

Politics in Living Standards: *The Ideology and Subject Formation of the Human Development Index*

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Humans make assumptions. Many assumptions become embedded in society's collective thought, language, and power dynamics. They even extend to laden concepts like human development in the form of the central United Nations (UN) Human Development Index (HDI). But consequences are more far-reaching; lack of critical engagement with seemingly explicit measures of relative human development may result in phenomena like latency or inferiority complexes. Both the Human Development Report itself and its critics ask conventional questions like how can we measure human development or improve countries with lower scores.¹ Such lines of questioning start the conversation about human development and health at a point past questions of what the HDI really is. More insidiously, such discussions conceal what the HDI truly is; that is, an abstract ideological measure rather than a concrete appreciation of relative human health. Human development is an artefact. "Artefact" refers to a worldly product of human work, which consists of all

¹ For examples, see Ricardo Martinez, "Inequality and the New Human Development Index," *Applied Economics Letters* 19 (6): 533-5; Satya R. Chakravarty, "A Generalized Human Development Index," *Review of Development Economics* 7 (1): 99-114; Kenneth Harttgen and Stephan Klasen, "A Household-Based Human Development Index," *World Development* 40 (5).

artificially produced things.¹ Although we may assume them to be so, these things are not a part of the life process but rather are distinctly different from people's natural surroundings. By analyzing the historical development of thought, language, and power surrounding this artefact of global human development and health standards, it may be revealed how the HDI shapes today's language of human development and health, and how it conditions people into certain kinds of subjects. It will be argued that the historical development of global living standards into the ideological artefact of the UN Human Development Index and its subsequent subject formation problematizes health by excluding human agency from assessing health and human development.

The historical development of thought, language, and power surrounding the artefact of global living standards formed a certain kind of subject or, in other words, has presupposed what it is to be a productive human being. "Thought, language, and power" refers to dynamic processes of not only what is explicitly written about a concept² but also deeper meanings embedded and assumed within

2 Examples of explicit materials about the HDI include information in United Nations Human Development Reports and in face-value critiques of the HDI. See United Nations Human Development Reports, "Human Development Index," last modified 2011, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>; Martinez, "Inequality and the New Human Development Index"; Chakravarty, "A Generalized Human Development Index"; and Harttgen and Klasen, "A Household-Based Human Development Index." Endnote references may be divided into the sections of "Bibliography" and "Materials." Althusser, Arendt, Brown, and Foucault would be in the "Bibliography" section, and all other references would be in the "Materials" section. This distinction is in relation to the designation of "thought, language, and power." "Materials" points to explicit materials that are mainly "facts" and lack deeper critical thinking; in contrast, "Bibliography" points to a deeper level of analysis that critically engages with the embedded meanings and assumptions within the collective conscience of society.

the collective conscience of society in the form of thought, language, and power. This thought, language, and power includes bio-power, nation-states, the concept of human development and a human rights regime, and the concept of agency in health, all of which shaped the UN HDI as an artefact. In turn, the HDI shapes today's language of human development, which can be demonstrated by drawing connections between the HDI and an "ideological state apparatus."² Its engagement with concrete individuals and abstract geographical boundaries then forms certain kinds of subjects. The HDI conditions people into subjects who face an abstract ideology, a universal reduction of living standards, and lack of human agency due to the use of statistics and nation-states. "Human agency" refers to the degree of a person's ability to act in a matter; in this case, agency refers to the degree to which people can assess the matter of global living standards themselves. Overall, the HDI will be outlined as an artefact; followed by an analysis of these politics in living standards – historical developments that led to the HDI's formation, the nature of its language and ideological structure, and subject formation; and the argument that this political process is a problematization of health that excludes human agency from assessing health and human development.

