Global Justice as Ethico-Political Labor and the Enactment of Critical Cosmopolitanism

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This essay links global justice to a materialist theorization of an alternative globalization in order to decenter the formalist current predominating in contemporary human rights discourses. It does so through the concept of the work of global justice: namely, the ethico-political labor and forms of social action that are constitutive of transnational struggles for emancipation. Using this framework, the essay proposes a way out of the human rights blackmail in which radical thinking is mired, by arguing in favor of a politically deontologizing and social constructivist vision of global justice. The latter serves to outline the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of a critical cosmopolitanism grounded in structural transformations of the existing world order.

Key Words: Global Justice, Human Rights, Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, Practice, Multitude

Hitherto, discussions of global justice have been dominated by a formalist approach that primarily frames emancipation as a normative or institutional outcome—that is to say, a logic of attribution from above whereby official institutions (namely, states and international organizations) prescribe and grant transnational rights to individuals or groups. What results is a juridification of political struggle, which formalists equate with or view as directed toward legal entrenchment (in national and supranational constitutions, multilateral treaties, etc.) and recognition of human rights; in other words, for formalism, the project of global justice aims first and foremost to bolster legal-political structures and principles that can advance or protect socioeconomic and civil-political rights around the world.

One prominent version of formalism is philosophical normativism, which takes its key from various sources (ancient Greco-Roman Stoicism, Enlightenment Kantianism, non-Western humanism, etc.) in order to interpret global justice via the prism of a cosmopolitan ethics. This begins from a subject’s self-understanding as a citizen of the world and a concerned member of humankind (“la terre est ma patrie”), who is conversant with and appreciative of a variety of different sociocultural settings and their accompanying customs, beliefs, norms, and symbolic systems; the prototypical cosmopolitan subject is a well-travelled and open-minded polyglot who regularly
negotiates between and crosses cultural boundaries, since nothing human is foreign to her. Of greater direct relevance here is the ethical imperative that follows from this world-dwelling identity, the recognition of universal moral equality. For philosophical normativism, then, human beings are entitled to the realization of the same socioeconomic and civil-political rights as well as to enjoy the same freedoms and protections, regardless of their specific circumstances or sociocultural location. Global justice thrives on concern for the well-being of all persons in the world, the faraway stranger no less than the proximate neighbor. More concretely, philosophical normativists specify universal moral principles, such as hospitality and egalitarian reciprocity, that can guide the regulation of international relations for the construction of a peaceful and multilateral world community, and that can legitimate global distributive justice through the reallocation of material resources on a planetary scale.¹

Politico-legal institutionalism is another widespread rendition of formalism, one that treats global justice as a question of redesigning the world system in accordance with international human rights procedures and cosmopolitan principles. Institutionalists thereby advocate for the reform or complete overhaul of the existing transnational legal infrastructure and set of multilateral political institutions, in order to increase democratic accountability and socioeconomic fairness as well as to tackle problems confronting humankind as a whole (environmental degradation, migration, etc.). Proposals range from a world parliament to multiscaled yet interconnected executive structures with overlapping jurisdictions, and from global citizenship (a status granting socioeconomic and civil-political rights and accorded to all human beings) to the enforcement of an international legal regime that would regulate interstate relations and the conduct of powerful transnational private actors (e.g., through taxation of financial transactions or international labor codes). Put succinctly, politico-legal institutionalists believe that transforming the official system of planetary governance produces the clearest path to global justice.²

Although important in many respects, both philosophical normativism and politico-legal institutionalism overlook or marginalize a vast array of forms of sociopolitical action performed by groups and persons who may not seek official sanction or juridical inscription, yet who are engaged in transnational emancipatory politics. Moreover, formalism tends to favor an additive approach to global justice (which becomes a matter of trying to grant more rights to more individuals and, conversely, to reduce the numbers of persons suffering from rights violations as well as numbers of rights being violated) while taking for granted or leaving unexamined systemic factors that underpin socioeconomic and civil-political injustices as well as the exercise of biopower: national and global structures that create relations of domination as well as massive inequalities in the distribution of symbolic and material resources. In the end, formalism poorly grasps processes of radically

1. For a sample of philosophical normativist writings, see Appiah (2006); Beitz (1999); Bohman and Lutz-Bachmann (1997); De Greiff and Cronin (2002); Derrida (2001); Habermas (2001); Kant (1991); Nussbaum (2002); Pogge (2002); Singer (2002).

2. Politico-legal institutionalist writings include Archibugi (2003); Beck (2005); Falk (2000); Held (2004).
democratic participation in the making of global justice, which is more often than not produced and sustained by nonlegalistic or extrainstitutional claims, discourses, and forms of action.

