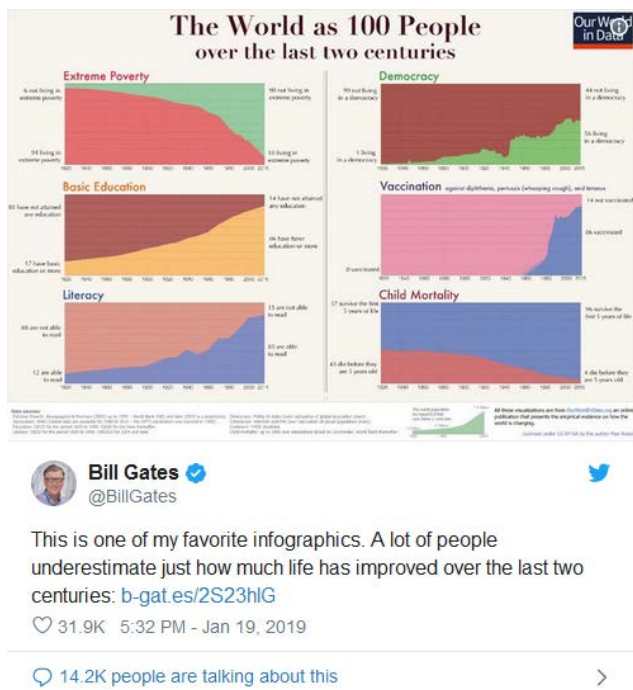
Well, Jason Hickel couldn't let the poverty thing stand, and so published a critique in the *Guardian*, which identifies Hickel as "an academic [a lecturer in anthropology] at the University of London and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts."

Bill Gates says poverty is decreasing.
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Jason Hickel

Hickel objects to the "extreme poverty" graph that shows a decrease in that figure from 94% in 1820 to 10% today. Hickel says this:

> These figures have been trotted out in the past year by everyone from Steven Pinker to Nick Kristof and much of the rest of the Davos set to argue that the global extension of free-market capitalism has been great for everyone. Pinker and Gates have gone even further, saying we shouldn't complain about rising inequality when the very forces that deliver such immense wealth to the richest are also eradicating poverty before our very eyes.
>
> It's a powerful narrative. And it's completely wrong.

Why is it wrong? Well, Hickel says that real data on poverty has been collected only over the last four decades, that it wasn't collected worldwide but for only "a limited range of countries. " Most important, he claims that income wasn't really a good index of poverty in the past, since people had natural resources independent of income—resources that were supplanted by "colonization" that forced people into capitalism and perforce into poverty:

> The graph casts this as a decline in poverty, but in reality what was going on was a process of dispossession that bulldozed people into the capitalist labour system, during the enclosure movements in Europe and the colonisation of the global south.
>
> Prior to colonisation, most people lived in subsistence economies where they enjoyed access to abundant commons – land, water, forests, livestock and robust systems of sharing and reciprocity. They had little if any money, but then they didn't need it in order to live well – so it makes little sense to claim that they were poor. This way of life was violently destroyed by colonisers who forced people off the land and into European-owned mines, factories and plantations, where they were paid paltry wages for work they never wanted to do in the first place.
>
> In other words, Roser's graph illustrates a story of coerced proletarianisation. It is not at all clear that this represents an improvement in people's lives, as in most cases we know that the new income people earned from wages didn't come anywhere close to compensating for their loss of land and resources, which were of course gobbled up by colonisers. Gates's favourite infographic takes the violence of colonisation and repackages it as a happy story of progress.

Hickel's other beef is that the "poverty line" is based on $1.90 per day, and should be much higher: around $7.40. If you use the higher figure, says Hickel, then the "number of people" (not the proportion of people) living below the line has increased since 1981, and the gains —people rising above that line—have taken place mostly in China.

What this suggests, and what Hickel admits, is that income *inequality* may have increased, not average well being. For example, if you put the poverty line at, say, $100,000 (just for grins), then yes, the *number* of people living below that line may have increased due to an increase in inequality of income since 1981. But that tells us little about the average well-being of people.

Hickel winds up arguing that the claim that poverty has decreased is therefore "madness— and no amount of mansplaining from billionaires will be adequate to justify it."

