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### Recommended Citation

Arneson, Richard J. (2006) "Global Institutional Reform and Global Social Movements Are Complementary, Not Opposed," *Cornell International Law Journal*: Vol. 39: Iss. 3, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol39/iss3/3>

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# Global Institutional Reform and Global Social Movements Are Complementary, Not Opposed

Richard J. Arneson†

Comment on Richard Miller's *Global Institutional Reform and Global Social Movements: From False Promise to Realistic Hope*

Richard Miller calls for building global social movements and counterposes this proposal to seeking global institutional reform. I am puzzled by the counterposition. On the face of it, one might suppose that one useful thing that global social movements might do is press for desirable global institutional reform. Perhaps some reform proposals are a trap for the unwary, but then intelligent social movements will pick and choose, and embrace only the desirable proposals (the ones that seem desirable on the basis of the available evidence). For example, a global movement that decries horrific child labor practices by firms producing goods for the global market might call for international treaties that commit signing nations to ban such practices and for an international enforcement agency to impose sanctions on nations that fail to fulfill these commitments. For another example, a global movement that both welcomes some so-called humanitarian military intervention by big powers in places undergoing huge, horrible rights violations, but is concerned that approval of humanitarian intervention might encourage a trend that degenerates into widespread bullying of weak countries whose policies irritate big powers, might lobby for some institutional reform that speaks to both concerns. One might lobby for a clear criterion of justifiable humanitarian military intervention coupled with the establishment of an international body empowered to authorize intervention that satisfies the criterion. I do not mean to be seriously advancing any particular reform proposals here. I mean to challenge Richard Miller's proposal that global social movements ought to refrain entirely from seeking global institutional reform.

To this Miller responds that any such reforms would inevitably be hijacked by the big powers, especially by the U.S. (the sole superpower at present), and used by them as tools to advance their own interests. For this reason these type of reforms would be counterproductive. I will call this the hijacking problem.

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No doubt there is some tendency toward hijacking as Miller notes. But its strength will likely vary from situation to situation depending, *inter alia*, on the type of reform that is at issue. Miller does not provide any evidence for the claim that any institutional reform that would likely be favored by progressive critics of the current global order would always do harm rather than good if it were established. I doubt that careful examination of the evidence would support his extreme claim.

We should also distinguish the consequences of pressing for global institutional reforms from the consequences if they were to be put in place. The former can be positive when the latter are negative, and vice versa. A particular case to notice is that of a sensible reform idea, one that would do great good for the world's peoples if it were instituted, but that is sharply counterposed to the interests of the big powers, which would surely prevent its adoption. But, regardless, touting the merits of the reform proposal and pressing for its adoption might do a lot of good, by both increasing people's rational allegiance to sound global policies and by undermining their allegiance to the big powers that so cynically and selfishly oppose them.

Take the case that is troubling Miller, namely, a global institutional reform with these characteristics: the consequences of its implementation by fair-minded, competent, and sincerely committed agencies would be highly desirable, but the overwhelming likelihood is that if it were actually to be implemented, it would be hijacked by forces in thrall to the big powers, with predictable, undesirable consequences. In some cases of this type, the right strategy for reasonable critics of the current global order would be to lobby for the institutional reform on its merits and simultaneously to call people's attention to the hijacking problem, denounce the hijackers, and to fight tooth and nail against those who would derail or sabotage the reform. It is easy to see that this strategy choice for the critics might sometimes be the one with maximal expected value, all things considered, even when giving the hijacking problem its full weight in the decision making calculation. Building global justice movements and seeking global institutional reforms can be complementary rather than opposed tasks.

Another response to Richard Miller's concerns about the pitfalls of pressing for institutional reform would be to carefully consider these pitfalls when deliberating which reforms to pursue. Some institutional reform proposals are more prone to hijacking than others, and, other things being equal, one should prefer to identify and rally behind proposals that are more resistant to co-option by big powers.

But, of course, other things are not always equal, and another dimension of the issue that Miller neglects requires emphasis. The gravity of the hijacking problem itself varies depending on the degree to which, in connection with one or another institutional reform, the interests of the big powers and the interests of the world's people are aligned or opposed. A banal but important truth that theorists advising global social movements should not forget is that empires pursuing their global interests sometimes carry out policies that advance rather than retard the cause of humanity,

the global common good. The partial overlap of what is good for the big powers and what is good for the world's people extends to global institutional reform. So the hijacking problem is not in each and every case a problem at all, much less a problem the correct response to which is immediately apparent.

The Roman Empire constructed a large system of aqueducts, and this was no doubt good for the empire but might have been good for humanity as well. After World War II the U.S. participated in the rebuilding of Europe under the auspices of the Marshall Plan. No doubt this rebuilding effort was designed to aid the U.S. and thwart the ambitions of its superpower rival, the U.S.S.R., but I submit that the Marshall Plan was nonetheless good for humanity and not merely good for the U.S. in its pursuit of global hegemony.