Hence, this article contends that the decentering of the formalist current that predominates in human rights discourses is a necessary step in the broader task of explicitly articulating global justice to a materialist theorization of an alternative globalization. It does so by introducing the concept of the work of global justice: that is to say, the ethico-political labor and modes of practice that are constitutive of transnational struggles for emancipation. Using this framework, the article then proposes a way out of the human rights blackmail in which radical thinking is mired, by arguing in favor of a politically deontologizing and social constructivist vision of global justice, which serves to outline the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of a critical cosmopolitanism grounded in structural transformations of the existing world order.

The Work of Global Justice

In order to shift our focus from formally derived rights and abstract principles per se to the ethical and political configurations of social relations generated by transnational emancipatory struggles, I would like to suggest a conceptual framework anchored in the notion of practice, which, despite having a lengthy pedigree in the human sciences, often falls into the space between two broad disciplinary traditions: Kantian moral-political philosophy, which views social action as following and derived from normative principles grounded in human reason (e.g., the categorical imperative); and the Durkheimian sociology of morality, which understands social action as an outcome of institutionally prescribed ideals and structurally enforced and sanctioned rules of conduct (e.g., socialization). For our purposes, however, a practice cannot be reduced to adherence to a norm or rule, as cognitivists would have it, or to the mechanistic execution of a preexisting structural code (Bourdieu 1990; Taylor 1995). Rather, it represents—and simultaneously produces—a pattern of materially and symbolically oriented social action that agents undertake within organized political, cultural, and socioeconomic fields, and whose main features are recognizable across several temporal and spatial settings. A practice confronts certain perils (or obstacles) and must therefore enact a certain repertoire of social tasks, thereby forming what I am terming a mode of practice (see Figure 1).

3. The practice-based model advanced here shares some similarities with the paradigm of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), notably its comparative and processual analysis of collective political action. However, instead of focusing on strategic action and mechanisms per se, I put the accent on the arduous, aporetic, and normatively oriented labor of enacting ethico-political tasks and confronting perils (via the concepts of mode of practice and of the work of global justice).
engaging in a mode of practice have the capacity to contribute to the creation, reproduction, and transformation of established relations and institutional fields of power within which practice is located, as well as to the making of new patterns of thought and action that may transcend existing ones. However, a practice is neither a spontaneous act nor the expression of pure free will on the part of agents, who would shape the social world outside any structural constraints or conditions. Instead, it is located within—and thus structured by—historically transmitted and socially institutionalized forms of thought and action, discourses, and relations of power, which have enabling and constraining effects upon a practice’s effectiveness and the range of possibilities within which it operates. The extent to which this range of possibilities expands, contracts, or remains identical varies in each context within which a mode of practice is performed, according to the field of sociopolitical forces that enframe it and which, in turn, it enframes. Importantly, to acknowledge the productive and creative aspects of a mode of practice is not to treat the latter as an improvisational art that defies taxonomic logic; on the contrary, it is characterized by regularized patterns of thinking and acting.

Intended to signify an ensemble of relations among seemingly disparate elements that forms a whole whose outlines are recognizable across a certain number of geographically and historically distinct circumstances, the term 'pattern' supports a conception of practice that navigates between the traps of structuralist and voluntarist accounts of social life. A mode of practice, then, is composed of and framed by patterns of discourse, ethical principle, and sociopolitical ritual. Furthermore, because these patterns can be similar across different settings, modes of practices are characterized by their “modularity” (Tarrow 2005)—that is to say, the fact that they are transposable across many settings in the world, a specific pattern in one situation being diffused to others. This transferability across contexts is more a matter of creative adaptation of a pattern of social action that originated somewhere else or at another epoch than precise mimesis of it, in response to varying local, national, and historical factors. Nevertheless, the enactment of the same mode of practice in different socio-historical environments is defined by a comparable repertoire of ethico-political
tasks and perils that agents perform or, to put it succinctly, by analogous features among numerous cases.4

By recognizing that patterns of social action are neither entirely singular (containing a unique combination of elements in each context) nor identical (containing exactly the same combination of elements in all contexts), the idea of modularity or “transposability” is designed to steer clear of the excesses of nominalism and false universalization. The first would make it impossible to comparatively draw analytical similarities across different manifestations of a mode of practice whereas the second would generalize a specific configuration of social relations without considering the distinctive features of a given situation. By contrast, the argument about the patterned character of a mode of practice aims for systematicity in its investigation of consistent and regularized configurations of ethico-political relations in several periods and sites, yet is simultaneously adaptable enough to pinpoint significant variations in the locally adapted versions of a mode of practice—which may in turn impact upon the modeling of a mode of practice. In other words, rather than subscribing to analytical notions of complete alterity (nominalist empiricism) or sameness (universalizing structuralism), it is more fruitful to apply principles of similarity and regularity across cases.