I was a but suspicious not just about the data, but about Hickel's motivations: the phrase "mansplaining from billionaires" suggests a social-justice agenda and perhaps an anti-progressivism associated with the Authoritarian Left. I realized that a response to Hickel's "poverty has increased" claim was probably in Pinker's last two books, but I didn't have them in my office when I read the *Guardian* article. I therefore wrote Steve this email:

> Steve,
>
> I won't bother you (for a while) after this, but presumably you saw the Guardian article by Jason Hickel on why world poverty isn't decreasing: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal
>
> I can't remember the data about this you adduce in your books, but in view of what you said there should be something wrong with this. What is it?
>
> cheers,
> Jerry

Steve wrote me a long reply (kvetching in the first sentence!), but nevertheless defended in an email the global consensus of *decreased* poverty. And again I asked him for permission to put up his email here, and he kindly agreed. As before, there was no understanding that what he was writing would appear on this site, but I asked and he allowed it to appear. I think this is good, for normally Steve wouldn't publish a response to an article like this, but the informality of this site allows me to put up his email take on what seems to be a misguided argument.

As usual, Pinker answers in perfect, publishable English. (Nobody writes better emails!) Here's his response to Hickel's piece.

> Hi, Jerry,
>
> Not sure why I should be the one to defend the consensus on global economic development against a Marxist ideologue enabled by the *Guardian*—I'm just a cognitive scientist who cites data from the real experts—but here are some observations (all of them made in the chapter on Wealth in *Enlightenment Now*).
>
> 1. The massive fall of global extreme poverty is not a claim advanced by me, Bill Gates, or people who go to Davos, but every politically neutral observer who has looked at the data, including the Nobel laureate economist Angus Deaton in *The Great Escape,* the United Nations (which declared its Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty as having been met five years ahead of schedule), and other experts in global development (who bolster their data with observations they have made while they spent time in the poorest countries), such as Stephen Radelet, Charles Kenny, and the Roslings. A comprehensive overview can be found (as always) in Max Roser's *Our World in Data* in the entry on Global Extreme Poverty.
>
> 2. The level at which one sets an arbitrary cutoff like "the poverty line" is irrelevant — the entire distribution has shifted, so the trend is the same wherever you set it.
>
> 3. It's not just China, or even China plus India — many poor countries have seen spectacular poverty reductions, including Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mongolia, Mozambique, Panama, Rwanda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. This is on top of rich countries that not so long ago were dirt-poor, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.
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> 4. Hickel's picture of the past is a romantic fairy tale, devoid of citations or evidence, and

flatly contradicted by historians such as Fernand Braudel who have examined contemporary accounts of life in previous centuries, and economic historians such as Angus Maddison and his students who have tried to quantify it using wills, government records, and other data.

5. The drastic decline in extreme poverty is corroborated by measures of well-being other than income that are correlated with prosperity, such as longevity, child mortality, maternal mortality, literacy, basic education, undernourishment, and consumption of goods like clothing, food, cell phones, even beer—all have improved.

6. It's also borne out by a sanity check from people who have actually spent time in poor countries and have observed what life is like in them—not just development experts, but also biologists I know who have visited their field sites in Africa annually for many decades, and who have remarked on changes that can be seen with the naked eye: stores that have food, kids that wear shoes, people that are overweight rather than starving, shanties replaced by cinderblock, poor people with bicycles and TVs.

7. The political agenda of Hickel and other far leftists is obvious: it's humiliating to their world view that the data show massive improvements due to markets and globalization rather than an overthrow of capitalism and global redistribution (see the quote by David Graeber in "Enlightenment Wars," and the back story on Hickel's radicalism in this article, originally published in *The Telegraph*).

Best,
Steve

As always, you be the judge.

A letter to Steven Pinker (and Bill Gates, for that matter) about global poverty

February 4, 2019

Dear Steven,

I'm writing to respond to a letter you posted regarding claims I made in the *Guardian* about the global poverty narrative. I'm addressing you directly because I think it's preferable to engaging in back-channel debates, and because I'd like to invite you to respond to what follows. This is an important question and it demands serious, honest engagement.

The point of my piece was that the story of global poverty is more complex than you and Gates have been willing to acknowledge, and the data do not support your narrative about neoliberal globalization. Let me elaborate on my key points here, to clear up any confusion, while also addressing your specific comments.

