

The Sympathetic Skeptic: An Interview with Richard Falk

Richard Falk

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Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Visiting Distinguished Professor in Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has been a prominent and prolific voice in scholarship on international law and world order since the late 1950s, and more recently has championed the promotion of 'humane global governance' as an alternative to top-down economic globalization.

Richard Falk was integrally involved in the World Order Models Project in 1960s-1980s. WOMP was a research-focused outgrowth of the world government movements of the 1940s and 1950s, and its head, Prof. Saul Mendlovitz of Rutgers, was an advocate of binding world government. Falk was more skeptical, famously arguing that most world government proposals are guilty of 'premature specificity.' The World Government Research Network's Luis Cabrera interviewed Prof. Falk on his long career and current views on global integration.

1) You were the North American director for the World Order Models Project (WOMP), which was aimed in part at developing an inclusive international academic dialogue on global integration. What were the major challenges to developing a genuinely global dialogue, and how successful do you think the project was in meeting them?

I think the main participants in WOMP were very disposed to a global dialogue, although sharp differences in outlook were present from its inception. There was an initial split between those of us from the North who focused on war prevention given the anxieties generated by the U.S./Soviet geopolitical rivalry and those in the South who were concerned with development, overcoming European colonial legacies, and steering clear as possible of the Cold War. A secondary split was between Saul Mendlovitz, the overall director and fund raiser who made the project possible, who strongly believed in the near term inevitability and desirability of world government in some form and the rest of us who believed that the preconditions for democratic world government did not exist, were not on the horizon, and in any event were fearful of international integrations of political authority and power beyond the level of regionalism. WOMP was successful so long as it agreed to disagree, which it did during its initial decade or so of existence. There were stimulating meetings in various parts of the world, and a series of interesting books describing our 'preferred world for the 1990s.' Mendlovitz edited a volume of essays that gave an overview of the project by giving the authors an opportunity to put forth their distinct visions of a feasible, necessary, and desirable future for world order. Of the principal authors my book *A Study of Future Worlds* came by far closest to endorsing a global

integrationist vision by its stress on the necessity of ‘a central guidance system’ to deal with the problems of the world in the 1970s, but still tried to keep my distance from the Western tradition since the end of World War I of pushing world government schemes.

The second phase of WOMP sought to fashion a consensus view of the future of world order. Its shared framework was based on the acceptance of world order values (peace, human right rights, economic wellbeing & justice, and environmental protection) rather than on trends toward global integration. There was little attention given to the emergence of ‘globalization’ and its economistic orientation via neoliberalism or the optic provided by ‘the Washington consensus.’ This second phase of WOMP coincided with the end of the Cold War. The differences in regional priorities persisted, and the projected ended in a mood of frustration, especially on the part of Mendlovitz who until the very end believed that the secret to a peaceful future was challenging the war system and establishing a robust form of global constitutionalism. The rest of the WOMP participants were either not interested in this form of advocacy or suspected it as a kind of Western geopolitical Trojan Horse that contained a blueprint for global domination that was to be disguised in public discourse as a plan for world government.

2) Overall, what do you see as the most significant contribution of WOMP? What are the lessons that current scholars should take from the WOMP experience, including in such coalitional efforts such as the World Government Research Network?

I think the idea of bringing together prominent scholars in their respective regions who shared normative preferences for a humane world order was an extraordinarily prescient initiative, but it may have been prematurely enacted. I believe there is more awareness in this period of the early 21st century of the need for the collaborative design of alternative futures in an historical context of intensifying global integration and a growing awareness of the fragility of political arrangements in a state-centric structure of world order that can neither protect the global/human interest in relation to climate change and nuclear weaponry nor can provide national or human security for peoples living within the boundaries set by the nation-state.

Online collaboration provides exciting opportunities for collaboration without any dependence on major funding, although it gives up the benefit of face-to-face contact that deepens social networking. The WOMP experience may be helpful in identifying the limits of such collaboration as well as the importance of setting a research agenda that gives space and relevance to a variety of viewpoints. The dialogic experience works best when there is a shared normative ground that is at the same time comfortable with the reality and legitimacy of divergent views, with participants refraining from any compulsion to overcome disagreements and divergent priorities.

3) You have long been associated with world order studies and world federalism, but you have also been consistently skeptical of advocating a binding world government in the relatively near term. What would you say to the many researchers who in recent years have helped revive academic dialogue around world government, in many cases advocating it?

I am not sufficiently familiar with the recent trends in world government advocacy by scholars to have any strong opinion about its usefulness either pedagogically or as the basis for engaged

citizenship. I continue to find absent the political preconditions for any kind of constitutional consolidation of authority at the global level as distinct from considerable latent potential for regional and sub-regional integrative developments. I also see some societal benefits accruing from reversing trends toward global integration, and have an interest in what I have enigmatically called ‘anarchism without anarchism’ and might seem to be at odds with my earlier support for global reform to achieve central guidance capabilities.

My scepticism about world government is grounded on three types of objection: first, creating a global polity without a prior global community is almost certainly a formula for either collapse or tyranny; secondly, the unevenness of material circumstances and cultural outlook would make the control of the political center almost certain to depend on iron fist structures of domination and exploitation; thirdly, the almost total absence of political will among either contemporary elites or publics to create a world government, or even to posit world government as a desirable goal; nationalism remains a strong ideological reinforcement for the maintenance of a state-centric world order.