Richard Miller above all wants to caution critics of the present global order not to conceive their proper role as essentially consisting of whispering sound advice into the ears of the leaders of the big powers and especially not of the current biggest power. The U.S., after all, is a menace to global progress on many fronts and should be confronted rather than cajoled. But the proper role of a critic is multi-faceted. Where U.S. interests conflict with the interests of the people of the world, rightly interpreted, the critic should denounce policies advancing U.S. interests. Where the enlightened, long-run interests of the U.S. or of the coalition of big powers coincide with the interests of the people of the world, rightly interpreted, the critic can proceed on two fronts, advising the leaders of the big powers and rallying progressive world public opinion. Since big powers sometimes pursue misguided and short-sighted conceptions of their strategic interests, and since there is room for arguing that enlightened self-interest should be tempered by morality, advising big powers as to where their true interests lie can be a job worthy of a global justice advocate. The enterprise is not necessarily immoral. Nor on the other hand is it otiose, since it is not a given that big powers always pursue the most enlightened conception of their long-run advantage. Moreover, global social movements, as Richard Miller conceives them, are just the institutional expression of global justice advocacy.

The possibility I have just abstractly described is the actual state of affairs that is obtained in connection with the institutional reform Richard Miller considers. This is to relax current restrictions in international treaties and international law on humanitarian military intervention (across the borders of a sovereign nation) that prevent massive violations of human rights short of genocide, massacre, or enslavement. Those who favor this relaxation tend to couple it with investing special authority in some United Nations special-purpose court or agency to decide on the legitimacy of any proposed intervention. Richard Miller finds institutional reform proposals along these lines to be generically bad ideas, because they are sure to be manipulated by the big powers and especially by the current sole superpower to advance its strategic interests against the interests of humanity.

My reply is simple. When the internal politics of a country have degenerated to the point that outside observers say that the government is perpetrating, or abjectly failing to prevent, massive serious human rights violations, outside military force can often improve the situation. There is a *prima facie* moral case for intervention in such circumstances, which should not be dismissed by appeal to statist conceptions of the rights of national sovereignty. Suppose that big powers are very unlikely to intervene in such circumstances to improve the situation, even if international law and international treaties call for this to be done, unless the big powers perceive that intervening will advance their interests. But that supposition, even if true, does not argue against the relaxation of international law or an expansion of United Nations authority to authorize selective military intervention. There may be a sufficient coincidence between big power interests in global stability and order, and the moral interest in preventing massive human rights violations, so that this is a case in which the hijacking problem does not generate an argument that defeats institutional reform proposals.

However, having said this much, I am not yet in a position to endorse any particular global institutional reform proposal motivated by the concerns outlined in the previous paragraph. The details matter and merit a careful examination that is beyond the scope of this comment. What I do claim to have shown is that Miller's generic suspicion of global institutional reform, rooted in concern about the hijacking problem, is off-base. He sees a genuine problem, but he exaggerates its magnitude and ignores offsetting factors.

The global institutional reforms that Miller disparages tend to involve bringing about a simulacrum of the rule of law in international affairs. The broad gaping problem, to which the reform problems are at best band-aid solutions, is that the international order is anarchic. The order and stability that an effective sovereign state provides within the borders of a single independent country are not matched by any comparable order-providing mechanism in a world of independent sovereign states each possessing varying amounts of military power. I believe that in the long run, in a world in which military technology is gradually becoming ever more potent and lethal, the solution to this problem is the establishment of effective world government. Let this world government be as federalist and decentralized as you like, so long as it commands an effective monopoly on the use of large-scale military force. In the absence of an effective world government, a stable coalition of big powers or the empire of a single superpower is a poor second-best alternative, but still *second-best*, i.e., the best available alternative substitute. Hence, strengthening global governance institutions inherently involves a delicate balancing act. We need to strengthen institutions that provide a pseudo-rule-of-law and rally opinion in favor of institutions that will, in the future, provide a genuine international rule of law without, in the short and medium run, bringing about anything that makes it likely that current big powers will behave in ways that are worse for humanity than what they would otherwise have done.

We need to try to prevent the worst possible outcomes that current international anarchy might bring about while at the same time helping to bring about a future that ends the international anarchy.

The claims I have just asserted are normatively and empirically controversial. I cannot defend them here, which is not to say they need no defense. I simply want to indicate the assumptions that underlie my skeptical response to Richard Miller's counterposition of global social movements to global institutional reform. Given these background assumptions, I am more optimistic about the likely good consequences of pressing for global institutional reform than he is, and I am perhaps less optimistic than he about the likely good consequences of building global social movements as these are presently constituted.