First, the long-term poverty graph (1820-present) developed by Max Roser and recently tweeted by Bill Gates is misleading and has little empirical legitimacy. There are a few reasons for this.

Real data on poverty has only been collected since 1981, by the World Bank. It is widely accepted among those who research global poverty that any data prior to 1981 is simply too sketchy to be useful, and going back to as early as 1820 is more or less meaningless.

The data for 1820-1970 comes from a source (Bourguignon and Morrisson 2002) that draws on the Maddison database on world GDP. That data was never intended to assess poverty, but rather the distribution of global GDP – and that for only a limited range of countries. We might try to speculate about the share of GDP that the poorest people had, but that's very different from telling us anything very useful about poverty.

It is important to recognise that the graph mixes two very different measures. The measure for 1820-1970 is purely *income-based*. In other words, it excludes the non-monetary goods and resources that people may have acquired from their land, from trees, from forests, from rivers and the sea, and in the form of gifts from relatives. By contrast, the World Bank's measure for 1981ff is *consumption-based* – it includes not only income but also the monetary value of all non-monetary transactions.

These two disparate measures cannot be united into a single long-term trend. Roser's graph attempts to do so, but it is not peer-reviewed, and to my knowledge there is no actual scholarship that underwrites this move. It might make for nice social media, but it's not rooted in science.

In fact, uniting the two methodologies is misleading in both directions. (1) By assessing only income from 1820-1970 it likely *understates* the resources that people had at their disposal in comparison to the representation of the later period, and (2) By assessing total

consumption from 1981ff it *overstates* people's income in comparison to the representation of the earlier period.

The only way to construct a legitimate long-term graph would be to use a single indicator, either income or consumption. While data on income alone is not regarded as a robust way of assessing poverty, it is at least available (if too patchy to be useful) for the whole period. But in such a graph the falloff in poverty since 1981 would not be nearly as steep, as it would not count non-monetary transactions. Alternatively, we could wait until someone devises a reasonable method for measuring poverty in consumption-based terms since 1820. But in the meantime, I think it's wise to refrain from making claims about long-term poverty trends that lack empirical validity.

You say: "Hickel's picture of the past is a romantic fairy tale, devoid of citations or evidence." On the contrary, as the above makes clear, it is the graph of the past on which you so glibly rely that is devoid of evidence.

As to my *actual* claims about the past, my argument was straightforward. I simply pointed out that we cannot ignore the fact that the period 1820 to circa 1950 was one of violent dispossession across much of the global South. If you have read any colonial history, you will know colonizers had immense difficulty getting people to work on their mines and plantations. As it turns out, people tended to prefer their subsistence lifestyles, and wages were not high enough to induce them to leave. Colonizers had to coerce people into the labour market: imposing taxes, enclosing commons and constraining access to food, or just outright forcing people off their land.

You ask for citations. Here are some you might try: Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*, Ellen Wood's *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*, Mike Davis' *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, and of course Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*.

The process of forcibly integrating colonized peoples into the capitalist labour system caused widespread dislocation (a history I cover in *The Divide*). Remember, this is the period of the Belgian labour system in the Congo, which so upended local economies that 10 million people died – half the population. This is the period of the Natives Land Act in South Africa, which dispossessed the country's black population of 90% of the country. This is the period of the famines in India, where 30 million died needlessly as a result of policies the British imposed on Indian agriculture. This is the period of the Opium Wars in China and the unequal treaties that immiserated the population. And don't forget: all of this was conducted in the name of the "free market".

All of this violence, and much more, gets elided in your narrative and repackaged as a happy story of progress. And you say I'm the one possessed of romantic fairy tales.

The Maddison database on which you rely might tell us what the dispossessed gained in income (eventually), but it does not tell us whether those gains offset their loss of lands, commons, supportive communities, stable local economies. And it tells us nothing about what global South economies might be like today had they been free to industrialize on their own terms (take the case of India, for instance).

Let me be clear: this is not a critique of industrialization *as such*. It is a critique of how industrialization was carried out during the period in question. If people had willingly opted into the capitalist labour system, while retaining rights to their commons and while gaining a fair share of the yields they produced, we would have a very different story on our hands. So let's celebrate what industrialization has achieved – absolutely – but place it in proper context: colonization, violence, dispossession and all. All we gain from ignoring this history is ignorance.

