Homo cooperativus: Rethinking international relations

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The Corona pandemic, which is far from over, and even more so the climate crisis, which is only just beginning, will change the international system for good. These immense challenges care little about national borders, and they will not be mastered by misguided 'my country first' nationalisms in the Trump mode nor by forming new antagonistic geopolitical blocs. Multilateralism is slowly returning, the standard mode of international politics post-1945, which prevailed in a world that, despite all Cold War bloc confrontation, became aware of the mutual dependencies that shaped it and in which East-West antagonisms were in fact toned down. Pursuing the own national interests? Sure – but only if it goes along with cooperation for the benefit of all.

All over the world, 'souvereignists' are putting up resistance against the renaissance of multilateralism, and their nationalism tends to be based on a classic economic principle: the self-preservative drive of the *homo economicus*, an ideal type that mainly pursues economic goals and is driven by self-interest. According to this notion, producers and consumers act rationally within a largely transparent market whose 'invisible hand' ensures that private vices (like the avarice of certain individuals) are channelled into public virtues, i.e., general wealth (Mandeville 1714). Many have challenged this simplistic conception of human behaviour, even in mainstream economics, and for good reasons. But what could an alternative paradigm look like, one that focuses less on self-interest and competition but rather on the human inclination and capacity to cooperate?

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We propose that we turn to the *homo cooperativus*, the comeback model of human interaction in modern anthropology. While also inherent in primates, sharing and helping, as a group of experts around Michael Tomasello at the Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig found, are of particular importance to the *conditio humana*, even prior to language acquisition (Tomasello 2009). For example, toddlers spontaneously help adults to master certain tasks, be it by lending a hand or by providing information (e.g., about the location of a searched-for item). If we did not have this general disposition, conventions essential to survival and the good life would not be passed on, from shared basic social norms to practices of symbolic exchange to higher-level social institutions. The more independent they become, children learn to differentiate and behave altruistically even towards persons unlikely to return the favour. Anthropologists recognise this as a part of our natural endowment that all subsequent enculturation builds on: Rousseau's innately cooperative and compassionate human being, then, triumphs over the selfish, inconsiderate *homo economicus* à la Hobbes, who can only be tamed by taking away his weapons. "The degree to which we cooperate", the biologist Martin Nowak echoes, "sets us apart from the rest of creation. This is the fundamental reason humans have managed to eke out a living in almost every ecosystem on Earth and indeed have started to venture well beyond Earth" (Nowak 2011: 268). That everyone benefits from cooperation is the golden rule of human life on Earth, and mutual expectations make it easier to abide by social norms and behave empathetically. For this to work, however, our institutional environments have to be built accordingly – and that, as many times before in the history of humankind, is clearly not the case at present.

Could an interpersonal pattern of empathy and collaboration also shape the spirit and procedures of international relations? Indications that it can are provided by the gift-exchange paradigm which the French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) detected in tribal relationships and also normatively applied to the building of a post-World War I order in Europe (König 1978; Moebius & Papilloud 2006; Adloff 2017). Mauss called the gift a "total social phenomenon" that combines symbolic, religious, economic, legal and social aspects, thus constituting more than a merely economic exchange phenomenon. As we all know, a gift should go beyond taking out one's wallet or chequebook. It has to mean something to both giver and recipient, and it has to be presented at the proper time – only then can it stabilise a relationship beyond the moment of giving, which is its basic function. Things get complicated, though, because giving and receiving entail a mandatory reciprocation. Mauss iden-

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tified exactly this triad of giving, receiving and reciprocating in archaic practices like the potlatches of the North American Indigenous peoples, a ritual ceremony in which the parties attempt to outdo each other in presenting gifts (Harkin 2011). This, Mauss realised, was an alternative to the modern logic of calculation and to bureaucratic fiat – a third model of social integration. By creating a precarious balance between voluntariness and social obligation, gift-giving brings about long-term relations between individuals, groups or whole societies, thus safeguarding social cohesion. Mauss hoped to have discovered in this paradigm a 'solid rock' within the turbulent seas of the post-war 1920s, a resting place even for modern societies.

Can the considerably expanded *do ut des* of gift exchange, located by Mauss in largely pre-capitalist societies, be transferred to today's international politics as well? We can test and make plausible such a transfer to our own global conditions by way of three examples: debt relief, refugee rights and the global gift economy that is beginning to emerge in debates on patent waivers in the health care system.

We will concentrate on the most recent example illustrating the necessity for global cooperation, the current COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunity it entails for gift exchange, the release of patents (Fratzscher 2021). Countries with budget deficits and dysfunctional health systems ought to receive vaccines, drugs and medical infrastructure for free, so that immunisation can at last happen globally – if it does not, the virus and its variants could always rapidly spread again, not least in the rich North. Although this solution is self-evident, patent protection and the understandable aim of companies to make profit continue to stand in its way. It is important to recall, however, that the idea behind patents was simple and non-exclusive: inventors were supposed to report on their innovations in such a way as to enable all fellow specialists to recreate them; in return for their openness, they receive the right to sell their invention exclusively for a certain period of time.

