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Modern citizenship is usually considered a force for equality in the contemporary world because it equitably distributes rights to the members of a polity. In her provocative book, Ayelet Shachar highlights important ways in which citizenship contributes to inequalities. By drawing insightful parallels between property rights and citizen rights, she illuminates the iniquity of the global inequalities that citizenship produces. She then elaborates provocative proposals to alleviate these injustices.

In this essay I will briefly review Shachar’s arguments, then situate them in the context of historical trends of global inequality in health, education, and income in order to better understand their limits. I point out that alleviation of global income inequality has lagged behind improvements in inequality for global health and education, and I assert that one reason for this disparity is that many of the rules that structure the development of global markets favor wealthy countries. Placing Shachar’s analysis in a realist world illuminates how it underestimates citizenship’s contribution to international inequality. By motivating governments to enhance the opportunities and welfare of citizens, citizenship encourages states to more effectively exclude noncitizens. It also drives states to secure international rules to benefit their citizens even when they are detrimental to people in other countries. This point suggests that the author’s remedy for global inequality—the birthright privilege levy (BPL), a tax to redistribute resources from wealthy to poor countries—will have limited impact and that it fails to address some of the most profound sources of inequality.

Shachar’s Argument for Global Redistribution

Many of Shachar’s insights come from the analogy she draws between citizenship and property rights. Both, she points out, are humanly devised, multifaceted institutions. Each serves two core functions: opportunity enhancing and gatekeeping.

Property rights and citizenship enhance opportunity by serving as the basis for agency in social interaction. Each includes rights and access to resources that enable people to increase their autonomy and freedom. Each set of rights is exercised in “markets of opportunity.” Like property, citizenship serves as a basis for exchanges that, when aggregated, generate a collective preference regarding alternative forms of social welfare. Citizenship, like property, can serve as capital. It can be accumulated, if we agree that citizens can utilize their rights to acquire new ones. As in the case of property, some citizens use their rights more effectively than others. However, unlike property, citizenship cannot be alienated or traded.

The gatekeeping functions of citizenship and property involve a system of rules that regulate access to and control over resources. In the case of citizenship, these resources are access to the rights and shared resources of a political community. That all members of the community are entitled to equal access to the rights and resources of a community makes the demarcation of members and nonmembers all the more important. The territorial and citizenship boundaries of a polity often do not coincide. They are determined by distinct procedures, and access to a polity’s territory frequently does not bring access to citizenship.

Countries usually adopt one of two principles as the primary basis for determining citizenship. Jus soli allocates citizenship on the basis of birth in a country’s territory. Those born within the country’s territorial boundaries automatically are designated as citizens, whereas those born outside are excluded. Under the principle of jus sanguini all children of citizens become citizens regardless of where they are born. Countries also elaborate procedures for outsiders to join the community of citizens, but these procedures for naturalization are highly restrictive, and people who become citizens in this way comprise only a very small share of the total citizenry.

In Shachar’s view, the gatekeeping function of citizenship produces objectionable inequalities. In essence, jus soli and jus sanguini allocate the remarkably disparate levels of opportunity provided by citizenship through a “birthright lottery.” Citizens of affluent countries enjoy more abundant opportunities than do citizens of poor countries. Their access to these opportunities through the good fortune of their birth is, in principle, similar to the access of scions to the enhanced life chances provided by the estates of their wealthy families. There is an irony here. While citizenship’s opportunity-enhancing function has played such a crucial role in sweeping away the privileges of ascriptive status, its gatekeeping function transforms the abundant opportunities provided to the citizens of affluent countries into new privileges of ascriptive status. Citizenship, writes Shachar, becomes “the quintessential inherited entitlement of our time” (p. 11). If, as most normative theorists would agree, the inherited estate of a wealthy scion should be taxed, then should we not tax the abundant opportunities inherited by citizens of wealthy countries? Her answer is that we should, and she proposes the BPL as a “binding corollary” to the privileges acquired through birth by citizens living in wealthy countries.

