

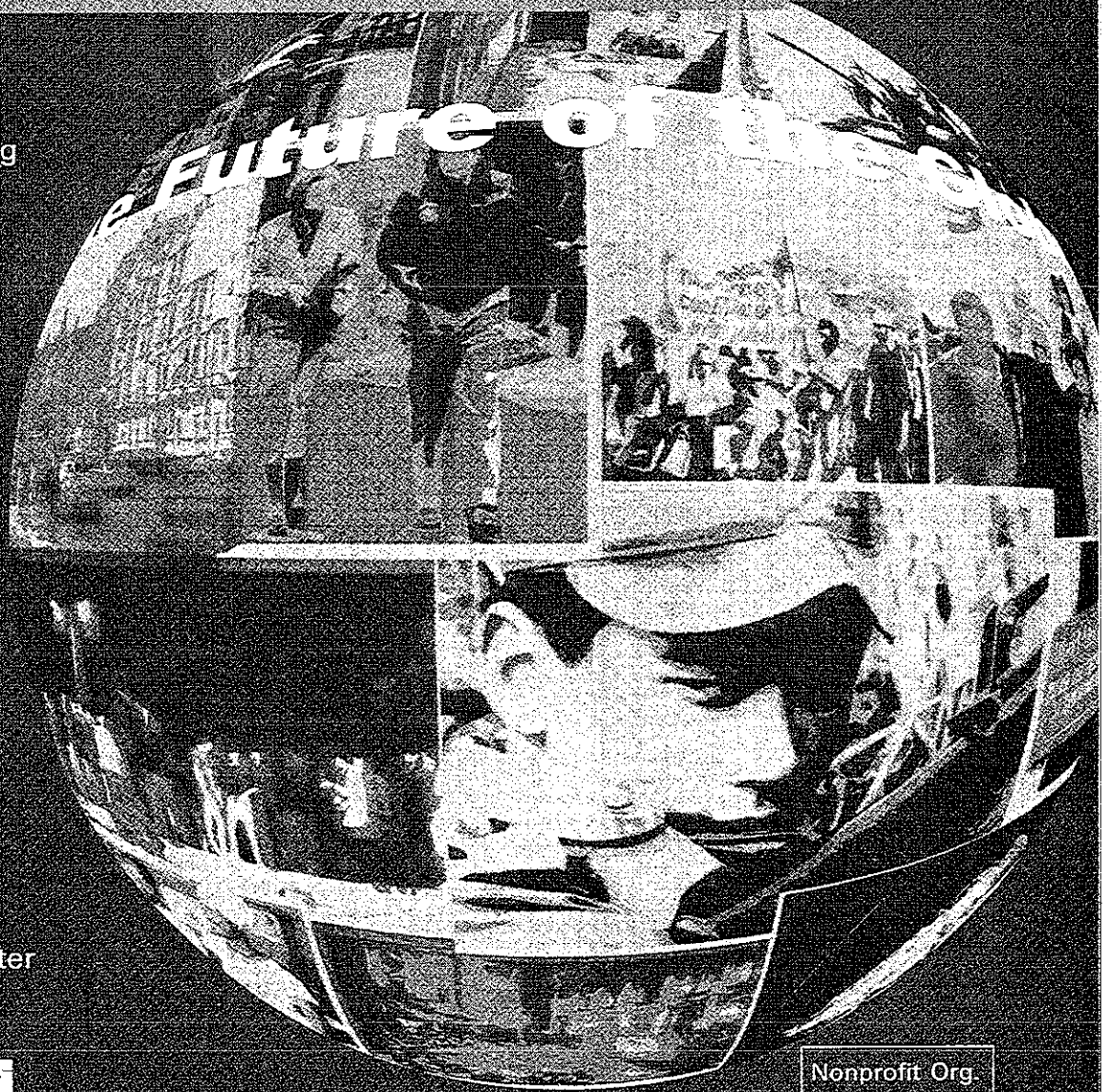
# HARVARD INTERNATIONAL Review

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## Visions of the International in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- Willem Duisenberg
- Robert Hormats
- David Kennedy
- Joseph Blatter
- Riordan Roett
- Joseph Biden
- Ayesha Jalal
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- Bruce Don
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# HARVARD INTERNATIONAL *Review*

## THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBE



### departments

#### EDITORS' NOTE 4

The *HIR* at 20

#### THE WORLD AHEAD 5

A Glance at This Issue

#### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR 6

#### GLOBAL NOTEBOOK 8

Warnings for Australia  
Germany's Stifling Indecision  
Environmental Transfers  
Chávez and the Venezuelan People  
Microcredit's Future  
Reducing Crime in the Former USSR

#### INTERVIEW 86

An Interview with Joseph Blatter,  
President of FIFA

#### REVIEW ESSAYS 90

Ted Galen Carpenter on Lefever  
Shashi Tharoor on Naipaul

#### ENDPAPER 96

Haunted by History: Race and National  
Reconciliation in South Africa  
by Thabo Mbeki, President of the  
Republic of South Africa

#### WORLD PRISMS 30

The Future of Sovereign States and International Order

Richard Falk, *Professor of International Law and Practice,*  
*Princeton University*

#### HIGH VELOCITY 36

International Business in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Robert Hormats, *Vice Chairman of Goldman Sachs, International*

#### REVOLUTIONARY ADAPTATIONS 42

Science and Technology in International Relations

Bruce Don, *Director, Science and Technology Institute,*  
*RAND Corporation*

#### THE CAPITAL MISTRESS 48

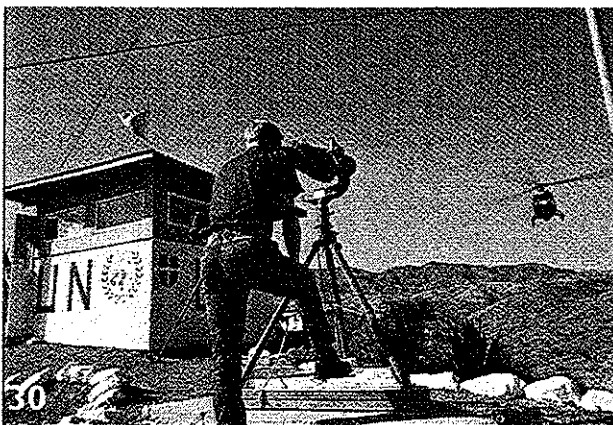
Free-Market Models and the Global Economy

David DeRosa, *Professor of Finance, Yale School of Management*

#### BACKGROUND NOISE? 52

The Underlying Politics of Global Governance

David Kennedy, *Professor of Law, Harvard University*



# Background Noise?

## The Underlying Politics of Global Governance

**S**ince the Cold War, internationalists have come to share a diagnosis of the changed conditions for statecraft. International politics has fragmented, involving more diverse actors in myriad new sites. Military issues have been tempered, if not replaced, by economic considerations, transforming the meaning of international security. A new politics of ethnicity and nationalism is altering the conditions of both coexistence and

BY DAVID KENNEDY

cooperation. Interpreting these changes has become a matter of deep ideological and political contestation among intellectuals concerned with international law, organization, and security. Unfortunately, a widespread tendency to disregard what seem to be background conditions and norms has influenced mainstream interpretations for the worse. Common but mistaken ideas—like the idea that international governance is separate from both the global market and from local culture, or is more a matter of public than of private law—sharply narrow the sense among foreign-policy professionals of what is possible and appropriate for foreign policy.