Regarding this last point, I want to warn against a mistake that Miller himself does not make, but that a careless reader of his essay might slip into making. In assessing the relative merits of global institutional reforms and global social movements, it would be a mistake to compare, on the one hand, global institutional reform proposals as they are and are likely to be, adopted and implemented in a world dominated by big power politics, and, on the other hand, global social movements as they might ideally be in the most desirable future scenarios we can envisage. We should rather compare like to like, actual and likely to actual and likely, and most ideally imaginable to most ideally imaginable. If we make the mistake of comparing actual and likely institutional global reform proposals, warts and all, to ideally imaginable global social movements, unmarred by any blemish, we will fail to notice that big power politics distort both institutional reforms and social movements, not the former only.

If one calls to mind actual global social movements protesting the current international economic and political order, one perhaps thinks first of European farmers demanding continued national agricultural subsidies and tariff protection against competition from poor farmers in developing countries. The conflict of interest represented here is a widespread phenomenon. The opening up of markets to global trade brings well-paid workers in rich countries into competition with poorly paid, equally productive, and hard-working workers in poor countries, to the detriment of the former. Of course the distributional consequences of the growth of global markets are quite variable and can be nasty rather than nice. The world's already best off can be made even better off without having to provide sufficient concomitant benefits to others to offset the increase in both inequality and relative poverty country by country. Globalization facilitates trade and increases economic activity and, with it, the negative externalities that accompany economic expansion. As Richard Miller notes, big powers conspire to slant the rules of the international economic game in their favor. Still, nothing guarantees that popular discontent spurred by global economic change will tend to be progressive and egalitarian rather than regressive, protectionist, and mercantilist. Global social movements are a work in progress, and nothing inherently tends to press their aims to converge on internationalist solidarity and global justice. The struggle to

set and maintain a posture of global solidarity and friendliness is an ongoing project even within organizations, groups, and movements ostensibly devoted to these aims.

In a hopeful spirit, one might speculate that increasing global trade itself, involving distant strangers in reciprocal, mutually beneficial interactions and cooperative interdependence, will by its own logic tend, over time, to encourage people to view global strangers in distant countries as part of "us" not "them." But this market logic is uncertain and doubtful, and does not necessarily lead to attractive results without concerted political action by men and women of good will and good sense. So I am with Miller; the world needs global social movements.

In conclusion, I comment on an interesting observation by Richard Miller that is independent of the lines of argument so far canvassed. In view of the fact that in its international role the U.S. is now the biggest bully on the block, he suggests that U.S.-based global justice movements should feel free to abandon any feelings of obligation to position themselves in public debate as patriotic or pro-America. Loving one's country, one inevitably tends to overlook and minimize its faults, and if one is a citizen of the U.S., loving one's country is probably a bad idea, a standing temptation to excuse inexcusable moral evils.

I have no quarrel whatsoever with the idea that global social movements should be internationalist in spirit and orientation. My quibble here is with Miller's conception of patriotism as love of country. This formulation confounds issues of cultural cosmopolitanism with the issue of impartial cosmopolitan morality. Let me explain.

From the moral standpoint, so far as I can see, love of country understood as opposed to cultural cosmopolitanism is a "don't care." Whether an individual's cultural loves are cosmopolitan or parochial is morally inconsequential in and of itself. I myself confess to loving my country. I love America, its diversity and sprawling grossness and energy. These cultural tastes might be aesthetically and intellectually deplorable but they don't in any way prevent the person who has them from being a proper citizen of the world.

Nor does love of an individual or a collectivity have to be accompanied by a disposition to overlook or whitewash the faults of what one loves. I can love my children without having any disposition to downplay any moral vices they might exhibit. Loving one's son, identifying closely with him, may well make one especially appalled if he, rather than someone else, is an ax murderer. Shakespeare said that is not love that alters when it alteration finds, *not* that is not love that ever finds any alteration or blemish even when it is staring you in the face. The same goes for loving one's country. This trait need not induce moral blindness to national crimes and faults.

From the standpoint of global justice, the internationalism that matters is the cosmopolitanism of moral impartiality. According to this doctrine of moral impartiality, actions and policies are to be assessed by everyone according to their consequences for people everywhere. A life is a

life. An American baby is no more or less precious than a baby born in any other country. The violent death of an American citizen in Iraq is no more and no less morally bad than the comparable violent death of an Iraqi citizen in Iraq or anywhere else. A gain in well-being achieved for an American is morally no more important than an identical gain in well-being achieved for any other person instead (though a gain for a person who has less, in my book, counts for more than an identical gain for a person who already has more).

There are defensible conceptions of cosmopolitan moral impartiality other than the consequentialism outlined above. An American branch of a global justice movement that genuinely prizes respecting human rights would not give more weight to respecting rights of Americans than respecting the comparable rights of people anywhere. I applaud Miller's call for the abandonment of patriotism if love of country means putting a thumb on the moral scale in favor of fellow countrymen.



