Book Review

Global Inequality as a Consequence of Human Diversity: A New Theory Tested by Empirical Evidence
Tatu Vanhanen

Why are some nations so much wealthier than others? And why has the difference between the wealth of nations continued to grow until recently despite international aid and other attempts to redistribute wealth? The standard answer among social scientists is that the difference is a result of the exploitation of poorer countries by richer countries or a lack of particular kinds of natural resources, or particular kinds of history or culture, in poorer countries.

This book's thesis is as bold as it is controversial: As with any animal, humans evolved into sub-species which vary in intelligence due to differing environmental selection pressures for this characteristic. Even within these sub-species there is genetic variance in intelligence. Intelligence strongly correlates with numerous measures of individual and national success and especially those that measure standard of living. As such, there will always be 'inequality.' It is a biological fact of human existence.

In Global Inequality, Vanhanen examines the relationship of six measures of national living standard - GNI per capita, tertiary education, infant mortality, life expectancy, sanitation, and democratization - with average IQ in 178 countries. His conclusion is that around 75% of global variation between nations in these measures is explained by national differences in average intelligence. In discussing his results, Vanhanen looks at each of the nations whose relationship is an outlier on each measure and explains why this is the case. He also defends Richard Lynn's national IQs from the often unreasonable and tendentious criticisms that have been leveled against them.

Quite apart from its carefully-argued thesis, Global Inequality has a number of points to recommend it. Often, books written by scientists who propose biological and more specifically genetic theories as explanations for social phenomena tend to summarily dismiss or even ignore the environmentally-determinist theories which are, often for ideological reasons, advocated by scholars in the social sciences and humanities. This permits humanities scholars
to argue that the scientist is 'reductionist' or not familiar with the relevant literature, allowing them to dismiss his scientific work with their own theories. In this regard, Vanhanen's patience is extremely useful. He spends considerable time looking at every significant environmentally-determinist explanation for global inequality, showing that they are question-begging, partial explanations, or do not accord with the available evidence.

In fact, in that the book is relatively short, I would have liked to have seen it go much further in this regard; defending the utility of the concept of intelligence and even philosophically or morally justifying studying population differences at all. These avenues tend to be those down which ideologically-driven scholars turn in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence which proves that they are wrong. They may also attempt to argue that concepts such as 'intelligence' or even the desire to have wealth or education are 'very Western.' Accordingly, it would be useful to note the obvious problem with this argument: People everywhere value these things or proxies for them such as access to resources, wisdom or common sense. The modern concept of 'intelligence' itself only really developed in the twentieth century but that does not mean it is irrelevant to understanding life in 1899 or in 2000 BC.

Another criticism which they will tend to level is 'reductionism' and so I would like to have seen this rebutted in greater depth. Vanhanen focuses on intelligence because it is the only relevant measure of human diversity for which sound data exists for numerous countries. To avoid the charge of reducing everything to intelligence, then, it would have been useful to explore what the other possible measures are—such as personality—and show that the available data is deficient. Likewise, he does not look at the extent to which economic differences actually cause intelligence differences between countries. Vanhanen should have argued in his book that there is indeed a powerful effect of education and other aspects of "modernization" on intelligence or related abilities (as evidenced by the strength of Flynn effects), but that nations with higher native intelligence are better able to optimize their educational systems and achieve greater returns to educational investments than less intelligent nations.

Although it is unfair that those advocating a partly genetic explanation are held to higher standards than extreme environmentalists it is, alas, a fact of academic life. Thus, when all else fails, critics will attempt to find some very minor mistake in the text of their opponent and exaggerate its significance in order to argue that it renders the entire project suspect. Vanhanen opens himself up to precisely this kind of criticism via his habit of using Wikipedia and various other questionable websites as sources of information. This does not help him reach the desired point where the only criticisms his opponents can level are absolutely
without substance and are simply expressions of emotion, meaning that no intelligent or reasonable student could realistically be persuaded by them.

Also, Vanhanen's final chapter contains a number of questionable arguments and thus it would have been better to shorten it. Vanhanen's tentative solution to global inequality seems highly problematic, not merely for the practical reasons that he notes. He suggests that the solution would be the 'complete biological mixing' of all races. Vanhanen then maintains that this possibility should be discussed in greater depth elsewhere. It seems that the obvious consequence would be a period of relative equality followed by the gradual reassertion of inequality through mating based on genetic similarity. An example would be Latin America, in which the populations are largely mixed but income inequality is much higher than in more homogeneous nations with similar levels of development. As such, this brief discussion seems like an unnecessary and confusing add-on. Likewise, Vanhanen argues that 'some kind of human solidarity should be established to support the coexistence of diverse human populations' (p.171). He doesn't expand on this in any way, so it is unclear why he asserts it, let alone decides to end the book with it.

But, in many ways, it is best not to judge this as a book but as an extended thesis. In that regard, it makes a clear argument and an original contribution and defends it convincingly.

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