The Rise of Asian Economies and the Deprovincialization of Globalization

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Interviewed by
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The following is an edited and annotated transcript of an interview conducted on November 16th 2017 at the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC).

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University of Washington in Seattle, where he was also a professor of Geography and International Studies. Funded by the US National Science Foundation, Mellon, Brocher and other foundations, his work focuses on the changing geography of politics and citizenship in the context of globalization. He is the author of a 2013 textbook on globalization that is used in universities around the world, as well as in his own MOOC on *Global Markets and Personal Impacts.* Entitled *Introducing Globalization: Ties, Tensions and Uneven Integration,* the book offers an evidence-based critique of the 'flat-world' myth-making that turns Globalization into a justification for neoliberalization. Professor Sparke is also the author of another book, *In The Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State,* as well as over hundred other academic publications.

NS = Nirvikar Singh

MS = Matthew Sparke

MS: To set the scene for our interview, let me begin by giving you a little more background about the questions I want to pose about globalization and the rise of Asian economies. I am in the process of developing revisions to my globalization textbook[1], and for a number of reasons, I want to focus more clearly in the 2nd edition on the impact of the growth of Asian economies on the global economy, and the role in particular of India and China in the evolving story of globalization.

I want to do this for at least three different sorts of reasons. Firstly for ethical reasons, I don't want my account of globalization to be ethnocentric. Secondly for empirical reasons, I want to address how Asian economies have become the driving force at the center of where global growth and development is happening. And thirdly, for critical reasons, my text tries to counter 'flat-world' narratives—Thomas Friedman[2] type flattening narratives that are actually rather provincial and US-centric—and argue that the story of globalization has always instead been a global story of uneven

1 Sparke, M. (2013). Introducing Globalization: Ties, Tensions and Uneven Integration, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

2 Freidman, T. (2005). The world is flat. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

development. Inspired by post-colonial theorists, I would like to address these evolving patterns of unevenness in ways that also help de-provincialize depictions of globalization[3]. That is basically where I'm coming from, and reviewing your incredible work and your many different contributions to economic research, I felt that you were a great person to offer advice.

NS: Thank you, I'll do my best.

MS: Initially, let me ask a rather big question. In short, where do you think the growth of the Asian economies is taking globalization and changing the globalization story?

NS: Yes, that is a really big question, and I think my answer is a pretty obvious one. China is going to drive global growth because it is over a billion people, and growth on that large a base is really going to make a difference. I think I saw a chart in *The Economist*, which showed that purchasing power parity per capita income in China is higher than that in Russia. The Russian data was slightly older, but still. We would not previously have thought of them as being at similar income levels, and yet China is getting there.

MS: So, what does that mean?

NS: It means that China is going to be a major consumer of goods that we would have thought of as rich country goods, and that includes automobiles, white goods, not just luxury items, but also all kinds of goods that are consumed by the middle class. And I think that this means that China changes from being just a factory for the world and source of irritation for the United States because of the imbalance in trade, to also being a major consumer. That will have a more positive impact.

The other side of this is that China is striving very hard to be not just an imitator, but also an innovator. Some of the data might overstate Chinese contributions to academic publications, but the

3 Chakrabarty, D. (2009). Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference. Princeton University Press; and Spivak, G. C. (2008). Other Asias. Wiley-Blackwell.

way that they're investing in the university system, suggests to me that China will start being important there too. In that sense, in these two ways – developing a consumption-based economy and developing their capacity for innovation – they're doing something we've already seen with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

MS: But on a much bigger scale.

NS: Yes, on a much bigger scale. So that is all going to have a major impact.

MS: Do you think that it will pull in some of those other countries you were just describing, insofar as they will be selling not just staples, but intermediate goods, components, and even finished goods to China?

NS: I think that's a possibility, and also it creates room for other countries to export to the already industrialized world. Vietnam and Bangladesh are now coming in and taking some of the lower end economic areas like garments, and China is now upgrading more. So, there's a kind of trickle-down effect for countries like Vietnam.

MS: What about India?

