

Introducing Global Justice in International Relations Theory

Written by Alix Dietzel

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Introducing Global Justice in International Relations Theory

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/02/global-justice-in-international-relations-theory/>

ALIX DIETZEL, JAN 2 2018

**This is an excerpt from *International Relations Theory – an E-IR Foundations beginner’s textbook*.
Download your free copy here.**

Global justice is a theory that exists within the broader school of cosmopolitanism, which focuses on the importance of the individual as opposed to the state, community or culture. Cosmopolitans take the individual as their starting point because they believe that all human beings have equal moral worth and therefore have the right to equal moral consideration. In this sense, even if cosmopolitans disagree on how to ensure that individuals are the subject of equal moral concern, the focus of these differing approaches is the value of the individual. This focus on the moral importance of the individual has led some cosmopolitan scholars to critically engage with theories of justice, which are traditionally confined to the state and contained within the realm of political (not international) theory. This endeavour has led to the theory of global justice, which seeks to investigate the question of how best to secure a just life for all individuals on Planet Earth, regardless of their nationality or status.

The basics of global justice

Justice, at its core, concerns itself with who deserves what and why. True to their cosmopolitan roots, contemporary global justice scholars concern themselves with the moral worth of the individual, regardless of place of birth, and focus on problems of global cohabitation in which individuals are not yet treated as morally equal or where the moral focus has traditionally been on states. To engage with such problems, global justice scholars usually focus on what individuals across the world deserve and how distribution of these entitlements can be achieved. The answers to these types of questions vary significantly depending on which problem is being addressed.

John Rawls' (1971) *Theory of Justice* set out a theory that political structures (typically states) can determine who deserves what and why due to the power to make laws, raise taxes and dispense public spending. Therefore, such structures should be built carefully to ensure a just distribution of rights and duties between all citizens. Hence, Rawls' idea was one of *distributive justice*. Rawls was not advocating for communism, where all wealth is shared equally, but for a society where inequality was moderated so that those who were disadvantaged (for whatever reason) were at least able to live a decent life. Rawls theorised that such a structure could only exist within a democratic society, or in other words, a specific type of state. Therefore, Rawls' account of justice describes the potential for a just human existence for those fortunate enough to live within such a state – but his theory was not designed to apply internationally as no such formal structure of global distributive justice exists.

Cosmopolitan scholars take issue with Rawls' state-centric approach to justice and argue that questions of justice must include all humans, regardless of state association. For example, Charles Beitz (1975) argues that limiting questions of justice to the national level in the modern global era is morally inappropriate, because we now have global institutions that may be able to perform some of the basic functions of the state, such as collect forms of taxation or make laws. Thomas Pogge (1989) stresses that global inequalities between individuals call for a global approach to justice that can effectively respond to these inequalities. Although these scholars ground their arguments in different ways, they both advocate for a widening of the scope of justice to the global level. These types of

Introducing Global Justice in International Relations Theory

Written by Alix Dietzel

arguments are where the term 'global justice' originates and provide the bedrock for its emergence as a theory of IR.

When discussing global poverty, Thomas Pogge (2001) and Gillian Brock (2010) argue that poverty alleviation should focus on redistributing wealth and resources between rich and poor individuals. When analysing humanitarian intervention, scholars such as Mary Kaldor (2010) and Daniele Archibugi (2004) make the case that individuals must be prioritised over state-centric non-intervention laws. Furthermore, scholars such as Garrett Brown (2012) analyse the issue of global health and argue that the health of individuals is determined by global structures to make the case for reform. Contemporary global justice scholars focus on problems as diverse as gender inequality, immigration and refugees, warfare and climate change. This implies that the question of who deserves what, and why, covers a wide range of topics, most of which are contemporary international relations problems. This is why the discipline of global justice is so relevant to IR, because global justice scholars concern themselves with analysing and assessing fundamental problems caused by global cohabitation. In this sense, it is a modern theory that will continue to be relevant as long as global problems exist.

