As power diffuses away from the Western, liberal developed core and as the intractability of the international system to liberal prescriptions becomes more evident, so the character of writing on global justice changes. Global liberalism is entering harder times, and the space for a ‘middle-ground ethics’ comes into sharper focus. For Amartya Sen, we should resist attempts to find universal principles for perfectly just social arrangements and to identify transcendental principles of global justice (Sen 2009). Instead, we should concentrate on our shared sense of ‘injustice’ and on the possibility of agreement on realization-focused strategies to mitigate some of the worst and most pressing forms of injustice. Just as important, we should see value pluralism both as an inescapable reality and as an opportunity. Hence, the importance, as I will discuss below, of non-parochialism and of deploying the ‘the eyes of many people’.

For Charles Beitz it is not helpful for philosophers to try and tell us what human rights ‘really are’. Instead, we should seek to locate and build upon what Beitz calls a ‘practical conception’ of human rights: “A practical conception takes the doctrine and practice of human rights in international political life as the source materials for constructing a conception of human rights” (Beitz 2009: 102). The embedded practices of international society occupy a central role in our theorizing. “We want to understand how these objects called ‘human rights’ operate in the normative discourse of global political life. Whether we should accept claims about human rights as sources of reasons for action for us is a further question. But we cannot think clearly about this further question without first understanding the practice in which these claims are made and responded to” (Beitz 2009: 105).
Going down this road forces us to confront a number of pathologies and, in particular, those associated with power. “What matters, it might be said, is not the discursive practice abstracted from its context but the practice as it actually operates, influenced as it must be by the global distribution of power” (Beitz 2009: 201). To a notably greater extent than in his earlier writings, Beitz acknowledges the extent to which the contamination of the human rights system by the power and particular interests of the powerful can undermine the authority of human rights principles. So we have here a picture of international human rights that stresses both the importance of embedded practice and the constraints posed by the distribution of political power.

There is a great more to say about both these books. But, for all the differences of their concerns and of their approach, these two examples suggest some of the ways in which global liberalism has responded to the changing character of global international society with its complex and hybrid character: a society that faces a range of classical Westphalian challenges (especially to do with power transition and the rise of new powers) but one that faces these challenges in a context marked by strong post-Westphalian characteristics (both in terms of the material conditions of globalization and the changed character of legitimacy). They also reconnect with an earlier tradition of normative thinking in International Relations associated in part with classical realism but far more centrally with the English School.

This chapter has three objectives. The first section gives one account of what a middle-ground ethics might look like, drawing out some of the principal elements of a pluralist conception of international society. Here I would like to sharpen the reasons why, from this perspective, so much recent writing on global justice simply misses the point and fails to take seriously the implications of the structurally non-ideal character of international and global politics.

The second section examines the extent to which writing on global justice in the 1990s very clearly reflected particular readings of the post-Cold War world. This matters for middle-ground ethics, first, because of the need to recognize the historical and cultural rootedness of even the most abstract ethical claims; and, second, because justice is never simply about abstract principles. Rather it must involve a clear-headed understanding of the particular constellation of agents, processes and institutions that might propel and sustain movement toward a more just global order. As recent writing has stressed, we need to return to an appreciation of the moral limits in international politics and the
identification of the conditions of possibility for implementing ethical objectives (Price 2008).

There are many ways in which understandings of the evolution of the post-Cold War international system and thinking about global justice are related. In the first place, the re-constitution of the hegemony of the so-called liberal ‘Great West’ set the agenda of much normative debate: the opening of space to intervention, apparently freed from the power–political and ideological distortions of the Cold War years and with the potential to serve a much broader range of liberal purposes; the extent to which the apparent triumph of liberal democracy, combined with the apparent deepening of globalization, made global democracy and the application of Western liberal political principles on a global scale an obviously important focus for normative analysis; and the belief in the potential for different forms of both institutionalized and more informal elements of global governance to push international society at least some way further down the road that would lead away from Westphalia.

An alternative reading stressed not the hegemony of the Greater West but the other ‘power-shift’, away from states and toward the consolidation and spreading of new forms of global public power whose transnational operation affected the character of many (especially weaker) societies and the life-chances of many individuals within those societies. Equally, the thickening of global civil society opened up new ways of thinking about global political activism, about notions of representation, and about the character of the varied constituencies that ought to be represented.