By foregrounding these ideas, it becomes possible to grasp that the ethical and political substance of global justice is produced by five modes of practice: bearing witness (testimonial acts and responses), forgiveness (forgiving and the redress of past injustices), foresight (the prevention of mass suffering and material deprivation), aid (assistance in the face of humanitarian crises and structural violence), and solidarity (constructing a planetary consciousness and lines of intersection among multitudes). Each of these modes of practice is composed of a repertoire of tasks, as enumerated in figure 2, and is thereby transposable to the extent that such tasks are present in many apparently disparate sets of circumstances across the world.

Without making a claim to a totalizing representation of the field of global justice, or to the necessary complementarity or contradiction between modes of practice, the model proposed here has the merit of incorporating five patterns of ethico-political action that are particularly salient in many societies and for which actors mobilize noticeably intense social labor. More and more progressive forces are organizing their struggles in the form of testimonial gestures, forgiving, preventing harm, lending assistance, and developing a planetary consciousness, which is generating simultaneously zones of conflict and affinity between them. In a similar vein, the schema covers a large swath of the progressive civic associations and institutions that participate in the enactment of global justice: these include eyewitnesses, diasporic ethno-cultural communities, and media outlets (for bearing witness); survivor groups, truth commissions, and transitional justice NGOs (for forgiveness); environmental movements and humanitarian NGOs (for foresight);

4. This is not to claim that the global diffusion of a mode of practice is necessarily unproblematic, as the desire to reproduce a widely publicized and relatively successful response to a global injustice in one setting may be plagued by insufficient consideration of local, national, and historical particularities in another setting.
public health and emergency relief organizations (for aid); and multiple players in the alternative globalization movement (for solidarity).

The constellation of five modes of practice of global justice renders in action-theoretical terms the conventional categories of civil-political and socioeconomic rights: whereas bearing witness and forgiveness concern the former, aid and solidarity involve the latter, with foresight applying to both dimensions. However, the model that I am proposing adopts a “perspectival dualism” (Fraser 1997; Fraser and Honneth 2003) in demonstrating that these two aspects are indivisible because mutually constitutive. Resistance to structural violence as well as the transnational redistribution of material and symbolic resources, via practices of aid and solidarity, sustains processes of bearing witness and forgiveness, which themselves facilitate the recognition of past and present-day mass human rights violations that is required if assisting distant others and cultivating a sense of reciprocity with them are to be possible on the global stage.

What binds this constellation together are three common features of all instances of the work of global justice: intersubjectivity, publicity, and transnationalism. First, the five modes of practice are intersubjective in that they involve dialogical processes of recognition between two parties: namely, groups that experience, anticipate, or inform others of instances of structural or situational violence (eyewitnesses, activists, media, etc.) and groups that pick up such calls and convert

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**Figure 2** The Work of Global Justice
them into political demands (social movements, NGOs, and so on). Accordingly, within formal and informal sectors of the world order, struggles for global justice strive to construct politicized audiences that, by recognizing the claims of victims and survivors of human rights abuses, are able and willing to take steps to stop or avert such abuses. Second, the work of global justice draws upon civic associations’ capacity to invent and sustain public spaces at the local, national, and transnational levels, which are designed to foster wide-ranging democratic participation and citizens’ involvement in processes of debate and deliberation about human rights and an alternative globalization. I am using an expansive definition of these worksites of global justice, in order to include public arenas as varied as art exhibits and international tribunals, in addition to protest marches and media outlets transmitting accounts of given humanitarian crises. Such spaces are simultaneously enabling to modes of practice and produced by them, for civil society actors’ initiatives publicize global injustices and try to affect public opinion about them. Third, due to the efforts of these same civil society actors, the work of global justice is being transnationalized to the extent that public and political awareness of cases of situational and structural violence is crossing borders in significant ways. Of course, the local and national aspects of modes of practice of global justice remain just as meaningful as ever, but the transnational dimension is superimposing itself atop them and thereby adding another layer of sociopolitical struggle and normative claims to human rights. In fact, activists may sometimes bypass their “home” nation-state when unfavorable or hostile circumstances result in the domestic nonrecognition or misrecognition of their claims (e.g., because of governmental denial or public indifference). In such instances, civic associations can “scale up” by appealing for transnational support and drawing upon legal and institutional avenues in the form of advocacy networks, multilateral treaties, intergovernmental organizations, international courts, or other states—in turn putting “rebound” pressure on recalcitrant domestic governments.5