Although we know professional disciplines have blind spot—some emphasize public at the expense of private order, governance at the expense of culture, economy at the expense of society, law at the expense of politics—we hope

An expanded version of this essay was published as "The Disciplines of International Law and Policy" in the *Leiden Journal of International Law*, Vol 12(1) 1999: 9-134.

these run-of-the-mill limitations could be corrected by aggressive interdisciplinarity. Unfortunately, blindness to the background can be maintained, even reinforced, in the face of interdisciplinary work. Specialists in all fields overestimate the impact of globalization on the capacity for governance because they share a sense that governance means the politics of public order, while a background private order builds itself naturally through the work of the economic market. As a result, these specialists underestimate the possibilities for political contestation within the domain of private and economic law. Foreign-policy intellectuals overestimate the military's power to intervene successfully while remaining neutral or disengaged from background local political and culture struggles. Specialists tend to overestimate the technocratic or apolitical nature of economic concerns, including the independence of economic development from background cultural, political, and institutional contexts. A shared sense that cultural background can be

disentangled from governance leads specialists to overemphasize the exoticism of ethnic conflict as well as the cosmopolitan character of global governance. The result is a professional tendency to overlook opportunities for an inclusive global politics of identity—for working constructively on the distributional conflicts among groups and individuals that cross borders.

### *Disaggregate Public Policy*

No one was "present at the creation" of the post-Cold War world—it happened in too many places at once. The fragmentation of international political life was long underway. Dozens of new states, many with economic and military power surpassing the old great powers, multitudes of splinter groups with access to weapons and the media, and myriad private actors had all begun to play a role in making foreign policy. Within states, the political class splintered as politics became a complex administrative and social process.

These changes have led analysts to

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reaffirm their most familiar and dogmatic propositions: that sovereignty has eroded, that international law should be understood politically, that the boundary between international and municipal law is porous, that "transnational" law may be the better term, that international law may not be as universal as it pretends, that the international regime is better understood as a process or multilevel game than as government by legal norms. International lawyers embrace politics and political scientists show interest in the legal process. All hope to renew and restate what has been disciplinary common sense for a century: pragmatism, anti-formalism, interdisciplinarity. This methodological self-confidence heralds a familiar political optimism: the end of the Cold War will complete the internationalist project, inaugurating a humanitarian "civil society": an "international community" which will dethrone the state, welcome wider participation and open international law to the political.

There is a dark side to this decentralization about which internationalists are more ambivalent. The erosion of the state also transforms the methods and objectives of public policy, eroding the ambitions of public law, expanding private law and private initiative, withering the welfare state under conditions of globalization, inaugurating a democracy deficit, governance by experts, technocracy. Law fragments political choices, spacing them out in bureaucratic phases structured by proliferating standards and rules. Political interests become factors to be balanced in an apparently endless process. Take trade, for instance: once broken down into hundreds of technical disputes and individual negotiations about specific tariffs and regulations, each on its own timetable in its own institution, commercial interests are hard to aggregate into a "trade war" between two "nations" except rhetorically.

As the spirit of free trade replaces the spirit of multilateralism, more changes than just the site of decision-making. In a technocratic private market, the locus for political choice is less opened up than it is rendered invisible. Take the European Union, whose political decision-making always seems to take place "elsewhere": last year at the summit, across the road in the Council, down below in the Member States, and so on. The idea of a "government" promoting a "program" has been replaced by the enlightened management of prosperity. This dramatically narrows the participants whose interests are understood to be in contestation internationally—exactly as it celebrates an opening of the policy process to civil society. EU policy managers treat the transitional economies of Central and Eastern Europe less as a set of political exclusions and choices than as the technical management of different natural stages of development. But the replacement of political choices by technical options, like the emasculation of the public state, empowers some interests and disempowers others.

Mainstream internationalists greet this trend with a tone of tragic resignation. Something called "globalization" has rendered public intervention in the emerging global market more difficult than it was within the welfare state, whether for the environment, labor standards, consumer protection, or redistributive taxation. Although analysts often bemoan the weakening of traditional public policy levers in the face of newly mobile capital, their relative resignation contrasts starkly with their enthusiasm for a newly open international political process, as if enthusiasm about new participants were linked to confidence that they can now do little mischief. The link here is a familiar liberal one between democracy and a disempowered state, between strong markets and weak governments. The

common theme is a disempowering of public law and the disappearance of background private and commercial affairs from the jurisdictional domain of politics.