Shachar documents many stark international disparities in economic and social welfare. In dramatizing “what citizenship is worth,” but since her mandate as a legal...
Global Inequality in Historical Perspective

There have been tremendous improvements in levels of poverty and human development in our affluent world. The number of people living below the absolute poverty line of $1.25 a day has dropped from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion in 2005. The share of the world’s population below this line has been halved, from 51.9% to 25.2% in 2005. One of the broadest indicators of welfare, the Human Development Index, increased by 41% from .48 in 1970 to 0.68 in 2010, and the gap between developing and developed countries narrowed by about one-fourth since 1970.

Improvements in global health have made a major contribution to these gains. Over the long term, while mean life expectancy gradually improved from just 28.4 in 1820 to 38.5 in 1929, global inequality with regards to life expectancy virtually doubled (from a Theil index of 0.023 in 1820 to 0.046 in 1929), largely due to a 17-year increase in Europe and its settler colonies in North America and Asia, and a 7-year increase in Latin America. At the same time, life expectancy in the rest of the world stagnated. After 1929, the increase of life expectancy accelerated, reaching 66.3 in 2000, while the Theil index for global inequality of life expectancy between countries declined from 0.046 to just 0.009, as increases in longevity in the European countries and their offspring approached their natural upper limit while increases in Asia and Africa began to catch up. Despite this convergence, immense disparities persist. A citizen born into a country in sub-Saharan Africa can expect to live 28 years fewer than a citizen of a country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Education follows a somewhat different historical pattern. Mean years of primary and secondary schooling increased from just 1.06 in 1870 to 6.70 in 2000; however, international educational inequality began the period at very high levels—with a Gini coefficient of 0.793—due to the efforts by European countries in the nineteenth century to achieve universal primary education and their predominance in secondary education. The Gini coefficient steadily declined to 0.394 in 2000. The convergence was in large measure driven by the increase in years of education in Asia. Slower increases in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa made a modest contribution. These data overstate the decline in educational inequality because data availability limits years of schooling to primary and secondary education. This places a ceiling on the growth in years of schooling. Absolute differences remain large as citizens in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are in primary and secondary school for only 4.5 and 4.6 years, respectively, while citizens in OECD countries stay in school for 11.4 years. There are substantial variations in educational quality since the wealthier countries of Europe, North America, and Asia have higher quality of education.

Global income inequality is an even more complex picture. Like health and education, the study of global income inequality is a relatively new field. Data are imperfect, incomplete, and not infrequently revised. Scholars are developing new analytical techniques to enhance our understanding. The trends are complex, and the field has yet to develop a consensus on key methodological issues. Consequently, the findings regarding global income inequality are often divergent and controversial. This is especially true for studies estimating trends in the last few decades. For instance, M. Pinkovskly and Xavier Sala-i-Martin find that the Gini coefficient for global interpersonal inequality declined from 0.68 in 1970 to 0.61 in 2006, while Branko Milanovic (2010) estimates that it increased from 68.4 in 1988 to 70.7 in 2005. Sudhir Anand and Paul Segal's review of recent studies concludes that findings about trends in global income inequality in recent decades “are not robust across different estimation methods and datasets,” and that “there is insufficient evidence to determine the direction of change.”

One area of relative consensus is that current levels of global inequality are very high by historical standards. A recent study by Milanovic shows that total global interpersonal inequality rose steadily from .43 in 1820 to .64 in 1950 when it reached a plateau. It has remained roughly at this plateau since then. Even those analysts who find a declining trend in inequality over the past decades still place the Gini coefficient for global income inequality above .60, the equivalent of the world’s most unequal countries. If there is a case for some measure of redistribution in the world’s highly unequal countries, then Shachar’s case for international redistribution is persuasive.

Global inequality can be disaggregated into two components: inequality between countries and inequality within countries. Growing inequality between countries caused the entire increase in global inequality between 1820 and 1950. The share of global interpersonal inequality accounted for by inequality between countries rose dramatically, from just 35% to at least 82%. These trends underscore that from the standpoint of income inequality, Shachar’s birthright lottery premium is more valuable since 1950 than ever before.

