Beyond the BRICS: Power, Pluralism, and the Future of Global Order

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People like simple stories and clear narratives. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the narrative of "emerging powers" and "rising powers" seemed to provide a clear and powerful picture of how international relations and global politics were changing. Indeed, there was an upsurge of policy and academic debate about the growing importance of non-Western regions and their leading states—notably Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the so-called BRICS—for international politics and the world economy. The story suggested that power was diffusing away from the United States and the West; that the emerging powers were becoming far more consequential actors, both globally and within "their" regions; and that, to remain effective and legitimate, global governance institutions needed to be reformed in order to accommodate their rise.

The main elements of this "rise" narrative are by now well known. One of the most visible signs of change was increased diplomatic activism by large developing countries: coalitional politics within the World Trade Organization (WTO) following the Cancun Summit in 2003; the formation of the IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa) Dialogue Forum in June 2003; the activities of the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) countries at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit in 2009; and the formation, diplomatic consolidation, and gradual institutionalization of the BRICS themselves. The emerging powers were seen to be pursuing a dual-track strategy. If one side of diplomatic activism was to seek

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greater influence and greater voice within existing institutions (as with the desire of Brazil and India to secure permanent membership on the UN Security Council), the other concerned the creation of alternative forms of cooperation, or what can be seen as "exit options," such as the BRICS New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or China's One Belt, One Road initiative.

On their own, these events might have attracted only passing attention. To many, however, they reflected deeper structural changes that were taking place in the global economy and in the dynamics of global capitalism. The BRICS were important not just because of their rapid economic development but because of the predicted structural changes that would fundamentally alter the balance of global economic power and transform the global economy in the future. The narrative, then, was centered largely on the rise of the rest and the decline of the West, characterized by an irreversible shift of power from the West to the East and to the South. Within academia, theorists of all persuasions engaged with the BRICS and analyzed developments through their particular interpretative lens. The BRICS narrative, then, captured both a specific set of political and economic developments built around specific countries ("Rising China," "Brazil's Moment," "India Shining"), but also a broader understanding of historical change.

Yet the story has not unfolded in the way many analysts expected. Over the seventeen years since the BRIC label first came into being in 2001 (originally without South Africa) and, most especially, since the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, the plotline can easily be read to suggest that the story has ended and that it was much ado about nothing.

In the first place, economic frailties and vulnerabilities within many of the countries in transformation have become more evident. Many emerging economies have witnessed slower growth or even outright recession, an intensification of capital flight, and an erosion of the export-led growth on which their emergence was seen to depend. At the same time, social tensions and political instability have spread, often driven by corruption and by protests against corruption. For example, Brazil and South Africa are experiencing deep and systemic crises involving both economic slowdown and political corruption. These are the most serious crises since their respective democratic transitions. Expectations that the emerging powers would overhaul and reform global governance institutions were overly optimistic. Yes, some change took place, but many demands were resisted, and, as we shall see, the centrality of global governance institutions has itself been

called into question. Once heralded as the engine of global growth, many analysts now highlight the hype surrounding the BRICS and refer to the "BRICS fallacy."[1] Rather than a single collective story about the BRICS's linear trajectory to greater growth and power, we have observed instead multiple narratives of more measured and uneven growth across the emerging world, together with a much greater emphasis on both domestic and systemic instability and vulnerability.

