

peter singer

one world

the ethics of globalization

Second Edition



Yale Nota Bene

yale university press new haven & london

I a changing world

Consider two aspects of globalization: first, planes exploding as they slam into the World Trade Center, and second, the emission of carbon dioxide from the exhausts of gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles. One brought instant death and left unforgettable images that were watched on television screens all over the world; the other makes a contribution to climate change that can be detected only by scientific instruments. Yet both are indications of the way in which we are now one world, and the more subtle changes to which sport utility vehicle owners unintentionally contribute will almost certainly kill far more people than the highly visible one. When people in rich nations switch to vehicles that use more fuel than the cars they used to drive, they contribute to changes in the climate of Mozambique or Bangladesh—changes that may cause crops to fail, sea levels to rise, and tropical diseases to spread. As scientists pile up the evidence that continuing greenhouse gas emissions will imperil millions of lives, the leader of the nation that emits the largest share of these gases has said: “We will not do anything that harms our economy, be-

cause first things first are the people who live in America.”¹ Consistently with this approach, as sales of sport utility vehicles increase, the average gas mileage of cars sold in the United States falls, and each year the U.S. Congress rejects measures to raise fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks. The last time federal standards were raised was in 1985.²

President George W. Bush’s remarks were not an aberration, but an expression of an ethical view that he has held for some time. In the second presidential debate against Vice-President Gore, then-Governor Bush was asked what use he would make of America’s power and influence in the world. He said that he would use it for the benefit of all Americans. He may have learned this ethic from his father. The first President George Bush had said much the same thing at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. When representatives of developing nations asked Bush senior to put on the agenda the over-consumption of resources by the developed countries, especially the United States, he said “the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation.” It was not negotiable, apparently, even if maintaining this lifestyle will lead to the deaths of millions of people subject to increasingly unpredictable weather and the loss of land used by tens of millions more people because of rising ocean levels and local flooding.³

But it is not only the two Bush administrations that have put the interests of Americans first. When it came to the crunch in the Balkans, the Clinton-Gore administration made it very clear that it was not prepared to risk the life of a single American in order to reduce the number of civilian casualties. In the context of the debate over whether to intervene in Bosnia to stop Serb “ethnic cleansing” operations directed against Bosnian Moslems, Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, quoted with approval the remark of the nineteenth-century German statesman Otto von Bismarck, that all the Balkans were not worth

the bones of a single one of his soldiers.⁴ Bismarck, however, was not thinking of intervening in the Balkans to stop crimes against humanity. As Chancellor of Imperial Germany, he assumed that his country followed its national interest. To use his remark today as an argument against humanitarian intervention is to return to nineteenth-century power politics, ignoring both the bloody wars that style of politics brought about in the first half of the twentieth century, and the efforts of the second half of the twentieth century to find a better foundation for peace and the prevention of crimes against humanity.

In Kosovo, though the policy of giving absolute priority to American lives did not prevent intervention to defend the Kosovars, it led to the restriction of intervention to aerial bombardment. This strategy was a total success: NATO forces suffered not a single casualty in combat. Approximately 300 Kosovar, 209 Serb, and 3 Chinese civilians were killed. Observing the American policy, Timothy Garton Ash wrote: “It is a perverted moral code that will allow a million innocent civilians of another race to be made destitute because you are not prepared to risk the life of a single professional soldier of your own.” This blunt condemnation of the approach to the duties of a national leader taken by—at least—the last three American presidents forces us to consider a fundamental ethical issue. To what extent should political leaders see their role narrowly, in terms of promoting the interests of their citizens, and to what extent should they be concerned with the welfare of people everywhere?

Romano Prodi, at the time President of the Commission of the European Union, and a former Prime Minister of Italy, responded to President George W. Bush’s “first things first” statement by saying that “if one wants to be a world leader, one must know how to look after the entire earth and not only American industry.” But the question is not only one for those who aspire to be world lead-

ers. The leaders of smaller nations must also consider, in contexts like global warming, trade pacts, foreign aid, and the treatment of refugees, to what extent they are prepared to consider the interests of “outsiders.”