Relational measures like Gini coefficients often aggregate multiple underlying trends. For instance, while the Gini coefficient for global income inequality in the last few decades has not shown significant change or has slightly
declined, disparities in growth rates among developing countries have contributed to increased differentiation of their per capita gross national income (GNI). The term “developing countries” has always been a problematic residual category whose conceptual boundaries are negatively delimit to include all those countries that were not affluent or communist (i.e., not the First or Second World but the Third World). The exercise in concept stretching obscures the remarkable diversity in social organization and history that characterizes developing countries. In recent decades, these differences have grown, as some developing countries have succeeded in accelerating economic growth over an extended period while others have failed to sustain rapid growth. China used to be among the poorest countries in the world, but today its per capita income is 10 times greater than Malawi—the world’s poorest country—but only six times less than that of the United States. The accelerated economic growth of the two Asian giants, China and India, has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty while serving as a force for diminishing global inequality. At the same time, countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia have fallen behind other developing countries during the 1980s and 1990s. The differentiation of this “bottom billion” has contributed to a polarization of income and wealth between the world’s most affluent and poorest countries.

A second, related, trend has been the growth of absolute inequality. Most studies of global inequality use statistics like Gini coefficients that represent relative inequality or the aggregate structure of income relationships between the people or countries in the world. Measures of relative inequality do not vary with transformations that affect each case in the same proportion. Measures of absolute inequality are based on the absolute differences between cases. They will vary with proportionate transformations, but not when transformations involve adding the same number of units for each case. For instance, in 2009, the per capita GNI of Guatemala was PPP$4,600, about one-tenth of the $45,600 per capita GNI of the United States. If each country’s GNI per capita grew by 3%, then relative inequality would remain the same. Absolute inequality, in contrast, would increase by $1,231 because GNI per capita of the United States would grow by $1,368 while that of Guatemala would increase by only $137. Guatemala would have to grow 10 times faster than the United States to increase its economy by the same number of dollars. If Guatemala were to grow 5% annually while the United States grew annually by 2%, the absolute income gap between the two countries would continue to increase for the next 49 years. It would take 80 years to eliminate the gap.

Even if poor countries grow at a more rapid rate than wealthy countries, absolute inequality will increase for quite some time. Over the past 30 years, the absolute differences between wealthy and poor countries are stark, and economic growth has increased absolute inequality. At the extremes in 1980, U.S. GNI per capita in current PPP dollars ($12,130) was about 58 times greater than that of Burundi ($210), the poorest country. In 2009, at $45,600, the U.S. per capita GNI was 152 times greater than the Democratic Republic of Congo’s GNI of $300. More broadly, in 1980, the average GNI per capita of high-income countries ($9,151) was 26 times greater than the average of low-income countries ($356). By 2009, at $36,227 it was 31 times higher than that of low-income countries ($1,174). As these data show, despite the important progress that the world has made and the reduction of inequalities, especially in health and education, very substantial absolute disparities remain. The “citizenship premium” remains substantial, and it is likely to remain so for a long time into the future. In light of the differentiation among developing countries and consequent global polarization of inequalities, addressing the problems in the “bottom billion” should be the top priority.

Economists largely neglect measures of absolute income inequality, but Martin Ravallion points out that popular perceptions of increasing global inequality are likely based on the more palpable growth of absolute differences. Furthermore, he adds, “there is little obvious reason for assuming that it is the relative inequalities in incomes (rather than the absolute inequalities) that matter instrumentally to valued social outcomes. Arguably, inequalities in power relate more to absolute inequality of income than relative inequality.”

Since improved health and education are important factors in promoting economic development, as witnessed by the rapid economic growth of countries like China, it is surprising that declining global inequalities in health and education have not contributed to a greater decline in global income inequality. The translation of absolute inequalities into power asymmetries may help to explain why the world income inequality has been stickier than inequality in health and education. This is a complex issue, and this essay is not the place for a comprehensive explanation. One factor is relevant here. At the international level, public health and education are characterized by nonrival consumption. Improvements of health and education in one country do not affect the levels of health and education in other countries. It is also true that economic growth in one country does not detract—and generally complements—economic growth in other countries. However, market rules and institutions that shape economic globalization can have distributional consequences. Affluent countries may use their power to establish rules that structure the dynamics of global markets in ways that produce favorable distributional outcomes. Global income inequality would be reduced if countries did not legislate immigration rules that permit only the most talented people to migrate.
from poor countries, if they did not enact discriminatory tariffs and immense agricultural subsidies, or if they did not implement a very restrictive regime for intellectual property rights.