How far and in what ways does writing on global justice now need to confront a new set of changes and challenges? I suggest that it does. Both the international political system and the structures of global capitalism are in a state of flux and uncertainty. Power is shifting in global politics from the old G7 to a new group of emerging powers. The financial crisis of 2008 sharply underlined the relative strengths of the newcomers who are recovering rapidly, and the new weaknesses of the established ‘G7’. The international system is increasingly characterized by a diffusion of power, including 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 and democratization; 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 end of the Cold War and the liberal ascendancy.
There is a great deal to debate about the nature and extent of these complex changes. And their normative implications remain contested and uncertain. In the third section, I want to do no more than suggest some of the ways in which thinking about contemporary power shifts and about the role of today’s emerging powers press us to reconsider the relevance of the sorts of pluralist middle-ground ethics that I sketch out in the first section. In so far as political theory assumes a more realist approach in the light of these far less auspicious developments, so the connections with the traditional agendas of International Relations (and especially of the English School) come back into focus. On this account, political morality will need to accept that there will be a recurring (but not absolute) need to give priority of order over justice; that global politics generates serious moral dilemmas rather than just moral conflicts; that the appropriate standards of evaluation will arise from within the political world itself rather than coming from an external legal or moral standpoint; and that politics will remain all too often characterized by in-eliminable conflict rather than reasoned consensus.

Ethics and international society

The instrumentally driven, power-inflected, and conflictual character of global politics has, of course, traditionally been viewed solely as a constraint on normative politics and on the possibility of moral progress. But this is an incomplete picture, even of writing within the realist tradition. Realist writing on global justice was often skeptical but it was rarely wholly dismissive. The point of ‘realism’ was not to demonstrate the existence of all-determining laws of political life which leave no room for political and moral choice. It was rather to warn against the dangers of moral theorizing that ignored the pathologies of power characteristic of international life. Carr was clear about the need for utopian ideas and insistent that power must have a purpose: “Most of all, consistent realism breaks down because it fails to provide any ground for purposive or meaningful action” (Carr 1939/2001: 86). Understanding power was necessary to puncture the illusions of liberal ‘utopianism’, to highlight the moral traps, blow-backs and dirty hands involved in the actual promotion of liberal goals, and, most importantly, to engender restraint and humility. So, on one side then, we need to understand the extent to which the structurally non-ideal character of international politics and the persistent pathologies of power and self-interest limit the possibility of effective moral action.
But, on the other side, politics is not just about violence, coercion, and the clash of material power. Rather at the heart of politics lies the need to turn the capacity for crude coercion into legitimate authority. There is always likely to be a basic requirement of legitimacy and this will, in turn, create space for normative argument and debate. This is principal entry point for the idea of international society. Normative theorizing about international society can never take the underlying political order for granted—even in highly institutionalized settings such as Europe. Order must remain a primary value on which all other goals must ultimately depend; and any notion of a shared global public political culture is always likely to remain fragile. Sometimes this rests on a particular view of politics—the idea that political conflict is ubiquitous and perennial; and that antagonism is constitutive of human societies. Sometimes it rests on an argument that there are categories of especially difficult political problems created by the multiplicity of separate political groupings; by the immense value diversity across the global system; and by persistent inequality driven by historically deeply embedded patterns of uneven development. The centrality of political order has been displaced in a good deal or recent writing on global justice, particularly under the influence of Rawls. This has much to do the way in which Rawls and his many followers adopt a particular understanding of the ‘political’ and takes a particular kind of political society as has starting point. As MacDonald and Ronzone note:

A significant consequence of this kind of approach to the theory of justice is that the fundamental constitutive features of the political order itself—the set of practices and processes that constitute its basic institutions and social fabric, and the relationships of power that sustain them—is placed beyond the critical jurisdiction of the theory. For if the basic institutional and social features of the political order are to serve as firm foundations for the theory of distributive justice (as part of the ‘public political culture’ of liberal-democratic states which constitute Rawls’s methodological starting point in Political Liberalism), then they must be taken in some sense as fixed, and not themselves presented as primary targets for critical normative interrogation in the theory. As a result, proceeding with a theory of justice that is political in the Rawlsian sense (a theory of justice that is ‘political’ as distinct from ‘metaphysical’, as Rawls puts it) turns out to discourage systematic theorizing that is political in the different sense of investigating the justice or injustice of an underlying political
order—its constitutive institutions, and underlying social norms and relationships of power.

(Macdonald and Ronzoni 2012: 525)

Four more specific themes of this pluralist account of the ethics of international society can be identified. 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 international law, and war) matter because, in the first place, a breakdown of major power relations carries with it catastrophic dangers; and, in the second place, because stabilizing the power–political interests of the major players is crucial to the stability and effectiveness of the elaborate multilateral institutions needed to realize global justice. This is at the heart of what Cochran calls the “notion of international ethics as international society management” (Cochran 2009).

A second theme or thread 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. Jeremy Waldron has suggested that much Kantian-inspired theory has been debated by people who already agree about many of the most central principles of justice (Waldron 2000). 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. Equally, it has been easy to adopt a rather empty category of ‘non-ideal’ theory and to leave compliance problems, whether legal or moral, to one side when the direction of history seemed so clear and when structural power appeared so clearly weighted on the side of the global liberal order. One of the most important consequences of the emergence of new powers, of new forms of political and social mobilization, and of the broader ‘provincializing’ of the Western liberal order has been the creation of a far greater heterogeneity of interests and values, as well as a far greater capacity for effective contestation.
A third theme emerges from the idea that moral values should, so far as possible, be kept out of international life and of particular international institutions. The 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 myth-making and hypocrisy; but it can also serve an important purpose, including a moral purpose.