Bringing to light the repertoires of tasks that constitute modes of practice of global justice is meant to underscore the work of global justice: the latter is less an abstract norm or institutional outcome than a multidimensional, socially and historically constructed project produced by the ethico-political labor of emancipatory struggles—one that may be undone through antagonism between various practices or, conversely, may have an added valence because of their complementarity. Further, there is no singularity or permanent stabilization of the meaning of global justice, for such meaning is always contested by different progressive actors and susceptible to dissensus. As such, the crucial question not only concerns how global justice is legislated from above through normative ideals or procedural-cum-organizational arrangements, but also how its imperfect manifestations may or may not function in concrete sociocultural settings; what matters, then, are the ways that progressive civil society participants attempt to put global justice into practice by confronting difficulties and obstacles that characterize the labor of bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid, and solidarity. It is in the performance of tasks defining these modes of

5. Keck and Sikkink identify this phenomenon as a “boomerang pattern” of activism (1998, 12–3).
practice and in the negotiation of antagonisms between actors that lie the sociopolitical and ethical thickness of global justice and, ultimately, the prospects of an alternative globalization.

Resignified in this manner, human rights matter only to the extent that agents put them into practice via forms of action that challenge relations of exploitation and domination, as well as contribute to systemic change at the global and national level—thereby protecting persons and groups from mass, severe, and structural injustices or, more affirmatively, contributing to meeting human needs and making human capacities flourish via the establishment of a different world order. Accordingly, the work of global justice is productive of the field of human rights itself and practices are thereby simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by structures (from above) and forms of political action (from below). Modes of practice represent processes of permanent invention and reconfiguration of such relations that seek to generate new structural configurations and normative principles—including the perpetual interrogation of existing human rights laws, institutions, actors, and strategies, as well as the identification of previously unsuspected relations of domination and the emergence of new sociopolitical projects, claims, and forms of struggle directed toward structural transformation of the world order.

Integral to the work of global justice is the fact that struggle represents the core of its enactment—and this, using two meanings of the term. In the first instance, relations of power structure the fields of action within which modes of practice operate, as actors strive to obtain and retain material and symbolic resources and to exercise strategies through which to advance their interests and have their world-views recognized by governments, international organizations, and ordinary citizens. Accordingly, divergences and similarities between such actors over the definition of what constitutes global justice are present to the extent that discursive contest is integral to the process. Struggle is also used to denote the work of global justice’s Sisyphean character: namely, the fact that it consists of perpetually difficult, even flawed and aporetic, labor. Indeed, modes of practice of global justice cannot permanently or completely overcome sociopolitical and normative perils, but must instead constantly and contingently begin to confront them anew by attempting to enact a variety of tasks; no moment of transcendence, finality, or perfection awaits those who perform these tasks, which aim as much to curb or avert grievous human rights abuses as to achieve universal emancipation. In this respect, what we need to recognize is that such labor fails to assist human beings at least as frequently as it succeeds in doing so, and that its effectiveness has been hitherto rather modest when we consider the state of the world today. Over the past decade, despite certain promising institutional developments in the field of human rights and the increasing prevalence of human rights discourses in public spheres, severe global injustices regularly occur. Consequently, the recurrence of both structural and situational forms of violence continues to subject populations in the global South to material and symbolic deprivations (including extreme poverty, famine, crimes against humanity, and epidemics) on an all too frequent basis. Nonetheless, acknowledging difficulty and contingency does not imply that the work of global justice is thereby futile or that we must resign...
ourselves to the status quo. On the contrary, these realities bolster a materialism that views bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid, and solidarity as imperfect and enduring types of social action—rather than abstract ideals toward which we can strive—performed with resilience on messy terrain, in the face of dangers that incessantly threaten to engulf them. An alternative globalization, then, is not a teleological endpoint—the predetermined culmination of the necessary progress of emancipation over time through transcendence—but a laborious and imperfect working through without finality or guarantee of either commonality or contradiction.