**The Limits of Shachar’s Case for the Birthright Privilege Levy**

Because Shachar’s focus is on citizenship, she gives inadequate focus to the international context. She fails to consider the impact of international anarchy and, thus, does not appreciate the practical limits of the BPL. Perhaps more importantly, she underestimates the extent to which citizenship creates incentives to establish rules that promote international inequality.

In contrast to national regimes, realism highlights that the international regime lacks an effective governing authority. By basing her advocacy for the BPL on an analogy with the inheritance tax, Shachar claims to shift the case for international redistribution “from the realm of charity or morality to that of legal obligation” (pp. 100–101). However, because there is no global government to enforce the BPL, its implementation is dependent only on moral commitment and self-interest, just like contemporary programs for foreign aid.

The impact of foreign assistance on international inequality holds some lessons for Shachar’s case. François Bourguignon, Victoria Levin, and David Rosenblatt examine the impact of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), including bilateral grants, concessionary loans, debt relief, and technical assistance for 2002. They found that ODA had only a marginal impact on the international Gini coefficient for international income inequality (i.e., between-country differences but not differences within countries). It reduced it from 0.5424 to 0.5380, less than 1%. Nonetheless, ODA had its greatest impact on the poorest. The authors estimated that ODA increased the GNI for the bottom decile of the population by between 8 and 15 percent. These changes were larger than the changes brought about by trade liberalization, but not surprisingly, they were significantly smaller than redistributive measures in many countries. For instance, in France and several other European countries, taxes and transfers increased the per capita income of the poorest two deciles by at least 70%, and Mexico’s public expenditures reduced its Gini by 18%, from 0.48 to 0.39.

Because international anarchy means that the BPL lacks legal sanction and is supported only by morality and self-interest, it is likely not to fare much better than foreign assistance when it comes time for budgetary allocation of national resources. And in current circumstances, in the United States at least, foreign assistance is the least popular of all budgetary provisions. According to a January 2011 Gallup poll, by far more people favored cutting foreign aid (59%) than any other budgetary provision. It is no coincidence that despite repeated pledges to the contrary, donor countries lag far behind the Millennium Development Goal of increasing foreign aid to 0.7% of their GNI. In 2010, official development assistance amounts to only 0.31% of the donors’ GNI, a level that is even lower than in 1990.

By separately analyzing the impact of citizenship’s opportunity-enhancing and boundary-keeping functions, Shachar underestimates the contribution of citizenship to international inequality. The modern state’s opportunity-enhancing function creates incentives to erect more impervious borders to exclude outsiders. Enhancing social welfare benefits to citizens adds to the costs of hosting noncitizens and, therefore, increases the incentives to keep them out. The costs of social welfare to noncitizens have been an important argument for political supporters of more exclusive immigration policies in advanced industrial countries. Furthermore, states’ opportunity-enhancing function motivates them to advance their citizens’ interests by shaping the rules of the international economy in their favor. In the realist world of international politics, wealthy countries are more likely to secure favorable rules than are poor countries.

Shachar rejects cosmopolitanism. She claims to strike “a new balance between political justice and global justice without substantively detracting from the participatory and enabling qualities of membership in a self-governing polity” (p. 22). Advocates of “statism,” such as John Rawls, will point out that the BPL would diminish the autonomy of political communities and curb the incentives of citizens to devise new strategies to enhance their community’s future welfare. Regardless of what one thinks about this statist critique, it is impossible to deny that Shachar’s BPL fails to address perhaps the most iniquitous source of global inequality—rules fashioned by powerful countries to enhance their citizens’ welfare by discriminating against poor countries. Remedies that directly address the iniquities of global rules like Aidan Hollis and Thomas Pogge’s health impact fund are more ethically defensible than the BPL, and because they target specific problems, they are likely to be more effective.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this essay, I have highlighted the limits of Shachar’s arguments. In particular, I have adopted a realist perspective to show that her advocacy of the BPL is likely to experience many of the same constraints that limit the impact of foreign assistance. Furthermore, the BPL fails to address the most unjustifiable sources of inequality and is likely to be less effective than other remedies that do. Shachar’s provocative and erudite scholarship nonetheless provides a valuable contribution. It places another arrow in the quiver of those advocating the need for greater measures to alleviate global inequality, and it provokes these advocates to think more rigorously about the proper
balance between the need for global redistribution and the rights of polities to self-determination.

