

**Talking to Stanley.**  
**What do we need for global justice to make sense**  
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*Warning:*

*This is a slightly edited version of a lecture delivered at the launch  
conference of the Centre for the Study of Social Justice  
(Oxford, 26 November 2005).*

*Before it becomes suitable for careful reading, it still needs quite a bit of  
work done to it, not just footnotes added.*

*Hence: not to be circulated beyond the participants, but critical  
comments more than welcome.\**

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One afternoon of early November 2005, as I was walking in a busy street of Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, a little crowd of kids gathered around me once again shouting "Onye Ocha", "White man" – hardly surprising since I had seen no white person myself for several days, apart from a couple of albinos. What was in many ways far more surprising is that we could communicate with each other, on a variety of subjects, despite the fact that, in all likelihood, these primary school kids had never met any native of any European language.

We talked, enough for them to know that I was coming from Belgium, a very popular place in Nigeria, because it is generally believed to be a city in Germany from which most of Nigeria's recent second-hand cars originate, and hence a fabulously wealthy place. So when I said that I had to leave because I needed to catch my plane back home, one of the kids said he wanted to come with and when I told him he could not, he asked me why not. I stuttered something, which he did not find convincing and which I did not find convincing either. And I left the street, Owerri, Igboland, Nigeria, Africa, with the nagging feeling of leaving behind a dishonest answer.

I do not know what the kid was called, but let us call him "Stanley", as every second a third boy in Igboland seemed to be called "Stanley". My central claim, by way of answer to the question that forms the subtitle of this paper, can then be compactly phrased: *Talking to Stanley is a necessary and sufficient condition for global justice to make sense.*

By *global justice*, I shall mean here an egalitarian distributive ideal that applies to the conditions of all individuals human beings in today's world in the same way as our conceptions of social justice are egalitarian ideals that apply to the conditions of all individuals members of a particular society. Global justice in this sense is therefore distinct from and irreducible to pity, charity, benevolence or humanitarianism, distinct from and irreducible to a ban on injustice as the voluntary harming of our

people, distinct from and irreducible to the fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of cooperative ventures. When asking when global justice, so characterized, *makes sense*, I am asking about a set of necessary and sufficient conditions under which it has the same sort and strength of ethical appeal as social justice has at the domestic level.

### **A global race?**

On this question, there are two fundamental positions, the second of which comes in many variants. The first position, which might be labelled the *cosmopolitan* position, maintains that global justice always makes sense whenever and wherever mankind exists, irrespective of the relations between human beings worldwide or between the human societies they form. The second position, which I shall call the *relational* position, maintains that global justice only makes sense when certain relations that typically link the members of the same society start applying worldwide. Depending on whether or not one believes those relations to obtain to a sufficient extent worldwide, one will then be led to assert that global justice, as characterized, does make sense in today's world, as asserted for example by Charles Beitz, Thomas Pogge or Joshua Cohen, or fails to make sense, as asserted by John Rawls , David Miller or Thomas Nagel.

From the perspective of this second position, the key question is of course, what are exactly these relations that need to link together the people or the populations of the world, for global justice to make sense. I would like to distinguish five views, corresponding to five interpretations of these conditions, several of which can be further sub-divided, but which, taken together, give us a good grip on the relevant landscape.

For global justice to make sense, according to a first view, what we need is a *global race*, i.e. such a high permanent level of migration and intermarriage that the whole of mankind forms a single people, that it is no longer possible to identify distinct peoples with their distinct histories and their specific genetic and cultural characteristics. The existence of a global race is no doubt sufficient for global justice to make sense, and probably most helpful for its realization. But as many, if not all, national societies are a long way from forming a single race in this sense, those for whom social justice makes sense at a national level cannot possibly require the emergence of a worldwide single race as a necessary condition for global justice to make sense. And I doubt anyone would seriously offer the existence of a global race as a necessary, not just a sufficient condition.

### **A global community?**

A second, far more plausible view, corresponds at least roughly to David Miller's (1999a, 1999b: ch.12) position. For global justice to make sense, what we need is a *global community*, i.e. a worldwide reach of those common sympathies which Mill viewed as constitutive of a nation and Rawls as an essential feature of a people. What we need, in other words, is that mutual identification and solidarity feelings be lifted beyond the limits of one's national group, to embrace mankind as a whole. The most straightforward way of conceiving this process consists in viewing this process as a swelling of the scope of one's overarching collective identity and of the corresponding patriotism until it embraces the human species as a whole. We are obviously far off the mark in this respect. And if this is the criterion, Miller is justified in dismissing the relevance of an egalitarian conception of justice to the global level.

However the move beyond national solidarity can take a different form. In his critique of Rawls's (1999) way of thinking about worldwide justice — as fairness between the peoples or nations superimposed on fairness between individuals within each nation —, Amartya Sen (1999a, 1999b, 2002) argues that one should reject the idea, implicit in this approach, that national identity is each person's sole or primary identity, and think about worldwide justice in connection with a multidimensional proliferation of non-nested identities that generate border-crossing identification and solidarity between, say, doctors, catholics, alcoholics, feminists, salsa dancers, Malibu surfer advocates or speakers of agonizing languages and thereby end up knitting together the whole of the world population. The thickening of a global civil society thus turns mankind into a global community.