Political philosophers often berate international society theorists for their lack of concern with the foundations of moral argument or their reluctance to engage with any strong conception of the good. This may be true. But the contrary position is to argue that, in political life, foundations are dangerous things. It was precisely the obsession with the ‘foundations’ of religious belief that made the 17th century in Europe so bloody and interventionist. The Hobbesian ‘solution’—so influential for international society thinking—was to look instead for the empirical conditions for agreement, a set of facts “about what the world will call good”, as Hobbes put it.

This leads to the fourth, and more positive, thread, 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 more 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 counter-claims 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 power and ambitions of the strong. As I have suggested elsewhere, the threefold challenge here involves moral accessibility, institutional stability, and effective political agency (Hurrell 2007; ch. 12). In addition to its functional and contractual character, this is where the international institutional and especially legal order enters most strongly into the normative picture.

On this account—of course rather easily idealized—international law and society law can be viewed as a sociologically embedded transnational cultural practice in which claims and counter-claims can
be articulated and debated and from which norms can emerge that can have at least some determinacy and argumentative purchase. To pick up on the language of the opening chapter of this volume, practice becomes the source of the insights that guide us and of the shared meanings without which global ethical discourse remains illusory. Legal, moral, and political norms, then, can play a communicative and epistemic role, shaping the conditions within which claims, including justice claims, can be made and debated. It is on these foundations that more expansive understandings of global justice might develop. International society has at least 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 more 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 counter-claims 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 power and ambitions of the strong.

Martti Koskenniemi captures very nicely the tension between the messy and power-cementing role of international law on the one hand and the importance of the practice of law and of legal argument in expressing and debating collective projects on the other.

Statehood, self-determination, sovereignty, minority rights, secession, non-use of force—there are many well-founded critiques of all that. But they are part of the institutional vocabularies that make it possible to express the character of collective life as a project—and our institutions and practices as platforms on which the point of that project is constantly imagined, debated, criticized and reformed, over and over again…. International law invites everyone to participate in the imagining of humankind’s collective telos, not despite its indeterminate character but precisely by virtue of its openness.

(Koskenniemi 2011: 25)

The rise of the Have Nots

For all those interested in the character of contemporary international relations, the 1970s is a crucial period: first, in terms of the nature of the problems, including declining US hegemony, the rise of new powers, the emergence of new issues including energy, population, environment, proliferation, and the idea of a powerful anti-Western coalition;
the need to negotiate with the Have Nots and to reconstitute power arrangements around regional actors and rising powers; and second, in terms of the choices and responses to these challenges in ways that shape our contemporary situation, in particular the viability of hegemonic re-assertion. After all, a central part of Washington’s response to the relative decline in US hegemony in the late 1970s was to re-assert its power and to foster and encourage an aggressive phase of globalization, especially of financial globalization. And yet it was precisely the particular characteristics of this new period of economic globalization that helped to create the conditions, first for the successful reassertion of US and Western power, but subsequently for the successful emergence of China and other emerging powers and hence for the current challenges to US power and authority. The other central feature of the US policy in the 1970s was to revive a policy of active and aggressive intervention in the developing world. While this may have played an important role in the victory of the West in the Cold War it also helped to foster, or deepen, or shift the character of many of the conflicts that are proving so intractable to Washington today, especially in relation to Islam and the Islamic World. Seen from both perspectives the ‘long 1970s’ become more important in understanding where we are today, and the end of the Cold War rather less so. As Arne Westad has suggested, such a conclusion appears still more evident when we look back at the Cold War in a global rather than US-centric perspective (Westad 2006).

The 1970s had raised important issues about order and justice. On one side, many were concerned about the challenge posed by the Third World to Western understandings of power–political order (see, e.g., Tucker 1977); to traditional understandings of international society challenged by the combination of increased cultural diversity and a shift in power (such as Bull and Watson 1985); and to Western liberal understanding of human rights, democracy, and economic development. On the other hand, the salience of the demands of Third World states helped to put the issue of North–South relations firmly on the agenda and undoubtedly stimulated both political and academic concern with questions of justice. The focus, however, was on interstate or international justice and on developing states as at least potential vehicles of justice.

By the early 1980s all this had changed. The reformist rhetoric of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) had been both defeated and deflated. Power-centered accounts of North–South relations stressed the existence of a ‘structural conflict’ reducible to contending sets of power and interest—however encrusted within the empty rhetoric of justice (Krasner 1985). The powerful neo-liberal critique of rent-seeking
southern elites cut deep into progressive third-worldism. On the left, post-colonial writers viewed the post-colonial state with deep disdain, while critical political economists argued that, to the extent that developing countries ‘emerged’, it would be as the result of structural changes in patterns of capitalist global production and would be built around transnational and class-based coalitions between Third World elites and the managers of the global capitalist economy.

