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The De-socializing of Jim Kim?

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By Jon Shaffer

The 12th president of the World Bank Group, Dr. Jim Yong Kim, is arguably the most powerful anthropologist in the world. As the co-founder of the groundbreaking NGO Partners In Health, the former president of Dartmouth College, the former head of the World Health Organization's 3 by 5 Initiative, and longtime champion of "the science of global health delivery" (Kim, Farmer, & Porter 2013) and liberation theology's exhortation to make a "preferential option for the poor," Kim's work has routinely used the "*re-socializing*" disciplines of anthropology and the social sciences to build arguments for greater investment in caregiving programs for poor people around the world. As a clinician and a scholar, Kim has coupled his work as a doctor for the poor to an ongoing process of "ethnographically embedding evidence within the historically given social and economic structures that shape life so dramatically on the edge of life and death" (Farmer, 2004). This is certainly a different approach from any past—or, likely near future—presidents of the World Bank, who have tended towards business titans or highly quantitative economists.

Historically, Kim has also been a fierce critic of the World Bank. Co-editing the tome, Dying for Growth, which takes aim at the market fundamentalist policies of powerful governments and neoliberal financial architecture built into the structure of World Bank loans and development assistance through the 1990's, Kim has routinely advocated intellectually linking the widespread suffering of the global poor, to particular neocolonial policies and extractive financial procedures of the powerful people residing in places like Geneva, New York, and Washington, D.C.

Which is why Kim's latest reform agenda as the head of the World Bank is so puzzling. It deserves special scrutiny by social scientists interested in global governance, international development, global health care delivery, and social justice. A recent piece in the New York Times, titled "The World Bank is Remaking Itself as a Creature of Wall Street," characterizes Kim's gambit:

> "Instead of relying solely on contributions from reluctant donor governments, he is pushing private investors — sovereign wealth funds, private equity firms and insurance companies — to pony up trillions of dollars for projects in Indonesia, Zambia, India and

> elsewhere. His pitch: They can reap rich returns by putting their money to work alongside the World Bank."

The piece leaves one with many questions: What does it mean for a financial institution like the World Bank to move *closer* and become *more* like a "creature of Wall Street"? Why would a life-long champion and scholar of health and human rights make common cause with those responsible for the 2008 global financial crisis, which has harmed health particularly amongst the poor and vulnerable (Karanikolos et al., 2016)? Why would he link arms with the political heir-protectress of the U.S.'s racist, misogynist, right-wing president? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how should this shift be examined, theorized, and interpreted by social scientists and activists fighting for social and economic justice?

It is easy to read this situation ungenerously. Reading the pundit accounts in the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *The Financial Times*, and *Politico* could easily lead one to the conclusion that, perhaps, the World Bank is desocializing Jim Kim.

Another, more nuanced reading (perhaps with the PIH-gang's own brand of hermeneutics of generosity) however, could see his efforts as a realist analysis of a changing world order and a pragmatic play at reorienting the finance sector's incentives towards investments in pro-poor programs.

At a recent lecture Jim Kim gave in the Harvard College course, Case Studies in Global Health: A Biosocial Perspective taught by physician-medical anthropologists Paul Farmer, Arthur Kleinman, Anne Becker, and Salmaan Keshavjee, he gave a more nuanced pitch for his reforms to the more than 180-person, mostly undergraduate and graduate student audience[1]. He explained that, based on the World Bank's objective to fight poverty in all its dimensions, he wants to tie large-scale lending and private financial flows to a rank order list (a new document that the World Bank is calling "The Changing Wealth of Nations") of countries' commitments to (or lack of) investment in human capital. Investments in education, anti-stunting programs, and health care delivery systems expand what he calls "grey matter", which he sees as a necessary precondition for sustainable economic growth. During the lecture, Kim said, "We're going to do a ranking, from 1 to 150. We're going to rank countries based on their stock of human capital." As a result, "Heads of state, ministers of finance, must be terrified of not investing more in their people… Let's make it very uncomfortable to not invest in health and education."