NS: India is a very complicated story. On the one hand, it has the skills, but it really has failed -- and is continuing to show signs of not succeeding -- as a major manufacturing nation. For example, in garments, it is not competitive with Bangladesh or Vietnam, where it could be. India has this unusual pattern of development where some of its manufacturing has become quite capital-intensive prematurely. A lot of its exports are tied to the IT sector with software services and so on. There are areas where it's following a more conventional path like automobile parts and so on, so certainly it's not a totally gloomy story. But somehow India has not been able to get its act together in terms of following the traditional manufacturing path towards development. Successive governments have tried to figure out solutions, but there are very complicated reasons having to do with the federal structure of

India that create obstacles.

MS: Right, you have this co-authored 2006 book addressing some of these challenges.[4] In the introduction to this book, you discuss how the federal structure of India leads to Indian states sometimes being pitted against one another in a more or less competitive relationship, and that this complicates the ability of the national government to invest in country-wide infrastructures that would be necessary to grow the economy.

NS: Yes, I would maybe put it a little differently now, in that I think the pattern of development and policy across different Indian states is very uneven, but even in the strongest performing states, the central government acts as a barrier because it determines the flexibility of the states to go ahead. So, obviously, trade policy is one example, but also areas such as infrastructure have been a major barrier for the states.

Let me take a very obvious example, that of ports infrastructure. I think that has been under major control of the central government. So, an individual state, a coastal state such as Andhra Pradesh, has to rely on the central government to invest in the ports infrastructure in order for it to become, say, an exporting hub for manufacturing. That's one example; but in some other cases, the states themselves have policies which are detrimental to economic growth.

Some things are improving like the introduction of a more rational indirect tax system of goods and services -- that's finally in place -- so some of the internal barriers to trade are gone, which I think will also help with connections to the outside world. But, if you look at the data in terms of trade as a proportion of GDP, India is still far behind China. This suggests that its global engagement, or even its engagement with Asian production networks is below what it could be. I think that's something that Indian policy makers understand, but they haven't figured out how to solve that

4 Rao, M. G., & Singh, N. (2006). The political economy of federalism in India. Oxford University Press.

problem in a very accelerated way, where they can find appropriate export niches, or where they can find ways to become part of this Asian production networks. And countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia have done better there.

MS: In China what do you think they been able to do more successfully?

NS: I think several things. One was starting earlier. Another was being able to draw on overseas Chinese capital more effectively. Having both a more centralized system and a more decentralized system in the sense that the central government could create the right national climate, but also the provincial and even local governments could have a certain flexibility in terms of promoting business and so on. All of those factors allowed China to get on a global growth path more quickly than India. And India, I think, has a somewhat more ambivalent relationship with the rest of the world and even perhaps with capitalist modernity too. There's a certain Gandhian tradition of "we don't want to get corrupted by wealth."

MS: A tradition that also had a geopolitical alignment, ironically enough, in Nehru's leadership role in the so-called Non-Aligned Movement.

NS: Yes, non-alignment still rears its head on the geopolitical side. So U.S.-India ties have tended to be a little bit problematic because of past political history.

MS: This ties back perhaps to the comparisons with China. One other thing I researched as a way of approaching these questions about the India-China contrast with you were the bilateral trade statistics with the United States. The figure for China-US bilateral trade last year was $580 billion, whereas India-US bilateral trade was really just a tenth of that at $58 billion. Interestingly, in turn, the India-China bilateral trade was pretty much the same as India-US bilateral trade at 70 billion. So, if we go back to what we discussing previously, and China continues to be more of where the growth comes from globally, how is that going to impact India with its rather different geopolitical history? Is India going to be able to capitalize on inter-Asian growth? There is all this interesting discourse[5], what can be analyzed as geopolitical turned geo-economic discourse, about the rise of the BRICS, and the development of the Shanghai corporation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment bank, the Silk Road fund, so on, and presumably some of these projects are likely to involve or impact India too?

NS: Yes, I think so. But I'm not sure how. To the extent that India has to compete with countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh at the lower end, and then in the middle with countries like Malaysia, to export to China, India is going to be at a disadvantage. So, India has a generic problem, and that's not just with China, but also with US and with Europe and so on. India has the general problem of not being competitive in making physical things, and again there are niches where it's doing ok, like automotive components, but it's going to have to figure out how to develop other niches, like certain types of medical devices. That would be an opportunity.