The justice debate also shifted, and in two broad directions. First, liberal theorists reacted strongly against the notion of state-based claims for distributive justice and against the so-called ‘morality of states’ (see especially Beitz 1979; new ed. 1999). Cosmopolitanism was clearly about achieving justice for individuals; it was about what ‘we’ in the rich world owed to distant strangers. Here, of course, we find the enormous growth of work on distributive justice, especially on the part of those who sought to deploy Rawlsian approaches to the global level. At the same time, it is important to note that most of this work saw the post-Cold War dominance of the United States and the West not as a problem but as an opportunity to be exploited. If this involved interventionism, paternalism, even renewed empire on the part of the rich and powerful then so be it—so long as social justice was being promoted. Anthony Pagden usefully noted the close historical relationship between European cosmopolitan ideas and the spread of empire (Pagden 2000). Very little of this work made reference to the self-understandings of the ‘objects’ of justice in the non-Western world. There was very little sympathy with the view that post-colonial nationalism might have a value different from other forms of communitarianism.

The other major development was to shift normative attention shifted away from southern states and toward social movements and civil society groups within the Global South: the World Social Forum (WSF), anti-globalization groups, post-Seattle protest movements. The idea that the WSF represented the ‘New Bandung’ precisely captured this shift—away from states and toward different forms of social movements (Hardt 2002). In part, anti-globalization movements were seen as exercising effective political agency and as the most viable means of developing countervailing power in the face of market-driven globalization. But they also became central to a new generation of deliberative democratic theorists interested in bottom-up approaches to the problems of unequal globalization and to the need for greater global democracy. Far-reaching claims came to be made about the normative potentiality of global civil society as an arena of politics that is able to transcend the inside–outside character of traditional politics, and to fashion and provide space for
new forms of political community, solidarity, and identity (among a very large literature see Bohman 2007; Macdonald 2008; for a review, see Scheuerman 2008). The thrust of this normative debate was clearly and strongly anti-statist.

All this, of course, reflected the Zeitgeist of the post-Cold War period. In the 1990s, global order was widely understood through the lens of liberal internationalism or liberal solidarism. Globalization was rendering obsolete the old Westphalian world of Great Power rivalries, balance of power politics, and an old-fashioned international law built around state sovereignty and strict rules of non-intervention. Bumpy as it might be the road seemed to be leading away from Westphalia—with an expanded role for formal and informal multilateral institutions; a huge increase in the scope, density, and intrusiveness of rules and norms made at the international level but affecting how domestic societies are organized; the ever-greater involvement of new actors in global governance; the moves toward the coercive enforcement of global rules; and a fundamental changes in political, legal, and moral understandings of state sovereignty and of the relationship between the state, the citizen, and the international community.

Academics, especially in Europe and the United States, told three kinds of liberal stories about the post-Cold War world. Some stressed institutions and the cooperative logic of institutions. Institutions are needed to deal with the ever more complex dilemmas of collective action that emerge in a globalized world. The complexity of the governance challenges meant that international law and international regimes would necessarily increase in number, scope and variety. It also meant that as large states, including large developing states, expanded their range of interests and integrated more fully into the global economy and world society—as they ‘joined the world’ in the popular language of the 1990s—they would be naturally drawn by the functional benefits provided by institutions and pressed toward more cooperative and ‘responsible’ patterns of behavior. They would gradually become socialized into a West-led global order. The process would not necessarily be easy. It would be uneven and often unsettling. But, on this view, the broad direction of travel was clear.

Others stressed the Kantian idea of the gradual but progressive diffusion of liberal values, partly as a result of liberal economics and increased economic interdependence, partly as a global civil society liberal legal order comes to sustain the autonomy of a global civil society, and partly as a result of the successful example set by the multifaceted liberal capitalist system of states. A third group told a more
US-centered story. The United States was indeed the center of a unipolar world. But, true both to its own values but also to its rational self-interest, Washington would have a continued incentive to bind itself within the institutions that it had created in the Cold War era in order to reassure smaller states and to prevent balancing against US power. A rational hegemon in an age of globalization would understand the importance and utility of soft power. In return for this self-binding and the procedural legitimacy it would create, and in return for US-supplied global public goods and the output legitimacy that they would create, other states would acquiesce and accept the role of the United States as the owner and operator of the system (Ikenberry 2001).

The challenge posed by Soviet Union and its allies (the so-called Second World) had been seen off with the victorious end to the Cold War. Through a mix of these three processes those developing states of the old Third World that had previously challenged the Western order (especially in the demands of the 1970s for a New International Economic Order) would now become increasingly enmeshed, socialized, and integrated. The nature and dynamics of power was changing. Soft power would outstrip hard coercive power in importance and concentrations of liberal power would attract rather than repel or threaten. Just as the example of a liberal and successful European Union had created powerful incentives on the part of weaker and neighboring states toward emulation and a desire for membership, so, on a larger scale and over a longer period, a similar pattern would be observed in the case of the liberal, developed world as a whole. The 1990s, then, were marked by a clear sense of the liberal ascendancy; a clear assumption that the United States had the right and power to decide what the ‘liberal global order’ was all about; and a clear belief that the Western order worked and that it had the answers. Yes, of course there would be isolated rogues and radical rejectionists. But they were on the ‘wrong side of history’ as President Clinton confidently proclaimed.

