

Global Justice: An Exegesis of Contemporary Theories

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The field of global justice is rife with academic disagreement on a number of fundamental questions – “What does ‘global’ mean in this context?”, “What would justice look like?”, “Who is best placed to achieve it?”, “Is the aim of global justice to set base standards, or as Stanley Hoffman describes, “starting from what is and groping towards the ‘ought’” (1991)?”. This essay will show that the lack of consensus on global justice is a microcosm of schisms present in international relations (IR) perspectives. This impasse renders a universal conception of global justice untenable and infeasible. More cogently, if one cannot construct a hypothetical, coherent solution to global justice, how will it be implemented? This paper will start by clarifying the concept of global justice that will be explored throughout this essay. Secondly, the shortcomings of current theories of global justice will be examined. Finally, a brief look at the way forward, and the importance of reasoned discourse on the subject.

What is “Global Justice”?

The discussion of global justice engenders a number of questions, with each academic camp providing different solutions. In this section, I will outline the definitions utilised in referring to key terminology.

Firstly, what is global justice? Global justice is a component in normative IR theory focusing on the moral obligation of the world’s rich to the world’s poor (Shapcott 2014). The key tenant is redistribution of wealth to reduce global poverty. The term ‘global justice’ will be used interchangeably with ‘distributive justice’.

Secondly, what is meant specifically by justice, is it the same as equality? This essay will use a definition of justice predicated on Adam Smith’s *original position* and John Rawls’ *veil of ignorance*. These measures focus around how best to theorise a just society without inherent bias. These approaches work by questioning whether an individual, with no knowledge of their position within a society in terms of wealth, merit, or genetics, would consider it just.

Theories of Justice

There are three primary approaches to global justice: cosmopolitanism, communitarianism, and neorealism. Each of these views emphasise a different component in IR theory and posit different solutions to the issue of inequality. While cosmopolitanism views individuals as members of a global society, communitarianism and neorealism adopt a state-centric view of justice.

Cosmopolitanism, as an approach, focuses on the responsibility of individuals to act as global citizens. The compulsion towards cosmopolitanism is grounded in two criteria – a commitment to a universal community, and detachment from local or national affiliations (Slaughter 2008). There are multiple distinctions within cosmopolitanism. I will adopt the nomenclature put forward by Steven Slaughter to easily distinguish. Cosmopolitanism is broken into three sub-theories, each mandating different levels of systemic alteration: moral, institutional, and political.

Moral cosmopolitanism argues for very little change. Rather, it suggests principles of human concern can be used as metrics by which existing arrangements and institutions may be measured (Beitz 1999). Thereunder, it is a consequentialist framework to ensure each political relationship maintains a positive influence on human rights. For

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example, the current model of the United Nations (UN) forms an ersatz moral cosmopolitan institution. In this capacity, it affirms and denounces states for their impact on human rights and justice. However, the UN is subject to the same theoretical flaws as moral cosmopolitanism itself. For a political body to be in a position to exercise this critique of nations in a democratic international system, it must have the consent of every nation of its constituency. The UN achieves this consent through a commitment to 'sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' of member states (United Nations Charter Section 2(4) 1945). However, this means that the UN is near-void of 'hard power', and is dependent on member states (Nye 2012). Rather, the UN's ability to be an impetus of reform is largely via 'soft power'. Nye delineates the difference, saying "hard power works through payments and coercion (carrots and sticks); soft power works through attraction and co-option" (Nye 2012). Yet, hard power is subject to scorn from realist governments. Joseph Stalin once asked derisively, "How many troops does the Pope have?" Nye acknowledges this weakness, saying the UN has 'very little power when the great powers oppose an action' (Nye 2012). Therefore, for moral cosmopolitanism to be a proper method through which to achieve global justice, significant restructuring is required of existing global structures such as the UN to give greater autonomy.

Institutional cosmopolitanism seeks to create institutions that champions the primacy of human rights compared to other state affairs (Slaughter 2008). This theory is taken up by Thomas Pogge in his seminal book, *World Poverty and Human Rights*. A central approach is the development of state-transcendent bodies to oversee the state's commitment to human rights. Institutional cosmopolitanism, by its very design, evokes violations of a state's right to self-determination. This, while increasing the likelihood of tangible change, invites considerable critique from realist scholars for compromising state autonomy. Therefore, where moral cosmopolitanism theoretically fails but could practically succeeds in the objective of instituting change, institutional cosmopolitanism practically fails, but theoretically succeeds. The foundational impasse of cosmopolitan theories of global justice is creating some form of body to ensure human rights are upheld, yet by the same token requiring that body be powerless enough to gain state consent.

The final cosmopolitan approach, mandating the most systematic reform, is political cosmopolitanism. This theory argues for the creation of universal political institutions which include all people to ensure global justice is upheld (Slaughter 2008). This is the theory taken on by the likes of Daniele Archibugi, Richard Falk, Anthony McGrew, and David Held. The model put forward by Held is tripartite, mirroring the governmental system present throughout much of the Western world, but at an international level. Firstly, the establishment of regional 'councils' that make decisions over a certain geopolitical area. While some examples of this exist, such as the European Parliament, Held argues for an 'enhancement of the role of such bodies' (Held 1995:108). Secondly, change in the General Assembly and Security Council to 'give the Third World a significant voice' (p. 111). Thirdly, the creation of a transcendent UN chamber to exercise further scrutiny on the actions of member states (p. 111).

