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From National Sovereignty to Interdependence: New Perspectives of Distributive Justice in the Age of Globalization

Abstract: This article defends the need of a cosmopolitan perspective within the contemporary debates in Political Philosophy, a perspective from which the demands of distributive justice can be consistently enforced. This point will be addressed in four parts. In a first step, we will present the unavoidable background of contemporary thought about justice: globalization (1). Next, the decidedly state-centered perspective related to the still hegemonic idea of social justice will be highlighted (2). The third part will take note of globalist reactions to the prevailing methodological nationalism (3). And finally, we will emphasize the need to design minimal global institutions that make it possible to implement the universalist requirements of justice with a cosmopolitan slant (4).

Only four decades ago, John Rawls developed his theory of justice for a world that, to a great extent, is already the world of yesterday. The same could be said of an entire current highly influential in contemporary political philosophy inspired by him. The world of today is increasingly only one world, with a high degree of interdependence among all of its parts, which is virtually without precedent. Just as the consequences of actions and omissions in domestic affairs no longer distinguish national borders, the possible answers to multiple challenges also overflow the bounds of territorial limits within which each State exercises its function of government. In the age of globalization, analyses that assume obligations of distributive justice valid only for those who are part of the same political community are not only useless in practical terms, but also inappropriate in theoretical terms, because the limits between the internal and the external relative to national borders have been erased in contemporary political action, and the distinction between interior and exterior has become extremely vague. With that context, this article will defend the need to add a cosmopolitan perspective from which the demands of distributive justice can be consistently enforced. This point will be addressed in four parts. We shall begin by presenting the unavoidable background of contemporary thought about justice: globalization (1). Next, the decidedly state-centered perspective adopted by the still-hegemonic idea of social justice
will be highlighted (2). The third part will take note of globalist reactions to the prevailing methodological nationalism (3). Lastly, we will emphasize the need to shape minimal global institutions that make it possible to implement the universalist demands of justice with a cosmopolitan slant (4).

1 Globalization as backdrop of justice

The thick lines that one sees drawn on maps and which serve to demarcate the physical perimeter of territory under the control of each State generate the illusion of a world fragmented into closed units that enjoy autonomy and power. However, for some decades now, we have had a representation of Earth provided by artificial satellites which more truly reflect reality. In an era when reality is visually constructed, these photographs, profusely reproduced, serve as an icon of a way of thinking which has gradually taken root in the collective consciousness. The image of our planet moving through space reveals to us that the whole of humanity is embarked on a unique voyage which binds us to a common destiny. All human beings share ‘one world’: a limited spherical surface. This powerful physical image of the Earth is, moreover, fully compatible with the recurring and contradictory phenomenon of globalization, taking this key term in its most descriptive meaning, namely, as the growing interrelationship between different regions of the planet as a consequence of different processes by which goods and services, as well as ideas and information, and ultimately also persons, cross national borders at an unprecedented speed. The social space where human interactions take place has as such ostensibly expanded and its limits become coextensive with the physical limits of the planet.

The ubiquity of the term globalization in the language of our time does not mean that its reference is a phenomenon that suddenly appeared at the end of the 20th century. Instead, it is a long historical process initiated at the beginning of modernity and of which in recent decades we have witnessed a renewed and powerful impulse, brought about to a large extent by the revolution of information and communication technologies. As Ortega warned in 1929, features of this process were already visible centuries earlier: “Since the 16th century, all of humanity has become involved in a gigantic process of unification, which in our time has reached its insuperable end. There is no longer any part of humanity which lives separately; there are no islands of humanity”.¹ The astonishing technological development of recent decades has made some unprecedented dynam-

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¹ Ortega (2008), 272.
ics of interconnection possible, refuting the Madrid philosopher’s assertion that this process had already come to “its insuperable end”. In any event, with this term one alludes not so much to a result as to a process of intensification and acceleration of cross-border relations in the most disparate environments. This process reveals not only the interconnection, caused by the extraordinary mitigation of distances and communicative immediacy, but also the interdependence, between different regions and inhabitants of the world. Globalization reveals itself to us not only as a social change and, consequently, an external process, but as a profound change of perspective in the self-perception of human reality, to the point that it can be conceived as the doorjamb upon which the image of the era turns.