Academic debates on global order were dominated by a dual liberal hegemony: a historicist hegemony that has too easily assumed that history is moving down a one-way street; and an analytical liberal hegemony that has tended to work with a narrow notion of agency; with too little room for the historical analysis of the structures within which supposedly ahistorical logics of rational choice and collective action play out; and still less room for understanding their temporal and geographical rootedness.

Viewed from today we can point to the large number of factors that have disturbed this picture and that have pushed global order
back in a broadly Westphalian direction. These have included: the renewed salience of security, the re-valorization of national security, and a renewed preoccupation with war-fighting and counter-insurgency; the continued or renewed power of nationalism, no longer potentially containable politically or analytically in a box marked ‘ethnic conflict’ but manifest in the identity politics and foreign policy actions of the major states in the system; the renewed importance of nuclear weapons as central to the structure of regional security complexes, and in the construction of great power hierarchies and the distribution of seats at top tables; and finally the quiet return of balance of power as both a motivation for state policy (as with US policies in Asia) and as an element in the foreign policy of all second-tier states—not hard balancing and the building up of hard power; but soft balancing either in the form of attempts explicitly de-legitimize US hegemony or to argue for alternative conceptions of legitimacy.

Still more important, as the 1990s progressed so economic globalization fed back into the structures and dynamics of a Westphalian state system rather than pointing toward its transcendence. The state as an economic actor proved resilient in seeking to control economic flows and to police borders; and in seeking to exploit and develop state-based and mercantilist modes of managing economic problems, especially in relation to resource competition and energy geopolitics. Most significant, the very dynamism and successes of liberal globalization was having a vital impact on the distribution of interstate political power—above all toward the East and parts of the South. If the debate over power shifts in the 1990s concentrated on the shift of power from states to firms and non-state actors, the ‘power shift’ of the past decade has focused on rising and emerging powers, on state-directed economic activity, and on the mismatch between existing global economic governance arrangements and the distribution of power among those with the actual power of effective economic decision.

The global financial crisis fed into these changes. In part, this has been the result of the degree to which emerging economies have been relatively less directly affected. But in part it has followed from less direct impacts. For many influential figures in the emerging powers it is historically extremely significant that the financial crisis broke out and most seriously damaged both the economies but also the technical and moral authority of the center of the global capitalist system. The crisis has also shifted the balance of arguments back to those who stress the advantages of large, continentally size or regionally dominant states—states that are able to depend on large domestic markets,
to politicize market relations globally and regionally, and to engage in effective economic mercantilism and resource competition. There is a strong argument that we are witnessing the most powerful set of challenges yet to the global order that the United States sought to construct within its own camp during the Cold War and to globalize in post-Cold War period. Many of these challenges also raise questions about the longer-term position of the Anglo-American and European global order that rose to dominance in the middle of the 19th century and around which so many conceptions and practices of power–political ordering, international legal construction, and global economic governance have since been constructed.

It is within this context that arguments about the emerging powers have flourished. Arguments about the increased importance of rising powers have grown more strident and come from an increasingly broad range of perspectives. From a power-centered perspective such states are seen as central to the dynamics of the balance of power in the 21st century, as well as to the possible emergence of new concert-style groupings of major powers. From an institutionalist perspective such states are also crucial. Their detachment or opposition to current institutions is correctly seen one of the most important weaknesses of existing institutions—think of the move away from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund on the part of major emerging economies, or the opposition to developed country preferences in the World Trade Organization led by Brazil and India, or the effective breakdown of the global aid regime in the face of the new aid donors such as China and India. Such countries are clearly substantively critical to the management of major global issues as climate change or nuclear proliferation. But they are also procedurally critical if international institutions are to re-establish legitimacy and a degree of representativeness, for example through reform of the United Nations Security Council or of the international financial institutions.

Faced by shifting power a common theme has been skepticism within the United States and Europe as to the capacity of large emerging states either to lead or, more modestly, to assume a ‘responsible role’ within the Western-led liberal international order. There is frequent frustration with the failure of the ‘Good BRICS’ to ‘stand up and be counted’ (Traub 2012). On this account, large, emerging powers should no longer hide behind their colonial past or their previous position as members of the Third World or the Global South. “The salient feature of the Third World was that it wanted economic and political clout. It is getting both” (‘Rethinking the “third world”: Seeing the world differently’,
The Economist 12 June 2010: 65). The ever greater heterogeneity across the developing world and, above all, the power of today’s emerging developing states makes any residual reliance on ideas of the Third World or the South wholly redundant. On the back of such a view come calls for major emerging powers to jettison claims for special treatment or special status—in terms of the trading system they should ‘graduate’ from the developing country category; in terms of climate change they should not hide behind the Kyoto Protocol’s idea of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’; and in terms of humanitarian intervention states such as India, Brazil, or South Africa should externalize their own domestic democratic commitments. In other words, they should no longer use relative weakness, historical grievances, or developing country status as an ‘excuse’ to evade assuming their ‘responsibilities’ as major powers (Rachman 2010).

