

POLITICAL ORDER AND UNIVERSAL VALUES IN THE 21st CENTURY

Otto Hieronymi
Webster University

The three main conclusions of this paper are the following:

(1) Domestic and international order is based primarily on *shared political values*, rather than on geopolitics, ethnicity or purely material interests. This was the case in the 20th century and is likely to be the case also in the 21st century.

(2) Political stability and a peaceful international order do not require a complete uniformity of political values and of political philosophy. Pluralism and differences in political objectives, values and perceptions are essential features of free political communities. This is true not only between states but also within each state: in fact, some of the most lively divergences and debates take place not between but within states. At the same time, there is a need for common shared political values, for *universal values*, values that James Huntley summed up under the title of *Pax Democratica*¹.

(3) Finally, the world has made considerable progress towards not only identifying, but also respecting a series of fundamental positive universal values. It is important to stress that these values, of which *humanitarian values are an important example*, should not be considered as relevant only for a limited group of countries.

In my paper I will deal with four main issues:

(1) The first one is the importance of politics and of political order;

(2) The second issue is what we can call the paradox of the 20th century. This is the contrast between unprecedented violence and oppression, on the one hand, and unprecedented freedom, prosperity and cooperation, on the other hand, i.e. the contrast between “political evil” and “political good” that marked so deeply the last hundred years.

(3) The third section deals with domestic and international order(s) in the 20th and the role of values.

(4) The fourth, concluding section deals with the challenge of political order in the 21st century and the question of universal values, with particular emphasis on the role of humanitarian values in this context.

¹ James HUNTLEY: *Pax Democratica: A Strategy for the 21st Century*. Palgrave, 2nd edition, 2000.

The importance of politics and of political order

The expression *politics* often evokes confused or even negative reactions. For a long time, it has been a widespread practice to contrast *private virtue* and *political amorality*. In recent years, it has become fashionable, even among *political* philosophers, to praise the superiority of “civil society”, over the “political community”. The adjective “apolitical” has a generally favorable connotation, whereas being “political” is often perceived as engaged in “artful and dishonest practices”.

Today the “in” term (“politically correct” term) is “good governance”, a technical notion, free of “value judgments” that is closer to the (much admired) “good management”, than to the outdated, more “political” concept of “good government”. In fact, there are many who believe that taking politics out of society altogether would be the best recipe for an ideal world.

Does this negative view have to do with the very nature of politics, with the quality (good or bad) of particular brands of politics, or with a misunderstanding of the definition and with an underestimation of the importance of the concept?

Among the many definitions of *politics*, some contradictory, some of them overlapping, let me mention just a few representative ones at the start of my paper. Thus, politics has been defined as (1) the *art and science of government*, (2) a *branch of ethics concerned with the state or social organism*, (3) a *division of moral philosophy dealing with the ethical relations and duties of governments or other social organizations*, and finally (4) the *total complex of interacting and usually conflicting relations between men living in society*. (Cf. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*².)

Firstly, these definitions do confirm the *importance of politics*. For unless one lives on a desert island, politics is a key factor in determining the quality of life (and often even the chances of survival).

Secondly, these quotes from the dictionary also show the *complexity* and the *interdependence* of the various aspects of politics, and in particular the link between *politics as an art*, on the one hand, and *politics as an expression of values*, on the other hand.

Finally, because of its importance and because of its complexity, the *quality of politics*, the *quality of political order*, and ultimately the *quality of political values* are a decisive factor for each of us as individuals and for national and international society at large³.

² *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1986.

³ Cf. David Blankenhorn: *What We Are Fighting For*, Propositions, Institute for American Values, New York, February 2002. This text, signed by more than sixty well-known American intellectuals, gives a well-balanced presentation of American political values and of universal human values, and makes a strong case that there is a broad overlapping between the two. It is regrettable, however, that *humanitarian values* are not explicitly mentioned in the text.

The subject of the present conference, focusing on the international role of values, was decided in the summer of 2001, before the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. For many people in the United States and elsewhere these events provoked a profound shock not only because of the number of victims and because they so dramatically demonstrated the vulnerability of modern society. They were shocking also because the developments since the autumn of 2001 have brought home the truth, that some of us, leaders, experts and “general public” seemed to have forgotten: the truth about the importance of domestic and international political order, not just of power, not just of interests, but ultimately of political values in shaping the life of nations, and ultimately determining issues of war and peace throughout the world.