Now, to the present period.

You say that the "massive fall of global extreme poverty" is simply a neutral fact of the data. But here again the data on this is more complex than you have ever acknowledged (I collaborated with Charles Kenny to review the basics here).

The narrative that you and Gates peddle relies on a poverty line of $1.90 per day. You are aware, I'm sure, that this line is not a neutral phenomenon, handed down by the gods or given in nature. It was invented by people, is used for particular ends, and is hotly contested both inside and outside of academia. Most scholars regard $1.90 as far too low to be meaningful, for reasons I have outlined in my work many times (see here and here). See Reddy and Lahoti's withering critique of the $1.90 methodology here.

Here are a few points to keep in mind. Using the $1.90 line shows that only 700 million people live in poverty. But note that the UN's FAO says that 815 million people do not have enough calories to sustain even "minimal" human activity. 1.5 billion are food insecure, and do not have enough calories to sustain "normal" human activity. And 2.1 billion suffer from malnutrition. How can there be fewer poor people than hungry and malnourished people? If $1.90 is inadequate to achieve basic nutrition and sustain normal human activity, then it's too low – period. It's time for you and Gates to stop using it. Lifting people above this line doesn't mean lifting them out of poverty, "extreme" or otherwise.

Remember: $1.90 is the equivalent of what that amount of money could buy in the US in 2011. The economist David Woodward once calculated that to live at this level (in an earlier base year) would be like 35 people trying to survive in Britain "on a single minimum wage, with no benefits of any kind, no gifts, borrowing, scavenging, begging or savings to draw on (since these are all included as 'income' in poverty calculations)." That goes beyond any definition of "extreme". It is patently absurd. It is an insult to humanity.

In fact, even the World Bank has repeatedly stated that the line is too low to be used in any but the poorest countries, and *should not be used to inform policy*. In response to the Atkinson Report on Global Poverty, they created updated poverty lines for lower middle income ($3.20/day) and upper middle income ($5.50/day) countries. At those lines, some 2.4 billion people are in poverty today – more than three times higher than you would have people believe.

But even these figures are not good enough. The USDA states that about $6.7/day is necessary for achieving basic nutrition. Peter Edwards argues that people need about $7.40 if they are to achieve normal human life expectancy. The New Economics Foundation concludes that around $8 is necessary to reduce infant mortality by a meaningful margin. Lant Pritchett and Charles Kenny have argued that since the poverty

line is based on purchasing power in the US, then it should be linked to the US poverty line – so around $15/day.

The literature on this issue is now vast and nuanced – I have only scratched the surface here – and yet you pretend it doesn't even exist. That is intellectually irresponsible, and an inadequate approach to scholarship.

You say: "The level at which one sets an arbitrary cutoff like 'the poverty line' is irrelevant — the entire distribution has shifted, so the trend is the same wherever you set it."

Not so fast. In fact, the story changes quite a bit - and you know it. If we use $7.40 per day, we see a decline in the proportion of people living in poverty, but it's not nearly as dramatic as your rosy narrative would have it. In 1981 a staggering 71% lived in poverty. Today it hovers at 58% (for 2013, the most recent data). Suddenly your grand story of progress seems tepid, mediocre, and – in a world that's as fabulously rich as ours – completely obscene. There is nothing worth celebrating about a world where inequality is so extreme that 58% of people are in poverty, while a few dozen billionaires have more than all of their wealth combined.

That's proportions. Don't get me wrong: proportions are an important indicator – and we should pay attention to it. But absolute numbers are equally important. In fact, that is the metric that the world's governments first agreed to target in the Rome Declaration in 1996, the precursor to the Millennial Development Goals. The goalposts were shifted to proportions in the following years, which created the impression of faster progress. But really now it's a moot point: if the goal is to end poverty, what matters is absolute numbers. Certainly that's what matters from the perspective of poor people themselves.

And if we look at absolute numbers, the trend changes completely. The poverty rate has worsened dramatically since 1981, from 3.2 billion to 4.2 billion, according to World Bank data. Six times higher than you would have people believe. That's not progress in my book – that's a disgrace. It is a crushing indictment of our global economic system, which is clearly failing the majority of humanity. Your claims about global poverty intentionally skate around this fact. Again, that is not responsible scholarship.