Part of his justification for financial sector intervention came from a statement from President Xi Jinping of China at the World Economic

Forum: that the "global economy is the big ocean you cannot escape from." Kim said that, "if the president of the world's largest communist party is willing to make this statement, what does this mean for the World Bank Group? It means that we need to find a way to help everyone to be able to swim."

Figure 1: Photo from Kim's lecture at Harvard College on November 28, 2017.

Functionally, Kim's social strategy—dubbed The Human Capital Project—is about naming and shaming countries that choose not to invest in their population's human capital. One could view this as a form of reverse-structural adjustment: decisions to increase public investment in health and education are rewarded by better loan terms and larger loan volumes from financial institutions, with the World Bank as the key arbiter. Kim went on, "We have to first create an environment where it's inevitable that they will invest in people, but then we also have to do it in a way that they are convinced that they are not going to lose an election… But, I feel I have a moral responsibility to reveal to leaders and ministers of finance that if they don't invest in their people they're going to be in big trouble."

Is The Human Capital Project an attempt at the financialization of global governance, writ large? Perhaps. As Susan Erikson wrote here in November, 2015 about the "financialization" of the Ebola response, it is through the "turn away from redistributive, taxpayer-based donor health aid, [that] financial instruments like the World Bank's Pandemic Emergency Facility — known more colloquially as "Ebola bonds" — look increasingly likely to finance future global pandemic responses" (2015). As she says, "Markets may make money, but they also lose it. How will the public verify that future pandemic funding has actually been secured? Private sector reporting standards are far less transparent than those for tax-payer public monies, which means that future financial gains and preparedness lack the usual oversights and accountability measures."

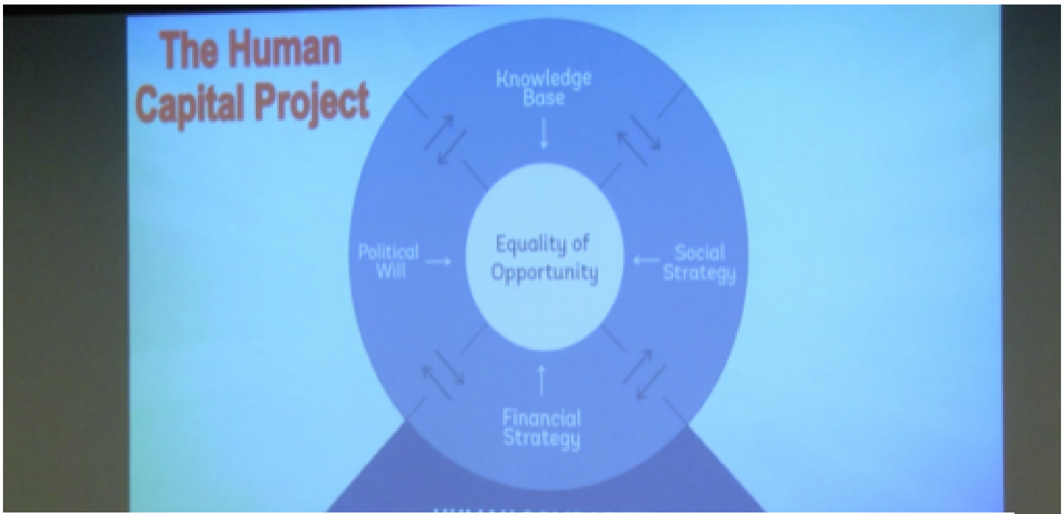

Figure 2: Kim's schematic of the World Bank's "Human Capital Project."