One area where I think India has both a comparative and competitive advantage is in things related to software. Certainly, it's less competitive now than it used to be in areas like basic call center services (where now places like the Philippines have become more attractive for US companies). But India can still do a lot of business process outsourcing and services like medical imaging, or legal research, where the language skills of at least a segment of the population are beneficial.

There's always some room at the bottom end of software services for testing and quality assurance, but certainly the Indian IT firms are trying to move up to higher end services, competing more with

5 See Lee SO, Wainwright J and Glassman J (2017) Geopolitical economy and the production of territory: The case of US-China geopolitical-economic competition in Asia. Environment and Planning A. DOI:10.1177/0308518X17701727; and Sparke, M. (2017) 14. 2017, "Globalizing Capitalism and the Dialectics of Geopolitics and Geoeconomics," Environment and Planning A. DOI:10.1177/0308518X17735926.

global companies in terms of providing more packages of services relating to security software, and e-commerce.

MS: So, can we talk a little more about how the policy environment in India might relate to these global economy integration opportunities? I know you have written about the sort of policy environment for finance and talked about financial development policies that are necessary, but to build what you were just talking about with the growth of niches, you mentioned medical devices. It seems that more generally India has developed a very successful generics pharmaceutical sector, and part of the reason why India became the so-called pharmacy to the developing world lies in the distinctions of Indian patenting law. These provided a kind of infrastructure, a legal infrastructure, that allowed India to grow the generics sector with companies such as Cipla and Ranbaxy leading the way.

I'm interested, in this respect, in two things. First in the specifics of how that has worked and whether it's sustainable as companies like Novartis continue to challenge Indian patent law. I know that Novartis lost in its big Indian Supreme Court case, but as global companies like this continue to pressure India to conform to US patent law there's surely going to be more pressure on the Indian government to reform and conform with the global WTO rule-set relating to Trade Related Intellectual Property or TRIPs.

Second, in a countervailing direction, I'm interested in whether because of the success of the generics sector in India, and the public health value that's recognized in the country of having a robust generics sector, whether that can actually become a new global model, instead of having to conform to the existing global model. Can the Indian model become a global model? From my perspective, as someone who's interested in access to medicines as a human rights issue, it seems to me that it would be good if the Indian model prevailed over the existing WTO model. [6]

6 For a high level UN report reviewing these issues and underlining the need for such new global norms see http://www.unsgaccessmeds.org/final-report/

NS: Yes, I think you've summarized things beautifully, and I completely agree with you. I think that's one of the challenges of India dealing with the United States. It's that the United States has a particular set of institutions in areas such as intellectual property rights which are actually very harmful to consumers. And we can see that in many contexts in the U.S. domestic market. In that sense, India has to work out ways to serve other advanced country markets—Europe, Canada, Australia—where it's not under pressure just from U.S. multinationals. I think the same kind of issue can arise with Swiss multinationals, and you're right that some of the W.T.O. language can make it difficult. But, India may have to think about allying with other countries, such as China, to create a countervailing force.

And besides that, another area that should be of concern to India is seeds. Because U.S. multinationals are really trying to proprietarize the supply of seeds in a way that could be very problematic for Indian farmers down the road. And, obviously, there are some benefits from some of the seeds that are being provided by U.S. multinationals, but to me this is a very different model than the original Green Revolution model, where it wasn't privatized intellectual property, but public goods. I think it's a shame that the U.S. is not recognizing that that older model was actually better for global growth and stability, rather than the current one of trying to privatize everything. We are all familiar with the general argument for privatization as a spur for innovation, but I think that argument has been oversold for many kinds of products such as seeds and pharmaceuticals. And there are many other examples which suggest that the balance is not socially optimal.

MS: Do you mean that we end up empowering monopolists to such an extent that it kills off innovation?

NS: Exactly! These are global debates that the Indian government is going to have to figure out how to navigate. I think we know that as Indian companies develop they will also be on the side of privatizing certain type of intellectual property, but this is where some of the Indian traditions of wariness of full-blown capitalism will be helpful.

MS: How have they played out in the financial area?

