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“Homo Cooperativus” – Rethinking International Relations

The Corona pandemic, which is by no means over, and even more so the climate crisis, just becoming visible, will change the international system. It will not be possible to overcome these enormous challenges disregarding all national borders with nationalist aberrations like Donald Trump’s “My Country First” or the formation of antagonistic geopolitical blocs. What is needed instead is nothing less than a new model of human interaction, argues Claus Leggewie – “homo cooperativus” needs to replace “homo economicus” once and for all.

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An international policy under the label "multilateralism" is timidly making a comeback, a standard that prevailed after 1945 in a world that, despite the bloc confrontation, became aware of its interdependencies and was able to mitigate deep East-West antagonisms. Countries certainly still pursued national interests but also cooperated for mutual benefit. Even the "United States of Europe" – imagined only by visionaries until 1945 – became a reality, albeit in the slimmed-down version of the European Union, the peculiar hybrid between a confederation of states and a federal state.

The "sovereignists" believe otherwise and often base their nationalism on a classical economic principle: the self-preservation interest of Homo Economicus. This ideal type predominantly pursues utilitarian goals and is driven by self-interest. Producers and consumers thus act rationally under the condition of an extensive market transparency. Via the market's invisible hand, private vices (such as individual greed) could be transformed into public virtues, i.e. general prosperity.ⁱ

Many have disputed this oversimplified image of man with good reasons, and strong doubts have surfaced in established economic science. But what could an alternative paradigm look like that focuses less on self-interest and competition and more on human capacities for cooperation?

The Homo Cooperativus is proposed here, which recent natural research has proven is the standard model of human interaction. A research group led by Michael Tomasello at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig found that sharing and helping are already inherent in primates.ⁱⁱ Moreover, sharing and supporting constitute the human condition before the acquisition of language. Adults spontaneously help a toddler cope with specific tasks by lending a hand or providing the youth with information, for example, describing a place where something has been lost. If this predisposition were not the general rule, agreements necessary for survival and the good life, ranging from shared simple norms of behavior to symbolic exchanges and higher-level social institutions, would all fail. With increasing independence children learn to make distinctions and direct altruistic actions even toward those who may not reciprocate. Anthropology recognizes in this our natural endowment upon which all subsequent enculturation builds.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this respect Jean Jacques Rousseau's naturally helpful and compassionate man remains right compared to Thomas Hobbes, a forefather of Homo Economicus, who, as a ruthless egoist, is only tamed when the state takes away his weapons. The biologist Martin Nowak also found: "Their ability to cooperate is the real reason why humans have succeeded in carving out a habitat for themselves in almost every terrestrial ecosystem and in advancing far beyond the earth into outer space" (translation by the author).^{iv}

The co-evolutionary rule of life is that no one has to forego their advantage and everyone has something to gain from cooperation: mutual expectations facilitate social norms of behavior and empathy. However, there is no guarantee for this. The institutional environment must comply – and today, as it has often been in human history, this is clearly not the case.

Everyone has probably experienced that cooperation can succeed and how satisfying its results can be. Yet, can an interpersonal pattern for empathy and cooperation also mold the spirit and procedures of "international relations"? Intimations of this can be found in the "gift exchange" theorem, which the French sociologist and ethnologist Marcel Mauss traced in tribal relations 100 years ago and proposed as a base for the reshaping of the postwar order after the First World War.

Mauss called the gift a "total social phenomenon", meaning that it combines symbolic, religious, economic, legal, and social aspects and thus is more than a mere economic exchange. We personally experience this when giving: a gift should be more than "pulling out a wallet or checkbook"; it must mean something to both the giver and the receiver; it should come at the right time, and only in this way can it strengthen a relationship beyond the moment.^v

It becomes complicated because giving and receiving entail obligatory reciprocation. It was precisely this three-step process that Marcel Mauss observed in archaic relationships such as the North American Indians' potlatch, a ritual and intoxicating expenditure of gifts.^{vi} This represents a counterpart to the modern logic of calculation and bureaucratic arrangement – as the third pattern of social integration. Gift exchange forges a social bond in a thoroughly precarious balance between voluntarism and social obligation that endows long-term relationships between individuals, groups, and entire societies. In the severe post-war crisis of the 1920s, Mauss hoped to have found a "rock" on which to build modern societies.

