

Stepping stones to a cosmopolitan order

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'The Islamic State' is a group known across the world. The notion of the 'war on terror' reaches across continents. 'Sub-prime markets' was a concept known only by few before it became widely understood as a trigger of the 2008 global financial crisis. Weather patterns in southern Africa used to be understood as an act of God; they are now thought of as man-made – the product of climate change. The local reverberates across the world, as global events and forces reshape the local.

Individual countries can adopt the most stringent rules for the regulation of genetic research, but if other countries ignore such rules the human genome will be open to unchecked manipulation and human beings could become made to order in the years (not so far) ahead. The Doha trade round stalled on the refusal of emergent powers (in particular India) to bow down to the G2 (the US and EU), yet the rules of trade are still largely dictated by leading states and regional blocs with deadly consequences for some: the subsidization of the cotton industry in the USA or agricultural food produce in the EU, affects the life chances and life expectancy of others, for example, in the case of cotton, West African cotton farmers. The rules governing nuclear proliferation were fixed by the geopolitical victors of 1945, but is the justification of these rules still persuasive in a global order marked by shifts in the balance of power? Emergent countries and other nations might stand up and say 'you have them, why not us'? Who makes the rules governing our genetic makeup, global habitat, resource use, economic exchange and security is a pressing matter in an age of global interdependence. Who gets what, when and why are no longer questions confined to state silos, democratic or otherwise.

The extensity, density and velocity of global interconnections today creates a world of both extraordinary opportunity and risk. Opportunity because an economic division of labour stretching across the world, world trade patterns, global communication infrastructures, a rule based multilateral order and a growing sense that action is needed now on global challenges creates unparalleled prospects for prosperity, development and peaceful coexistence. Risk because never before have human communities been so densely interwoven whereby the fortunes of each is bound together in fundamental ways; a world of overlapping communities of fate. Hence, the era is one of significant promise and colossal challenges. At the same time, the knowledge humankind has developed is no longer just an elite privilege; diffuse and available on the internet (accessible to over a quarter of the world's population), the cognitive resources of science and culture can be explored by a diversity of actors, with benign or regressive intent.

The vulnerability of the global system combined with the democratization of knowledge led one commentator to consider that humankind has only a 50/50 prospect of reaching the end of the century without a major setback.¹ Take this together with the potential for conflict in global hot-spots to ricochet across the world – Israel/Palestine, increasing turmoil in the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, along with transborder threats such as Ebola, climate change or biodiversity loss – then the warning does not seem out of place.

¹ Martin Rees, *Our Final Century*, London, Arrow Books, 2003, pg. 8.

The rules of the interstate system, and sovereignty over territory, were set by those with effective power from the late 16th century: might made right. Sovereignty in the modern period could never just be about the rights of indigenous people, because colonizers sought to disregard these. Sovereignty was thus established and secured through effective power – holding a territory and displaying the flag. Up to the foundation of the UN, sovereignty trumped other values with a claim to universality. From the development of the UN onward, sovereignty was spliced together with human rights and democratic standards in an unstable amalgam. The permanent members of the Security Council (the USA, China, USSR/Russia, UK and France) could manage the global agenda (although the USA had far more influence than the rest), as less powerful states could disregard human rights in regulating and controlling their territories. Yet, with the foundation of the UN system, the development of the EU, and the beginnings of a global environmental regime, stepping stones were laid down to a universal constitutional order – stepping stones which were clearly marked, with a clear direction of travel, and yet obviously slippery.

Within this context the meaning of sovereignty shifted in international law from effective power to, in principle, rightful authority – authority that upholds democratic values and human rights standards. The law of war was complemented by human rights conventions, together setting down limits to what it is that human beings can do to each other in war and other forms of organized violence perpetrated by state or non-state actors. The principles of accountability and self-determination were enshrined in these agreements and, through the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century, became entrenched in waves of democratization, marked by such moments as the fall of the Soviet Union, the election of Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa, the Arab Spring, and ongoing protests in Hong Kong. In Europe something equally remarkable happened: the most war-mongering and destructive continent in history turned from Hobbes to Kant and created a pacific union in which war among EU countries was banished for the first time. In addition, sovereignty was no longer regarded as unitary and absolute as authority became parcelled out at many levels and citizenship became synonymous with membership in diverse communities – cities, subnational regions, states, and supranational associations.

Of course, there were huge forces seeking to ensure that any passage across the stepping stones to a universal constitutional order – what I call a cosmopolitan order – was not just unsafe but seemingly impossible. The war on terror bypassed international law, weakened the UN system, and sought to place the US and its allies in a position to extend the era of Western hegemony. It also sought to ensure that American or British conceptions of power and rulership remain dominant in the world. Yet it was not to be. Why? Because the world since 1945 has changed fundamentally: might no longer makes right; human rights and the standards of self-determination cannot simply be trodden on; freedom cannot be achieved through war and organised violence; a lasting peace can be won only through the consent and act of participation of the many; and power is becoming more diffuse as the world becomes more multipolar.