Also associated with the set of events, processes and experiences subsumed beneath the term globalization is the idea of progressive elimination of borders, in the most physical meaning and also in another, more metaphorical meaning: in the way that the fundamental problems of human survival no longer know borders and that, as such, the conceptual dichotomies that unequivocally imply borders, as do inside/outside and interior/exterior, have lost much of their explanatory potential. That is why the adoption of a vision with a much broader view, a cosmopolitan perspective, has acquired enormous potential, not only theoretical but also practical, as a way to respond to challenges posed by cross-border processes that end up placing all of us in a situation of common exposure with regard to global threats. Given that the main threats are deterritorialized, their solution also requires going beyond the classical territorial fixation from which the traditional national viewpoint suffers.² That is why, in the context of globalization, cosmopolitanism has ceased to be a mere philosophical notion or moral value and has become the indispensable perspective for any rigorous socio-historical analysis: “Mankind, which for all preceding generations was no more than a concept or an ideal, has become something of an urgent reality”.³ This new cosmopolitanism, more than a more or less shared feeling, is a methodological focus whose consistent adoption entails a ‘Copernican turn’, so the initial understanding that the real space of our actions is much greater than the short distances of the space of our local and national ties and affiliations should give way – at least in the realm of political philosophy – to the replacement of the polis by the cosmopolis as a priority frame of reference.

With the latest wave of globalization, we have seen the failure to adapt to current times by the political construct that was shaped, in a strictly European first

³ Arendt (1968), 82.
phase, with the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and which began to spread to other continents after the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. The international order began to form around States, to which it attributed exclusive powers of decision for internal order as well as for external representation: this is basically what the notion of sovereignty consisted of. Meanwhile, and especially since the end of the 20th century, the Westphalian construct, that is, the consideration that the modern State – a territory-based, autonomous political unit that maintains the monopoly of violence – represented the appropriate frame of political action has lost much of its value and use, to the point that it is increasingly difficult to point out an exclusive sphere of State conduct given the multiplication of spaces which are difficult to regulate and whose responsibilities are not entirely clear.⁴ There are no longer many affairs that are manageable in the strict space of the State. States, even the most powerful ones, never reach the critical dimension required in the era of globalization. And yet – and herein lies the crux of the matter – this old framework has not been replaced by any alternative model. Therefore, whoever confronts issues related to the social and political articulation of our world often has the disturbing sensation of making one’s way with outdated maps that prevent them from locating and orienting themselves with a minimum of rigor in a still-insufficiently explored environment:

We are like travelers navigating an unknown terrain with the help of old maps, drawn at a different time and in response to different needs. While the terrain we are traveling on, the world society of states, has changed, our normative map has not.⁵

Following this topographic metaphor, it is becoming more urgent to have new cartography – new normative in addition to cognitive maps – that enable one not only to locate oneself in them but also give information about what takes place in the new constellation, in that globalized, closely interconnected, densely interdependent world which contains areas of ambiguous sovereignty, and be able to react with the least bit of clarity. We certainly do not have the right tools: “We have entered the new century without a compass”⁶ as Maalouf states. In this theoretical-practical context, holding on to the old concept of state sovereignty is naive, as the vast majority of supposedly sovereign States lack the necessary means to autonomously decide their fate. To the extent that nation-states have ceased to be the main subjects of history, policies of a strictly national scope lead to a dead end:

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⁶ Maalouf (2009), 11.
Interdependence is now raised above sovereignty as an active principle of international politics.⁸ Beyond the unavoidable imperatives of a globalized economy, there has arisen a whole series of questions and challenges whose etiology and possible solution exceed state boundaries. It is not merely the sum of individual, although important issues, but instead something more serious and important: that the whole of the human species seems to be a community that, like it or not, is exposed to global risks,⁹ a consciousness reached after experiences of common vulnerability and mutual dependence. With the greatest conceivable risk shared by the entire community of humanity, that is, with the possibility of the destruction of life on the planet, one questions the ability of States to confront problems whose effects do not stop at the spatial frontiers between countries nor at the temporal borders between generations. To allude only to well-known challenges that affect basic interests, neither the AIDS pandemic, nor the hole in the ozone layer, nor acid rain, nor the repeated collapses of financial markets, nor mafias, nor terrorists, nor nuclear accidents confine their effects to just one country; they can spread to any State, whether or not it is responsible for their genesis and reproduction. No doubt some of these heterogeneous phenomena will even have an impact on generations yet to be born. In light of “the disabling effects of globalization on the decision-making capacity of the state governments”,¹⁰ whose room for maneuvering has been considerably decreased, the obsolescence of the State as a functional framework for the political management of the collective risks, inequalities and challenges of our world is even more obvious.

The difficulties in confronting problems which are not confined to borders and in assuming responsibility for those problems is exacerbated by the fact that different globalizing processes – globalization is not a single process, but rather a multi-dimensional phenomenon which affects several spheres of action – do not all advance at the same pace, and as such produce enormously dysfunctional imbalances. While economic globalization and especially the globalization of financial markets can be qualified as wonderful (regardless of the assessment

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⁷ Toulmin (1990), 206.
⁸ See Innerarity (2013), 117.