As Ash suggests, there is a strong ethical case for saying that it is wrong for leaders to give absolute priority to the interests of their own citizens. The value of the life of an innocent human being does not vary according to nationality. But, it might be said, the abstract ethical idea that all humans are entitled to equal consideration cannot govern the duties of a political leader. Just as parents are expected to provide for the interests of their own children, rather than for the interests of strangers, so too in accepting the office of president of the United States, George W. Bush has taken on a specific role that makes it his duty to protect and further the interests of Americans. Other countries have their leaders, with similar roles in respect of the interests of their fellow citizens. There is no world political community, and as long as that situation prevails, we must have nation-states, and the leaders of those nation-states must give preference to the interests of their citizens. Otherwise, unless electors were suddenly to turn into altruists of a kind never before seen on a large scale, democracy could not function. American voters would not elect a president who gave no more weight to their interests than he or she gave to the interests of Bosnians or Afghans. Our leaders feel that they must give some degree of priority to the interests of their own citizens, and they are, so this argument runs, right to do so. But what does “some degree of priority” amount to, in practice?

Related to this question about the duties of national leaders is another one: Is the division of the world’s people into sovereign nations a dominant and unalterable fact of life? Here our thinking has been affected by the horrors of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. In Rwanda, a United Nations inquiry took the view that

2,500 military personnel, given the proper training and mandate, might have saved 800,000 lives.⁵ Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who, as Under-Secretary-General for Peace-Keeping Operations at the time, must bear some responsibility for what the inquiry has termed a “terrible and humiliating” paralysis, has learned from this situation. Now he urges, “the world cannot stand aside when gross and systematic violations of human rights are taking place.” What we need, he has said, are “legitimate and universal principles” on which we can base intervention.⁶ This means a redefinition of state sovereignty, or more accurately, an abandonment of the absolute idea of state sovereignty that has prevailed in Europe since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

The aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001 underlined in a very different way the extent to which our thinking about state sovereignty has changed over the past century. In the summer of 1914 another act of terrorism shocked the world: the assassination of the Austrian Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, by a Bosnian Serb nationalist. In the wake of that outrage Austria-Hungary presented an ultimatum to Serbia in which it laid out the evidence that the assassins were trained and armed by the Black Hand, a shadowy Serbian organization headed by the chief of Serbian military intelligence. The Black Hand was tolerated or supported by other Serbian government officials, and Serbian officials arranged safe passage across the border into Bosnia for the seven conspirators in the assassination plot.⁷ Accordingly, Austria-Hungary’s ultimatum demanded that the Serbs bring those responsible to justice and allow Austro-Hungarian officials to inspect the files to ensure that this had been done properly.

Despite the clear evidence of the involvement of Serbian officials in the crime—evidence that, historians agree, was substantially accurate—the ultimatum Austria-Hungary presented was

widely condemned in Russia, France, Britain, and the United States. "The most formidable document I have ever seen addressed by one State to another that was independent," the British Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey, called it.⁸ The American Legion's official history of the Great War used less diplomatic language, referring to the ultimatum as a "vicious document of unproven accusation and tyrannical demand."⁹ Many historians studying the origins of the First World War have condemned the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum as demanding more than one sovereign nation may properly ask of another. They have added that the Austro-Hungarian refusal to negotiate after the Serbian government accepted many, but not all, of its demands, is further evidence that Austria-Hungary, together with its backer Germany, wanted an excuse to declare war on Serbia. Hence they must bear the guilt for the outbreak of the war and the nine million deaths that followed.

Now consider the American response to the terrorist attacks of September 11. The demands made of the Taliban by the Bush administration in 2001 were scarcely less stringent than those made by Austria-Hungary of Serbia in 1914. (The main difference is that the Austro-Hungarians insisted on the suppression of hostile nationalist propaganda. Freedom of speech was not so widely regarded, then, as a human right.) Moreover the American demand that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden was made without presenting to the Taliban any evidence at all linking him to the attacks of September 11. Yet the U.S. demands, far from being condemned as a mere pretext for aggressive war, were endorsed as reasonable and justifiable by a wide-ranging coalition of nations. When President Bush said, in speeches and press conferences after September 11, that he would not draw a distinction between terrorists and regimes that harbor terrorists, no ambassadors, foreign ministers, or United Nations representatives denounced this

as a "vicious" doctrine or a "tyrannical" demand on other sovereign nations. The Security Council broadly endorsed it, in its resolution of September 28, 2001.¹⁰ It seems that world leaders now accept that every nation has an obligation to every other nation of the world to suppress activities within its borders that might lead to terrorist attacks carried out in other countries, and that it is reasonable to go to war with a nation that does not do so. If Kaisers Franz Joseph I and Wilhelm II could see this, they might well feel that, since 1914, the world has come round to their view.

