

Opinion **Globalisation**

## The case for sane globalism remains strong

Today's most pressing policy challenges require multilateral co-operation

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Human beings are alone in the universe. This should on its own make us think globally but there are other reasons to do so © Nasa

Martin Wolf JULY 16, 2019

Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto.” (I am a human being. I consider nothing human foreign to me.) These words by [Terence](#), a second century BC Roman playwright, make a noble motto for our time. They define a position condemned by many, [including the president of the US](#), as “globalism”. Yet that should mean more than economic — or, as some call it, “neoliberal” — globalisation. It should mean that humanity has global obligations and interests. To meet the former and promote the latter, the nation state is the start. But we must also think and act far beyond it.

This has been brought home to many by photographs of earth as a brilliant blue marble suspended in space. These were the culmination of half a millennium of exploration and scientific discovery that brought Terence’s words to life. Human beings are closely related. They are a part of a complex web of life. They share a planet that is the only one in the solar system that carries life of any kind. There may be more life like us elsewhere in the universe. But so far we have not found it. We are alone.

This should on its own make us think globally. But there are other reasons to do so, both moral and

practical.

One of the great achievements of the [Bretton Woods conference](#), whose 75th anniversary we celebrate this month, was to include development as a goal. This enshrined a moral obligation: to help all humans achieve a standard of living sufficient to live fulfilling lives. It is possible to quibble about the extent of the success. But we are now close to eliminating extreme human destitution — those “nasty, brutish and short” lives described by the 17th-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. The decline in the proportion of humanity living in [absolute poverty](#), to less than 10 per cent, is a huge achievement.

I make no excuses for continuing to support policies and programmes, including trade-oriented development, that helped accomplish this. The notion that it may be necessary to thwart the economic rise of non-western countries, in order to cement western domination, is, in my view, an abomination.

Yet globalism as I have defined it — a concern for humanity and the planet as a whole — is also a practical cause. In a [column](#) in 2012, entitled “The world’s hunger for public goods”, I argued that the range of public goods we now need has vastly increased, with the complexity of our economies and societies. For the same reason, ever more of those public goods are global. We share the biosphere. That makes environmental protection a global public good. But does anybody in Europe or the US doubt that wars in neighbouring regions affect them? So peace is also a global public good. So, too, is a predictably open and stable world economy. So, too, is development: an impoverished world is an unstable world. Everywhere we look we see global public goods.

That is why the victors of the second world war decided to create effective international institutions. They had experienced unbridled national sovereignty. The outcome had been catastrophic. Nothing since then has rendered global co-operation less essential. This is true within Europe, which is why the British decision to turn its back on the EU is depressing. It is true globally, which is why the US decisions to turn its back on the [Paris climate accord](#) and repudiate the rules of the World Trade Organization are also depressing. Global public goods can only be provided by co-operation among states. If they refuse, these goods will not be provided.

Globalism, broadly defined, is inescapable. But it also creates challenges.

The first is that human beings are organised politically within states. Those states function because they create identities and loyalties. These are necessary if states, especially democratic states, are to function successfully. Global co-operation also depends on the operations of effective and so legitimate states. It follows that policies must also be judged in terms of their domestic legitimacy. In some cases, immigration being among the most important, that balance was lost. Control over who lives within a country is a fundamental aspect of sovereignty. Globalism does not mean a world without borders. That would be unworkable: without borders, there would be no states. Without states, there would be no order, domestic or global.

The second set of challenges is managing the interface between the global and the national. Experience suggests that we have gone too far in some areas and done too little in others. In

economics, the globalisation of finance has arguably gone too far. Some believe international trade has also gone too far. But a meticulous survey of evidence by Harvard's Elhanan Helpman in [\*Globalization and Inequality\*](#) shows this is not so. Liberal trade has not been a dominant source of rising inequality within countries. Meanwhile, areas where global co-operation has not gone far enough include business taxation and the environment.

The final and perhaps most important of all challenges is containing the natural human tendency to scapegoat foreigners for failures of domestic policy and cleavages among domestic interests. If trade is not the dominant source of rising inequality, what is? Technology is one answer. Changing norms of corporate governance are another. But tackling these is far more difficult than blaming imports and immigrants. Moreover, many ills have nothing to do with the global at all. The dependence of Americans on job-related health insurance is a massive source of insecurity and anxiety. This clearly has nothing at all to do with trade. Blaming ills on foreigners may be a successful diversionary tactic. It is also highly destructive.

We must think and act globally. We have no alternative. That is not the same thing as supporting global *laissez faire*. It is, instead, about defending co-operative globalism. Such globalism rests on legitimate states. Nobody doubts this. But legitimate states need not be xenophobic bullies. On the contrary, they can and must achieve a balance between the claims and concerns of the local, the national, the regional and the global. This is difficult. The simpler thing to do is to blame everything that goes wrong on perfidious foreigners and their "globalist" supporters. It is an effective political battle cry, because human beings are so tribal. It is potentially catastrophic, all the same.

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