The Human Development Index is the UN's measure of human development. It consists of health – life expectancy, education – mean and expected years of schooling, and living standards – GNI per capita.³ These three measures are expressed in a single statistic with a value between 0 and 1, which contains goalpost minima and maxima. Countries are then measured on this relative scale and ranked in their performance relative to each other. Despite this measure's direct explanation that living long, being educated, and having money constitute human development,

its true goal is indirectly exposed in the HDR's explanation of uneven development. It states:

National wealth has the potential to expand people's choices. However, it may not. . . . People and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country.⁴

These statements suggest that human development and health consist of a human's degree of choice, and that living long, being educated, and having money are the specific indicators that comprise the capabilities able to influence the degree of a human's choice within certain geographical areas. It is important to note what the HDI is *not* suggesting in this statistical measure of choice. For example, the HDI does not account for alternative views of human development other than the idea of choice. The HDI also does not account for other potential indicators of the degree of someone's choice, such as a human's own perception. In fact, it could be said that the HDI does not measure human development; rather, it uses choice as a stand-in for whatever "human development" may be. I will argue that this artefact problematizes health by excluding human agency in assessing health and human development through the following exploration of the politics in living standards' historical development, the nature of the HDI's language and ideological structure, and subject formation.

The historical development of thought, language, and power that formed the concept and now measure of global living standards in the UN HDI consists of multiple parts. These include bio-power, nation-states, the concept of human development and the human rights regime, and the concept of agency in health.

The first part of global living standards, “bio-power,” was most famously observed by Michel Foucault. “Bio-power” refers to the increasing historical engagement of biology and politics, as power was increasingly being exercised at the level of life itself. For example, wars were waged in the name of a particular population’s life necessity.⁵ Rather than questioning juridical boundaries of sovereignty, politics began putting the living being into question. The old “power of death” was supplanted by the new “power over life.”⁶ The HDI may be considered an example of bio-power because it makes a political measurement at the level of life – human development, in this case. The HDR’s above statement that capabilities determine the development of a country is a demonstration of this power over life because it emphasizes that countries must be assessed in how well they administer the capabilities necessary for choice – in other words, an assessment of the administration of life. Furthermore, the HDI uses statistics, which hides the abstract ideologies of choice, capabilities, and nation-states to provide a political measure of health and human development. Hannah Arendt’s exploration of the public and private spheres helps to explain why it is difficult to see the seemingly normal “nature” of the HDI. She argues that we find it difficult to distinguish between the public (the *polis*) and private (the household) spheres because

We see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a . . . nation-wide administration of housekeeping.⁷

This suggests that we find the line between the public and private blurred because the public partly manages the private, just as bio-power suggests that politics (the public) now operates at the level

of life (the private). Arendt finds that this development stems from the scientific thought of “national economy” or “social economy,” wherein a collective of families are economically organized into “the facsimile of one super-human family . . . [which] we call ‘society,’ and its political form of organization is called ‘nation.’”⁸ Thus, it is easy to assume that it is natural for a political authority like the UN to measure life itself because the line between the public and private spheres is blurred by the administrative practices of Western political systems.

The second part of global living standards is the development of countries or “nation-states,” which the UN and HDI use as parameters in its measurement of human development. The modern state system is commonly argued to have originated in Western Europe in 1648 when the Peace of Westphalia was agreed upon by the major powers involved in the Thirty Years’ War.⁹ Among other principles, it yielded the recognition of sovereignty, which is to have supreme jurisdiction within a geographical boundary. The nation developed next from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards.¹⁰ The HDI “measures the average achievements in a country in three basic dimensions of human development,” which states simply that human development is measured using the parameters of countries or “nation-states.” The historical development of the nation-state provided the foundation of the United Nations as an international organization and, so, provides statistics with these abstract geographical boundaries. The use of specifically nation-states to assess health and human development is significant because it suggests who may be held responsible for the provision of capabilities. As stated, “The HDI can also be used to question national policy choices.”¹¹ That nation-states are given the responsibility of health provision means that the world’s populace does *not* have agency in agreeing whether or not to have

global living standards, nor in agreeing on what those standards might be. Most people did not formally agree to global living standards despite their derivation from statistical averages of the world's populace. Thus, the nation-state, as a part of the historical development of living standards, contributes to the argument that the HDI excludes human agency in assessing health and human development by making health provision a governmental responsibility.