Shortly before the September 11 attacks, a United Nations panel issued a report pointing out that even if there were no altruistic concern among the rich nations to help the world's poor, their own self-interest should lead them to do so:

In the global village, someone else's poverty very soon becomes one's own problem: of lack of markets for one's products, illegal immigration, pollution, contagious disease, insecurity, fanaticism, terrorism.¹¹

Terrorism has made our world an integrated community in a new and frightening way. Not merely the activities of our neighbors, but those of the inhabitants of the most remote mountain valleys of the farthest-flung countries of our planet, have become our business. We need to extend the reach of the criminal law there and to have the means to bring terrorists to justice without declaring war on an entire country in order to do it. For this we need a sound global system of criminal justice, so justice does not become the victim of national differences of opinion. We also need, though it will be far more difficult to achieve, a sense that we really are one community, that we are people who recognize not only the force of prohibitions against killing each other but also the pull of obligations to assist one another. This may not stop religious fanatics from carrying out suicide missions, but it

will help to isolate them and reduce their support. It was not a coincidence that just two weeks after September 11, conservative members of the U.S. Congress abandoned their opposition to the payment of \$582 million in back dues that the United States owed to the United Nations.¹² Now that America was calling for the world to come to its aid to stamp out terrorism, it was apparent that America could no longer flout the rules of the global community to the extent that it had been doing before September 11.

We have lived with the idea of sovereign states for so long that they have come to be part of the background not only of diplomacy and public policy but also of ethics. Implicit in the term “globalization” rather than the older “internationalization” is the idea that we are moving beyond the era of growing ties between nations and are beginning to contemplate something beyond the existing conception of the nation-state. But this change needs to be reflected in all levels of our thought, and especially in our thinking about ethics.

To see how much our thinking about ethics needs to change, consider the work that, better than any other, represents late-twentieth-century thinking on justice in the liberal American establishment: John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*. When I first read this book, shortly after its publication in 1971, I was astonished that a book with that title, nearly 600 pages long, could utterly fail to discuss the injustice of the extremes of wealth and poverty that exist between different societies. Rawls’s method (this is like mother’s milk to every philosophy or politics student now) is to seek the nature of justice by asking what principles people would choose if they were choosing in conditions that prevented them from knowing what position they themselves would occupy. That is, they must choose without knowing whether they themselves would be rich or poor, a member of the dominant ethnic major-

ity or of an ethnic minority, a religious believer or an atheist, highly skilled or unskilled, and so on. If we were to apply this method globally rather than for a given society, it would immediately be obvious that one fact about which those making the choice should be ignorant is whether they are citizens of a rich nation such as the United States or of a poor nation such as Haiti. In setting up his original choice, however, Rawls simply assumes that the people making the choice all belong to the same society and are choosing principles to achieve justice *within* their society. Hence when he argues that people choosing under the conditions he prescribes would choose a principle that, subject to constraints intended to protect equal liberty and fair equality of opportunity, seeks to improve the position of the worst-off, he limits the conception of “worst-off” to those within one’s own society. If he accepted that to choose justly, people must also be ignorant of their citizenship, his theory would become a forceful argument for improving the prospects of the worst-off people in the world. But in the most influential work on justice written in twentieth-century America, this question *never even arises*.¹³ Rawls does address it in his most recent book, *The Law of Peoples*, and I shall say something later about what he says there. His approach, however, remains firmly based on the idea that the unit for deciding what is just remains something like today’s nation-state. Rawls’s model is that of an international order, not a global order. This assumption needs reconsidering.

For most of the eons of human existence, people living only short distances apart might as well, for all the difference they made to each other’s lives, have been living in separate worlds. A river, a mountain range, a stretch of forest or desert, a sea—these were enough to cut people off from each other. Over the past few centuries the isolation has dwindled, slowly at first, then with in-

creasing rapidity. Now people living on opposite sides of the world are linked in ways previously unimaginable.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Karl Marx gave a one-sentence summary of his theory of history:

The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist.¹⁴

Today he could have added:

The jet plane, the telephone, and the Internet give you a global society with the transnational corporation and the World Economic Forum.