Although global justice scholars usually assert that individuals must be the central unit of moral concern when exploring global problems, it is important to note that these scholars often prioritise different goals in order to ensure that individuals are the subject of equal moral concern. For example, some scholars emphasise human rights, some discuss the importance of institutions operating fairly (referred to as procedural justice), some emphasise the importance of human capability, while others are concerned with fair global social processes. It is important to keep this diversity in mind when studying global justice. No two scholars have the exact same aims, which implies a healthy diversity of ideas within the field. This is true even within more narrow subjects, such as climate justice, where authors have many different ideas on how to achieve a just response to the problem of climate change.

While you might assume that an approach that seeks to treat all humans on Earth better is popular, or logical, global justice also attracts some notable criticisms. David Miller (2007) argues that national borders are more important than cosmopolitan global justice. Miller believes that coming to an agreement on principles of justice requires a common history and culture and that defining global principles is not possible because of national differences on conceptions of what is 'good' or 'right'. Thomas Nagel (2005) and Michael Blake (2001) both argue that global justice cannot be achieved without the backing of powerful global institutions. However, global institutions that have power over individuals and states simply do not exist (yet), rendering discussions about global principles of justice futile. Finally, Iris Marion Young (2011) regards cosmopolitanism as a Western-centric theory that does not have the global appeal it purports to have. After all, global justice is based on the importance of the individual and often makes appeal to human rights and other liberal norms, which some perceive as Western ideals, not universal ones. These criticisms do not take away from the importance of global justice: like all theories of IR, its theoretical development is spurred on by answering its critics.

Global justice and climate change

Climate change requires actors from around the world to come together and agree on how to move forward. As temperatures continue to rise and the global response lags behind what scientists recommend, global justice scholars are becoming increasingly interested in climate change and its global (mis)management. Spurred on by the global nature of the problem and the injustices it presents, global justice scholars have also turned their attention to climate change for several important reasons.

First, climate change is undoubtedly a global problem and global justice scholars are keen to engage with such problems. Greenhouse gas emissions cannot be confined within a state, they rise into the atmosphere and cause global temperature changes within and outside of their original state borders. Although it is difficult to establish direct blame or fault, it is nonetheless undeniable that virtually all individuals, states and corporations contribute to some degree to climate change. In this sense, the global nature of the climate change problem defies conventional assumptions about state sovereignty and justice, which is what makes it so interesting to global justice scholars.

Second, climate change requires a global solution, which suits global justice scholars who are interested in providing

Introducing Global Justice in International Relations Theory

Written by Alix Dietzel

recommendations for problems of global cohabitation. No one state can stop climate change on its own. There is no doubt that combatting climate change will require a collaborative effort, implying the need for global agreements. Coming to such agreements will inevitably involve discussion about which actors must lower emissions and by how much or even which actors should contribute to the costs of climate change – such as helping certain populations adapt to rising sea levels or extreme weather. These are, by their nature, questions of distributive justice and are therefore of interest to global justice scholars.

Third, climate change presents an unfair distribution of benefits and burdens between morally equal individuals, who are the key concern of global justice scholars. Climate change will most negatively affect those living in less developed countries who have done the least to contribute to the causes of climate change, while those living in developed countries, who have contributed the most emissions, will likely suffer the least. This is because less developed countries are more often located in areas which will bear the brunt of the problems associated with climate change. Furthermore, developing states typically do not have as many resources as developed states to adapt to dangerous weather patterns. For example, the Solomon Islands has already lost five small islands as a result of climate change and yet it is one of the lowest emitting countries in the world. Paul Harris (2010, 37) argues that the climate change problem 'cries out for justice' because the effects of climate change fall disproportionately on people who are already vulnerable, cannot adequately protect themselves and have not significantly contributed to the problem.