Second, the global system into which the BRICS were said to be emerging has changed dramatically as a result of the return of geopolitics, the structural instabilities and inequalities of global capitalism, and the impact of new and disruptive patterns of social and political mobilization. Today, many global governance institutions are under severe strain. Gridlock, stagnation, fragmentation, contestation, and, most recently, backlash have become the dominant frames within which to analyze global governance. And in many advanced economies new cleavages have opened up between those in favor of continued global integration and global governance on the one hand, and those who reject the opening of borders, the transfer of political authority beyond the nation-state, and the promotion of proclaimed universal values on the other. And, of course, Trump and Brexit have become shorthand to capture the salience of backlash politics: anti-immigrant sentiment; anti-elite and anti-expert feeling; dissatisfaction with traditional political parties; and a multifaceted reaction against globalization, "free trade," and global governance. The spread of backlash politics and populist nationalism and the specific rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration place the primary challenge to the existing global order at the center of the system. Here the challenge is often not to a particular regime, treaty, or agreement, but rather an attack on the very notion of a rules-based order itself and of the very idea and ideal of international law. As many have noted, the extreme transactional mentality of the present U.S. government sits extremely ill with any conception of institutional stability and, still more, with any notion of multilateralism. Multilateralism certainly needs to be built around bargains, but these bargains have to be embedded within shared understandings of both specific and diffuse reciprocity.

As a result, both the players and the plot look very different than just a short while ago. The challenge to the Western-centered global order now seems to come from the heartland of that order, and many of the assumptions behind notions of emergence no longer hold. For example, much work on rise and emergence centered on institutions and on global governance. Large emerging

countries mattered because of their obvious centrality to tackling global challenges, such as climate change. Equally, for those concerned with bolstering the legitimacy of global governance institutions, greater inclusion of the largest and most dynamic countries of the Global South and greater regional representation are obvious political avenues to explore. For emerging countries, institutions are logical "paths to power" both as domains for voice and as constraints on the powerful. But in a world where the most powerful can either seek to create alternative institutions (as was already evident under Obama in relation to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, for example) or choose simply to walk away from existing institutions and multilateralism (as the United States has now started to do under Trump), such pathways to power will inevitably be undermined. For realists this is unsurprising, as power has always been primarily about hard power—that is, military and coercive power. On this calculus of "who is up and who is down," the generalized pretentions to greater influence made by, or on behalf of, the emerging world fall away. Most importantly, when it comes to global economic governance, emerging countries have powerful interests in the stability of liberal economic institutions as bulwarks against protectionism in the West and as protectors of the very globalized economic environment that has helped to secure their rise. Hence the idea of the G-20 as the savior of globalization.[2]

One possible conclusion, therefore, is that the focus on the BRICS and the obsession with the idea of rising powers reflected a moment in time that has now passed. The storyline is now about backlash from the core; and, with the exception of China, rising powers have returned to their role as secondary or supporting actors in the drama of global politics. Yet such a conclusion is profoundly mistaken for three sets of reasons: the continued reality of the post-Western global order and deep changes in what constitutes the global; the need to understand nationalist backlash as a global phenomenon; and the imperatives of the new pluralism. Let us look at each in turn.

The Post-Western Global

Here it is important to escape from the shadow of the post-1990 world and to see the BRICS as only one element in the longer-term historical process by which a Western-dominated international society became global and as one stage in a longer-term revolt against Western dominance that has by no means ended. The focus on the post–cold war period and on the apparent naturalness of a

Western-dominated, self-described "liberal" order has led to a foreshortening of history. There was never a liberal global order during the cold war. The United States was never globally hegemonic. Geopolitically, there was a balance of power, albeit shifting and asymmetrical. Ideologically, the cold war involved a clash of rival visions of Western modernity, particularly as it was played out across the developing and postcolonial world.

During this period, the United States and the West were consistently challenged in power-political terms and in ideological terms by what was then called the Third World. These challenges, too, were part of something larger than the story of the cold war. In fact, a central part of the story of global order in the twentieth century involved the struggle of the Third World, or later the Global South, against the ongoing legacy of the Western-dominated imperialist global order of the nineteenth century—one that was highly globalized, but deeply unequal in its core-periphery structure. The empowerment and social and political mobilization of the previously subordinate was one of the great drivers of historic change in the twentieth century; and, as a consequence of these challenges, the global order in which we live today is now far more global than ever before. The longer-term movement toward a post-Western world was interrupted, but not fundamentally dislodged by the brief and fleeting period of U.S. unipolarity. Thus, far from being some kind of natural state, the period from 1990 to the early 2000s is the historical anomaly; and the BRICS do not stand as some unique and novel development, but rather as one element in a longer-term story.