Can the "Do, ut des" (Latin: "I give so that you may give") of gift exchange, which Mauss found in predominantly pre-capitalist societies, be transferred to today's international politics? To test the plausibility of gift exchange in the present global context, I will explore three examples: (1) debt forgiveness, (2) rights of climate refugees, and (3) global gift economy which is beginning to emerge in the current debate on free patents in health care. In all three cases, international politics must extend into the future, both temporally and materially. On the horizon then is a new social contract – now between generations – representing animate and inanimate nature as co-actors in transnational politics.

Let us start with debt relief, one of the oldest exchanges in human history. Many have found themselves in the unpleasant situation of not being able to repay debts or getting back the money and goods they have lent. Debts cannot be serviced if one cannot raise funds by one's own fault or the fault of others. These debts may then be relieved because they could only be collected at the price of ruining one's business partner, which would be to one's own detriment, too. This everyday experience is also quite common in international affairs. Only debt relief can keep a bankrupt player alive and prevent the collapse of the entire house of cards, which –

as we all know – is systemically based on enormous private and public borrowing.

It's not often that a Homo Economicus thinks outside the box. Still, one major German banker did, to the horror of his colleagues. At the 1987 conference of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Alfred Herrhausen, then head of Deutsche Bank, adopted the idea of Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, who had described his country's catastrophic economic situation.^{vii} Herrhausen was convinced that many countries in the "Third World" would never be able to repay their debts, or if they did, their situation would even deteriorate further. Therefore, the only right thing to do was to cancel the debts of such countries and, in return, encourage them to undertake economic reforms.

In this regard, the leftist anthropologist David Graeber has reminded us how intensively debts are interwoven with guilt.^{viii} The Middle High German "schulden" meant to be obligated, to have to thank, and to be guilty. Moral debts are thus monetized, and monetary demands are morally underpinned. The core of this money-and-morality entanglement is that people are usually convinced that they have to pay back debts. The mediating element is money, which "manages to transform morality into a matter of impersonal arithmetic – and in this way to justify things that would otherwise seem scandalous or indecent to us" (translation by the author), as another classical sociologist, Georg Simmel, put it.

Peter Sloterdijk's analogous question was: "Is there an alternative to the instinctual accumulation of value, to the chronic trembling before the moment of balance, and to the relentless compulsion to repay debts?" (translation by the author).^{ix} That was before the Greek Debt Crisis, but even then, debt crises had ruined entire societies. The dirigiste treatment of "the" Greeks by the EU-"troika", the tabloid pressures, and the impatience of even well-meaning observers demonstrates that Greece was being chained in the debt tower to a troubled past in a way that colonized or excluded any possible future. Yet the Germans in particular, to whom paying off and paying back happened after 1918 and 1945 - undoubtedly justifiably - could have known not only how this makes one feel, but also what irrational reactions it led to. It could not surprise anyone that Greeks unwilling to pay reminded German disciplinarians of massacres during the Nazi occupation and now, in turn, made claims for reparations themselves. All Greek governments since 1950 have insisted that, contrary to what German courts and experts assert, these claims were in not

settled by the London Debt Agreement of 1953 or the Two Plus Four Treaty of 1990.

In these agreements, the logic of gift exchange had come into play, which Lord Keynes, the patron of economics, had also urged for as the treatment of the German Reich after the First World War: namely, to set up reparations in such a way that there would be no thought of revenge, and that the debtor even while forced to pay can at the same time exist as a future cooperative partner and contribute to the common good of Europe. Reparations involve a financial obligation, but they must also be mutually beneficial.

The victorious Western powers took this to heart after 1945: more significant than the payment itself was the possible contribution of the defeated Germans to a supranational economic community which, as a community for peace and development, could then also politically set about overcoming European nationalism. The London Conference of 1952/53 adjusted the debt service obligations of the capacity of the young Federal Republic of Germany. "Gracious creditors" thus enabled West Germany's re-emergence as the *économie dominante* in Europe, which the creditors would probably have prevented or delayed with higher demands, had they foreseen it. It is quite plausible that a business-minded banker still had this in mind in 1987.

What was true for Greece is even more valid for the poor countries of the Global South. Only an interruption of repayments allows for a new beginning and, presumably, to the astonishment of the aggrieved parties themselves, gives them back their freedom. More important than coming to terms with the past are future-oriented investments in renewable energies, lower emissions, gentler tourism, sustainable agriculture, and in building a knowledge society.

