

A GOVERNMENT FOR THE WORLD

So here’s a final solution: instead of trying to bypass politics, why don’t we scale it up to match the size of the problem? Voters in rich states have got used to letting their governments take some of their income and having it redirected towards needier fellow citizens. Why not try it on an international level? Though inequality has been growing in the United States, it is nothing like the gulf that exists between the US and the poorest parts of Africa. If a world government could redistribute global resources on the same scale that the federal US government redistributes between, say, New York and Louisiana, the results would be transformative. (Poorer US states get significant transfers from wealthier parts of the Union, amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars a year.) All it takes is a central authority with the coercive power to levy taxes and then decide how they should get spent. No such authority presently exists at the global level. Perhaps it is time to make one.

The dream of a world state has been around for about as long as there have been nation-states competing and squabbling over the planet’s resources. It can seem like a no-brainer: if states have the power to enforce agreement but can’t agree among themselves, don’t you need a super-state to enforce agreement between states? Kant considered this option when he discussed the idea of perpetual peace at the end of the eighteenth century. But he decided it would be a bad idea. The reason he gave was the obvious one. Such a super-state would be too big. A world government would be too cumbersome and

too remote from the lives of the individuals who had to live under it. Kant thought that, whatever new connections are made by advances in global communications and the spread of international trade, there is still too much global diversity to be accommodated within a single political structure. A state large enough to find room for everyone on the planet would end up hopelessly distant from the actual political experiences of many of its citizens. That argument still looks compelling today. World government remains a bad idea. As always in politics, it’s worth thinking about the worst that could happen. The worst that could happen with a global state would be a global civil war.

Sometimes it is assumed that Hobbes’s view of politics points in the direction of a world state. If individuals in the state of nature can see that they need to stop fighting and hand over power to a higher authority, why don’t sovereign states agree to the same thing? The answer, as I have already indicated, is that states are not like natural human beings. They are far harder to kill. Many states – and not just the most powerful ones – will choose to take their chances on violence. This means that it is very difficult to engineer the circumstances in which all states feel as afraid of each other as individuals feel in the state of nature. There would have to be some truly cataclysmic collective threat to get the United States, Russia and China to think they were all so vulnerable that they had no option but to pool their separate right to defend themselves. Perhaps an asteroid on collision course with earth would do it, or an invasion from outer space. These are the scenarios that really excite