The alleged incapacity to act in a responsible manner may result from a wide range of factors: from the absence of a clear and coherent view of their own foreign policy goals, let alone of what their preferred vision of international order would look like; from the extent to which this gap can be attributed to the messiness and complexity of rapidly changing domestic politics and societies; or from the extent to which it might be a rational response to their particular position in the international power hierarchy or to their interests on a particular substantive issue.

The eyes of many

The temptation for many in the West is to maintain the faith. Yes, global liberalism might find itself in harder times. And yes, shifting power can all too easily constitute a fundamental challenge, whether in form of illiberal versions of religious fundamentalism or the sorts of authoritarian revival seen in Russia or China, or the broader return of sovereigntist conceptions of international order. But the normative underpinnings of the global liberal order are surely clear.

But are they? One alternative is to explore the potential relevance of the sorts of pluralist understandings outlined in the first section and to discuss how far the changing character of global politics should press us toward a middle-ground ethics. In doing so we might usefully seek to recover a rather different view of a liberal international order, to examine how it differs from current US-centric versions, and to explore how it might be normatively grounded. In moving in this direction, I do not claim that such a view ‘fits’ the positions and policies of any particular large, emerging power. However, I do think: first, that, normatively,
it is crucial to recognize that there have been, and continue to be, many versions of liberalism and to evaluate power shifts and the policies of large emerging powers in this light; and second that, historically, the construction of the global liberal order has been far more open, contested, and contingent than some accounts would suggest.  

The starting place is, of course, the view that a pluralist and multipolar order is actually a morally better system that one in which power is heavily concentrated. This idea forms part of a deep-rooted tradition in Western thought, including in Western liberal thought and the list of illustrative statements is long: A balance of power ‘makes freedom possible’; it is a ‘constitutional principle of international society’; it is a necessary condition for the operation of international law and international institutions. During earlier rounds of debate on Western decline and on power diffusion, this case was made much more explicitly than is the case today. In 1972, for example, Alastair Buchan was cautious about resurrecting classic notions of balance of power (the ‘crude sense of countervailing power’) but stressed the importance of a ‘philosophy of coexistence’ and the way in which the ‘old multiple system’ had as one objective ‘the preservation of the autonomy of its members’. He went on: “The world is still divided into different political and cultural civilisations, and the main rationale and function of a multiple balance in the past has been to preserve the freedom of its members, while minimizing the risks and scale of war, for the reason that the destruction or crippling of one of them destroys the system… The autonomous state or civilization has a great deal of vitality and we are more likely to live in relative tranquillity if we respect this differentiation while opposing the temptations of universality for our own values or the claims of other polities” (Buchan 1972: 657).

If power is shifting and if conflict is to be avoided or limited, then it is crucial that new powers are accommodated within a reconstituted balance of power. The Haves and the Have Nots need to seek new forms of accommodation and negotiation. This perspective is stressed both by classical realists but, especially, by international society writers who see Great Powers and Great Power concerts as fundamental to the ordering of international society. In a world where value conflicts over the nature of global justice are rife, where institutions remain fragile, and where the dangers of over power–political confrontation can never be discounted, Great Powers have a special responsibility to uphold international order—by negotiating with other major powers ground-rules as to what constitutes legitimate foreign policy behavior; by agreeing who are the major players in the system and finding ways, individually
and collectively, to manage the entry of new members into the club; by managing global problems, especially in such cases as nuclear proliferation where their collective self-interest in preventing new entrants can be said to coincide with a more general system interest; and, finally, by managing weaker states and by providing a hierarchical order within the regions or on the issues in which they have dominance (for a recent examination of this perspective, see Ayson 2012).

Within the contemporary system, one response to shifting power has been exactly of this kind. On this view, we need to return to a far more Great Power-centered order—both to avoid tensions and potential conflict among the existing and rising powers but also to achieve the consensus needed to tackle the new and complex challenges such as climate change, terrorism and global economic governance. This can involve the reform of formal multilateral institutions—such as bringing new members on the US Security Council. But it can also involve increasing emphasis on different sorts of informal groupings, clubs, concerts, and coalitions. Indeed the proliferation of discussion of new Groups such as the G2 (the United States–China), the G8+5, or the G20 can be viewed in terms of a revival of concert diplomacy. (For a powerful argument about the centrality of major power politics and the need for mutual accommodation between the United States and China, see White 2012.)