What I do agree about is the vital importance of finding procedures and mechanism that will promote the global and human interest. The UN was conceived to fill this gap, but its statist structures has made it mainly a venue where competing conceptions of national interests seek to find compromises. Such a framework has not been able to address problems of global scope such as nuclear weaponry, climate change, and the regulation of the world economy. Is it possible to imagine the effective promotion of the global/human interest without the existence of world government, whether in federalist or unitary form? I regard this as the primary survival question facing the human species that pertains to the role and nature of global governance. Without a capability to serve the global/human interest, I lack the imagination to grasp how a catastrophic future for generations to come can be avoided.

4) You have championed global civil society, or ‘globalization from below’ as a means of promoting more humane global governance and ultimately preparing the way for shared rule well beyond the state. Are you encouraged by developments in global civil society in the 55-plus years of your academic career, discouraged, or do you see the record as more mixed?

I remain uncertain how to respond. My mood varies with sudden changes in the global atmosphere. I felt encouraged, even excited, by the unfolding of the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement in 2011, but feel more discouraged by the success of subsequent counterrevolutionary forces that have proved so robust in the Middle East and by the inability of the Occupy Movement to sustain its initial impulse to challenge contemporary distortions and injustices attributable to capitalist logic and behaviour. I continue to believe that hope for the future rests upon challenges from below, a normative insurgency that posits an eco-humanist imaginary with sufficient persuasiveness to mobilize widespread support around the world, including among disaffected segments of economic and political elites that recognize the need for a paradigm shift away from growth-oriented compulsions, as well as a radical turn against the war system as the means to achieve security and stability.

5) You also have championed, with Andrew Strauss, the development of an initially consultative global parliament. Later versions of the argument advocate the signing of a treaty among existing democratic states to get the ball rolling. Does that still appear to you to be a more promising route than, for example, the one advocated by the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly?

Yes, I still believe that a global parliament that represents people directly is more promising than the creation of a parliamentary assembly that is likely to reproduce most tendencies already present in the UN. I think there is a better chance of a peoples assembly creating a different kind of global agenda with different priorities if it is established as the outcome of a populist movement. To be worthwhile a global parliament must be responsive to global interests and to the grievances of the most marginalized and vulnerable peoples in the world, and should be proposed with these goals uppermost. Of course, as a political institution a global parliament will evolve in ways that reflect changes in the political climate, but it should be insulated to the extent possible against manipulation by money and by national governments, especially by those governments harboring hegemonic ambitions.

6) You are often quoted (from a 1975 piece) as saying that global government proposals and proponents engage in ‘premature specificity.’ How long until the time is right, if ever?

What I mean is that without a political climate receptive to global government proposals, the blueprinting of institutions is an exercise of limited value, and tends toward an apolitical approach to global change. The Clark/Sohn plan for limited world government through the radical reform of the UN Charter is a clear illustration of what I have in mind. It lacks any conception of a political scenario that has the slightest chance of moving from the current state of affairs to the ideal future that they set forth as a solution for the world order challenges of the Cold War Era. There is a chicken and egg problem admittedly present: the demonstration of offer practical designs for how a world government would work is intended to overcome criticisms that argue that world government is not capable of preserving societal freedoms and could not restrain the abuse of power by those in control of such strengthened institutions. It has been my experience that those who set forth their plans for world government are usually ultra-rationalists who believe that change follows from having the best ideas, winning after dinner arguments. I disagree with such viewpoints, and regard change as following from the interplay and eruption of social forces. What seems useful at this time is for scholars acting in transnational collaboration to construct a series of political scenarios that envision benevolent forms of global transformation, including tentative ideas about institutional design. I would think this would be an excellent undertaking for the World Government Research Network just launched.

7) You have been actively engaged in social and political affairs for many decades. What advice might you have for upcoming generations of academics, in particular those working in areas of international politics and law, who might also want to engage, and do so effectively?

Political participation is a very personal matter, and depends on how a person views the world, as well as on conceptions of the proper interaction of the life of a professional academic and that of a citizen concerned with public policy. I have taken the view, which is controversial within

American universities that engaged citizenship can usefully include advocacy work, which can also make contributions to education in a free society. The first challenge is to develop the skills appropriate for critical and independent thinking. The second challenge is the importance of endowing conscience with sufficient authority as to validate the role of citizen/scholars in talking truth to power and entering the arenas of debate and action to promote preferred policy outcomes. I felt that forthrightness in the classroom combined with receptivity and openness to opposing viewpoints gave added vitality to the academic experience, and connect the pursuit of knowledge with a commitment to societal reform in positive ways.

It is important to be sensitive to the political atmosphere as it bears on particular issues. In my own experience there is no doubt that I have paid a price for articulating controversial beliefs on current policy issues and implementing such analyses with shows of solidarity with groups and peoples seeking liberation from oppressive circumstances. Challenging the established order is much more likely to produce pushback, even in the form of discriminatory actions and defamatory attacks, on some issues than others. For instance, on questions of world order, although many disagreements exist that reflect divergent worldviews and ethical standpoints, there is rarely the kind of effort to discredit opponents as is encountered when the focus is on contemporary issues of political and social conflict, especially if it touches on matters of military intervention, religious and ethnic identity or counters the work of strongly entrenched domestic lobbies.

FURTHER READING:

[Global Justice in the 21st Century](#): Richard Falk's blog
On the World Order Models Project: [World Policy Institute](#)