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Fixing global governance

Abstract. The failure of global governance, and how to remedy this, is a recurrent theme in political philosophy. This essay suggests a number of priorities, including: strengthening and reforming the United Nations system; addressing the pessimism in discourse about global governance, and acknowledging the advances which have been made; and engaging the cult of nationalism, with a reclaiming of the universalist ideals of renaissance humanism. Part of engaging the cult of nationalism also involves re-thinking the role of religion, especially as a force supporting nationalism and the status quo. Ultimately we do not know what future global governance will look like, but the key is to believe that transformation is possible.

There are numerous signs that the way the world is run is in trouble. These troubling signs include our seeming inability to agree on a way to deal with the global migration crisis; our seeming inability to address global climate change; continuing maldistribution of global resources; problems of global food security; our seeming inability to regulate multinational corporations; problems in regulating the internet; our seeming failure to limit the global arms trade; our seeming inability to make meaningful progress in nuclear and general disarmament; our seeming failure to enforce international human rights standards; our seeming inability to enforce responsible governance in both the public and corporate sectors; and our continuing reliance on war and killing as means of conflict resolution.

The complexity of the current situation is perhaps best illustrated by the growing world migration and refugee crisis. Critics assert that many of those seeking to enter the developed world are indeed economic migrants, that is, seeking a better material lifestyle. This is precisely where the debate becomes complex, especially for those in settler countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA, where a large part of the population consists of the descendants of those who did in fact migrate seeking a better life. It seems problematic to condemn people for doing this now, especially if fleeing dire economic conditions. This is yet another pointer of the need to change the way we organize global society.

The failure of global governance, and how to remedy this, is a recurrent theme in international politics. Indeed, writers have been articulating this failure for some time. However, it does need to be said that the existing nation-state system is not entirely broken. For instance, improvements in the standard of living enjoyed by most individuals within developed countries in recent

centuries have been made possible due to the stability engendered by the nation-state system. Yet it is difficult to contest that we need now to be looking to re-assess what social scientists call the Westphalian system, the system of governance through nation-states, and ask how we can progress to something better.

I want to suggest that the first priority in progressing to something better ought to be to support and strengthen the United Nations system. It is commonplace for commentators to note just what a flawed system the UN is. For instance, power within the UN Security Council rests very much with the five permanent members, each of whom is a nuclear weapons power, and each of whom has the power of veto over any resolution. Critics point to the extent to which United Nations resolutions are routinely ignored, and that the United Nations is all about talk and not action. And there is also an underlying perception that power in the United Nations system rests with the nation-states which are most powerful, as the United Nations system cannot afford, in an economic sense, to alienate those powerful nation-states.

Yet it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that working from this flawed system to something better offers us one of the best hopes of better world governance. There are many current initiatives to renew the UN, and we do not know what will emerge from these initiatives. For instance, one intriguing current initiative is the Campaign for the Establishment of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (CEUNPA), with global representatives directly elected from the peoples of the world. This radical proposal offers the potential for the UN to become a genuine democratic global organization, and a genuine democratic voice, rather than merely a collection of representatives (elites) of nation-states.

I would suggest that a second priority is to engage the pessimism infecting thinking about global problems. This is not to understate the global problems. Yet the problem with pessimism is that it tends to be self-fulfilling. It is noteworthy that so many popular movies today are dystopian and post-apocalyptic, reflecting a wider cultural belief in the inevitability of some kind of civilizational collapse. If one does not believe there can be solutions to problems, then one will act in a way that tends to bring that vision into reality. In other words, unless one believes that there are workable solutions to global governance, then one will not commit to proposed solutions, as these obviously cannot work. Conversely, if one believes that a peaceful, socially just and ecologically sustainable society is possible, then one will be more willing to work to bring that society into reality.

Of course, what is realistic or optimistic or pessimistic can rest upon one's own perceptions. Many will argue that we're unavoidably locked into a cycle of self-interest and force, but it is also the case that self-interest can be, paradoxically, a motivator for change and co-operation, in that it can be seen that unless we co-operate as a global society, then the results will be disastrous. It also needs to be stated that, despite current challenges, and as pointed out in the most recent UN Millennium Goals Report (2015), there have been unprecedented efforts and profound achievements in key areas, such as the global reduction of the number of people in extreme poverty, the growth of the middle classes in developing regions, the global reduction in the number of people suffering undernourishment, and the growth in universal primary education.

I would argue that a third priority in improving global governance is to engage the cult of nationalism, which, paradoxically, is still dominant today. We live in a strange world, where the actual authority of the nation-state is being steadily eroded, but yet nationalism as a culture and ideology seems to be more dominant than ever. We need to re-define how we think of ourselves, that is, as global or planetary citizens, rather than citizens of a particular nation-state. Interestingly, this universalism is not a particularly new idea. A universalist vision was articulated within renaissance humanism, with, for instance, Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536) writing of his desire to be a *civis totius mundi*, or a citizen of the whole world, and Francisco de Vitoria (1483-1546) writing of a *res publica totius orbis*, or a republic of the whole world.

An interesting part of re-thinking nationalism, I would suggest, is also re-thinking religion, and the part religion plays in underscoring the legitimacy of the nation-state. I would suggest that too often organized religion plays the role of legitimating the nation-state, or legitimating war, and of legitimating the status quo. We need a religious or spiritual vision which is more inclusive, and more open to social and cultural change. Paradoxically enough, this does not necessarily involve inventing new religion or religions as such, but realizing that there already is a utopian element within existing religious traditions – that change is possible.

What will improved global governance look like? It could be a form of evolving and growing global consensus, where there are shared aspirations and shared standards, applicable to all and accepted as being applicable to all. Improved global governance may also involve more explicit and workable sanctions against those individuals, and groups, who do offend against international human rights and international standards. And improved global

governance may also involve new and reformed overarching structures, specifically involving the United Nations. I suspect all will be necessary. The key, however, is to believe that this project of transforming global society is possible, in which case the possible may soon become the inevitable.

Dr James Page. Originally published in Online Opinion, 29 October, 2015.