Number of People in Poverty
(under $7.40/day 2011 PPP)
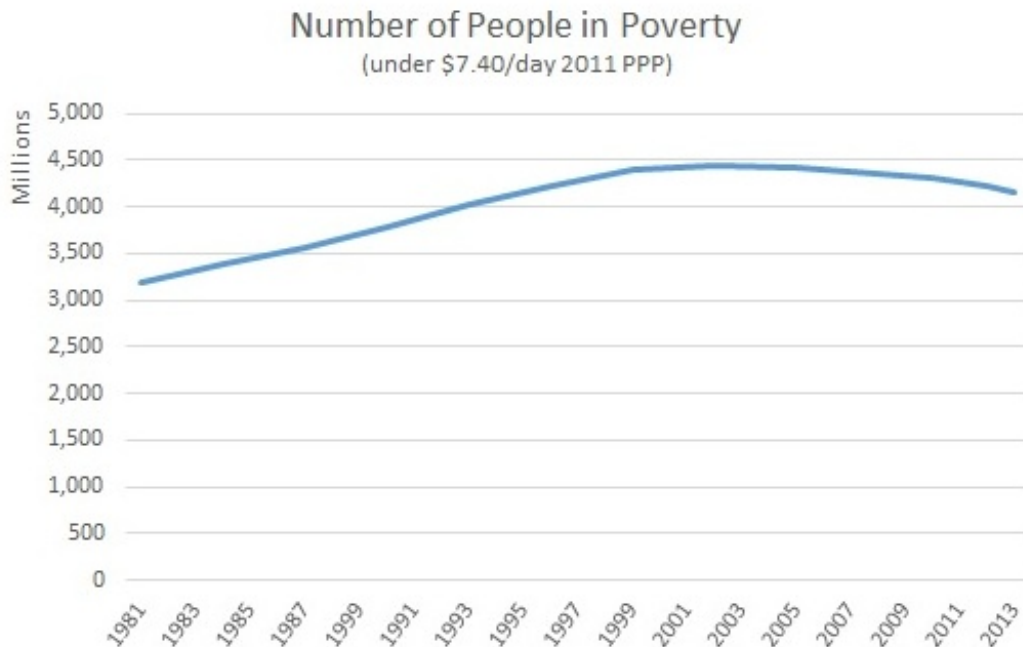
But what's really at stake here for you, as your letter reveals, is the free-market narrative that you have constructed. Your argument is that neoliberal capitalism is responsible for driving the most substantial gains against poverty. This claim is intellectually dishonest, and unsupported by facts. Here's why:

The vast majority of gains against poverty have happened in one region: East Asia. As it happens, the economic success of China and the East Asian tigers – as scholars like Ha-Joon Chang and Robert Wade have long pointed out – is due not to the neoliberal markets that you espouse but rather state-led industrial policy, protectionism and regulation (the same measures that Western nations used to such great effect during their own period of industrial consolidation). They liberalized, to be sure – but they did so gradually and on their own terms.

Not so for the rest of the global South. Indeed, these policy options were systematically denied to them, and destroyed where they already existed. From 1980 to 2000, the IMF and World Bank imposed brutal structural adjustment programs that did exactly the opposite: slashing tariffs, subsidies, social spending and capital controls while reversing land reforms and privatizing public assets – all in the face of massive public resistance. During this period, the number of people in poverty outside China increased by 1.3 billion. In fact, even the *proportion* of people living in poverty (to use your preferred method) increased, from 62% to 68%. (For detailed economic data and references to the relevant literature, see Chapter 5 of *The Divide*).