Seen in this way the challenges to global order coming from the Western core reinforce the view that we live in a far more diverse world than was assumed twenty years ago, with more participants, and with a far greater range of voices and views. The resurgence of the right and the contestation within Western countries simply adds to the diversity of global international society. The international system is increasingly characterized by a diffusion of power, including but not limited to emerging and regional powers; by a diffusion of preferences, with many more voices demanding to be heard both globally and within states as a result of globalization, democratization, and the backlash against globalization; and by a diffusion of ideas and values, with a reopening of the big questions of social, economic, and political organization that were supposedly brought to an end with the fall of the Soviet Union and the liberal ascendancy. Among these challenges the continued economic and developmental success of an illiberal and nondemocratic China poses the greatest ideological challenge to engrained Western liberal assumptions.

The most crucial dimension of the "global" does not, therefore, lie in the nature of the problems (climate change, nuclear proliferation, etc.), or in notions of interdependence and globalization and the degree to which states, societies, and peoples everywhere are affected by global processes. It lies rather in the increased capacity of a far wider range of states and social actors to become active subjects and agents in the politics and practices of global politics and different forms of ordering, both around and beyond states. It is the diffusion of agency and of political consciousness that has been the most important feature of the globalization of international society. This means that the historical self-understandings of a much wider and culturally diverse range of players need to be central to the theoretical and practical analysis of global politics. Nothing has happened since the 2008 financial crisis to change this picture.

Nationalist Backlash as a Global Phenomenon

The second reason for maintaining a focus on the developing and emerging world is that the same global forces that have propelled populist nationalism and the rejection of liberal global governance at the core are also at work across the Global South, even if they take a different form. There is a general turning inward across many societies, not least because of the sense that the "global" constitutes a threat and that globalization and global governance are the source of the problems and discontents that they face. To be sure, every story of nationalism and of nationalist backlash has its own particular contexts and specific historical trajectories. Equally, the players in these stories will stress what makes their story unique: their traditions, culture, and specific sense of nationhood. And yet the existence of apparently similar processes in so many different parts of the world should press us to consider what kinds of systemic forces, logics, and dynamics may be at work. This is where we find one of the principal challenges to straightforwardly economic and economistic accounts of recent developments in the Western core. In the context of Trump or Brexit it seems obvious that we should focus on the losers of globalization, on those "left behind," and on those threatened both by truck and trade and by movement and migration. But across the emerging world and the countries in transformation in the Global South, the situation is more complex and far more uneven—but no less relevant for understanding global order.

Yes, economic failure, the limits of domestic economic change, extraordinary levels of corruption, and a sharply negative external environment seem implicated

in the crises that we are witnessing in, for example, Brazil and South Africa. But across the emerging world more broadly, it is important to focus less on the extreme ends of inequality and on the losers within the advanced industrialized countries and more on the apparent winners—those misleadingly characterized as the new middle classes of the emerging world. Certainly in an absolute economic sense, they are indeed "winners"—as Branko Milanovic and others have shown. Milanovic writes, "In short: the great winners have been the Asian poor and middle classes; the great losers, the lower middle classes of the rich world."[3] But what does this mean politically? It means that there are increasing numbers of people who are still poor and highly exposed to the vulnerabilities and vicissitudes of the market; at the same time, they are more mobilized politically, including in technologically enabled new ways, and more effective in raising demands against governments—over participation, over corruption, and over the delivery of basic state services. Yet in many cases these demands are being raised against governments, regimes, and state structures that are manifestly unable to satisfy them—and for these regimes the siren call of nationalism is an obvious political expedient.

