

Critical Views: On — the Difficulty of — Being a World Citizen

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Posted: 20 October 2016

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The ideas expressed in this essay were presented at the World Government Research Network's conference in Brisbane, Australia in June 2016.

To say the idea of world government gets mixed reviews would be an understatement, to put it mildly. Many people dismiss the idea out of hand as either a utopian fantasy or a recipe for dictatorship by unaccountable elites bent on world domination. Even those who don't lie awake at night fretting about black helicopters and what goes on in smoke-filled rooms packed with powerful vested interests quite justifiably worry about well-known problems of democratic accountability.

At an historical moment when democratic institutions around the world are suffering a crisis of legitimacy, making the case for world government is consequently getting increasingly difficult. The most promising example of institutionalized international cooperation we have yet seen – the European Union – is in crisis and has become synonymous with dysfunction. Britain's ill-advised decision to leave only reinforces the idea that such projects are definitively off the historical agenda.

Paradoxically enough, however, some of the smartest people on the planet – a number of whom can be found on this site – continue to argue that not only is world government normatively desirable, it's actually a functional necessity and one that will inevitably be realized. The only question is when.

The casual observer can be forgiven for feeling somewhat confused. Even those of us who take a professional interest in such matters can succumb to bouts of acute cognitive dissonance as we try to get our heads around what we – in this case the human race – need to do to survive in a civilized fashion. The reality is that some problems such as climate change simply cannot be addressed by isolated 'communities of fate' of a sort that have come to dominate politics and governance over the last four or five hundred years.

The fact that we all live within nationally demarcated boundaries is one of the defining features of modern political life and it determines the existential variety, too. Those born in Victorian Britain thought they had won life's lottery – or those in the upper classes did, at least. Even now, people are willing to risk their lives to get into 'the West' with its implicit promise of affluence, peace and social stability. It's not hard to see why.

Some would say it was ever thus: throughout history, life has always been tough and uncertain for many – most? – of the human race. Indeed, it's possible to make a plausible argument that we – the human race, again – have collectively never had so good.

This rather abstract way of thinking about the human condition is not much consolation to those living in Syria rather than Sydney, however. For those of us fortunate enough in such privileged enclaves of peace and prosperity the question is whether we have obligations beyond borders. Are we obliged to care about the fates of strangers we will never meet and whose lives only appear fleetingly, if at all, on our television screens?

At one level, the answer is clearly 'no'. Unless you subscribe to some sort of religious belief that obliges you to take an interest in the welfare of your fellow man or woman, no one can compel us to care. True, seeing children getting blown up night after night gets a bit wearing, but you can always literally and metaphorically switch off.

But even if we take this quite understandable approach to problems we can do little to address, they will not disappear from the world's political agenda or even from our consciousness. The fact is that we are stuck with them. The world really is much more interconnected, interdependent and interactive than it has ever been before. What happens in one part of the world really can exert an influence elsewhere – even if it's only in an increasingly futile effort to seal off one part of the world from the problems of another.

It is precisely because of the global nature of many problems that some people think that world government or at least an increasingly effective process of global governance has to be part of the way we conduct human affairs – however unlikely and unprecedented that might seem in principle. It is also becoming evermore apparent that even relatively humdrum policy issues such as taxation are becoming impossible to manage without high levels of international cooperation that transcend national boundaries.

And yet even if we accept that transnational cooperation is a necessity for achieving effective governance in everything from climate change, disaster relief, to the governance of myriad areas of economic and social life, actually doing this effectively and uncontroversially is much easier said than done. Not only will some actors inevitably benefit more than others from such initiatives, but some states also remain implacably opposed to the very idea of anything that impinges on national sovereignty.

In East Asia where I do most of my research, states have a long history of jealously protecting national sovereignty and little enthusiasm for the sort of cooperation that characterized the European Union in its heyday. Indeed, many in Asia feel vindicated by what has happened to the EU of late and read it as a cautionary tale of elite level hubris, rather than the most important

attempt yet to transcend narrow national interests in pursuit of a more cosmopolitan common cause.

For students of international politics like me this is a real problem at both an intellectual and personal level. Part of me thinks that the arguments for greater international cooperation in the face of global problems are simply overwhelming and self-evident. But I am also very familiar with Asia's empirical and historical record; it has created entrenched ideational and institutional obstacles to greater cooperation that are unlikely to be overcome in my lifetime – which is understandably the principal focus of my attention.

So what should those of us who would like to see greater collaboration occur actually do in the face of such seemingly insurmountable institutionalized obstacles? One response might be to follow Antonio Gramsci who said that he was 'a pessimist because of *intelligence*, but an optimist because of *will*.' Developing forms of global citizenship, world government and a common consciousness do seem inherently improbable at this historical juncture. Believing in the possibility of change is vital, however, if only for our own psychological well being.