The call for a temporary patent waiver for COVID-19 vaccines, for the ultimate sake of all humans on Earth, originated in South Africa and India, countries that lacked such vaccines (Nature 2021). US President Biden's affirmative response was quickly countered by practical concerns: the production of vaccines is a highly complex affair, manufacturing capacities are lacking, and should we really dispossess drug makers of their intellectual property? In cases of absolute emergency, the answer has to be yes. If pharmaceutical companies do not voluntarily waive their patents in the current situation, we have to resort to stipulations in international conventions

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that allow for compulsory licensing. Surely, it is not legitimate in such a state of emergency to privatise vaccines whose development has for the biggest part been funded by tax money?

As France's president Macron proclaimed, vaccines should become a global public good. The WTO's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) hampers direct access to affordable vaccines and drugs. Even some companies proposed alternatives, such as bans on exports of raw materials or selling vaccines at cost price. Concerns that a patent waiver may result in less investments in research or that it could take very long until the countries of the Global South are able to produce vaccines themselves are ultimately invalid. After all, patent protection deterred these countries from building the necessary capacities in the first place. The obvious conclusion would be to reorganise the production of goods essential for survival along the lines of Open Source. Everybody must have affordable access to vaccines. But this will only come about by means of a veritable gift economy, which would protect the rich as much as the poor. A waiver on patents is just one aspect of the larger project of overcoming the unjust international division of labour and finally following through with the idea of knowledge transfer.

Our contemporary society has many areas of conflict that call for global cooperation – or in fact for a modern type of gift exchange between wealthy and poorer nations. Our suggestions emphasise the equality of countries, and even more so of their inhabitants, vis-à-vis arguments of utility and competition for scarce resources. This is certainly a normative approach, and who advocates it should be aware that international politics unfortunately does not function that way, that our capitalist world society is riddled with injustices which will not just vanish once certain rights are codified globally. The renationalisation of interest-driven politics has widened gaps and intensified tensions. And it is true that, as the 'realists' among international relationists stress, even liberal constitutionalism may reflect and solidify power hierarchies. The multilateral post-war order never was an assembly of equals to begin with; it mirrored the material North-South divide, colonial and postcolonial power relations, and the dominance of the Western, liberal conception of the modern world. And yes: NATO never was the guardian of regional security for the benefit of all, the WTO no guarantor of justice and the EU hardly ever a court of appeal for the oppressed and offended. And yet they provided norms, legal options and procedures for critiquing and mitigating the inequalities and injustices – international courts of law and arbitration in particular adorn their statutes with enlightened, cosmopolitan ideals. The only 'realist' alternative would be to pursue these ideals even more resolutely or else

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descend into chaos and anarchy. Despite the autocrats' beliefs and actions to the contrary, humanity needs binding rules, respected agreements and enforceable sanctions in case of violations. Only thus can global problems like a pandemic, climate change or species extinction be mastered; only thus can corruption and autocratic hubris be contained; only thus can ethnic cleansings and religiously motivated persecution be terminated.

As if that was not already ambitious enough, the theory and practice of international politics now needs to open up in two more regards: first, with respect to the ecological and financial debts we leave to posterity, debts that have been accruing since the 19th and escalating since the late 20th century, making it necessary to modify the classic social contract to include future generations. Secondly, that contract would also have to be expanded in view of non-humans. We must come up with a 'natural contract' that bids goodbye to the arrogant notion of *homo sapiens* as the crown of creation, entitled to impose his will on nature *ad libitum*. Not just disadvantaged people but also animals, plants and even inanimate nature must be given a voice in international politics (somewhat in the spirit of Bruno Latour's 'parliament of things') (Eroukhmanoff & Harker 2017; Corry 2020).

Homo cooperativus is not just an airy cosmopolitan fantasy: nice to have but utterly naïve or, as some experts think, even dangerous in the rough world of global modernity. In fact, in all fields of knowledge, voices have by now emerged who contribute very pragmatically to the realisation of cosmo-political ideas (Leggewie 2021). Certain fine artists come to mind who fuse experimental nature research, advocacy for threatened peoples or species, the documentation of damages and down-to-earth imaginations of the future into impressive works of Anthropocene art. Those who find this too vague and of marginal relevance can instead turn to the latest decisions of national and international courts (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2021; Birschel 2021), which harshly sanctioned instances of a further exploitation of nature, a neglect to institutionalise climate and species protection and the prevailing of inhumane supply chains in global trade – with the result that private companies as well as public financial institutions have already started to put their investment and procurement procedures to the test. Contrary to the objections constantly raised, such a new international politics will not turn out to be a gateway for authoritarianism but an instrument of strengthening democratic participation.

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