Second, there is a further very old liberal intuition, namely, that some equality of power or some capacity to make one’s voice heard is necessary to compel recognition and respect. Of course, a simple capacity to exert power is an unlikely candidate for normative approval and much will clearly depend on the type of power being exerted and on the purposes for which it is used. Justice (as opposed to a paternalist concern with welfare) and a meaningfully shared and grounded conception of rights are not possible in situations of extreme inequality and dependence. As a result, we can never leave unequal power entirely out of the picture.

Cosmopolitan liberal theory has been strangely silent on the question of agency. Post-Cold War liberal discourses on global justice often appear to be discourses about what the rich and powerful owe to the poor, weak, and oppressed. The weak and oppressed appear mostly as the passive objects of (potential) benevolence. Their voices, visions, and understandings of the world are seldom heard or seldom deliberated upon. Instead, we might look to more strongly republican modes of liberal thinking with their emphasis on the importance of states as agents, with their powerful ideal of non-domination, and with their central concern...
with minimizing alien control. Deliberation is never enough if the political terms of deliberation are insufficient or lacking. As Pettit suggests, the most serious danger posed by international institutions is not that they themselves will exercise alien domination but that they will fail to prevent different forms of interstate domination. The legitimacy of international institutions will be seriously weakened to the degree that interstate inequalities generate asymmetrical bargaining and involve the domination of weaker parties (see Pettit 2010; and also Laborde 2010). It is for this reason that it matters that emerging developing countries have been able to place a broader range of moral issues on the global agenda—the importance of representation and of ‘democratizing’ international institutions, the role of differential needs in trade negotiations, the role of historical and current inequalities in assigning responsibilities within a climate change regime. It matters, too, that major Southern states have been able to lead and facilitate coalitions of developing states.

A third, and connected, issue has to do with the power to hold account. Liberal principles of political legitimacy are sustained by a combination of moral and strategic purposes. It is of course true that liberal political principles—such as ‘transparency’, ‘accountability’, ‘participation’—are underpinned in part by purely moral values, such as the values of individual autonomy and equality. But they are devised also to serve the strategic function of constraining—as effectively as possible—abuses and misuses of power by those who wield it without regard for these liberal moral values. Principles of political legitimacy must articulate not only underlying moral values, but also the kinds of strategic mechanisms that are required to protect these values from real threats arising from prospective abuses of power. Thus the claims from emerging powers for reform of international institutions do not rest only on what resources they can bring to resolving shared problems, nor on the degree to which they may provide greater representativeness. They also rest on the degree to which they prevent the dominance of special interests and institutional abuse on the part of the currently strong.

Fourth, there is the question of representativeness. There are, of course, enormously complex and unanswered questions as to the proper scope of democratic ideas beyond the state and as to how the values of democracy should be applied to global governance and to global social choices that will shape the life chances of individuals and communities in the 21st century. But there is still good reason for believing that giving substance to the democratic idea at the global level may well come to play the sort of critical role in the 21st century that the idea of national
self-determination played in the 20th century. Given the diffusion of the capacity for social and societal mobilization and pressed by emerging powers, the current distribution of decision-making power is likely to come under increasing attack. The messiness of emerging power democracy has led many to stress instead a rather idealizing view of civil society and of global social movements and to question the representative credentials of large emerging powers. Nevertheless the representative claim remains important.

Of course, many of the claims about representative and procedural legitimacy made by emerging powers will be instrumental. Any self-respecting realist would expect that today’s emerging powers will use the normative potential of the system to increase their power and legitimacy. It is entirely natural that they will use the language of procedural and substantive justice in making claims for a greater role within international organizations (as with India and Brazil in the WTO or the G20). They will denounce attempts by established Western powers to use international norms to further their own interest—for example as regards humanitarian intervention. They are behaving in essentially the same way as did the revisionist states of the 1930s, exploiting both their power and the moral resources of the system. But governments and societies tend to see far more instrumentalism in the policies of others than in their own, and, while instrumental abuse strains the possibilities of effective consensus, it does not undermine the importance of the underlying claims to which voice is being given.

It is also the case that far harder questions are raised by major illiberal states. The rules of international society cannot be solely a matter for democratic states to decide upon among themselves. Henry Shue has criticized Rawls for focusing his *Law of Peoples* around the foreign policy of a particular kind of states, and for failing to provide sufficient guidance as to the rules that might shape relations with non-aggressive repressive states, especially those that do not accept Western liberal notions of reasonable pluralism. He writes:

> If the ‘public’ at the international level consists of the states that are not at war with each other, it may be better for the ‘public’ to be as nearly global as possible. . . . Irrespective of whether it would count as Rawlsian international public reason, we need to find or make a basis for a normative consensus about international conduct amongst more of those who disagree about the principles of domestic conduct.