The concept of “human development” and the human rights regime are the third part of the historical development of global living standards. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the history of human development as it stems from multiple political theorists like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, etc. whom wrote conjectural histories of development, and from other movements like humanism. Nevertheless, this concept suggests that humans develop or “unfold” along a similar trajectory.¹² In addition, a feeling of entitlement largely stems from the human rights regime upon which the United Nations built itself.¹³ The UN states that all humans possess human rights, making them entitled to human development as though it is a concrete object that can be grasped if the conditions that we believe shape this particular kind of human development are present. What is significant about human development and the human rights regime is that they abstract human development from its practice. Similarities can be drawn between Brown's discussion of “freedom” and this part of living standards to help illustrate this position.¹⁴ She asserts that the liberal rendering of freedom as a concept abstracts it from its historical or contextual practice in which it is rooted.¹⁵ Similarly, the UN established human development and living standards as independent concepts instead of subjective practices. This abstract concept of human development and the feeling of entitlement

generated by the human rights regime partly informed the formation of the HDI and its consequent suggestion that the “problem” of health and human development can be potentially “solved.”

The last key part of the historical development of global living standards is the suggestion and simultaneous removal of human agency in health. In collecting statistics to measure a particular kind of human development, the HDI implies that people have agency in the determination of this health. In other words, the HDI does *not* suggest that health is only natural, or subject to, for example, God or the will of fortune. Arendt makes two arguments about politics that are useful here: first, that politics is now mainly concerned with vanity and not-suffering as opposed to its past concern of immortality-seeking; and second – because of the first – that the modern public sphere is now significantly smaller than it used to be.¹⁶ When applied to the notion of human agency in health, this argument suggests that the strife for human development and health – not-suffering – is characteristic of a declining public sphere. In other words, the HDI’s statistics suggest that humans can pursue and achieve something that does not have value beyond the immediate goal of living. This emphasis on immediate living (health or not-suffering) actually removes human agency in assessing health because living is seen as the only problem here on Earth, which is then rationalized by statistics and seen as a problem that can be potentially solved. Thus, the notion of humans being able to alter their health also removes human agency in assessing this health by granting statistics the “job” of measuring and potentially “solving” the “problem” of health.

While these historical developments mutually constitute the thought, language, and power that formed the HDI, the HDI itself also informs the language of global human development and health standards today, and engages with concrete individuals and abstract geographical boundaries to form certain kinds of subjects or productive human beings.

The current nature of the language of global human development and health standards can be understood by considering Louis Althusser's article "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."¹⁷ The HDI can be compared to an "ideological state apparatus" (ISA), which is a plurality of institutions that are based on and shape ideology in both the public and private spheres.¹⁸ Althusser elaborates that ideology constitutes or "interpellates" or "hails" concrete individuals as subjects or "ideological subjects." Recognition of subjects is based on ideology, which then constitutes an ideological subject as is evidenced in material practices and rituals.¹⁹ The HDI is comparable to an ISA because the concepts used in its language are ideological rather than independent scientific variables based in statistics, and it is the product of an international public institution based on the nation-states and human rights regime that inform its parameters. For example, as stated above, the HDI does not measure human development; to ascertain what "human development" is, is an ideological formation or stand-in for human development rather than the concept itself. Statistics help in legitimizing this ideological structure of indicators by making it appear to scientifically deduce from "real-world" numbers that some geographical areas better provide for health and human development than others. However, these statistics are pre-supposed by the idea of *choice*, where one's capabilities determine the degree of one's choices and, therefore, supposedly also the

degree of one's human development. Thus, Althusser's exploration of ISAs reveals the nature of the language of global human development and health standards as an ideological structure legitimizing itself with statistics and nation-states. Althusser also notes that ISAs, given their basis on and shaping of ideology, engage in subject formation.