NS: Finance right now is a major concern for Indian growth. The way that the financial sector has developed, in my reading, is that there has been a strong emphasis on stability. India has not had the kinds of crises that one has seen repeatedly in Latin America, but some of that has come at the cost of inadequately greasing the wheels of commerce. Certainly, bank nationalization has had some very positive impacts. But the public-sector banks have sometimes been politicized, and that has sometimes led to a kind of crony capitalism in loan making. That's somewhat true of the Chinese case too, but because China has been growing faster and has a healthier overall budget, it's able to deal with those problems in a better way than India.

India is really struggling with non-performing assets, which are mostly concentrated in public sector banks. The latest bank recapitalization program involves not using money from government budget revenues to bail out the banks, but selling bonds which are going to be held by the public-sector banks in order to fund additional equity. It's a little bit of a shell game, but still, it can take some immediate pressure off the banks, and that problem really needs to be fixed for corporate lending, which is not happening. There could be issues in corporate balance sheets, which are also restricting their borrowing, but I think non-performing assets on the banking side are the major problem.

Then, of course, India has been very slow in terms of coming up with other ways of lending to enterprises, finding ways to make funds available to small and medium-sized enterprises where technology enables more possibilities that are not tied to the traditional banking model. With the issue of assessing borrowers and monitoring borrowers, technology helps there in terms of bringing down the cost of monitoring, conducting transactions, and so on. Raghuram Rajan was really pushing the central government to develop platforms for secondary finance, such as factoring. But access to working capital remains a huge constraint for small firms in India leaving them vulnerable to being squeezed by bigger firms.

MS: So you see a lot of challenges facing small and medium sized firms in India as tied to limitations in financing.

NS: Yes, and that's a huge chunk of the Indian firm landscape. India has a relatively small number of big firms, but lots of very small firms which never grow, partly because of policy constraints and partly because of these finance constraints. And firm development is also pretty anemic in the middle of the distribution, which gets neglected and which also really can't get the right sources of financing for growth. This is clearly an area where East Asian development has been different.

East Asian development has been driven by big firms, the Chaebol in Korea, the Keiretsu in Japan, and some similarly large conglomerates in China. In each country these big firms have been able to create domestic supply chains, and somehow Indian firms have not managed that, and I'm not sure why. Instead, they just squeeze their suppliers. To be sure, Japanese firms have also squeezed their suppliers, but not to the point of keeping them completely captive. Indian small firm suppliers instead tend to be right at the margins of sustainability, and this surely constrains their ability to network globally too. One needs to think about this challenge at the domestic economy level before one can really think about plugging into global production chains. Or maybe they both have to happen simultaneously.

MS: Yes. Then there's all the writing about how the global demand of big buyers pulled the East Asian economies into global production networks.[7]

7 For example, Hamilton, G. and Kao, C-S. 2018. Making Money: How Taiwanese Industrialists Embraced the Global Economy, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

NS: Yes, India has perhaps missed that boat, or the train has left the station. I don't know which! But certainly, the slow-down of growth in Europe is a limitation today for future export-led growth.

MS: As too perhaps is the decline in debt-fueled consumption in the US from the pre-crash years before 2007-8?

NS: Yes, and that's why I've been thinking about things like medical devices. Sixty-five years ago the Japanese could say, well automobiles is going to be a booming sector—it has high income elasticity of demand, and it has positive externalities, in terms of knowledge spillovers. Maybe we can say the same about aspects of healthcare today, including medical devices, which is an area where India can be on the next train.

MS: Yes, it's not as if the demand for medical devices is going to decline all the while people keep getting sick. Chronic disease is itself getting globalized, and that demands more and more medical monitoring.

NS: Yes. The health challenges facing aging populations create all sorts of new economic demands. I'm a big believer in these sorts of demographic trends as important drivers of growth.

MS: Can we shift now to talk about populations whose lives are instead imperiled by economic forces? In this regard I wanted to ask you what you think about some of the areas of global finance that are supposedly pro-poor, and that are much talked about in the context of globalization and its discontents. I'm thinking in particular of microfinance, but also micro savings, which are sometimes critically distinguished from micro credit. Relatedly, conditional cash transfer programs are also meant to be pro-poor financial innovations. Do you hold much hope for any of these initiatives? Do you think they offer much for poorer Indians?