Notes

1 The last three chapters of Shachar’s book discuss the inequities produced by *jus soli* and *jus sanguine*. It argues that states should move toward including people who establish a “real and effective link” to the polity through their residence and contributions to its community (p. 165)—a principle that she calls *jus nexi*. This is a sensible position that, as Shachar herself points out, has already partly been incorporated into many legal systems.

2 World Development Indicators 2010.

3 Bourguignon and Morrisson 2002, 741; Morrisson and Murtin 2005, 17.


5 Morrisson and Murtin 2005.


7 Anand and Segal 2008; Milanovic 2005.

8 Pinkovskly and Sala-i-Martín 2009; Milanovic 2010.

9 Anand and Segal 2008, 57.

10 Milanovic 2009, 12.


12 The 2005 International Comparison Program revised estimates of prices used for calculating purchasing power parity estimates. The changes resulted in increased estimates of global inequality because they increased price estimates for China and India, thereby diminishing their estimated growth rates and consequently reducing the reductions in global inequality that resulted from their economic ascent. The results for 2002 in Figures 1 and 2 used the old PPP estimates to ensure comparability with the earlier years for which estimates based on the new PPP estimates are not available. Estimates using the 2005 PPP prices are 70.7 for global inequality, 59.9 for inequality between countries, and 10.8 for inequality within countries, meaning that inequality between nations accounts for 85% of global inequality. (Milanovic 2009, 12).


14 Atkinson and Brandolini 2010; Svedberg 2004.

15 World Development Indicators 2010.

16 World Development Indicators 2010.


18 Ibid., p. 24.

19 Bourguignon, Levin, and Rosenblatt 2009.

20 Newport and Saad 2011.


22 Klausen 1995.

23 Rawls 1999.

24 Pevnick 2011.


References


The study of immigration and citizenship has had several distinct threads that don't necessarily intersect. There are the authors who focus on theories related to citizenship, multiculturalism, and issues of collective rights, such as Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor. Then there are the writings by Yasmin Soysal, David Jacobson, and others that focused on postnational citizenship and the expansion of rights for denizens in the 1990s. Coming from a different perspective, Gary Freeman, Mark Miller, James Hollifield, and others were focused on issues surrounding immigration and the labor market, with Hollifield arguing that liberal, rights-based regimes allowed immigrants to enter liberal democracies relatively freely, and once there, to be eligible for rights similar to those of citizens. Although these authors did not necessarily focus specifically on citizenship, they did raise many related issues that emphasized the political nature of immigration and the difficulties liberal democracies had in denying entry and rights.

What is striking is that you can come to very different conclusions about the importance of citizenship depending on the time period, or if you focus on factors such as political economy, party politics or immigrant integration. In my previous work, I have argued that those who study immigration politics and race politics need to open a dialogue in order to develop research agendas that deal with issues where these politics intersect. Ayelet Shachar's book leads me to want to add that those who study legal theory should also be in dialogue with those who study immigration and citizenship politics in both the American and comparative politics arenas. “Cross-pollination” among these fields could lead to more interesting theoretical discussions, as well as more practical approaches to difficult political issues.

For this symposium, we were asked to assess Shachar’s argument and the attention she focuses on the phenomenon of the “birthright lottery.” This provocative book sets out to sell a vision of citizenship that could ultimately lead to a decrease in global inequality. She ends the book with a “plea for creating a basic infrastructure of opportunity for every child everywhere on the face of the earth by overcoming our rigid structures of automatic transfer of citizenship via birthright” (p. 190). Even the idealist in me finds this idea far too utopian to be practical, which Shachar occasionally acknowledges in the text, noting that the implementation of such a change, particularly her idea of a “birthright privilege levy,” would be daunting at best. Inequalities exist within countries as

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