(Shue 2002: 318)
A fifth issue has to do with intervention and what should be made subject to intervention. It is the classical realists (as well as the classical liberals) who question the capacity of interventions to bring about more good than evil and the dynamic of unintended consequences. One may recall Reinhold Niebuhr or Morgenthau in respect of the Vietnam War. But the difficulties and limits to effective intervention were also elaborated, and clearly, by John Stuart Mill, and the moral case against intervention was nowhere more powerfully stated than by Kant (Hurrell 2014). The discourse of emerging countries has evolved considerably from the very rejectionist and defensive stance taken in the early post-Cold War years; and many of the traditional liberal arguments for greater caution can be found in, or can be developed from, the recent statements of large emerging powers.

The rules of accommodation here are likely to be rather different from the sorts of debates that have driven, for example, the discussions about the responsibility to protect. Not necessarily displacing these norms, the focus would be more on whether it is also possible to develop understandings on the relationship between a liberal order in which action is taken to prevent atrocities and some degree of power–political consensus on the boundaries of such action. Stable concert-style diplomacy depended, after all, not on the prohibition of intervention but on: (1) shared agreement that interventions would not be used to promote power–political purposes. (Hence, the crucial difficulties posed by conflicts that arise when the promotion of humanitarian norms intersect with geopolitical and strategic goals, as in Syria or in Burma.) And (2) shared acceptance of regime legitimacy—not just survival of powers as powers, but agreement that the stability of regimes in major states should not be called into question.

All this may have two sorts of consequences for the way in which we think about global justice. One is to resurrect the case for a greater attention to the links between order and justice and to persistent doubts as to whether the maxims of law and morality can ever wholly displace the centrality of political decisions and political judgment. From this perspective, recent experience provides very strong grounds to be skeptical both of the European liberal predilection for global constitutionalism; and of the US belief that global liberalism can be best promoted by the effective actions of a powerful and prosperous liberal core. It is no coincidence that the sense of liberalism finding itself in far harder times at the global level is fostering a revival of traditions emphasizing political judgment. (On the recent emergence of the so-called ‘new political realism’ in political theory see, e.g., William Galston 2010.)
The second consequence is to force us to re-visit the old 18th concern with the importance of non-parochialism. As Smith puts it:

We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgement concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them.

(Smith 1790, quoted in Sen 2009:125)

Although abstract human reason can assist in the search for impartial and generalizable principles of justice, it is ‘the eyes of other people’ and the voices of different cultural traditions that are central. Non-parochialism becomes an essential requirement of justice in a global and interdependent world. This does not mean turning one's back on the claim of the liberal international order to be taking forward the agenda of the Enlightenment in the 21st century. It means, rather, that we might recover the critical spirit of much Enlightenment thinking, including skepticism about claims to absolute and universal authority without awareness of history, language, and locality. Kant’s original plea for submission of conflicting views to public adjudication has all too often been turned into the univocal imposition of a standard whose formal impartiality masked its origin in a partial interest.

Of course, the traditional moral reasons for valuing a balance of power (providing space for pluralism, guarding against the oppression of world government, protecting small states) can easily be countered by listing the ways in which including emerging powers more centrally within global governance may make effective multilateralism still harder to achieve—the greater heterogeneity of interests, the lack of cultural or historical solidarity, the proliferation of voices and demands within ever more mobilized domestic systems. It is also undoubtedly the case that today’s emerging powers are making moral demands for self-interested and often crudely instrumental reasons. And it is also the case that the room for moral deliberation as opposed to strategic bargaining within international public spaces is indeed extremely narrow. Nevertheless, we should not just evaluate the challenges to a global liberal order in terms either of what ‘we’ might be forced to give up; or how much ‘they’ can be accommodated or encouraged to
act as responsible stakeholders and as effective supporters of the particular kind of liberal order that emerged in the immediate post-1945 era, that was globalized with the end of the Cold War, and that is now under challenge—not, it should be noted, primarily from rising powers but far more crucially because of its own instabilities, intrinsic tensions, and moral failures on the part of the United States and other Western states. This might surely lead us to consider as full a range as possible of liberal international orders and the values which they seek to promote.

This kind of pluralist pushback is certainly discomforting, especially for those living in states characterized by what Abraham Lowenthal once labeled ‘the hegemonic presumption’ (Lowenthal 1976). A pluralist political ethics has always generated acute moral dilemmas and these will no doubt be rendered both more common and more acute by the powerful post-Westphalian forces outlined earlier. But the virtues of pluralism need to be evaluated alongside an all-too-likely alternative—namely, that Western liberals, disillusioned with the prospects of implementing their preferred version of global order, come to join forces with the many others who have always seen international life as a morality-free zone.

Notes

1. Note, however, that Hardt stressed the divisions within the WSF over the role of strengthening the sovereignty of developing countries, something that he deplored as a brake on the viability of non-sovereign alternative globalization positions.

2. Traditions always seem clearer and more coherent when looking back. Much has been done to focus attention on gaps and silences (as in the role of empire and race within the liberal tradition; see Vucetic 2011). In other cases, the question is not so much silences as unrecognized assumptions, as with the links between liberalism, the modern moral order and Christianity (see Taylor 2007).

References


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Chapter 11

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