We should, therefore, not forget that India's Modi came before Trump and Brexit. And we might also push back against analyses of populism that seem to concentrate exclusively on European or North American experiences. It was, after all, in Latin America (not Europe) that the theory and practice of populism was most fully developed. And what this literature stressed above all was the deep structural tension between *successful* economic development and very high rates of social transformation on the one hand and the issue of how the newly mobilized were to be incorporated into traditional and historically exclusionist political systems on the other. The old Latin Americanist debates about rapid growth and the expectations gap and between slowing growth and political dissatisfaction remain all too relevant.

In addition, it may be true that countries in transformation are in some sense status quo powers in relation to the existing global order, but that should not disguise the continued ambiguity of their relationships to that order. First, we have to recognize that large parts of the world have sought to reject or revise the Western-dominated order because it was built around their marginalization and around structured patterns of hierarchy and inequality, and it saw them suffering consistently at the hands of U.S. and Western intervention. It is now within this same order that they are faced by powerful Western political forces proclaiming

new versions of the very old ideologies of racist, religious, and civilizational superiority. Second, one of the potential dangers of focusing on backlash politics within the West is that it places too much weight on the agency of those populist groups who are the most vocal proponents of backlash politics. This may all too easily lead us to underplay the responsibility of liberals for creating the conditions against which populism of different kinds is currently mobilizing. Powerful critiques of the global liberal order can be found within the advanced industrialized world. But, of crucial relevance to this essay, many of these critiques have been loudly pressed across the emerging world. These critiques include the prevalence of corruption and cronyism; the dubious blurring of the personal, the political, and the public; the hypocrisy with which international law has been used and abused by the United States and its allies; the failings of so-called democratic interventionism; and the conscious attempts to depoliticize global governance by going down a technical, functional route and stressing the role of experts as part of the machinery and technology of global governance. In short, critiques of liberal overreach are not only the province of conservative populists or insular nationalists.

Two other factors characterize many of the cases of countries in transformation. First, they operate in contexts where the density of international institutions is weaker and hence where explanations of populist nationalism in terms of an endogenous reaction to the depth, density, and success of global governance work less well—and still less given the degree to which both globalization and global governance remain popular. In other words, we see nationalist backlash even in regions where institutionalization is thin and weak and where (in many cases) support for globalization remains high. Second, the rise of both illiberal democracy and overt authoritarianism across the emerging world calls into question the value of coalitional accounts that stress a neat divide between two ideal-typical coalitions: inward nationalist and outward internationalist.[4] As a result, support for the continuation of existing global economic institutions can easily sit side by side with sovereigntist pushback—against NGOs, against social media, against new communication technologies and the companies in which they are embedded, and against universalist claims for human rights and democracy.

The heuristic value of such ideal-types may remain, but increasingly hybridity becomes the rule, not the exception; and the challenge is to explain, as in China and India, the coming together of support for global integration and nationalist

mobilization. Far from socializing emerging states into a single logic of responsible global governance, relative success brings with it a natural desire for recognition—and for recognition of what is different, distinct, and exceptional. Exceptionality is a hallmark of all great and rising powers, and the conflictual distributional logic of the international political system easily translates claims of exceptionality into suspicion and mistrust.

The Imperatives of the New Pluralism

The third reason for maintaining a strong focus on the emerging world comes from the need to break free from the dichotomizing all-or-nothing debate surrounding the Western-led global liberal order and to reframe that debate in terms of a new pluralism that might be able to stabilize existing power struggles and provide a basis for the accommodation of divergent values. A great deal of liberal U.S. and European discussion, both political and academic, has been cast in terms of a struggle between restoring, reviving, or protecting the highly dynamic and successful global liberal order of the post–cold war period on the one hand and the atavistic forces of nativism and nationalism on the other. Either we maintain faith in the existing order or we open the doors to a new dark age of geopolitical and civilizational conflict and anarchy.