NS: Right, this is a very important issue. A lot of what we're seeing in terms of financial inclusion in India is really not just about enterprise, or even mostly about enterprise, but is, as you were suggesting, mostly about income support. The suggestion is that microfinance can sometimes help people not because they are growing their business, but because they can meet emergency health needs. And ultimately, that has a big positive benefit.

I also think the national rural employment guarantee scheme in India, which is not a microfinance scheme, has had positive impacts. This was a workfare scheme, which was first tried out many years ago in Maharashtra. Subsequently, a previous government expanded it nationwide as a huge new government budget item. It really propped up the rural economy. It pushed a lot of money into rural wages and increased rural consumption.

Now one can argue that maybe that money could have been used more effectively for capital investment rather than for income support. But it did encourage work on things like the digging of irrigation channels and building rural buildings. Somebody who had better work would not take it. Thus there was both some substitution and some new investment. And some corruption too. Yet even if it did not work all that well as a public investment program, it certainly pumped money into the rural economy. The discussion more recently in India has been about extending it into a universal basic income scheme. Again, the issues there are: what are the budgetary implications? Because if the government on the macro level is saying, well we have to keep the fiscal deficit under a particular level, then something has to give, and if the cost of transferring money to the poor is going to be building ports and roads, then you really have to do a cost-benefit analysis of the opportunity costs and trade-offs.

But another way to relax the budgetary constraints is to improve tax revenue in India, and I'm hopeful that the goods and services tax (GST) will be the first step towards that. I think that expanding the income tax base is also important. India collects relatively a low level percentage of GDP in taxes, relative to its income level, that is, even controlling for its income as a poor country. A couple more percentage points in the tax-GDP ratio would give the government a lot more flexibility.

So, to get back to your question, I think there are very strong arguments for putting money directly into the pockets of the poor. There are also strong arguments for financial inclusion, so creating bank accounts and giving people a reason to use them for making transfers to one another. There's also evidence, this is now global evidence, which says that if people have the right kind of bank accounts it makes it easier for them to save to buy more substantial and costly household goods

MS: Or to invest in education perhaps?

NS: Or education. So, this is all good and just to tie it back to my earlier point, one has to think of financial inclusion in India as a continuum, so not just poor households, but slightly less than poor households. Not just micro enterprises, but also small firms. If you're creating platforms where the really poor can borrow, then maybe you can also use similar platforms where small firms that are not individual micro enterprises can also do some kind of broadbased funding, including social enterprise-type funding or crowd funding.

MS: Perhaps you could make the argument politically that that's more sustainable if you move in the direction of widening who benefits from these programs. You build more support for them. And that seems to me to be especially important in the context of the sorts of blame games that emerge in the context of economic crises. This is another big area of globalization-related debate that I hoped we could touch on.

A variety of economists and social thinkers – including Joseph Stieglitz who was just interviewed in The Guardian[8] – have been talking about how economic alienation and distress create the breeding grounds for far right reactionaries to come to power.

8 Joseph Stiglitz, On why Trump is unfit to be US president, The Guardian November 16th 2017 at https://www.theguardian.com/business/video/2017/nov/16/joseph-stiglitz-trump-has-fascist-tendencies-video-interview. See also Daniel Bessner and Matthew Sparke, "Nazism, Neoliberalism and the Trumpist Challenge to Democracy," Environment and Planning A, 49 (6) 1214-1223. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17701429

Clearly the U.S. experience with Trump is not unique in this respect. It is happening across Western Europe and many other parts of the world. So it seems to me that these developments really make an urgent case for a more active involvement by the state in providing better protections for people from economic distress.

NS: Yes, I think that India is moving in a better direction in areas such as basic health insurance and crop insurance, which again, can be done using some of these technology tools to reduce transactions costs in ways that can reach relatively poor populations. So, the contrast between India and East Asia that I'd like emphasize again is that we know that East Asian countries by and large invested more in human capital and had a more equal distribution of income and human capital when they started their growth and that's a big challenge for India, because the danger is that starting from a less equal position it can go a Latin American route where the rich get richer and the poor stay where they are and you get social conflict and alienation and, ultimately, stagnation.