This brings us to the second example: a passport for climate refugees as an expression of world citizenship in solidarity. Nationalists feed on one issue above all: migration from south to north. Not entirely coincidentally, most nationalists also deny climate change and cling to outdated energy and environmental policies. Yet environmental disasters are already one of the leading causes of displacement.

The connection becomes most apparent when illustrated by the threat to flat island states, which are already endangered with extinction by "only" a two degrees Celsius increase of global warming and whose national populations can only secure their

survival by emigrating. The same applies to most of the world's mega-cities, which have largely grown and proliferated along coastlines. The refugee movement from the Middle East was also linked to climate change; a millennial drought in the "fertile crescent" exacerbated tensions in Syria in 2011. Behind ethnic and religious disputes, which continue to be considered the main drivers of war in International Relations, there are often material resource conflicts caused by environmental damage, which are then elaborated and legitimized ethnically and/or religiously.

After the First World War, when millions of people, especially in the collapsed Ottoman Empire, had lost their homes due to ethnic cleansing, most of them stood abandoned without valid identity papers. For them, in 1922, the polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, then High Commissioner for Refugee for the League of Nations, invented a passport for stateless people.^x The "Nansen Passport", for which he later received the Nobel Peace Prize, granted hundreds of thousands, including painter Marc Chagall, shipowner Aristotle Onassis, and photographer Robert Capa, a sanctuary in safe states. By 1942, 52 nations recognized the passport in principle. However, many refugees never enjoyed this status; European Jews, in particular, were refused admission to many states; in 1938, an international refugee conference in Évian on the shore of Lake Geneva failed due to Western protectionism.

However, what remains essential is what Nansen had in mind: he wanted to let every person decide freely about their residence. Today, we must understand that safe and legal emigration or immigration is not merely an ultima ratio but that those affected are morally entitled to compensation for the damage caused by the loss of their homeland. In 2015, for instance, a "Nansen Initiative" established a climate passport for migrants.^{xi} For people who are existentially threatened by global warming, the document is intended to grant access to welcoming states and offer the possibility of enjoying citizenship-like rights there. For the stateless of tomorrow, above all the inhabitants of these small island states, it opens up early, voluntary, and humane migration paths.

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) went one step further and recommended that the passport should also be given to people from other countries who are under massive threat, including internally displaced people. Among the 82 million refugees currently living worldwide, they form the largest group. Under the polluter pays principle, countries with significant historical as well as current

greenhouse gas emissions must be willing to do so, as they bear the primary responsibility for climate change.

A climate passport is essential because, globally, millions of people are relocating due to the sudden onset of extreme disasters such as floods, storms, bush and forest fires. From 2008 to 2016, around 228 million people had to leave their homes temporarily or permanently due to such disasters, an average of more than 22 million people per year. This does not even include those gradual changes such as drought, soil degradation, and groundwater salinization. The World Bank estimates that 143 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America will be displaced within their countries by climate impacts by 2050 if no countermeasures are taken.

"If this is in tomorrow's *Bild* newspaper, your climate passport is dead", a well-to-do older gentleman responded to me recently. What is your suggestion, I asked him? Look the other way, slam the door, ask refugees from Vanuatu and Tuvalu to drown instead? So far, climate migrants have not been able to invoke international refugee protection, which only protects against intentional actions by governments, such as persecution for religious or political beliefs, but not against environmental changes and natural disasters.

That is why international pacts for refugees and migration have been negotiated for several years. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, a uniform declaration on migration under international law, only exists on paper. Even EU states such as Hungary and Austria refused to sign it.^{xii} Even the significance of a global pact – which, by the way, is not legally binding – was talked down of fear of the right-wing populists to such an extent that little remained except European self-reassurance. Nevertheless, the climate passport remains on the agenda for the population of flat island states.

Otherwise, some "ingrate" like the writer Vladimir Nabokov, once the holder of the green "Nansen passport", will be able to claim that its sickly faded color already reveals how the holder is regarded: like a criminal with a day pass. The lapses in the "Nansen Passport" do not speak against but rather for prompt ratification of the climate passport.