However, the idea that liberal global governance is the only or even the most important thing that stands between order and anarchy is deeply misleading. The developments sketched out above make it very difficult to think principally in terms of the restoration or recovery of the kinds of global liberal order that dominated academic, policy, and political debate in the post–cold war years. The intellectual foundations of much of the institutionalist writing on liberal global governance have been exposed as incomplete and often flawed. Those foundations implied a world in which distributional conflict is secondary to efficiency, in which institutions have internal logics of path-dependent development, and in which legitimate power depends on sets of values that have become very broadly accepted and embedded. So power conflicts and distribution were pushed into the background, while value conflict was subsumed within the pale language of preferences. The shared recognition of the problem to be solved, the shared sense of potential benefits from cooperation, the legitimacy of all the players around the table, and the existence of a shared language for communication and contracting were all simply assumed. The historical preconditions for this kind of view

reflected a belief in the long-run modernizing dynamics of liberalism, which would work over time to mitigate ideological or cultural difference and divergence.

Normatively, many will object to the idea that the liberal order should pull back in the face of negative developments and simply adjust to the apparent new realities of power. After all, the whole point of a liberal international legal order is to uphold the rule of law, even in periods when it may be under sustained challenge. The whole point of liberal cosmopolitanism is to continue to push out the normative boat. The fact that neither publics nor governments are willing to respond to the massive humanitarian catastrophes in Syria is precisely why humanitarianism as a motivating ideal is so important. And keeping alive the flame of human rights against the critics both from without and within is always going to be far more important in times of stress, of illiberalism, and of authoritarian pushback. That is when human rights matter.

What is the alternative? The classical pluralist answer stressed the importance of managing value diversity and difference and the primacy of shared political understandings between and among the major states of the system. If we are going to adapt classical pluralism to contemporary conditions, four themes need to be stressed. The first theme concerns power and the conditions of order. The old-fashioned "institutions" of international society (the balance of power, great-power management, a pluralist and sovereignty-inflected international law, and shared normative understandings of war and violence) continue to matter because, in the first place, a breakdown of institutions carries with it catastrophic dangers, and in the second place, stabilizing the power-political interests of the major players is crucial to the stability and effectiveness of the elaborate multilateral institutions needed to manage globalization, realize global justice, and tame global capitalism.

A second theme concerns diversity and value conflict. One of the perennial attractions of a state-based, pluralist conception of international society is that it seems to provide one way—and perhaps the least bad way—of organizing global politics in a world where actual consensus on fundamental values is limited or where there is widespread skepticism as to how a cross-cultural morality might be grounded. If diversity and value conflict are such important features of international life, then we should seek to organize global politics in such a way as to give groups scope for collective self-government and cultural autonomy in their own affairs and to reduce the degree to which they will clash over how the world should be ordered. Values clash and collide and become politically more

important to the extent that shifting power enables a greater range of global actors to give voice to their values.

The third theme concerns the place of morality in international affairs and the need to constrain the place of moral values in foreign affairs. The old realist emphasis on the idea of an objective national interest has always been easy to criticize on empirical grounds. But, like so much in the world of the so-called "realists," it expressed a normative idea: that international life will be better, or again less bad, if states try to put aside arguments about fundamental values or deep ideological commitments and instead concentrate on bargaining over limited interests; and that it might be possible to link the character of these interests to a shared understanding of legitimacy and legitimate foreign policy behavior. Of course, this involves mythmaking and hypocrisy; but it can also serve an important purpose, including a moral one.

This leads to the fourth and most positive theme, namely, the argument that international society has the potential not just to help manage international conduct in a restrained way but also to create the conditions for a more legitimate and morally ambitious political community to emerge: by providing a stable institutional framework within which substantive norms can be negotiated; by developing a common language in which claims and counterclaims can be made and debated with some degree of accessibility and authority; and by embedding a set of formal rules that embody at least elements of equality and at least some restraints on the ambitions of the powerful. As I have suggested elsewhere, the threefold challenge involves moral accessibility, institutional stability, and effective political agency.[5] And, as I have suggested earlier in this essay, we only tend to notice the importance of these foundational ordering ideas when they are under challenge.