Whilst comprehensive, this theory fails on both counts of practicality and theoretical cohesiveness. The inherent logic of this approach is to establish a global watchdog to ensure global justice is met. By this method, corrupted and malignant states will no longer be in a position to entrench abuse of its people. There is no reason, however, to think this new government would be any less prone to corruption or denigration of virtue. Additionally, this approach engenders a furthering of a neo-imperialist agenda and traditional Western liberal democratic hegemony, undermining the very concept of *global*. Theoretically, there is no comprehensive detailing of how one may assimilate the entirety of the world's population into a sole democratic body. If a single state (or cultural or racial group in the advent of a deconstruction of states) were to abstain, this body would fail in its central aims. This body would then be forced to acknowledge the disjunction in aims and reality (not true *global* justice), or pressure – through hard power – remaining groups to acquiesce to the new governmental system.

Communitarianism opts for a different tact to that of cosmopolitanism, and instead emphasises one's role within their political community. The power of this theory is its ability to preempt opposition from states on the infringement of sovereignty for the cause of justice. It suggests that global justice within the microcosm of every state should be the "ought" (Hoffman 1991) we grope towards. In doing so, it appeases the UN requirement of sovereignty and territorial integrity (United Nations Charter Section 2(4), 1945), while maintaining a commitment to marginalised communities. Unfortunately, communitarianism fails in the former component of the titular issue – globalness. This methodology

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has no organ through which to ensure justice in countries with serious inequality. To mandate countries work towards resolving inequality and injustice would infringe on the very sovereignty this approach intends to uphold. Therefore a practical implementation of this theory would see minimal change. Highly ranked inequality-adjusted human development index (IHDI) countries such as Norway (HDR 2014) have little incentive or requirement to further equality. Low IHDI countries such as the Democratic People's Republic of Congo (HDR 2014) lack the financial resource to resolve massive systematic inequality. There is a crucial need for the impetus of well-positioned wealthy countries to assist in the establishment of sustainable and equitable sociopolitical and economic paradigms in poorer nations. Peter Sutch (2001) argues that the nature of communitarianism necessarily instigates moral relativism. In doing so, it would only uphold the status quo. Furthermore, such a solution ignores any causal connection between disenfranchised (frequently post-colonial) states and the incredible benefit acquired by Western outsourcing. In the words of Pogge:

The idea that our economic policies and global economic institutions we impose make us causally and morally responsible for the perpetuation – even aggravation – of world hunger ... is an idea rarely taken seriously ... in the developed world (2001:15).

This highlights the need for accountability for the detrimental economic influence the West imports to poverty-stricken nations.

Neorealism has a strained relationship with the concept of global justice. With a foundational emphasis on state sovereignty, the primacy of the state, and security above all, it leaves little motivation for magnanimity. While certain explanations of global justice present a causal connection between aid and security, this constitutes a morally unsatisfying explanation for charity. One intrinsically feels that philanthropy should not be premised on the notion of selfish gain or the eventual reciprocity of the assisted party. However this question has been explored by many other thinkers (see Peter Singer). Some realist authors such as Robert Gilpin argue that systemic economic inequalities are unavoidable in IR (McGrew 2004). Furthermore, the impotence of global institutions means an inability to ensure rich states will pursue altruistic policies in terms of distributive justice (Krasner 1985). Therefore neorealist theorists may err towards a perspective similar to that of communitarianism, looking to governments to ameliorate poverty within their respective states. However, realists adopt a further critique of this perspective for its redistribution of wealth without commitment to economic prosperity.

The Way Forward

Why then, if the case for all major theories is so bleak, does global justice remain such a prominent topic? One response is that analysis may help us inch closer towards a noble goal.

There exists a philosophical disjunct in IR theory on the purpose of discourse on global justice. Some authors purvey the realistic possibility of achieving the aim of global justice in our lifetimes (see Sachs and Pogge). Others discredit the notion of achieving it at all. However, there exists a secondary motive for this discussion, independent of its achievability: without a theoretical utopia to work towards, IR has no model to work toward – feasible or not. More simply: how may one reform the *is* without a conception of the *ought to be*? Regardless of whether it will get there, laying the palimpsest allows us to move toward equality.

Having established why, a following question is required: what is being done currently? The UN has recently released the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – 17 objectives to reach over the next 15 years. These include goals such as eradicating extreme poverty, ending hunger, and ensuring universal access to primary and secondary education (United Nations 2015). These goals build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) created in 2000, concluding in 2015. While failing to achieve many of its aspirational tenants, the MDGs made large strides in the field of world poverty. Aiming to halve 1990 levels of extreme poverty, 37% of the world's population living on \$1.90 a day, by 2015, this goal was met in 2010 (World Bank 2015). Recent estimates place 12.7% of the global population living in extreme poverty (World Bank 2012). While progress has been made, to say we're approaching equality is a dubious claim.

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Answering the question “is ‘global justice’ a feasible political goal?”: there is little evidence to support the statement. With IR theorists themselves unable to imagine a workable conception of justice, a practical implementation is – at best – equivocal. However, I do not believe the intention of discourse on global justice is the achievement of universal equality. Rather, having such a model of good to strive towards can make for a slightly better world. Even without universal equality, we can lessen the 91.2% rate of poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo (World Bank 2004); we can reduce the 500 million people living in poverty in East Asia and the Pacific (World Bank 2011); we can increase the mere 37.9% of children in Liberia that get secondary education (World Bank 2014); and we can alleviate the 120.4 per 1000 rate of infant mortality in Sierra Leone (World Bank 2014). These injustices can be addressed, but only if we have a global model of justice to aspire to. Whilst global justice may not be feasible, its moral imperative is incontrovertible.

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Date written: October 2015*