Against Human Rights Blackmail

As laid out here, this conception of the work of global justice allows us to refuse to play a game of intellectual blackmail according to which participants must either unqualifiedly support claims made in the name of human rights lest they be deemed antidemocratic or indifferent to human suffering, or yet again wholly condemn the entire edifice of human rights to avoid charges of a naively idealistic liberalism or resurgent neoimperialism. This Manichean logic sustains a politically ontologizing vision of human rights, for which the latter contain a determinate political essence (as intrinsically and completely either emancipatory or oppressive). Yet the relevant question is not whether one is for or against human rights per se, but rather how we can perform a deontologizing and politicizing turn that understands and evaluates such rights as sociohistorical constructs that may be leveraged for emancipatory purposes while recognizing that they are produced through, and productive of, local, national, and global relations of power. Being located on the contested and antagonistic terrains of political struggle and public discourse, human rights claims are contingent and perilous; they carry no given truths or preordained outcomes that would somehow transcend the normative and sociopolitical contexts of their deployment. Their substance is unstable, being constantly under dispute and remade by virtue of how they insert themselves into existing structures and how they are enacted by groups and persons in particular circumstances. Concretely, then, what matters are the effects that human rights-related debates and struggles among multitudes have on the creation of an alternative globalization. To what extent do such developments assist progressive actors in accomplishing the tasks underpinning modes of practice of global justice?

This kind of social constructivist vision undercuts one side of the politically ontologizing blackmail of human rights, which portrays them as inherently laudable because they transcend power to enter into the rarefied air of pure morality. Human rights would thereby represent an “antipolitical” and “postideological” stance beyond the conventional Left-Right cleavages, one that supposedly stands for human beings as such by being solely concerned with protecting the innocent or vulnerable against injustices; declaring that they refuse to “play politics” with human lives, liberal proponents of human rights seek to elevate them into a moralizing position above politics. However, as critics have convincingly demonstrated (Badiou 2003, 21–2; Brown 2004; Žižek 2005), this actually marks an “antipolitical politics” that
employs a rhetorical strategy trading on the moral standing of humanitarianism in order to preempt or disqualify any questioning of the motives of those invoking human rights and the policies or broader sociopolitical schemes they advocate. Who, after all, would want to be characterized as an opponent of, or apathetic toward, human rights? And yet we ought to be vigilant in the face of the possible appropriation or instrumentalization of human rights to justify, or even obscure the pursuit of, a variety of projects on the world stage (principally Western neoimperialism, neoliberal capitalism, or manufactured civilizational clashes). We need only refer to the recent appearance of hawkish, neoconservative versions of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, which, by selectively favoring the use of military force against certain states in the name of human rights, convert human rights into the means of legitimation of Euro-American hegemony (Bartholomew and Breakspear 2004; Bricmont 2006; Kurasawa 2006; Pandolfi 2000).

If an “antipolitical” idealism is highly dubious, so, too, is its opposite in the politically ontologizing game of human rights blackmail—namely, the assertion that the instrumentalization of human rights discourses reveals their very essence and underlying truth as ideological devices through which capitalist globalization and Western military interventionism can be made to appear valid (or at least palatable to liberals), veils that distort or conceal the actual imperatives of a world system structured by the Realpolitik of national self-interest and by economic exploitation. According to this logic, human rights function to maintain the West’s domination (by intervening or threatening to intervene in countries of the global South whenever it may prove strategically useful) and spreading the neoliberal mantra of free trade (that is, facilitating the unregulated circulation of capital across borders and its unlimited access to an international pool of cheap labor power). Further, some analysts assert that liberal individualism represents the inalienable core of human rights, which cannot but support a thin conception of negative freedom whereby self-maximizing and monadic subjects are “empowered” to make unimpeded choices (about who to vote for on occasion, and what to purchase often) in the marketplace of civil and political life without addressing systemic inequalities and relations of domination (Brown 2004, 455; Teeple 2004)—or conversely, victimized being who are reduced to their animal substance (Badiou 2003, 26).

This absolutist critique should be taken seriously for it raises several incontrovertible problems about human rights. Foremost among these is the ever widening disjuncture between the consolidation of a human rights industry, on the one hand, and the unjust civil-political and eroding socioeconomic conditions under which most persons in the global South dwell, on the other. One need not enumerate the numerous contemporary instances of structural and political violence around the world to conclude that the record of concrete human rights achievements in the past half-century is at best mixed; modest improvements have been realized in some spheres for some people, yet a vast segment of humankind has experienced either stagnating or deteriorating situations (due to poverty, disease, civil war, gender domination, etc.). Moreover, a radical politics must be wary of the rhetorical and instrumental deployment of human rights for the purposes of legitimating neoliberal or neoconservative ends, or their immiseration to the point that citizens are envisaged as individualistic consumers of rights who are responsible for achieving,
or failing to achieve, whatever freedoms they are formally granted (or yet again become mere suffering beings).