Technology changes everything—that was Marx's claim, and if it was a dangerous half-truth, it was still an illuminating one. As technology has overcome distance, economic globalization has followed. In London supermarkets, fresh vegetables flown in from Kenya are offered for sale alongside those from nearby Kent. Planes bring illegal immigrants seeking to better their own lives in a country they have long admired. In the wrong hands the same planes become lethal weapons that bring down tall buildings. Instant digital communication spreads the nature of international trade from actual goods to skilled services. At the end of a day's trading, a bank based in New York may have its accounts balanced by clerks living in India. The increasing degree to which there is a single world economy is reflected in the development of new forms of global governance, the most controversial of which has been the World Trade Organization, but the WTO is not itself the creator of the global economy.

Global market forces provide incentives for every nation to put on what Thomas Friedman has called "a Golden Strait-jacket," a set of policies that involve freeing up the private sector of the economy, shrinking the bureaucracy, keeping inflation

low, and removing restrictions on foreign investment. If a country refuses to wear the Golden Straitjacket, or tries to take it off, then the electronic herd—the currency traders, stock and bond traders, and those who make investment decisions for multinational corporations—could gallop off in a different direction, taking with it the investment capital that countries want to keep their economy growing. When capital is internationally mobile, to raise your tax rates is to risk triggering a flight of capital to other countries with comparable investment prospects and lower taxation. The upshot is that as the economy grows and average incomes rise, the scope of politics may shrink—at least as long as no political party is prepared to challenge the assumption that global capitalism is the best economic system. When neither the government nor the opposition is prepared to take the risk of removing the Golden Straitjacket, the differences between the major political parties shrink to differences over minor ways in which the Straitjacket might be adjusted.¹⁵ Thus even without the WTO, the growth of the global economy itself marks a decline in the power of the nation-state.

Marx argued that in the long run we never reject advances in the means by which we satisfy our material needs. Hence history is driven by the growth of productive forces. He would have been contemptuous of the suggestion that globalization is something foisted on the world by a conspiracy of corporate executives meeting in Switzerland, and he might have agreed with Thomas Friedman's remark that the most basic truth about globalization is "*No one is in charge.*"¹⁶ For Marx this is a statement that epitomizes humanity in a state of alienation, living in a world in which, instead of ruling ourselves, we are ruled by our own creation, the global economy. For Friedman, on the other hand, all that needs to be said about Marx's alternative—state control of the economy—is that *it doesn't work.*¹⁷ (Whether there are alter-

natives to both capitalism and centrally controlled socialism that could work is another question, but not one for this book.)

Marx also believed that a society's ethic is a reflection of the economic structure to which its technology has given rise. Thus a feudal economy in which serfs are tied to their lord's land gives you the ethic of feudal chivalry based on the loyalty of knights and vassals to their lord, and the obligations of the lord to protect them in time of war. A capitalist economy requires a mobile labor force able to meet the needs of the market, so it breaks the tie between lord and vassal, substituting an ethic in which the right to buy and sell labor is paramount. Our newly interdependent global society, with its remarkable possibilities for linking people around the planet, gives us the material basis for a new ethic. Marx would have thought that such an ethic would serve the interests of the ruling class, that is, the rich nations and the transnational corporations they have spawned. But perhaps our ethics is related to our technology in a looser, less deterministic, way than Marx thought. Ethics appears to have developed from the behavior and feelings of social mammals. It became distinct from anything we can observe in our closest nonhuman relatives when we started using our reasoning abilities to justify our behavior to other members of our group. If the group to which we must justify ourselves is the tribe, or the nation, then our morality is likely to be tribal, or nationalistic. If, however, the revolution in communications has created a global audience, then we might feel a need to justify our behavior to the whole world. This change creates the material basis for a new ethic that will serve the interests of all those who live on this planet in a way that, despite much rhetoric, no previous ethic has ever done.¹⁸

If this appeal to our need for ethical justification appears to be based on too generous a view of human nature, there is another consideration of a very different kind that leads in the same di-

rection. The great empires of the past, whether Persian, Roman, Chinese, or British, were, as long as their power lasted, able to keep their major cities safe from threatening barbarians on the frontiers of their far-flung realms. In the twenty-first century the greatest superpower in history was unable to keep the self-appointed warriors of a different world-view from attacking both its greatest city and its capital. The thesis of this book is that how well we come through the era of globalization (perhaps whether we come through it at all) will depend on how we respond ethically to the idea that we live in one world. For the rich nations not to take a global ethical viewpoint has long been seriously morally wrong. Now it is also, in the long term, a danger to their security.