It is against this background that one can begin to understand why realism, *raison d'état* and hegemonic state projects are a narrow, impoverished and counter-productive way of seeking to organize politics in a global era, and why cosmopolitanism is the new realism – a sounder framework for political activity than *realpolitik*.² Globalization has changed the terms of reference of politics: in an interdependent era, whether in economics, politics, or security, global issues cut across the domestic creating a plethora of urgent trans-border questions. *Raison d'état* is too narrow a set of terms of reference for addressing and meeting the challenge of

² David Held, *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities*, Cambridge, Polity, 2010.

climate change, water deficits, pandemics, financial market instability and reform, or security threats with a global dimension. Moreover, the old narrow club model of the permanent members of the Security Council, or the G5, G7 and G8, or the small community of bureaucrats from regulatory agencies and central banks that have governed the rulebook of banking since the end of Bretton Woods (the Basel Committee), disclose that such clubs inevitably govern in their own interests and take decisions, with complex ramifications and risks, for jurisdictions beyond their own borders.

These difficulties of accountability and politics were compounded in the late 1970s and 1980s by the re-assertion of the standard liberal model of economics and politics, or the 'Washington consensus' as it is sometimes called, which promised that internal market development coupled with global market integration was the key to development and prosperity, and that all else was empty rhetoric.³ But the model does not adequately explain the great economic success stories of the last two decades (China, India, Vietnam, Brazil among them) or recognize the damage it created when blindly applied, for example, across many Latin American countries and emerging markets in the post-Soviet era. Furthermore, the approach deliberately weakens the place of politics – local, national and global – by emphasizing markets above all as the key to collective development and problem solving. Market externalities, environmental degradation, and the public goods required to make markets work effectively (health, education, transport infrastructures, regulation, and so on) are all neglected or down played. Rising economic and political inequalities within many states, among states and even across the global domain are also treated as if they are natural phenomena.

An alternative model of politics and governance can be found in some of the most important achievements of law and institution building in the 20th Century, the stepping stones to a universal constitutional order, referred to earlier. These developments set down a conception of rightful authority tied to human rights and democratic values which can be entrenched in wide-ranging settings. In this perspective, political power is legitimate if, and only if, it is democratic and upholds human rights. In addition, the link between territory, sovereignty and rightful authority is, in principle, broken since rightful authority can be exercised in many spheres and at many levels, local, subnational, national and supranational. Accordingly, citizenship can be envisaged, as it is already in the EU, as equal membership in the diverse, overlapping political communities which uphold common civic and political values and standards. Citizenship, then, is built not on an exclusive membership of a single community but on a set of principles and legal arrangements which link people together in the diverse communities which significantly affect them. Thus, patriotism would be misunderstood if it meant, as it all too often has done, 'my country right or wrong'. Rather, it comes to mean loyalty to the standards and values of rightful authority – to common civic and political principles, appropriately embedded.

Suitably developed, this conception of global politics envisages a multilayered and multilevel polity, from cities to global associations, bound by a common framework of law, a framework anchored in democratic principles and human rights.⁴ The state does not wither away in this conception; rather, it becomes one element in the protection and maintenance of political authority, democracy and human rights in the dense web of global forces and transnational processes that already shape our lives. Perhaps more importantly still, it points to a political order no longer exclusively anchored in *raison d'état* and hegemonic state projects but in principles of cosmopolitan association.

These principles include the principles of: the equal moral worth of each and every human being (without which the human rights regime makes no sense); active agency and self-

³ Martin Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, pg.144.

⁴ David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order*, Cambridge, Polity, 1995.

determination (without which the unique human capacities of reasoning and moral choice cannot be recognized); and deliberation and consent (without which the democratic process would be stillborn). What makes these principles cosmopolitan is not only the universal nature of their claims, but also the rejection of the assumption that the choices, rights and duties of human beings must always be embedded in, and limited to, states, an assumption never fully justified in democratic theory in any case. In a world of overlapping communities of fate, the principles underpinning global politics must be cosmopolitan in their form, scope and manner of entrenchment.

It is sometimes argued that cosmopolitan principles are not only insensitive to cultural diversity and difference but deny them. Nothing could be further from the truth; for pluralism and cosmopolitanism are two sides of the same coin. One of the key conditions of pluralism is a set of values and arrangements that protect and nurture the possibility of cultural diversity and just difference. The set of principles that generate this possibility is one and the same as that which underpins cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan principles are the basis of human autonomy and self-determination; they are constitutive principles of living in communities that recognize the equal interest of all in moral, social and political choices, subject only to the constraints of not unwarrantedly delimiting or restraining the choices and activities of others. The principle of harm and, more broadly, justice are critical in this regard. At the same time, these principles underwrite pluralism and difference because they underpin the space of each and every person to steer a course through the interpretive frames and warring Gods of our time.

The principles of a cosmopolitan order include egalitarian individualism, mutual respect for each and every person's equal rights and duties, and self-determination. In a world of overlapping communities of fate these can only be embedded in the cross-cutting communities of human life. Once, these were small habitats, towns and cities. Later, they comprised great territories and time spans, that is, nation-states. Today, they embrace the local, the national and the global; in other words, spaces wherever power is entrenched and exercised. The stepping stones of the 20th Century laid down a path to a cosmopolitan constitutional order. The question is: can and will we follow it?

With wars currently raging in many parts of the world and gridlock on many of the most pressing issues of our time, this does not look likely. Yet, neither great cities nor states were built in short time spans, and so it is hardly likely a cosmopolitan order will be either. The trouble is climate change, resource scarcity, global economic imbalances, financial market instability, nuclear proliferation, among other pressing issues, require our energies and imaginative solutions now. In this sense, the universal constitutional stepping stones of the 20th Century gives clues as to how and where to travel, and what the form and shape of global organizations and institutions should be, but they offer no simple blueprints. These can only be worked out in the process of travel, with fellow travel companions, in dialogue and activities shaped by, and consistent with, cosmopolitan principles.