Nonetheless, while acknowledging the possibility of such effects, we need not follow absolutism in its essentialization of them as ontological necessities. Put differently, we should not throw out the baby of the potentially emancipatory uses of human rights with the bathwater of their failed or flawed applications (or yet again their liberal iterations). For one, it is unwarranted to infer the existence of a causal relationship, instead of a simple correlation, between the ubiquity of a human rights industry and the lack of alleviation of suffering and material deprivation in the global South. Global injustices are not being reproduced because of human rights per se (an essentializing argument) but rather partly, although by no means exclusively, due to the excessively formalist route to the realization of these rights that many governmental and civil society advocates have hitherto pursued. Indeed, the crux of the problem lies with such advocates’ excessive focus on normative and institutional matters, which has misled them into conflating the buildup of an official human rights infrastructure and of public discourse with actual progress in the socioeconomic and civil-political circumstances of people on the ground. Yet despite the prominence of liberal formalism, human rights should not be reduced to it and thereby dismissed. In addition, as I understand them here, human rights are understood not just negatively as the absence of “evil” or suffering, but affirmatively as discursive devices that contain a vision of the realization of collective potentiality (as the full development of the capabilities of all) through a radical politics geared toward structural transformation of established global structures in the manner specified in the next section.

Once we distance ourselves from the political essentialism and reductionism of the two poles of the human rights blackmail outlined above, the shift of analytical focus toward modes of practice of global justice enables us to contemplate the prospects of multitudes strategically employing human rights discourses and institutions as part of emancipatory ethico-political labor. While it should never be enframed by human rights, the work of global justice can draw on their normative and organizational resources to assist in the performance of the tasks required to construct an alternative globalization. This amounts to deploying what Žižek, following Lefort, has identified as the “symbolic efficacy of rights”: the formal dimension of human rights does not remain merely a form, for it has a political effectivity stemming from the substantive traces it leaves and its important spillover effects upon the content of socioeconomic and civil-political structures (Lefort 1986, 260–1; Žižek 2005, 130). Because of their vast public recognition, high standing, and institutional development, human rights offer a potent moral grammar and set of ethical horizons through which to produce an immanent critique of the existing world order, whose functioning contradicts governments’ and international organizations’ official commitments to the realization of such rights. Correspondingly, progressive civil society actors are reflexively situating their struggles “under the sign of the defence of human rights” (Lefort 1986, 242) so that instances of genocide, extreme poverty, capitalist exploitation, gender subordination, and health pandemics, among others, can be conceived of and denounced as violations of the fundamental rights to which all human beings are entitled. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan stretching of the moral
imagination, to the point that distant strangers are treated as concrete and morally equal persons whose rights are being violated or incompletely realized, offers nascent public legitimacy and political traction for the interventions of progressive groups in national and global civil societies. Because of the presence of human rights discourses, these groups can push for greater public debate about the past (how do we remember crimes against humanity, and how do we deal with their contemporary effects?), the present (how should we halt collective suffering in our midst, and how do we achieve a just world order?), and the future (how do we avert eventual humanitarian disasters, and how do we promote the capabilities of all?), including challenging systemic sources of inequality and domination. Rather than adopting a weakly moralizing strategy satisfied with lamenting how deplorable such circumstances are, multitudes can gain a certain degree of ethical and institutional traction in the current world order by presenting them as unjust conditions that deprive persons of their universally recognized rights to safety, food, shelter, gender equality, health, and so on.

Of course, a radical politics understood in terms of the work of global justice points beyond the symbolic efficacy of human rights, toward a substantive thickening and politically radicalizing redeployment of them to sustain a transcendent mode of critique that puts into question the current parameters of the world order. If the formation of a multilateral human rights edifice on the international stage appears to be a strictly formal development, it does enable progressive forces to employ legal means to rein in corporate and state power along democratic and egalitarian lines, or at least to try to symbolically shame institutions violating human rights into respecting their official engagements. Since the meaning of human rights as a discursively mediated social imaginary is open to contestation, progressive transnational actors can subversively appropriate them; indeed, once formally entrenched and validated, a bundle of rights can be thickened and politicized to become a normative and legal means of tackling the systemic roots of situational and structural injustices, not least of which is capitalist exploitation. When inserted into struggles within which they serve as components of practices of global justice, human rights can produce political leverage to organize and legitimate demands for the systemic transformation of the world order in the direction of an alternative globalization. The latter becomes a sine qua non condition to end mass abuses of civil-political and socioeconomic rights and, more affirmatively, to enact the symbolic and material underpinnings of the oft-declared principle of universal moral equality. This is precisely why certain activist groups have pushed for the signing of enforceable international treaties on socioeconomic rights and for the creation of the International Criminal Court—and conversely, why many states have been opposed to both initiatives (lest a government be sued for violating the basic rights to food, shelter, and health of its citizens, or U.S. military personnel and political leaders be prosecuted for war crimes). The work of global justice, then, uses existing institutional and legal tools to move toward a substantial reorganization of economic and political structures and redistribution of material and symbolic resources in line with the cosmopolitan idea of planetary egalitarian reciprocity (Habermas and Derrida 2003, 369; Woodiwiss 2005, 150 n. 1).
Therefore, rather than appealing to the aforementioned additive tendencies of formalist and liberal versions of human rights (that consist in strictly trying to increase the number of individuals with rights and the number of rights granted to each individual), a radical politics can selectively deploy and redefine human rights to contribute to the labor of radically restructuring sociopolitical relations at local, national, and global scales via participatory political and economic democracy, the North-South and domestic redistribution of resources and of capacities for existence, the establishment of new institutions of global governance, and intercultural dialogue. To briefly flesh out this vision, we should turn to critical cosmopolitanism.