The HDI engages with concrete individuals and abstract geographical boundaries to condition subjects whom face an abstract ideology, a universal reduction of living standards, and lack of human agency due to the use of statistics and nation-states. This abstract ideology consists of the HDI's ideas of choice, capability, and nation-states being the determinants of health and human development. It is an abstract recognition of the conditions of people's biology within certain geographic boundaries, and causes the individual to conceptualize human development as an individual assessment of variations in living in different geographical areas with the best provision of health. The HDI also reduces what constitutes a "healthy" human – truly what constitutes the capabilities that yield a high degree of choice – to three indicators of supposedly universal factors. This reduction may cause people to feel inferior or superior within certain geographical areas as they react negatively or positively to the HDI's ranking system.²⁰ Lastly, individuals lack human agency because of the statistical justification of an ideology rendering human participation in the discussion of global living standards null. In addition, the use of nation-states' geographical boundaries further removes human agency in assessing health standards by suggesting that it is the responsibility of governments to provide for health. These three features of the HDI's subject formation occur through Althusser's "interpellation" or "hailing" of concrete individuals because

[w]hatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. This is why men . . . are always conditioned beings.²¹

This statement suggests that people's interaction with the HDI causes both to condition one another. Therefore, the HDI conditions people into subjects who face an abstract ideology, a universal reduction of living standards, and lack of human agency due to the use of statistics and nation-states.

The above politics in living standards – historical developments that led to the HDI's formation, the nature of its language and ideological structure, and subject formation – problematize health because human agency is excluded from assessing health and human development. Health and human development are designated as problems to be solved. The HDI's thought, language, and power form subjects whom may find it difficult to see this problematization of health. The use of *choice* as a stand-in for human development is deceptive because it is truly an ideology which formed through the historical development of bio-power, nation-states, the abstraction of human development from its practice, and the notion of human agency in assessing health. The seemingly natural measurement of health and human development by the UN is partly due to the bio-power development of Western political systems administering people's lives, and is supported by the blurry line between the public and private spheres.²² This appearance of legitimization of the HDI is complemented by the UN's establishment of human development and living standards as independent concepts instead of subjective practices, which suggests the potential attainability of solving a “problem” like health and human development. Furthermore, the

notion of humans being able to alter their health removes human agency in assessing this health by granting statistics the “job” of measuring the “problem” of health. And lastly, the HDI’s use of nation-states complementarily suggests that governments have the responsibility of “solving” or providing for health.

A comparison of Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses with the HDI further reveals that this artefact’s current language of global living standards, which is based on an ideological structure legitimizing itself with statistics and nation-states, makes it difficult to distinguish how human agency is excluded. This is because, as the globe’s central authority on measuring global living standards, the HDI’s language is based on and shapes a particular ideology of human development and health. Throughout the HDI’s interaction with concrete individuals it conditions people into subjects who face this abstract ideology, a universal reduction of living standards, and lack of human agency due to the use of statistics and nation-states. Thus, the historical development of global living standards into the ideological artefact of the UN Human Development Index and its subsequent subject formation problematizes health by excluding human agency in assessing health and human development. While the normative question of whether or not humans *should* have agency in assessing global living standards is not the aim of this paper, this critique shows that the HDI is an abstract ideological measure rather than a concrete appreciation of relative human health.

Notes

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 7-8.
- 2 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.
- 3 United Nations Human Development Reports, "Human Development Index," last modified 2011, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>.
- 4 "Human Development Index."
- 5 Michel Foucault, "The Right of Death and Power over Life," *The History of Sexuality: Histoire De La Sexualité*, edited by R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 137.
- 6 Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," 140.
- 7 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 28-29.
- 9 Carl Mosk, *Japanese Economic Development: Markets, Norms, and Structures* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 82.
- 10 Mosk, *Japanese Economic Development: Markets, Norms, and Structures*, 82-83.
- 11 "Human Development Index."
- 12 "Inferiority Complex," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2011.
- 13 United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>.
- 14 Wendy Brown, "Introduction: Freedom and the Plastic Cage," in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 15 Brown, "Introduction: Freedom and the Plastic Cage," 6.
- 16 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55.
- 17 Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation."
- 18 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 85-86.
- 20 "Inferiority Complex." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2011.
- 21 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
- 22 Foucault, "The Right of Death and Power over Life."