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What Should Be the Central Concerns of Global Studies?

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Opinions vary widely in response to the question of what should be the central concerns of global studies programs. I would like to suggest two broad challenges:

1) understanding and explaining the rise of a global society and delineating the

unprecedented issues that this revolutionary condition poses for humans - whether they will survive and thrive - and

2) continuing evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency, and legitimacy of prevailing solutions to global governance in responding to these imperatives (a) to determine where current rule-based solutions fall short in meeting the needs and demands of the world's diverse and divided populations and (b) to explore and devise new ways to do better.

These are tall orders - enough not only to justify the development of a new interdisciplinary and interprofessional program of studies within an already crowded academic agenda, but also a sufficiently broad and capacious framework for study and action to encompass most of what programs currently march under the banner of global studies.

The Problems Posed by the Rise of World Society

What is meant by the global society is the growing interconnectedness and interdependency of peoples and states over the past several centuries. This condition has been created and is now propelled relentlessly forward by instant worldwide communications; rapid, low-cost long-range transportation; accelerating rates of scientific discovery and technological innovation and the rapid dissemination of this knowledge to all parts and populations of the globe; and ceaseless expansion of global markets in trade, as well as monetary, financial, and labor flows across national borders.

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What is new to the human condition is not only the widening scope, increased intensity, accumulating density, real-time speed and impact, cascading effects and synergisms of human exchanges across the globe over an increasing number of domains of concern to humans everywhere, but also, and now more relevantly, the progressive consciousness of this condition by enlarging segments of the world's populations. Actors increasingly understand that what each actor wants depends more and more on the cooperation - consensually or coercively elicited - of millions

(arguably billions) of other actors, arguably billions, depending on the issue to be addressed. Illustrative global issues include checking the spread of weapons of mass destruction, viral infections, and ecological disasters, creating greater plenty for the world's populations, and promoting the human rights of the world's six billion inhabitants, swelling to eight billion by 2030 and nine to ten billion by mid-century.

Given the scope and number of mutually dependent actors associated with the world society, global issues are ipso facto more complex and intractable than those at local, national, and regional levels in which the world society is embedded. More actors imply that more interests have to be taken into account. This means that more uncertainty about the outcomes of interdependent exchanges will inevitably arise as a consequence of the increased difficulty of estimating the differential power of actors to get their way. Increasingly solving global issues require that they be addressed *simultaneously and synchronously* at all levels of relevant human action; that is, globally.

Rule-Based Institutional Responses to the Problems of the World Society: The Crisis in Global Governance

Cooperation to address and solve the rising number and complexity of global problems is not a free good. It requires the elicited or induced cooperation of actors, most anonymous to each other, through rule-based institutions. These have evolved as the products of costly trial and error to suit human needs and demands.

The nation-state and the nation-state system have been the preferred choice of the world's populations to provisionally address the challenge of domestic, national, and global order. But the solution *is* the problem. The nation-state is the shaky building block of a warfare system at perpetual sixes and sevens. This decentralized, anarchical system is also an impediment to collective action. Witness, for example, the slow progress and backsliding to cope with global warming since the signing of the Kyoto accord. Paradoxically, failed states, which are unable to discharge the state's minimal but crucial obligation of security, threaten the viability of global order, as the war on terror suggests. These are only some of the obvious shortcomings of the nation-state and its system as a reliable solution to global order.

Similarly, global markets are the principal rule-based solution to the production and distribution of material wealth and welfare. The market system is also its own

stunning failure. As a social institution it understandably rewards the endowed, resourceful, and creative. The social result is both the production of untold material wealth and, as the downside, the unequal distribution of wealth and, accordingly, the unequal distribution of political power in the hands of the few vs. the many. Nor are free and fair markets, their impressive benefits notwithstanding, designed to address chronic and widespread global poverty. As Jeffrey Sachs persuasively argues, the coercive power of the rich states must be enlisted to marshal and distribute the resources in their possession to pull almost half of humanity out of poverty. Markets can't do the job.

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Finally, authority for all rule-based institutions implies the approval of those who are ruled. Popular or democratic government appears to be the appropriate solution to the imperative of legitimacy as an indispensable component of effective governance. But can we be sure that this solution is apt for the times? As Peter Singer has made clear there is a yawning disconnect between the power of nation-states and their populations and the impact of their decisions to address the entire range of issues confronting the world's populations in a fair and equitable manner. Which states, for example, gain most from World Trade Organization trading rules? The democratic deficit at a global level is immediately revealed in posing this question. Certainly the strong do not hold the short straws.

Nor can democratic regimes be automatically expected to protect human rights and the interests of their minorities. James Madison posed this issue over two centuries ago in No. 10 of the *Federalist Papers*. It is no less relevant today than it was then. A key explanation for the Dutch rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 was widespread fear that the interests of a small nation would be swamped in a larger, albeit more democratic-based, European Union.

There is also the issue of effective, not just legitimate, governance. Sir Henry Maine stressed the point over a century ago that "there can be no grosser mistake [than] to have an impression that Democracy differs from Monarchy in essence.... The tests of success in the performance of the necessary and natural duties of a government are precisely the same in both cases." This concern is echoed today in Bryan

Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Identifying the problems of a global society is no small task or trivial pursuit. There can be no solution to the problems posed by a world society unless the problems themselves are clearly delineated and widely understood. No solution is likely or lasting unless the human and material resources of actors needed to address these imperatives are coordinated through effective, efficient, and legitimate rule-based institutions.

QED: the object of study and action of global studies programs is the world society and global governance.

Tags

governance

civil society



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