**Fragments of a Critical Cosmopolitanism**

Given how ubiquitous the idea of cosmopolitanism has become in recent years and the fact that it is far from an unproblematic term, we should establish what a critical rendition of it is not. Among the flawed formulations of cosmopolitanism there exist two kinds “from above”: a formalism asserting that the legal, political, and moral institutionalization of the cosmopolitan spirit will have trickle-down effects on the everyday lives of populations; and a cultural elitism whereby economically dominant and spatially mobile persons identify themselves as rootless citizens of the world in order to demarcate themselves hierarchically vis-à-vis locally or nationally oriented groups, or according to which European civilization is elevated into the natural hearth and last remaining dwelling place of cosmopolitan thought (and, by implication, the rest of the world appears unsophisticated and provincial). Equally dubious is a neoliberal brand of cosmopolitanism often voiced by Western political and corporate leaders, who declare that free trade and unregulated markets are the preeminent vehicles through which formerly “isolated” states can become members of the international concert of liberal, enlightened nations. The exposure of such nations’ domestic economies to foreign investments, goods, and services through privatization and deepening integration into circuits of global capitalism will supposedly nurture democratization and openness to the outside world (Calhoun 2003; Gowan 2003; Hardt and Negri 2004, 234). Not to be forgotten is a neoimperialist usurpation of cosmopolitanism, which cynically appeals to the latter to legitimate the securing of Pax Americana. Cosmopolitan values are thereby converted into ideological weapons aiming to justify a new civilizing mission, that of “democratizing” a highly selective list of strategically significant “rogue regimes” in the global South by waging war against them. To paraphrase Rousseau, it may well be necessary to force these states to become “cosmopolitan”—that is to say, supportive of, or at least compliant with, U.S. geopolitical and economic interests. Clearly, then, any invocation of cosmopolitanism is to be taken with a great deal of skepticism.

That is why it is paramount to build upon the insights of those who have put forth the outlines of a critical cosmopolitan project articulated around principles of radical, participatory democracy and egalitarian reciprocity (Archibugi 2003; Beck 2003).

6. For critiques of this position, see Appiah (2006); Calhoun (2003).
2006; Habermas and Derrida 2003). Yet we can also cultivate this project’s emancipatory potential by anchoring it in the work of global justice, given that the latter’s modes of practice are constitutive of strategies through which multitudes can enact critical cosmopolitanism and underscore the ethico-political labor involved in reshaping the current world order’s economic, political, and cultural dimensions in the direction of an alternative globalization (see Figure 3).

The economic aspects of critical cosmopolitanism can take aim at neoliberal capitalism’s role in the reproduction of exploitation, structural violence, and distributional inequity within and between societies (chronic poverty, malnutrition and disease on a massive scale, etc.). Progressive forces can demand the establishment of a radically democratic model of governance of global economic activity, to replace the institutions of the Washington Consensus (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) and the World Trade Organization by an infrastructure prioritizing North-South redistribution and regulation of transnational financial and trade flows (e.g., the “social-index tariff structure” [SITS] proposal familiar to readers of this journal [DeMartino 2000]) as well as favoring participatory and collectivist systems of ownership and control of the means of production geared toward meeting basic needs and realizing capabilities equality, such as experiments

![Figure 3](image-url)
with workers’ self-management. The practice of foresight lays the groundwork here since participants in national and global civil societies are seeking to cultivate their capacities for far-sighted anticipation and public judgment in order to prevent or reverse the continued application of neoliberal orthodoxy in poor societies; for instance, several progressive NGOs and social movements have mobilized popular opposition to structural adjustment programs by building predictive models about the kind of economic havoc and social dislocation wreaked upon heavily indebted countries in the past. Likewise, the practice of transnational solidarity is vital to a critical cosmopolitanism in that its forging of a sense of responsibility for the socioeconomic plight of all human beings normatively bolsters redistributive projects while undermining the neoliberal promotion of privatized and unregulated markets characterized by profit maximization and wealth concentration. In turn, far-sighted and solidaristic action feeds the practice of aid, whose labor of reciprocity and egalitarian cooperation can foster structural transformations of the global economy by defending a notion of universal, free, and “noncommodifiable” public goods as well as collective ownership and control of productive resources to meet socioeconomic rights (to food, health, shelter, etc.) that are presently violated.