### *Reclaiming Politics*

In my view, we should reject both enthusiasm about the fragmentation of international political life and resignation before the shrinking ambitions of public policy in the face of a growing private sector. My argument is not that we should revivify the state or disestablish the international market. The welfare state often did entrench class, race or gender privilege within its borders while preventing movement of people, ideas, and capital—all in ways which buttressed inequitable resource distributions across the globe and shrunk the global imagination. In some cases a more technocratic politics has been a counterweight to the corrupt tendencies of mass politics and the capture of the welfare state by rent seekers of various sorts. And treating the state apparatus as the *sine qua non* of decolonization has often entrenched gruesome practices in the name of sovereignty.

My argument, rather, is that the resignation about the demobilization of a vigorous public policy indicates that even as welfare states erode, the notion of public policy they exemplified is alive and well: public policy as territorial intervention by "public" authorities against a background of apolitical private initiative. This resignation refuses to treat as political, as public, as open to contestation, the institutions and norms which structure that background market. If we think of the private domain as political, it is not at all obvious that the current situation is one of fragmentation rather than concentration. Global governance may have simply moved from Washington to New York, from the East Side to Wall Street, from Geneva or the Hague to Frankfurt, Hong Kong, and London.

Where factors of production are relatively immobile, a locality or private actor may have more capacity to conduct global public policy than either the welfare state or the institutions of international economic law.

The question, in other words, is not *whether* politics or *where* politics, but *what* politics. Internationalists should care less about whether the state is empowered or eroded than about the distribution of political power and wealth in global society. Because mainstream international analysts accept that the political and economic results which flow from a particular system of private initiative are outside the legitimate bounds of political contestation, they can be enthusiastic about a disaggregation of the state and the empowerment of diverse actors in an international "civil society" without asking who will win and who will lose by such an arrangement. As a consequence, the turn to political science too often illuminates the structure of the regime without adding to our understanding of its substantive choices.

Technocratic governance, a displacement of public by private, of political alignments by economic

of the politically contestable, confirming as natural the geographic and economic distributions thought to be the inevitable consequences of "the market." Underestimating the political nature of private institutions and initiatives, many mainstream internationalists have accepted the demobilization of policy making as they have lauded increasing access to its machinery. The result is an intellectual class unable to develop viable political strategies for the world it has applauded into existence, ratifying the political choices that result from the arrangements of private power to which the state has handed its authority, while still celebrating the expansion of participation in an emasculated public policy process.

#### *Economic Security*

Since the Cold War, national security has been increasingly understood in economic, rather than military terms. Of course, the question of who can project force abroad remains important, undergirding patterns of trade, prosperity, and emiseration. But we have a new security vocabulary of budget surpluses or deficits and hard or soft currencies rather than throw weights and silos. We

has left the world more secure and free to worry about prosperity. At the same time, economic security seems achievable through technocratic means, sound management and trade deals, and a smorgasbord of alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms. Trade wars promise to be friendlier than real wars: they cost less and can be won by lawyers.

In the meantime, we can think of all sorts of new uses for military machinery. During the Cold War, military interventions and proxy wars were hard wired to the central problem of global security. Now they float more freely, drifting into limited police actions, humanitarian gestures, and stabilization at the periphery.

The military has emerged from the collapse of the welfare state as the only bureaucracy broadly thought capable of acting successfully, so long as the mission does not bleed back into economic or political matters. Seen this way, the military is available for a wide variety of technocratic tasks, but should be protected from the quagmire of political or social engagement. The military will stabilize borders and prop up states precisely as globalization renders state institutions marginal sites for public policy. Analysts assert that our national interest now coincides with the stability of global governance for a global market. Consequently, the military should become a national contribution to that international order, for which we should be thanked and probably reimbursed. At the same time, nothing is very urgent—we could do it or not, it is a moral question, a technical question, maybe we should send the Red Cross instead, or hold a plebiscite, or enforce an embargo. We expect a police action, an air strike, force by permission, with limited objectives and clear avenues of retreat back to the cosmopolis.