Although global justice scholars agree that climate change will affect individuals and are therefore concerned with addressing the problem, these scholars have different ideas on what exactly is at stake and what should therefore be prioritised. For example, Simon Caney (2010) defines three distinct rights that are predicted to be threatened by climate change: the right to life, the right to food and the right to health – and any programme combating climate change should not violate these.

Tim Hayward (2007) defines a right specific to the climate change problem: ecological space – a human right to live in an environment free of harmful pollution adequate for health and wellbeing. Hayward's approach differs from Caney's because his priority is not protecting human rights that already exist in international law but rather creating new climate related rights that must be defended.

Patrick Hayden's (2010) conception of rights encompasses both environment specific substantive and procedural rights. Hayden's substantive rights include the right to be protected from environmental harm and his procedural rights include the right to be fully informed about the potential effects of environmental hazards, the right to participate in democratic procedures for climate policymaking and the right to complain about existing conditions, standards and policies (Hayden 2010, 361–362). In this sense, Hayden is concerned not merely with basic rights but also with fair procedures.

The debate about rights is important because defining who deserves what can help guide a discussion on what should be done about climate change and who should be responsible for climate change action. For example, if the right to health must be protected, this could imply that lowering emissions is not enough and that populations must be protected from disease in other ways – for example, by inoculating vulnerable people against certain diseases or providing clean drinking water in drought-prone areas.

The question of who is responsible for climate change action is another key point of discussion amongst global justice scholars. The discipline of IR is traditionally concerned with relationships between states. Some scholars following this tradition and these debates usually focus on which states should contribute how much to climate change action.

Henry Shue (2014) advocates for the *Polluter Pays Principle*, which is based on examining who caused the problem to determine who should pay (and how much) for climate change action – and the *Ability to Pay Approach*, which asserts that the responsibility should be borne by the wealthy. Thomas Risse (2008) takes issue with these approaches and advocates for an index that measures per capita wealth and per capita emission rates, then groups countries into categories.

Introducing Global Justice in International Relations Theory

Written by Alix Dietzel

In this sense, the debate concerns how responsibility for climate change should be allocated, which is important for international relations as it reflects ongoing discussions between states, most recently when putting together the 2015 Paris Agreement. Other scholars are keen to include non-state actors in their conceptions of climate justice and responsibility.

Paul Harris points out that cosmopolitanism is traditionally concerned not only with states but also with individuals. For this reason he studies how individuals are affecting climate change and discovers that it is rich individuals who produce the most greenhouse gases, regardless of which state they live in. As he puts it, 'affluence is the primary and disproportionate cause of global environmental degradation' (Harris 2010, 130). These individuals have responsibility to act on climate change by (for example) travelling less, reducing meat consumption and buying fewer luxury items. Simon Caney (2010) argues that all agents (not just the wealthy) who contribute to emissions and have the means of lowering these, including individuals, states, corporations, sub-state political authorities and international financial institutions, should be held accountable.

These debates about the climate responsibilities of non-state actors are important to IR theory, which is traditionally concerned with how states relate to one another. By discussing which other actors might be responsible for climate change, global justice scholars are able to move the discipline of International Relations in a new direction.

Conclusion

International relations theory has traditionally been overly concerned with global (dis)order. Global justice scholars have contributed to widening the scope of IR theory by shifting the focus to individuals, on a planetary scale, and thereby approaching problems of global cohabitation in a new way. Yet despite signs of progress in academia, states seem to be more focused on managing conflict, distrust and disorder than on reaching global agreements and treating one another fairly. For that reason, global justice as an issue has been under-represented in policy and global justice scholarship has not yet reached the same prominence as mainstream IR theories such as realism or liberalism. Nevertheless, in times of transnational terrorism, rising global inequalities, migration crises, pandemic disease and climate change – considerations of global cooperation, fairness and justice are more important than ever.

Find out more about this, and many other, International Relations theories with a range of multimedia resources compiled by E-IR.

Full references for citations can be found in the PDF version, linked at the top of this page.

About the author:

Alix Dietzel is a Lecturer in Global Ethics at the University of Bristol, UK.