Politically, the threats of a belligerent, neoimperialist U.S. unilateralism (exercised in the name of the “war on terror”), the resurgence of large-scale state violence, and the prevalence of crimes against humanity in many situations can be countered in a variety of ways: fostering a polycentric decisionmaking structure at the international level with the participation of multitudes; deterring political and military leaders from perpetrating acts of mass violence through sanctions and prosecution; and the enforcement and affirmation of civil-political rights in all parts of the world. The practice of bearing witness advances some of the political components of an alternative globalization, given that its tasks of giving voice to survivors of past and present atrocities, commemorating their suffering, and generating empathy for them can simultaneously alert publics about the occurrence of such atrocities and urge international organizations to put an end to armed conflict and domestic campaigns of organized violence (such as civil war, ethnic cleansing, or genocide).

Just as important, the labor of foresight enables far-sighted anticipation and action to prevent abuses of civil-political rights, through multilateral military intervention if necessary, while at the same time enriching democratic mechanisms of deliberation and assessment of the legitimacy of foreseeable humanitarian disasters and the means to address them—so that the cases of Rwanda and Darfur, on the one hand, and Iraq on the other, can be clearly distinguished. Nonetheless, if prevention fails, the labor of forgiveness becomes an essential element of the work of global justice because it struggles to ensure that those perpetrating crimes against humanity be held responsible for their acts restoratively or retributively, including the option of their prosecution in institutions such as the International Criminal Court. Moreover, it nurtures forms of collective mourning and reconciliation that seek political paths opposed to retaliatory and ever escalating cycles of warfare and violence (Butler 2004).

Critical cosmopolitanism’s cultural labor, for its part, must face up to the resurgence and clash of ethno-racial and religious fundamentalisms in contemporary domestic and world politics, world-views that essentialize similarities within
communities and divergences between them in order to present them as incommen-
surable and discrete enemies doomed to entertain conflictual relations with one
another. To resist these tendencies, a radical politics can support an intercultural
dialogism that deeply engages with different ways of life and thinking to produce a
vision of a just world order in which the recognition of the right to individual and
collective difference is bound to the assertion of universal equality. As such, listening
to, debating with, and learning from non-Western traditions of thought and the
manner in which progressive actors in the global South conceptualize human rights
can assist in reformulating cosmopolitanism and global justice in more inclusive
directions—so that, for instance, demands emanating from poor regions of the world
to consider international debt repayment as a grave injustice and the rights to food
and health as paramount can become cosmopolitan values. The practice of bearing
witness sustains this kind of intercultural dialogism by attempting to open up public
spaces for the testimonials of distant strangers to be heard and to foster under-
standing of their plight through audiences’ partial transposition into their shoes; the
resulting humanization of such strangers can weaken stigmatizing and reductionist
perceptions of them as mere representatives of threatening ideologies or group
identities. But the tasks of embracing pluralism and creating webs of affinity, which
inform the practice of solidarity, are equally significant in that they can destabilize
Manichean and purist models of collective identity by weaving solidaristic bonds that
cut across apparent civilizational, religious, or ethno-racial divides, and thereby
demonstrate the fluidity of sociocultural boundaries as well as the syncretism of
societies. To be cosmopolitan in this sense signifies moving past an ethically thin
tolerance for otherness or kindness toward strangers, toward participation in forms of
political action that assert human beings’ equal status while constructing a planetary
consciousness according to which a shared yet diverse human condition marked by
hybridity and métissage can thrive above and beyond absolutist categories of
familiarity, sameness, and proximity (Appiah 2006; Gilroy 2005, 67, 75; Sen 2006).

Conceiving of global justice as ethico-political labor, then, materially substantiates
and thickens cosmopolitanism. If the latter is to become more than an expression of
socioeconomic privilege or neoliberal capitalism, and if it is to avert being converted
into a tool of cultural imperialism, it will do so by grounding itself in forms of
emancipatory normative and sociopolitical action. Likewise, if human rights are to
move down from their formalist perches to become devices that can be mobilized to
combat global injustices and systems of domination, they will need to be redeployed
as components of the enactment of an alternative globalization. Then, and only then,
will the work of global justice sustain a politics of multitudes.

Acknowledgments

The research for and writing of this article were made possible by a Standard
Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
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