Review – Global Reboot

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Global Reboot
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Ever since the beginning of the pandemic, scholars, journalists, and policymakers alike have been debating the shape of the post-pandemic world. Using the major disruption caused by the pandemic as a starting point, much of the conversation asks how we can 'build back better', not just in terms of the necessary economic recovery but also in order to tackle much older challenges such as climate change or racial justice.

Global Reboot seeks to be part of this debate. The idea behind the podcast is to explore "how the world could look like after the pandemic" and to "identify solutions to some of the world's greatest challenges" (Podcast Trailer). In eight 20-30 minute episodes published between May and July 2021, *Global Reboot* seeks to take stock of where the global community is at and what could be viable ways forward. The podcast is hosted by Ravi Agrawal, editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy,* in partnership with the Qatar-based *Doha Forum*. Ravi Agrawal and his guests discuss a different 'global challenge' to be tackled after the pandemic in each episode. The issues covered include Climate Change (#1), Global Health (#2), Big Tech (#3), Economic Recovery (#4), and US-China Relations (#5) as well as Preventing Islamophobia (#6), Gender Equity (#7), and Racial Justice (#8). The line-up of experts featured in the podcast is impressive, including U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd, former Head of News at Twitter Vivian Schiller, Professor of Economics Dr. Mariana Mazzucato, and activist and civil rights leader Dr. Bernice King, among others.

Overall, *Global Reboot* successfully provides a compact and succinct introduction to major global challenges ahead. The episodes are accessible even to those with little previous exposure to the debate and therefore cater to the (potentially) broader audience that a podcast has compared to academic or policy contributions. While the agenda of *Global Reboot* is extremely ambitious, Ravi Agrawal and his guests are able to cover a remarkable amount of content and ideas in each episode. Because host Agarwal abstains from offering lengthy introductions of the problem at hand but instead lets his guests introduce their own assessment of the issues at stake, the podcast jumps right to the heart of the matter while still offering the audience all the information needed to follow along.

Unfortunately, however, the podcast does not fully live up to its own expectations. The reason why this is the case lies in a structural problem of the podcast: *Global Reboot* faces the almost insurmountable challenge of nailing jelly to the wall, that is: of defining what 'global' actually means, at least for the purpose of this podcast. What makes an issue 'global'? From whose perspective is a challenge 'global'? What is, and who are the actors of, a 'global' solution? While it is probably too much to ask from a podcast to answer these questions conclusively, settling on one definition would have given *Global Reboot* a much clearer direction. Instead, the episodes meander between two ideas of 'globality' that are equally unhelpful: Some episodes are heavily biased towards the perspective of the West (mostly the US) and seek to render the discussion global by universalising the particular experience of some societies, while others try to focus on as many countries as possible in order to expand the discussion into a global one.

Both approaches are problematic in their own regard. First, by focusing the discussion predominantly on the US and

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seeking to extrapolate its experiences to the whole world, the discussion becomes Eurocentric. In the episode on US-China relations (#5), for instance, former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd and host Ravi Agarwal discuss the rise of China mainly from the perspective of the Western world, with little regard to what China's new role in the global economic and security landscape looks like from the perspective of African, Latin American, or even Asian states. The challenges associated with China's rise, however, are different for different parts of the world: While for the US and Europe the implications of a strong China first and foremost concern the US-sponsored liberal international order, Asian countries grapple with threats to their security and territorial integrity. Many Latin American and African countries, on the other hand, need to balance the economic opportunities that China represents with new political and economic dependencies. What is especially problematic in this episode is its implicit assumption of a 'trickle down' effect of political, economic and security implications of US-China relations for other world regions. While this certainly will be the case to some extent and while it is undeniable that the US (still) has significant power to shape the course of events globally (the OECD's tax deal being the most recent example), viewing US-China relations exclusively from the perspective of the US dismisses the agency of other world regions to determine their own fate outside of the framework of a great power contest. The episode on climate change (#1) builds on similar Western-centric assumptions by discussing climate change almost exclusively through the lens of US politics, and also the discussion of Islamophobia (#6) remains limited to the experience of Muslims in the US, although anti-Muslim racism exists in many forms around the world, the systematic oppression of Uighurs being a particularly severe example. As a result, despite its name, in many episodes *Global Reboot* gives the impression of being first and foremost directed to a US-based audience (policy makers and citizens interested in US politics) rather than to the 'global community' that Ravi Agarwal refers to in the podcast. (On a very superficial and essentialising level, this is also mirrored in the composition of guests, who predominantly are from, or work in, the Global North.)

Second, by seeking to render the discussion global by covering as many countries as possible, some episodes risk omitting the particular domestic political and economic challenges that will shape a respective country's approach towards a global problem. As a result, *Global Reboot* remains superficial and vague in many instances. Episode 2 on Covid-19 and Global Health, for instance, seeks to derive lessons learned that are applicable to all countries around the globe, which renders the discussion superficial for the simple reason that discussing the particular set of challenges that each society was (or still is) facing is inherently impossible in a single podcast episode. When it comes to discussing tangible policy options, the attempt to present universally applicable solutions further limits the conversation to abstract ideas that are unspecific enough to be relevant to many social and economic contexts. Episode 6 on Preventing Islamophobia, for instance, emphasizes the importance of "developing relationships across divides" (#6), without offering insights into the prerequisites of such processes or indicating how particular policies may enable societies with very different cleavages to do so. While some degree of vagueness may be helpful when talking about similar challenges in many particular contexts, it glosses over the complexity and political challenges of solutions and seems to present easy fixes where in reality there are none.

Covering a global challenge and global solutions in 20 minutes without risking one of the two pitfalls outlined above seems almost impossible. A more constructive approach towards the podcast would hence have been to build the episodes around an understanding of globality as *interconnectedness.* All challenges covered in the podcast are global especially because the actions of one state changes the outlook of the others. Acknowledging the multiple (historical and present) linkages between different states around the globe and taking the interaction of their policies as a starting point would have contributed to a deeper and more complex discussion. Episode 1 on Climate Changeis a case in point: discussing climate change as a global challenge without addressing the concerns of low-income countries about a (perceived) trade-off between climate protection and economic growth as well as their calls for financial support for climate adaptation omits a key cleavage that may hinder global efforts to tackle climate change. Focusing on the interactions and connections *between* states would have further expanded the discussion to the role of international organisations, which are almost completely absent from the podcast.

What remains from *Global Reboot* is less a technical discussion of tangible policy options or an inquiry into the origins of global challenges and obstacles to their solution. Instead, the episodes offer a number of ideas for ways ahead as well as rough outlines of how these ideas could be implemented in practice. By keeping the discussion abstract in many instances, it inspires its audience to think big and to forget about the endless political tug-of-war that each step forward will inevitably involve. All in all, despite its shortcomings, this makes the podcast a valuable

contribution to contemporary debates.

About the author:

Katharina Kuhn is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her PhD studies the political economy of international taxation and foreign economic policy making in the periphery. Her other research interests include decolonial approaches to IPE, International Organisations (IOs), and the political ramifications of Covid-19. Her most recent publication discusses the impact of Covid-19 on decentral governance structures in Germany and Italy.