The problem is this: we expect a technocratic cosmopolitan governance to have no stakes in local disputes beyond stability, and therefore to deploy force in an unrealistically sanitary way,

**The question is not *whether* politics or *where* politics, but *what* politics. Internationalists should care less about whether the state is empowered or eroded than about the distribution of political power and wealth in global society.**

rivalries, the unbundling of sovereignty into myriad rights and obligations scattered across a global civil society—all this has transformed international affairs. That it has often meant an opening of international affairs to new actors and concerns, a democratization and proceduralization of international relations, may well be positive. But this transformation has also shriveled the range

reimagine missiles as missives, their deployment determined less by Clausewitz than Keynes, their military function shaped more by CNN than the Pentagon. Like the disestablishment of the state, the economization of security has largely been welcomed by our foreign-policy mavens. If the liberal peace hypothesis proves correct, the disaggregation of the state into a global market

Malaysian producers—but most will not. Development policy means preferring these investors to those, these public officials to those, not the technocratic extension of a neutral “best practice.” To make these choices we need a world which is open to a politics of identity, to struggles over affiliation and distribution among the conflicting and intersecting patterns of group identity in the newly opened international regime.

### *Policy Background Out Front*

The post-Cold War transformations of international affairs are hard to interpret. Foreign-policy professionals err when they sharply differentiate national culture and global governance or global economics and global politics. They err when they isolate politics within a shrinking public sphere, when they assume governance must be built while markets grow naturally, when they treat security as a technical matter, disengaged from social and political context. Our foreign-policy professionals have systematically underestimated the opportunities for engagement with the background worlds of private law, market institutions, and cultural differences.

From the fragmentation of international politics, specialists have too readily drawn an optimistic conclusion about global democratization and a pessimistic conclusion about the horizons for public policy. As military issues have been tempered by economic considerations, analysts have become unduly sanguine about projecting military force abroad without local political engagement, while simultaneously overestimating the amenability of economic security issues to technocratic measures. Our foreign-policy establishment increasingly sees military force both as an expression of a national interest unwilling to place a single soldier in harm's way and as a technical tool for cosmopolitan governance, able

to be extended abroad on the unrealistic condition that the cosmopolis lives up to its promise to govern without political, economic, or cultural entanglement. Whether specialists are thinking about economic stability among the wealthier powers or development at the

We could rethink the locus of international political contestation and public policy by invigorating debate about what have seemed to be the background rules and structuring institutions of private law, economic life, and local culture. The fragmentation of the

## **We have a robust process of global law and “governance” without a global politics. Real government is about the political contestation of distribution and justice.**

periphery, they think of the global economy in strangely depoliticized and technical terms. These misinterpretations often reinforce one another. Only after accepting the attenuation of public policy capacity in the face of globalization does it make sense to reinterpret security in economic terms turned over to technocrats indifferent to distributive concerns. The result is a decontextualized, deracinated, and depoliticized foreign policy.

By reinforcing the invisibility of background norms and private arrangements, mainstream commentators have taken important areas of political contestation out of the internationalist's vision precisely as the disaggregation of the state makes these norms and institutions the most significant sites for international policymaking. They stress the naturalness of current distributions of global wealth and poverty, focusing our attention on participation in public structures precisely when questions of economic justice decided elsewhere become most salient. And they reinforce the stability of cultural identity at precisely the moment diasporic and hybrid experiences make contestation among and within cultural groups the central context for both politics and economics.

state and the geographical expansion of the economy place local and global groups in complex and intersecting new relations. They invite a new global politics of identity. We should judge the global market, like the global political order, by the distribution it effects among today's overlapping cultural, political, and economic groups. The issue is not how to repress or manage national, ethnic, economic, race, gender or religious claims, containing them within the private or the national domain, but how we can engage them internationally. We are challenged to embrace the post-Cold War transition without transforming political, economic, or military questions into technical matters which narrow our political options and naturalize inequalities.

We might yet embrace the disaggregation of international affairs and the economization of security without resignation about global poverty, embrace the displacement of ideology by culture without sharpening the distinctions between cultures or the cosmopolitan conceit of living beyond the cultural. We might yet develop a vibrant global politics on the shifting sand of diverse economic and cultural claims about the distribution of resources and the conditions of social life. ■