

Inequality: The Key to Longevity

Toby Ord's "*The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*" is an important inquiry into the challenges and risks that await mankind. In his book, Ord notes the plethora of cutting-edge technologies that have been developed with the potential to aid the betterment of mankind's quality of life, but with the real risk of it running astray and causing the annihilation of said species. To this, Ord has put forth a multitude of solutions, most of which centre around increased international cooperation and stronger institutions acting in good faith. The book however is missing a key ingredient in its conclusion that makes it weaker – inequality.

Inequality in this essay refers to more than just economic inequality. Social and political inequalities are as much of an important factor as economic inequality is. With the world now so intimately connected, the effects of inequality are more starkly felt. As the world's median educational level increases (OECD, 2011; *Statista*, 2023), and with the globalised lens we are afforded, what we are missing out on is ever more perspicuous. This can breed discontent and even radicalised terrorism (Taspinar 2009; Franc and Pavlović, 2021).

On the other hand, global trust in democracy (Foa et al. 2020) and public institutions (OECD, 2021) are on a downward trend. These trends have been observed to be affected by various discontentment in socio-political-economic trends. The solutions Ord offers hinge greatly on the continuation of democratic institutions and trust in cross-border and domestic public leadership. With voter turnout also on the downtrend (OECD, 2021), it is easy to be pessimistic in one's outlook. In this essay, I will explore how factoring in inequality helps us better understand where

we are placed as a species, and how it can be the key to mobilising the masses to want to strive for a future that Ord outlines.

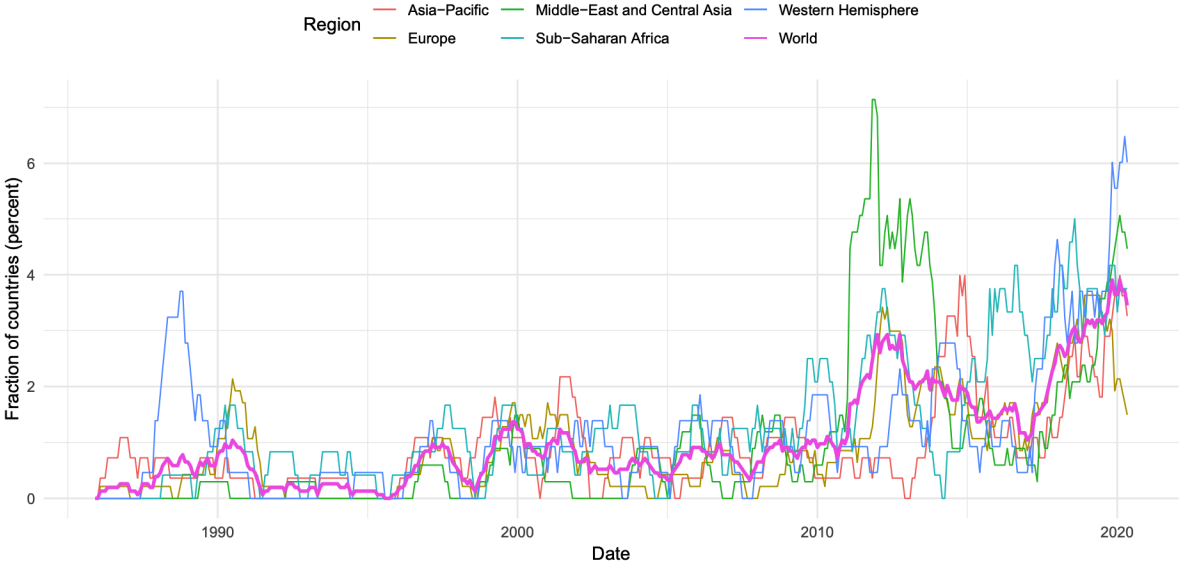


Figure 4: Fraction of countries with social unrest events, 12 month moving average

(Barrett et al. 2020)

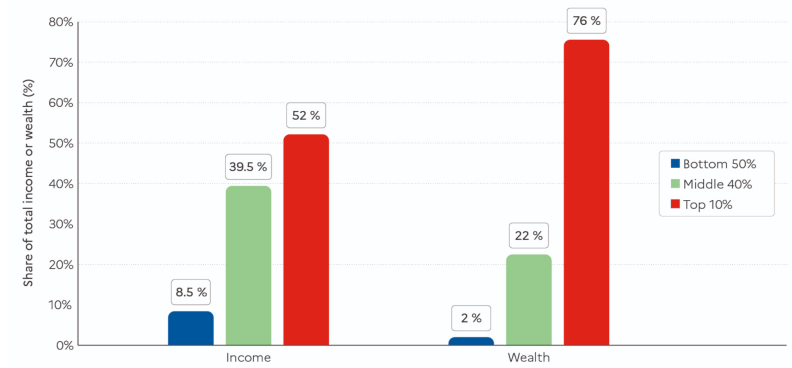
As observed in the graph, the trend on the average occurrence of social unrest in the world has been increasing. Barrett et al (2020) have identified that economic inequality has shown a strong correlation with the rising trend. What is remarkable is the developed and developing worlds having a general uptick in social unrest. With an arsenal of international alliances already working to facilitate political and economic progress, I take pause to wonder how much more successful can Ord’s proposed solution of a bigger international alliance be. In many developing countries, corruption is a major issue (Foa et al, 2020). In these cases, the issue of corruption for the most part can be traced to the history of colonialism (Angeles and Neandis, 2015), which has rewarded locals who benefited from the colonial era and placed institutional blocks from allowing the public to remove them from power. The social unrest bred from this can be seen from the Arab Spring. In the developed world, soaring politico-economic inequality is driving a

wedge in society. International uproar in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement took the developed world by storm (Shaw and Kidwai, 2020).