A utopian is one who does nothing. Despite what the populist right think, Europe does not have to accept "everyone" according to the migration pact. However, this

does not change the need for a normative and operational development of humanitarian cosmopolitanism. The number of refugees to be admitted is calculated according to objective requirements – as one in the Federal Republic should not forget. At the beginning of its history, Germany took in millions of displaced persons under worse conditions. It can also be seen today in Syria's neighboring states, which bear the brunt of mass flight. Migration is normal and desirable during these times and in this world. Those who pursue a refugee and energy policy that only follow short-term national interests, prevent pragmatic and multilateral solutions of regulated immigration and will very soon be overrun by reality.

The last example of the need for current global cooperation relates to managing the COVID-19-pandemic, which can only be tackled internationally. Gift exchange comes into play here, in that states whose budgets are deficient and whose health systems are ailing are donated vaccine, drugs and medical infrastructure so that immunization can succeed worldwide - and thus in every other place in the world, no matter how rich; for if it remains incomplete, the virus and its mutants can spread rapidly again everywhere, especially in the rich North. Patent protection and manufacturers' clear profit concerns stand in the way of this self-evident fact. The idea behind patents was simple and *non-exclusive*: inventors should tell the world about their innovations and describe it in such a way that theoretically, all other professionals could recreate it. In return for their openness, they get the opportunity to market their invention exclusively for a certain period of time. The demand to temporarily lift international patent protection for Corona vaccines so that people around the world could get immunized more quickly and the pace of vaccination could increase came from South Africa and India, where preparations are lacking; a swift encouraging response came from U.S. President Joe Biden personally.^{xiii}

Objections have been of a practical nature – the complexity of vaccine production is extremely demanding even without patent protection, and there is a lack of production capacity. So should intellectual property be expropriated? Voluntaryness is preferable, but compulsory licensing is undoubtedly provided for in WTO law. Is it, then again, legitimate to privatize vaccines in such an emergency when vaccines are usually developed with public research funding, i.e. with taxpayers' money?

Vaccines must become a global public good, insists France's President Macron. The WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)

hinders rapid access to affordable vaccines and medicines. Concerned corporations proposed alternatives: lifting export bans on vaccine raw materials or selling vaccines at cost price. The concern that lifting patent policy would hinder investment in research is untenable. Likewise, the Global South is not in a position to produce vaccines themselves. They have been prevented from building up such production capacities by patent protection. A change in the production of essential goods for survival would have to be developed principally in open source and open access processes. Everyone should have access to vaccines at fair prices. This is only possible with a veritable gift economy. This would protect the wealthier as well as the poor. Removing patent protection is certainly only one aspect; eliminating the unfair international division of labor and initiating an open transfer of knowledge is the larger project.

We have outlined three areas of conflict that call for global cooperation and, even more, for a modern exchange of gifts between rich and poor nations: debt relief, opening migration routes, and solidarity-based health care. This proposal stresses the balance of states and puts people over arguments of utility and the competition for scarce resources. The approach is normative and those who advocate it are better aware that the world, that international relations are unfortunately not like that. The capitalist world society is full of injustices that cannot simply be overcome by codifying global rights for all.

The re-nationalization of politics of self-interest has increased the disparity and exacerbated the frictions. And it is true, as the "realists" of International Relations point out, that the sphere of liberal constitutions has also reflected and reinforced power hierarchies; in truth, the postwar multilateral order has never been an assembly of equals, instead it was a reflection of material disparities, colonial and postcolonial power relations, and the dominance of a Western liberal understanding of the modern world. NATO, too, was never the guardian of a common good of regional security, the EU rarely an appellate body for the oppressed and offended, the WTO no guarantor of fair trade. But they did have norms, grievance channels, and procedures ready to criticize and mitigate inequalities and injustices, and particularly international tribunals and arbitration bodies adorn their preambles with enlightened cosmopolitan ideals. So a "realistic" alternative is to pursue these ideals even more resolutely – or to sink fully into chaos and anarchy. Despite what

autocrats think and do, of course, humanity needs binding rules, respected agreements, and enforceable sanctions against rule violations. Only in this way can global problems such as a pandemic, climate change, or species extinction be overcome. Only in this way can corruption and autocratic arrogance be banished. And only in this way can ethnic cleansing and religiously motivated persecution end. And as if all this were not challenging enough, theory and practice of international politics must now open up in two other respects: first, given the ecological and financial mortgages that have been placed on succeeding generations since the 19th century, and even more acutely in the last decades of the 20th century, with the entire burden of global warming and debt, we need to modernize the classical social contract, which is supposed to guarantee the protection of those living today to a generational contract which provides for those living in the future. Second, it must be expanded to a new treaty with nature that says goodbye to the arrogant role of man as the supposed "crown of creation", who imposes his dictates on animate and inanimate nature alike. Not only disadvantaged humans but also animals, plants, and even inanimate nature must be represented and given a voice in international politics in what has been called a "Parliament of Things".^{xiv}

