Fairness, Globalization, and Public Institutions

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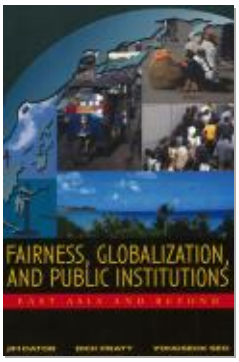

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structures work best for prosperity, planet, people, and future generations across civilizations.

Biotechnology and Fairness

Walt Anderson

It is widely accepted that there is a serious "digital divide" in the world, measurable by the enormous disparities in access not only to computers, but also to more basic communications technologies such as telephones and radios. Many different efforts now underway are attempting not only to get communications and information equipment in the hands of people, but also to enable them to use it effectively and gain practical access to the ever-expanding realm of public knowledge.

Less discussed, but no less serious, is what might be called a "genome gap," the inequality of access to the new capabilities of the life sciences and biotechnologies. The promise of new developments along these lines is so great that some people see the beginnings of a new stage in evolution as human beings enjoy health, abilities, and longevity far beyond anything known in the past.

There are many dark sides to this bright picture, the most serious of which are expressed in a simple and obvious set of questions: Which human beings? Whose diseases will be cured? Whose life will be extended? There is already an enormous wealth gap in the world, and inseparable from it is the "health gap": people in the wealthier parts of the world live longer, eat better, are better protected against disease. With new life-extending and performance-boosting enhancements, that gap can grow even wider, to the point that the rich and the poor are hardly the same species.

Such enhancements are already here, and there is no doubt that many more are on the way. Current research and development in biotechnology guarantees that new products will become available, and market conditions (particularly the increasing numbers of older people as the baby-boom generation ages) guarantee a strong demand for them.

Concerns about the safety and efficacy of such products can probably be resolved over time. The more possible it becomes for some people to live longer and function more effectively, the more acute becomes the difference between those who have access to such benefits and those who do not. All of those treatments cost money, and some of them cost huge amounts of it, and it hardly seems likely that publicly funded medical insurance, welfare agencies, NGOs, and international health services are going to bring enhancements to everyone. The best-case scenario (of astonishing breakthroughs in science and technology that fundamentally change human life) can easily become the worst-case scenario of inequalities beyond anything the world has yet seen.

It is a dismal (yet very real) prospect, and one that public policy makers have scarcely begun to think about. Some leaders in the world of science believe it is time they began. Not long ago an editorial titled "Exploring Life as We Don't Yet Know It" appeared in the respected British publication *Nature*. It urged that some organizations (such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO]) take on the job of looking at scenarios of likely future developments in the enhancement field, anticipating the time when feats "that are currently regarded as out of bounds have become both practicable and, to some, eminently desirable."