Many scholars have written about states' decreasing capacity to corral needed governance power and the ways that neoliberal capital fracture and rewire the governance of and financing for health interventions (Keshavjee 2014; Comaroff 2001; Cooper 2008; Goldman 1998; Sunder 2006). Arrighi and Silver most presciently have described cycles of capitalism and the processes through which financial capital expands its dominance. Perhaps, as they write, we are in a period of "hegemonic transition, in the course of which a new leadership emerge[s] interstitially and over time reorganize[s] the system so as to make its further expansion possible" (Arrighi & Silver 2001). Kim's quote of Xi Jinping basically names the hegemony of the global financial system: the "global economy is the big ocean you cannot escape from." Amid the chaos of postmodernity, capital is the one common denominator: "Money unifies precisely *through* its capacity to accommodate individualism, otherness, and extraordinary social fragmentation" (Harvey 103).

In the current geo/political/financial landscape, Kim certainly understands the weakened ability of states to deploy governmental/sovereign power (particularly the weakened position of the U.S. as a result of the Trump administration's inabilities), and the ascendancy of finance capital. This then brings the question: who or what wields sovereign power (Agamben 1998)? What gets included and excluded through these imaginaries, markets, categories, and financial products? What becomes meaningful and how do they construct problems? Perhaps Kim is trying to engage in the social construction of new incentives through using the legitimacy-conferring power of the World Bank by linking the commensuration of a country's "appropriate" level of investment in "human capital" to their credit-worthiness on the capital financial markets.

In James Scott's classic, "Seeing Like a State," ceaseless quantification and abstraction is the fundamental mode of governance in which populations and their problems become *legible* to state bureaucrats: "the state's attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion. Having begun to think in these terms, I began to see legibility as a central problem of statecraft" (Scott 2008).

Fourcade and Healey' more recent article, "Seeing Like a Market," is perhaps more useful in analyzing Kim's Human Capital Project as a new mode of *financial global government*—in which the decisions of elected leaders are coupled more closely with categories of moral worth codified by their linkage to financial opportunities in the global capital markets. They write, "An ubercapitalized world is an economy of differentiated moral judgments where distinctions regarding good behavior become an economic structure of opportunity. The moral structure grafts itself onto the economic structure by way of people's dispositions and choices." While Fourcade and Healey's work is focused on the micro context of individual-level social data, we could imagine this kind of financialized global incentive structure as a way to deal with the "ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and chaos" of global governance today. As Harvey said, "money unifies precisely *through* its capacity to accommodate individualism, otherness, and extraordinary social fragmentation."

In a world dominated by hyper-financialized market hegemony, how does one make a preferential option for the poor? Perhaps Jim Kim's reform efforts at the World Bank don't so much represent him becoming a de-socialized, neoliberal, free market fundamentalist as much as they demonstrate Kim's recognition that we are in a different kind of social moment. Perhaps he's right to say that, in the current order of things, the only way to attract the volume of capital necessary to make a dent in the massive problems facing the world (health, environment, infrastructure, etc.) is through changing the shape of the incentives and forces that shape the flow of private finance investments.

Perhaps it is through understanding that markets, like all social institutions, have moral, political, and social foundations; and, that by martialing the legitimacy of powerful institutions to codify the linkage between categories of moral worth and financial opportunity a new pro(er)-poor political economy might be possible.

The danger in all of this, of course, is that it is fundamentally an opaque, undemocratic, and elitist strategy. Where is the public oversight of this technical financial wizardry that commands so much power? And, while Kim may be able to create new incentives to pressure heads of state and ministers of finance to move new resources into policies targeting the poor, where do poor people fit in as agentic actors in their own right? What role should popular political power and participatory democracy play? A truly *social* strategy would imagine and actively support the role of subaltern social movements to make forceful claims—demands for protections of social and economic rights—on the very people Kim would have designing and packaging the financial products that control their fates.

I'll conclude with Jim Kim's own words from Dying for Growth in 2000, "History repeats itself. While the names may change, the fundamental relations between rich and poor remain the same. Yesteryear's colonialism laid the foundation of today's neoliberalism, doubtless soon to be replaced with a new "ism" for the new millennium… Unless the fundamental relations change, however, the poor will probably continue to suffer a disproportionate amount of violence and disease" (Kim, 2000).

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Note

[1] Full disclosure: The author was a teaching assistant for this course in the Fall of 2017.

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