Number of People in Poverty, Minus China
(under $7.40/day 2011 PPP)

Millions

4,000	
3,500	
3,000	
2,500	
2,000	
1,500	
1,000	
500	
0	

1981 1983 1985 1987 1999 1991 1993 1995 1997 1999 2001 2003 2005 2007 2009 2011 2013

% of People in Poverty, Minus China
(under $7.40/day 2011 PPP)

80%	
70%	
60%	
50%	
40%	
30%	
20%	
10%	
0%	

1981 1983 1985 1987 1999 1991 1993 1995 1997 1999 2001 2003 2005 2007 2009 2011 2013
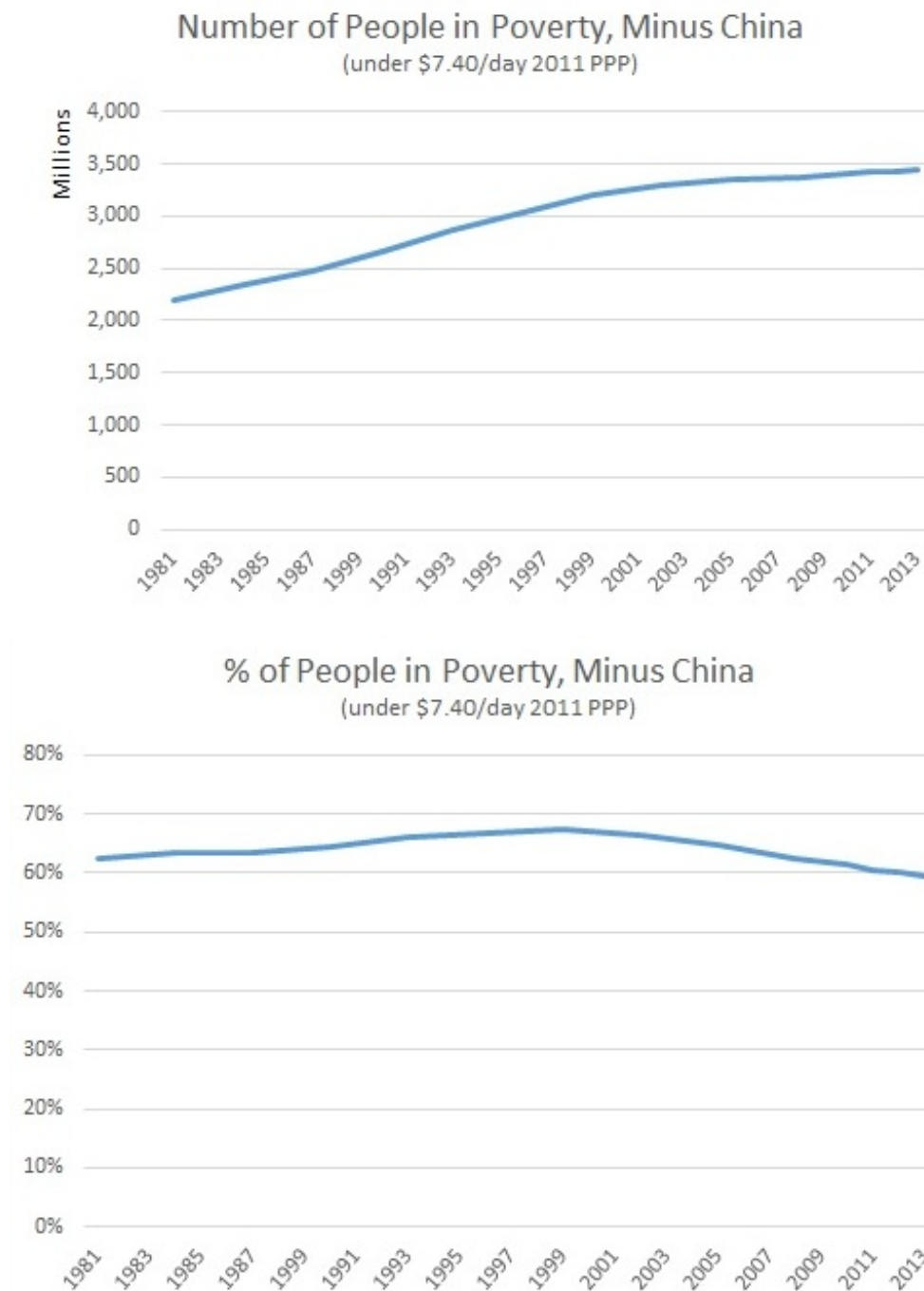
In other words, the imposition of neoliberal capitalism from 1980 to 2000 made the poverty rate worse, not better.