Political Order and the Paradox of the 20th Century

During no known and documented period in human history has there been a century characterized by such extremes of positive and negative developments as the 20th century.

On the negative side, the last 100 years witnessed: the spreading of aggressive nationalism; two world wars and innumerable other cross-border or “internal” wars; the rise of totalitarian regimes that were responsible for the persecution, the torture and the death of millions and millions of their own citizens; the spreading of oppressive ideologies, of the “Right” or of the “Left”, that aimed to reshape individuals, entire nations or the whole of humanity according to a single rigid mold; the multiplication of corrupt and oppressive regimes of all stripes; the use of technology to increase the scale and effectiveness of human destruction; the justification of terrorism and of random killings in the name nationalism, religion, class struggle, racial or ethnic difference or other similarly misused concepts and ideals.

On the positive side, the 20th century also produced achievements that were not only unprecedented, but also unimaginable, even as recently as the 19th century. These included: the spreading and consolidation of free, pluralistic and democratic societies; economic prosperity and social promotion on a scale that no “egalitarian” philosopher in the past could have hoped for; the respect of basic human rights including the right to be different; freedom of thought and expression, freedom of movement and freedom of religion, and freedom of economic, social, political and cultural initiative and expression; the reduction of discrimination of all kinds; protection and assistance of the weaker and solidarity at the national and international levels; the development and diffusion of technology to improve the material and spiritual quality of life; intensive international cooperation in all areas and economic and political integration respectful of the identity and the interests of small and large states alike; and last but not least, the realization of conditions of permanent peace in large areas of the world, including between nations that had been involved in the bloodiest wars in their history as recently as the middle of the 20th century.

What were the causes of these contrasting developments? Was it luck or misfortune, fate or accident, material conditions or the weight of history?

While all these factors may have played a role, individually or in various combinations, at one time or another in some of the positive and negative trends listed above, by now there can be no doubt that the decisive factors of influence were the *differences in the nature and quality of domestic and international political order*⁴.

Even today, we find political theorists, on the “Left” or on the “Right”, in the “West” or in the “Rest of the World”, in rich or poor nations, who believe that the trends that constitute the paradox of the 20th century, the contrasts between major positive and negative developments, have been the result of immutable forces, of objective material factors and differences. Their explanations include such factors as geography, history, religion, civilizations, and, of course, the conflict of allegedly irreconcilable national interests.

While again, all of these “objective” factors may have played a role in the “positive” or “negative” developments, what made the real difference were the “subjective” political ones: the differences in the quality political order, in political leadership and ultimately in the *fundamental political organizing principles, i.e. in fundamental political values*.

In fact, neither geopolitics, nor ethnicity, nor history, nor differences in religions or civilizations can fully account for the differences in the conditions and behavior of different states according to various positive or negative criteria listed above. For some of the major nations found themselves at various times during the 20th century in the positive or in the negative column: some of the truly democratic and prosperous nations of today, had been dominated and driven at one time by some of the *most evil and destructive political value systems*⁵.

The Lessons of the 20th Century

One of the most dramatic expressions of the paradox that was the 20th century was the *extraordinary contrast between political orders*. In fact, within the relatively “short twentieth century” (to quote the subtitle of Eric Hobsbawm’s book on the *Age of Extremes*⁶) the world has experienced a range of *widely diverging political orders*.

Before trying to define the challenge of political order for the 21st century, we should remember some of the key trends in the 20th in this context and the lessons we can learn from them.

⁴ For a systematic analysis of these issues cf. the famous trilogy of Wilhelm Röpke, a refugee from Hitler’s Germany: *The Social Crises of Our Time* (first published in 1942), *Civitas Humana* (1944), *International Order* (1945) and also *The German Question* (1945).

⁵ Cf. preceding note.

⁶ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm: *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph, 1994.

In the first place, there was a broad range in terms of *different domestic political orders* and there were also profound differences in terms of *international orders* (and *sub-orders*).

The various domestic political orders that could be witnessed at the national level in the 20th century differed not only from political orders that had existed in the past, varied not only from one region or group of countries to another region or group of nations, but there were also widespread radical changes in political order within the same country or group of countries within relatively short time spans.

There are few people who had contested the reality of the profound differences in domestic political orders not only at opposite ends of the globe, but even between the two parts of divided nations, such as what had been East and West Germany, and are still today South and North Korea.