On this account—of course, rather easily idealized—international law and society can be viewed as a sociologically embedded transnational cultural practice in which claims and counterclaims can be articulated and debated and from which norms can emerge that can have at least some determinacy and argumentative purchase. Certainly, this kind of pluralist approach to global order raises many difficult questions. For all those who believe in the primacy of value-driven politics—whether on the Right or Left—it will appear as selling out. It involves many hard choices—for example about the conditions for regional nuclear stability in a Northeast Asia in which North Korean nuclear capacity cannot be destroyed or wished away; or about a regional order in the Middle East in which Iran is an

accepted and legitimate power. And it cannot be simply a return to an old-style ordering based around great powers and classic Westphalian statecraft, both because of the structural changes and challenges embodied in globalization (including in what de-globalization might mean), and because of shifting notions of international political legitimacy.[6]

Conclusion

To return to the core focus of this article, this account of pluralism is the sort of conception of global order that has purchase in the policies, traditions, and practices of many countries in the Global South. Emerging powers have long stressed the need for pluralism and for recognition of difference and diversity. The complaint from rising powers and developing nations against globalization was that its benefits were unequally spread; that its values were selectively and unequally applied; and that the Western history of globalization neglected the countries and societies of the developing and emerging world, including their own narratives of how globalization had developed and where it was going. Internationally, then, the new pluralism will need to return to the foundational political conditions for order on which more elaborate mechanisms and institutions of global governance can be maintained. In terms of social models, it should force us to take more seriously the claims of multiple modernities, or at least of the many hybrid forms whose character cannot be understood or evaluated against a Western-derived ideal-type—be it of the varieties of capitalism, forms of regionalism, or categories of democratic politics.

Liberal stories of progress and simpleminded stories of modernization are once more under sustained attack—both from within the resurgent Right inside the West and from an emerging world for whom such stories have so often proved ambiguous at best and plainly destructive at worst. We do not need to accept John Gray's belief that "human progress is a lie," but we do need to respond to the challenge that he throws down:

> The modern myth is that with the advance of science one set of values will be accepted everywhere. . . . The trouble with this belief is not that it is a myth but that it is harmful. Human life could scarcely go on without myths. Certainly politics cannot. The flaw in the modern myth is that it tethers us to a hope of unity, when we should be learning to live with conflict.[7]

NOTES

[1] Harsh V. Pant "The BRICS Fallacy," *Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2013), pp. 91–105.
[2] See Amrita Narlikar, "Can the G20 Save Globalisation?" *GIGA Focus*, no. 1 (March 2017), pp. 1–12.
[3] Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Belknap, 2016), p. 20.
[4] See, in particular, Etel Solingen and Peter Gourevitch, "Domestic Coalitions: International Sources and Effects," in William R. Thompson, ed., *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Empirical International Relations Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[5] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 12.
[6] Henry Kissinger, *World Order. Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2014); and Andrew Hurrell, "Kissinger and World Order," *Millennium* 44, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1–8.
[7] John Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (London: Granta Books, 2004), pp. 103–104. Cited in Glyn Morgan, "Gray's Elegy for Progress," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2006), p. 237.

Abstract: In the early years of the twenty-first century the narrative of "emerging powers" and "rising powers" seemed to provide a clear and powerful picture of how international relations and global politics were changing. Yet dramatic changes in the global system have led many to conclude that the focus on the BRICS and the obsession with the idea of rising powers reflected a particular moment in time that has now passed. The story line is now about backlash at the core; and, with the exception of China, rising powers have returned to their role as secondary or supporting actors in the drama of global politics. Such a conclusion is profoundly mistaken for three sets of reasons: the continued reality of the post-Western global order; the need to understand nationalist backlash as a global phenomenon; and the imperative of locating and strengthening a new pluralist conception of global order.

Keywords: rising powers, emerging powers, BRICS, regional powers, global governance, global liberal order, populism, globalization