India still has to do a lot in terms of providing access to basic education. The evidence suggests that India is finally doing a good job of getting children into school, but then they're learning almost nothing. In 8th grade, they're at the 2nd grade level or 3rd grade level. Clearly the country has to do more to educate its population if it's going to avoid this problem of alienation. It's not just about producing software engineers. It's also needed for producing factory workers and service workers in hospitality industries. Being literate and numerate is important in a whole range of occupations.

MS: But back on those software engineers, in your new book on The Other One Percent book[9], you and your co-authors underscore how a good number of recent Indian migrants to the US have come

9 Chakravorty, S., Kapur, D., & Singh, N. (2016). The Other One Percent: Indians in America. Oxford University Press.

from relatively privileged backgrounds, and they've had access to education and that's partly what's made their journeys possible. Given that our conversation here will be published in an academic journal based at Panjab University, I am wondering whether you could share your thoughts about the implications for Indian students who are well-educated, who maybe have seen relatives or friends go off to the United States, but who are staying in India. What's your advice to those students?

NS: Well, Punjab is a really exceptional case. It became relatively well-off in the Indian context on the back of the Green Revolution, but it is now locked into a state of arrested development because there's been no transition to the kinds of economic activity in the service sector or in manufacturing that are going to grow the economy.

So that pushes people into migration because they're well off enough now not to work the farms themselves. They have tractors and they have migrant laborers. So what do they do? Many emigrate, but others stay, and in this respect Punjab gives an inkling of what could be a dystopian future for India – a dystopia in which you have extreme environmental degradation with poisoning of the water and also falling water levels, and at the same time lots of social discontent because people don't have jobs that they think are appropriate for their status. As a result, you also have a lot of abuse of drugs and alcohol in Punjab. And, so that's what happens when you have a pattern of distorted development. In some ways, it's parallel to what you see with the opioid crisis in the U.S. Here, it's the pharmaceutical companies that are pushing opioids. There, I actually believe the opioids are coming from Pakistan. Anyhow, my point is that emigration is not going to solve the problems. You can only have so many people migrating from India to the United States. We have 3 million Indian Americans, maybe 2 million of them were actually immigrants and 1 million were born here. But 2 million is a tiny fraction of the 1.2 billion in India.

So, you have to provide jobs for them in India, and that is actually the biggest weakness in Indian policy making. India is not creating enough jobs, and that is something that really needs urgent attention. You've got to have firms getting to the point where they're employing hundreds or thousands of people. China did that by being the factory to the world, and still they haven't completely absorbed all their rural labor. This is also a global problem, of course, one that the Middle East faces very dramatically. Latin America also faces it. Brazil has not solved this problem, nor many other countries. So for the young people in Punjab I'm not sure what to say. I would say that maybe you have to look for jobs in Bengaluru, Delhi, and Mumbai. That, probably, is where a lot of opportunities are going to be domestically, in the growth poles of these globally connected urban centers.

MS: Well that certainly seems to be the dominant global pattern with big so-called global cities separating themselves off as they become more closely connected to one another across international borders than they often are with domestic hinterlands. I had a related question that is rather more speculative, concerning the ways Indian migrants in the US maintain these really intimate long distance connections back to family in India. Do you think that personal and social knowledge in these familial networks flows in both directions in ways that may influence domestic norms and politics? For instance when gender norms and expectations shift amongst Indians living in America, does some of that changed outlook transfer back when migrants talk to family in India? Reciprocally, no doubt sometimes communication comes the other way too. News of something like this horrendous smog cloud currently hanging over Delhi perhaps impacts the environmental outlooks of Indians here in America too. If you have relatives in Delhi who are saying they can barely breathe, and you're talking to them in the clear air of coastal California, maybe it makes you more aware of the need to address global pollution problems? So, in other words, the communication and political awareness go both ways.

NS: Yes, but I also think what is happening in India now is the realization that one has to deal with environmental pollution -- air, water, land -- not just for the global commons, but also for India itself.

MS: Which is what China has started doing too.

NS: Yes, exactly, so I think that India is shifting very rapidly in this respect.

MS: And in an academic parallel we have also shifted very rapidly here through so many different questions relating to the rapidly changing global context. I am very grateful to you for all of your insights, and for your great openness in engaging all these globe-spanning issues in such a generous and generative series of responses. Thank you!