These instances of social unrest are not singular outbursts exclusive from the prior or successive ones of the region. They are indicative of a trend of an increasingly educated population realising the relative depravity they face in a socio-economic-political situation that continually permits such inequalities to persist.

“[These risks] will ultimately require new institutions, filled with people of keen intellect and sound judgement, endowed with substantial budget and real influence over policy” (Ord, 2020 pp. 196)

The solution rings a familiar tune – there already exist institutions that fulfil the task of dealing with these risks. The European Union is an example of an institution that already has real influence over policy (Mcbride, 2022). However social unrest in the form of protests have become increasingly commonplace today (Reuters, 2023). The problem here is not that the goals of the current institutions are any different from Ord’s. At the core of it, neither the current nor Ord’s proposed institutions have productively addressed inequality.



Interpretation: The global bottom 50% captures 8.5% of total income measured at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). The global bottom 50% owns 2% of wealth (at Purchasing Power Parity). The global top 10% owns 76% of total Household wealth and captures 52% of total income in 2021. Note that top wealth holders are not necessarily top income-holders. Incomes are measured after the operation of pension and unemployment systems and before taxes and transfers. **Sources and series:** *wir2022.wid.world/methodology*.

(Chancel et al., 2022)

Barrett et al. (2020) highlight the intensity of which people are connected to each other through technology. Many of the world's social unrest find part of their roots in inequality which is exacerbated by relative depravity facilitated by media technologies (ibid). Looking at the graph above (Chancel et al. 2022), the tangible differences in the lived realities of those below the global top 10% is truly felt. The reality that in the coming years, 66% of the global population will reside in cities can aggravate tensions as relative deprivation is ever more visible with socioeconomic differences in a densely populated area (Østby, 2016). And with the fact that cities are inherently more unequal, the threat of a fragmented society is ever-present (Peng, 2018).

Inequality has already claimed the lives of many and without factoring it into his solutions, Ord's solution has not accounted for the factors that threaten trust in public institutions which has led to a decline in favour for democracy, both of which are the bedrock for the liberal institutions we need to depend on.

“Multilateral action can resolve this tragedy of the commons, replacing a reliance on altruism with a reliance on prudence.” (Ord, 2020 pp. 200)

This conclusion lies on the presumption that the outlook and therefore prescription for how each state views the necessary action for the risks humanity faces lie on the same tangent. As I pored over the final chapters of his book, one question kept popping up in my mind: these solutions are already initiatives taken internationally, but why are they not working? It would seem that the United Nations (and Security Council), the G7, the European Union and a whole other slew of international alliances that aim to align on political or economic trajectories is the project that Ord is looking at improving.

“...the bare minimum of internationally binding constraints needed to prevent actors in one or two countries from jeopardising humanity’s entire future.” (Ord, 2020 pp. 202)

This conclusion assumes the homogeneity of the social, political, economic, and technological advancements of each of the 195 sovereign states. Consider this line from Al Jazeera, “It is high time for rich countries in North America and Europe to step up and help.” (Huq and Adow, 2022)¹. Franc and Pavlović (2021) and Taspinar (2009) have laid out how inequality and relative depravity can breed radicalisation. Extrapolating from that argument, it is not difficult to see how the Global South wants to hold the Global North responsible for much of the inequality faced globally, which would hinder international cooperation.

¹ Looking at the attitudes in different parts of the world when facing the same problem, we can understand the likelihood of cooperation. And in this case, the mood towards the Global North is one of scepticism.

Ord understandably has been socialised to pave the way forward with mutual assistance and partnerships in good faith. The example I quoted, Al Jazeera, is a news conglomerate based in Doha², in the middle of the Arab world. It contrasts starkly against Ord's socialisation as journalists and opinions stemming from that part of the world would have differing views on how the world came to such a precarious point. How each of us views the road up to "The Precipice" is affected by the world in which we grew up in. Facts being the same, it is the perception of them that can ignite wars or broker peace.

I think Ord's view moving forward is headed in the right direction. However, without including inequality as a key consideration of multilateral action and international cooperation has already proven to hamstring the efficacy of existing institutions. The same holds true for the book's conclusion. It is pertinent that inequality be considered in these conversations, as to do without has weakened the conclusion.

Word Count (excluding citations and titles):

1193

² Based on the definition of Global South by the [United Nations Organisation for Women in Science in the Developing World's](#) definition.

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