A second important feature of the last century was the shift in emphasis in nature and causes of actual and potential conflicts between states: a shift from territorial and other material claims and conquests, to a shift to conflicts of *political order*.

The defeat of Germany in 1945 had to mean, and it did mean the defeat of the most inhumane political order of modern times. Yet, the liberation from one totalitarian order at the end of the Second World War, was followed by the instauration of another totalitarian order for millions and millions of people both in Eastern and Central Europe and in Asia within a short time.

The Communist threat during the Cold war was not primarily a traditional attempt at territorial aggrandizement: it was the threat of the *imposition by force* of a rigid and inhumane ideology and of a political order based on that ideology. It was not only the imposition of this order that justified the use of ruse and violence. It was also a central tenet of this order that any attempt to move towards a more open political order, that would be more respectful of the citizens' freedom and human rights, had to be resisted by the use of force not only against foreigners, but also against the people of the country concerned.

A perfect illustration of the primacy of political order over territorial claims or national unity has been furnished by the *tragic fate of Vietnam*. The war against France may have been originally inspired by the desire of freedom and independence from a foreign oppressor. Yet, at least from the second half of the 1950s onward, the war carried out by the North for twenty years both in order to maintain the communist political order in the North and impose it on a less regimented and admittedly militarily less effective South. On a South, that despite its corruption and its political instability, had been the model of a pluralistic and liberal society in comparison with the regime to which it has been also subjected since 1975.

Some may object to this historical retrospect to a period well before the end of the cold war, as irrelevant in the framework of a humanitarian conference that is oriented towards the future.

Yet, it is important recall, especially for the benefit of those who do not remember, or were not even borne in those days, that the communist regimes had been among the principal (although not the only) producers of refugees during much of the 20th century, and that it had been essentially a one-way flow, a mass flight from communist persecution and very sparsely towards Communism⁷.

Another major issue of domestic political order, also with enormous humanitarian implications, brings us closer to the present.

While in the case of National Socialism or Communism the expression “political order” already strained the conventional meaning of the term, in the case of these more recent phenomena it is more correct to speak about the *destruction of all political order*.

Here, we are no longer in the presence of conflicts or of efforts, which aim at displacing or even at destroying an existing political order, in order to replace it with a specific new political order. What we are facing is the systematic destruction by various factions, militias, and other categories of essentially criminal groups of the basic functions and structures of organized society, of a political community. The depredations of these groups and the conflicts among them (and with more or less legitimate governments), are designated today by the term *internal conflicts*. We should, however also include the cross-border activities of these groups, or international terrorism, to use the *terminus technicus*, as well as the *true organized criminal activities* that are destroying so many lives and societies today.

We all know the enormous humanitarian consequences of this phenomenon that has marred in particular the decade since the end of the communist threat at the end of the 1980s. They include not only the hundreds of thousands and millions of direct victims, the destruction of the very bases of economic life and of a minimum of functioning public administration, but also the emergence of a culture of hatred, violence, lawlessness and of “ethnic” intolerance⁷.

The changes and the diversity in *international political order* have been as great in the 20th century as in domestic political order. This has been true despite the extensive efforts during the last sixty years or so, of the Marxists on the left, or of “Realists” on the Right, or of some “ex-Marxist Realists” like Carr, to make us believe that international order is regulated by immutable factors of influence and that it is largely independent of the nature of domestic political order.

There is broad agreement that post-World-War-II international political order differed profoundly not only from international order in the 19th century, but also from the international order of the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, between 1945 and 1990 we were in the presence not of a single international order, that many tend to describe, in a dangerous oversimplification, as the rivalry of two (essentially similar) superpowers. For almost fifty years, we had been in the presence of three international (sub)orders.

⁷ Cf. UNHCR: *The State of the World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

The first, and by far the most attractive and in the long run the most successful one was what we can call the Western liberal international order. This has been an order based on (1) *democratic open societies*, respect of human rights, of freedom and self-determination, (2) *economic integration*, and (3) international cooperation in general and *de facto permanent peace* among the countries belonging to this order.

The second international order was the *Communist international order*; based on virtually closed societies, and on rigid hierarchies and subordination in ideological, economic and military terms.

Third, fairly loose international order was the order of so-called *non-alignment*. This order was much less homogeneous than the Western or the Communist order. Its two main organizing principles were: a general resentment (often understandable in the light of many countries historical experience) against the “West” and the more or less systematic effort not to be fully absorbed into the orbit of the Communist order.

