

Via [David Brooks today](#), [Jim Manzi](#) from several months ago makes an intriguing argument regarding the equities of international climate change policy. Developing nations consistently say that developed countries should pay for the lion's share of climate mitigation because developed countries have caused the problem. But says Manzi,

What this ignores is that the reason the U.S. and Europe have historically emitted carbon dioxide is that they invented the modern economy. Along with putting all that carbon dioxide in the air, the West invented the polio vaccine, the limited-liability corporation, the high-efficiency power turbine, and so on. It invented, that is, the tools for creating wealth that successful parts of the developing world are now using to escape poverty — and, incidentally, to emit more carbon dioxide. It is less than obvious why we should put a special burden on the West to make reparations for carbon-dioxide emissions while ignoring the fact that the net global effect of the system that created these emissions has been extremely positive. Ask yourself this question: Would you rather be born at the median income level in Bangladesh today, or at the median income level in Bangladesh in an alternative world in which the entire Northern Hemisphere never escaped life at the subsistence level — that is, to live in a world of lower carbon emissions, but no science, no hospitals, no foreign aid, and no meaningful chance of changing the material conditions of your life?

This has purchase, but not as much as Manzi says. First, it assumes that the “benefits” brought about by the industrial development in the North have been shared equitably between North and South. There is little doubt that Bangladesh is better off than it would have been had the North not developed, but it does not follow that the advantages that it has now and in the future are even close to comparable to the disadvantages it will incur under climate change. If, say, development in the North amounts to \$10, of which \$9 goes to the North and \$1 goes to the South, and this development will then harm the South in the future by a total of \$9, but only continue to benefit it \$1, then it remains true that the South has been injured by \$9 and only benefitted by \$2. (All of this is accepting for the time being Manzi's assumption that all costs and benefits can be monetized, which they surely cannot be.) So Manzi's question has rhetorical power, but really does not get to the heart of the answer.

Second, Manzi confuses the ethical heart of the issue — a confusion that in fairness is also made by many advocates of the global South: he conflates *retributive* versus *distributive* justice. Put another way, the strongest argument for the developed world paying for climate

change is not that the developed world caused the problem; it is that the developed world is, well, developed.

Consider that the average Indian lives on less than \$2 a day. To the extent that someone has to make a sacrifice to save the planet, should it be hundreds of millions of similarly-situated Indians, or should it be tens of millions of Americans driving SUVs? A tendentious example, but one that accurately drives the equity picture. Who should pay, millions of Africans threatened by malaria and AIDS, or Americans who refuse to pay even a minor carbon tax? That's the justice question.

Manzi is that rarest of creatures: an intelligent, reality-based conservative. His ideas need to be taken seriously. But that doesn't make him right.