Homo Cooperativus is not a cosmopolitan fantasy^{xv} – something nice to have, but in the harsh reality of this world society, a naivety, or, as some experts think, a danger. For there have long been people in all disciplines, who work very pragmatically and rationally to realize cosmopolitan ideas. One such discipline is the visual arts, where experimental natural research, advocacy for endangered peoples and species, damage documentation, and tangible future fantasy come together to form an impressive phalanx of "art in the Anthropocene". And those who find this too vague and marginal should review the most recent verdicts of national and international courts^{xvi}, which are directed against the further exploitation of nature, global warming, species' extinction, and the inhumane supply chains in global trade. Effective sanctions have put the investment of private companies and public budget policy to the test. And contrary to frequent objections, such an international policy is not a gateway to authoritarian politics but really a means of strengthening democratic participation.

A German version of this contribution was previously published at deutschlandfunk.de.

ⁱ After Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of The Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714) <https://archive.org/details/MandevilleTheFableOfTheBees>

ⁱⁱ See Tomasello, M. (2009). *Why We Cooperate*, MIT Press: Cambridge/Mass. and *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge/Mass

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.eva.mpg.de/comparative-cultural-psychology/staff/daniel-haun#c44269>

^{iv} Nowak, Martin (with Roger Highfield) (2011): *SuperCooperators: Altruism, Evolution, and Why We Need Each Other to Succeed*. New York: Free Press, p. 268. See also Hanusch, Frederic/Claus Leggewie/Erik Meyer (2021) *Planetar denken. Ein Einstieg*. Bielefeld: transcript

^v Harkin, Michael E., 2001, Potlatch in Anthropology, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, eds., vol 17, pp. 11885-11889. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

^{vi} ^{vi} Harkin, Michael E., 2001, Potlatch in Anthropology, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, eds., vol 17, pp. 11885-11889. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

^{vii} Die »Schnapsidee« des Alfred Herrhausen, *Spiegel* 40/1988

^{viii} Graeber, David (2011): *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. New York: Melville House, p. 14, see Simmel, Georg. 2004 [1900]. *The Philosophy of Money (3rd enlarged ed.)*, edited by D. Frisby, translated by D. Frisby and T. Bottomore. London: Routledge.

^{ix} *Zorn und Zeit. Politisch-psychologischer Versuch*, Frankfurt/Main 2006

^x Los, Robert (2020), *Climate Passport: A Legal Instrument to Protect Climate Migrants – A New Spirit for a Historical Concept*, 31 December 2020 (<https://earthrefuge.org/climate-passport-a-legal-instrument-to-protect-climate-migrants-a-new-spirit-for-a-historical-concept/>)

^{xi} Chloé Maurel, *Ein Pass für Staatenlose*, in: *Le monde diplomatique*, 9.7.2015; Claus Leggewie, *Ein Pass für Klimaflüchtlinge*, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21.11.2018, S. 2.

^{xii} In addition to the US (then under Trump) and Israel (then under Netanyahu), three EU countries refused to sign the pact: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, all governed by authoritarian populists as well.

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^{xiv} See e.g. Eroukhmanoff, Clara, and Matt Harker, eds. 2017. *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*. Bristol: E-International Relations; Corry, Olaf. 2020. "Concluding Discussion: The Planetary Is Not the End of the International." In: Joana Castro Pereira and André Saramago (eds.). *Non-Human Nature in World Politics: Theory and Practice*, *Frontiers in International Relations*, Cham: Springer International, pp. 337-52.

^{xv} See my review Leggewie, Claus (2021) *Neues vom Grand Hotel Abgrund. Der Paradigmenwechsel vom Kosmopolitismus zur Kosmo-Politik (News from the Grand Hotel Abyss. The paradigm shift from cosmopolitanism to cosmo-politics)*. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* volume 15, pages 119–136

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<https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2021/bvq21-031.html>; <https://rsw.beck.de/aktuell/daily/meldung/detail/historisches-klima-urteil-shell-muss-co2-emissionen-reduzieren>