Finally, the most important lesson in terms of political order of the 20th century and in particular of the period following the Second World War was that the *nature and the differences of domestic as well as of international political order* were determined primarily in value terms, *in terms of differences in political values* rather than in terms of power or differences in material interests.

While there was no true universal international political order between 1945 and 1990, nevertheless there were blueprints for the universal values that could inspire a just universal international order. The Western order was far from perfect at the domestic or international level. Its members (i.e. the countries that were not kept by home-grown or external oppressors from joining the Western liberal order) came, however the closest to putting into practice among themselves these universal values defined in various texts from the preamble of the UN Charter to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Geneva Conventions of the Red Cross.

Universal Values and the Challenge of Political Order in the 21st Century

The story of the 20th century is that ultimately the “good orders” have had the upper hand: they have been both more attractive politically and morally, and more productive and efficient in economic and power terms. On both accounts, they have led to greater adherence by the population than in the case of oppressive orders.

One must not shy away in the name of “value-free” pseudo science from passing judgment over some of the domestic and international political orders that had prevailed in the 20th century.

Their cost had been enormous. Their cost had been enormous in terms of millions and millions of victims, of suffering, of destruction, of oppression and humiliation. The cost had been enormous in terms of

lost opportunities as well, for individuals, for families and communities, for entire generations. And the world is still paying the bills. Not only for the direct or the indirect consequences of the *current and recent disorders*, but for the many oppressive regimes on the Left or the Right which continue to exert a negative influence long after they had collapsed.

Today, there is a broad consensus that the world cannot afford in the 21st century the reappearance and consolidation at the international and at the domestic level of political orders of the kind that had been at the origin of some of the great tragedies of the 20th century. We cannot afford it because of the vastly increased population and the vastly increased expectations of the world in terms of both justice and freedom and economic and social prosperity. The vast majority of the world's population aspires to what only peace and cooperation, hard work and respect for human dignity can deliver. It is clear that propaganda, oppression and hatred are no recipes for achieving these goals⁸.

But we cannot afford the threat of the reappearance under the old or new colors of the kind of regimes that had been at the root of so much devastation internationally or within their own borders also because of the *greatly increased vulnerability of our interdependent and technology-based modern societies*.

This means that the world has to undertake a serious effort in promoting "good political order" at the domestic and at the international level. Political order or orders do not happen by themselves.

While some of Burke's warning about the dangers of disregarding tradition and organic developments remain valid still today, changes in "political order", for better or worse are not purely spontaneous. They are extensively influenced by ideas, values and policies: political order is "volontarist".

The conclusion of the present paper, and I think of our entire conference is that in the search for and implementation of universal values for a better and safer world, *humanitarian values* by themselves do not constitute the entire blueprint or program, but they are an *essential part of the recipe*.

Humanitarian values are an essential ingredient of the good society. Their absence or presence can be interpreted as a litmus test of the quality of domestic or international political order. Let me illustrate this with two key aspects of humanitarian values.

⁸ Cf. Otto Hieronymi: "The Evasion of State Responsibility and the Lessons of Rwanda: The Need for a New Concept of Collective Security", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 1996, Volume 9, Number 3, Special Issue on Rwanda; also in *Geneva and the Challenge of Humanitarian Action*, Proceedings of a Conference organized by Webster University, Geneva, UNHCR, 1997.

In the first place, humanitarian values inspire us to refrain from certain reprehensible action as a nation or as individuals, and to sanction or in extreme cases even to use force to stop others from committing these violations.

The *second issue is solidarity*. Humanitarian values are all about solidarity, about solidarity with the weaker, with the actual or potential victims of persecution, of violence or of other man-made or natural calamities. Yet, we have seen time and again that also at a broader level *solidarity is an essential complement to freedom and competition in realizing a good political order*. The 20th century has given ample evidence that both domestically and internationally solidarity is the use of scarce resources. Time and again we have seen that where greed and arrogance lead to systematic indifference to the loser, to the weaker, it is not only these latter will suffer but the very foundations of good political order will be threatened⁹.

⁹ See also: Otto HIERONYMI and Chiara JASSON: "Values and Interests as Motivation for Humanitarian Action", unpublished paper presented at the 43rd Annual Convention of the International Studies Association March 2002, New Orleans.