Since 2000, the most impressive gains against poverty (outside of East Asia) have come from Latin America, according to the World Bank, coinciding with a series of left-wing or social democratic governments that came to power across the continent. Whatever one might say about these governments (I have my own critiques), this doesn't sit very well with your neoliberal narrative.

But there is something else that needs to be said here. You and Gates like to invoke the poverty numbers to make claims about the legitimacy of the existing global economic system. You say the system is working for the poor, so people should stop complaining about it.

When it comes to assessing such a claim, it's really neither absolute numbers nor proportions that matter. What matters, rather, is the extent of global poverty vis-à-vis our capacity to end it. As I have pointed out before, our capacity to end poverty (e.g., the cost of ending poverty as a proportion of the income of the non-poor) has increased many times faster than the proportional poverty rate has decreased (to use your preferred measure again). By this metric we are doing worse than ever before. Indeed, our civilization is regressing. Why? Because the vast majority of the yields of our global economy are being captured by the world's rich.

As I pointed out in the *Guardian* piece, only 5% of new income from global growth goes to the poorest 60% of humanity – people living on less than $7.40/day. You have neither acknowledged this as a problem nor attempted to defend it. Instead you just ignore it, I suppose because it undermines your claims about how well the economy is working for poor people.

Here's how well it's working: on our existing trajectory, according to research published in the *World Economic Review*, it will take more than 100 years to end poverty at $1.90/day, and over 200 years to end it at $7.4/day. Let that sink in. And to get there with the existing system – in other words, without a fairer distribution of income – we will have to grow the global economy to 175 times its present size. Even if such an outlandish feat were possible, it would drive climate change and ecological breakdown to the point of undermining any gains against poverty.

It doesn't have to be this way, of course. We can end poverty right now simply by making the rules of our global economy fairer for the world's majority (I describe how we can do this in *The Divide*, looking at everything from wages to debt to trade). But that is an approach that you and Gates seem desperate to avoid, in favour of a blustering defense of the status quo.

You say, "The drastic decline in extreme poverty is corroborated by measures of well-being other than income that are correlated with prosperity, such as longevity, child mortality, maternal mortality, literacy, basic education, undernourishment, consumption, etc."

Yes, life expectancy, mortality and education have improved – this is fantastic news that we should celebrate! But, a few things:

(1) You can't make an argument about poverty by pointing to something else entirely. Consumption is increasing, yes. But that's not what's at stake here. What's at stake is whether consumption is increasing enough to raise people out of poverty.

(2) I'll be the first to agree that income and consumption are not the only measures of well-being. But one reason they are absolutely crucial is because they allow us to assess inequality in the distribution of world resources. A higher life expectancy among the poor is no justification for condemning them to a tiny and ever-shrinking share of global income. That is not a morally defensible position.

(3) In your work you have invoked gains in life expectancy and education as part of a narrative that seeks to justify neoliberal globalization. But here again that's intellectually dishonest. What contributes most to improvements in life expectancy is in fact simple

public health interventions (sanitation, antibiotics, vaccines), and what matters for education is, well, public education. Indeed, the countries that have been most successful at this are those that have robust, free healthcare and education. Don't forget that the US has worse infant mortality than Cuba.

(4) As for hunger, your claim here relies on a methodology used by the FAO after 2012 that has been widely criticized by scholars. The hunger-reduction narrative depends on a calorie line that – like your $1.90 poverty line – is too low to support normal human activity, ignores the impacts of food price crises, and tells us nothing about nutrient deficiencies. I cover this in detail in the second half of this paper. According to the FAO's earlier methodology, both the number *and proportion* of people in hunger was higher in 2009 than in 1995 – another trend that you glibly ignore.

In your concluding point, you descend to citing a piece by Ryan Bourne, not an academic who studies poverty but rather an employee of the Cato Institute, a right-wing think tank funded by the Koch Brothers. The piece is riddled with misleading claims which, when I pointed them out to him, he never corrected. I don't think we should consider this a valid source.

You opened your letter by slandering me as a "Marxist ideologue". I don't need to tell you that this doesn't count as an argument, and doesn't cover for the fact that you haven't addressed any of my substantive claims. In any case, I'm not quite sure what you mean. If by Marxist ideologue you mean someone who points out that the poverty data is more complex than your narrative allows, then, well, I suppose I am.