Like the existence of a global race, I have no problem accepting the rise of a global community, along either of these two paths, as a sufficient condition for global justice to make sense. I have even less of a problem believing that it would provide a powerful tool for realization of global justice. But on the global scale, just as on the national scale, what makes sense as a demand of justice cannot be derivative with respect to what people feel inclined to do for (some) others out of spontaneous sympathy. These feelings are historically variable and institutionally malleable and our convictions about whether egalitarian justice makes sense should shape them, use them, not submit to their rule.

### **A global state?**

According to a third view, for global justice to make sense, what we need is a *global state*. Thus, according to Thomas Nagel (2005), justice understood as it is here as an egalitarian distributive ideal between

individuals, makes sense only between people who are both subjects and co-authors of the same coercive laws, i.e. between the citizens of a state. Since there are no political institutions on a world scale that generate legal rules both coercively imposed on the whole of mankind and jointly co-authored by the whole of mankind, the very notion of global justice does not make sense.

Let me rephrase this claim somewhat more vividly. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1994, while the negotiations about to produce the WTO were in full swing, the US Business and Industrial Council published a full-page advertisement in *USA Today* with the slogan « Yes to World Trade. No to World Government. » On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005, Bono and a number of other music stars organized a huge « Live 8 » concert in London's Hyde Park in order to pressurize the G8 into adopting a big package in favour of a number of African countries. Their message was summarized the following day in the front page headline of *The Observer* : « We don't want charity. What we want is justice. ». According to Nagel, the US Business Council had its way, and therefore Bono is talking nonsense.

By contrast, Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel (2006) believe that Bono does talk sense, precisely because the US Business Council guys did not have their way. In their critique of Nagel, they accept his « political » variant of the relational position but argue, on the basis of a detailed analysis of the functioning of the WTO, that we have enough of a « world government », of a « global state », to trigger the meaningfulness of global justice, if not quite egalitarian, at least inclusionary. To warrant this conclusion, however, the interpretation of Nagel's condition needs to be softened along two dimensions.

Firstly, according to Nagel himself, for people to share a state, and therefore for justice to make sense between them, it is not really necessary that they should be the *co-authors* of the coercive laws to which they are subjected, but only for these laws to be "expected to be upheld by all as participants" and "intended to serve their interests even if they

are not their legislators". On this "broad interpretation of what it is for a society to be governed in the name of its members", justice therefore makes sense even in a colonial empire (Nagel 2005: fn14).

Secondly, for people to share a state, and therefore for justice to make sense between them, it is arguably not necessary either for them to be subjects and co-authors of all their coercive laws. If only some of the coercive laws are in common, as is the case for the citizens of the European Union, this may be enough for there to be a state in relevant sense. Nagel does not make that step explicitly. He does discuss the European Union (Nagel 2005: 144). But the reason why he considers that it does not qualify as an appropriate locus for demands of distributive justice is not that only a small subset of the legal framework is common to all its citizens but that it has not yet become "a genuine European federation with some form of democratically elected representative government" and may never become one, precisely because of the fear of its better-off parts that once such a genuine European federation is in place demands of egalitarian distributive justice would start making sense at EU level, with costly implications for them. However, with a directly elected European Parliament now enjoying legislative powers that are no longer negligible, with a European Commission whose members need to be individually endorsed by the Parliament, and with a right of exit by members states that has become purely notional, it is very hard, indeed impossible to see why justice makes full sense on political grounds between citizens of the Indian Union or of the United States, though not of the European Union.

It therefore looks as if the most sensible interpretation of Nagel's political conception of justice should be broadened not only, as he explicitly allows in his discussion of colonial empires, to dispense with a real co-authoring of the coercive laws, but also as he implies in his discussion of the European Union, to dispense with the requirement that all coercive laws should be shared. Cohen and Sabel's position can then be

understood as a soft variant of Nagel's political condition strictly construed, made more acceptable though a twofold weakening: an ultra-minimal interpretation of co-authorship (so minimal that it turns even the colonized into co-authors) and an undemanding interpretation of the sharing of coercive laws (that covers partial sharing of the sort we have in the EU). As a necessary condition for global justice to make sense, this mild variant of the political condition is no doubt more acceptable than the hard one. But, I shall argue, still not acceptable enough.

The relationship between the position I shall defend and those of Nagel and Cohen and Sabel can be sketched as follows. According to Nagel, what Bono says does not make sense because the US Business Council guys won their battle. According to Cohen and Sabel, what Bono says does make sense because those guys lost their battle. My own view is that those guys must lose their battle because what Bono says makes sense. This implies that even the two-dimensionally weakened political condition is too restrictive, that it may constitute a sufficient condition for global justice to make sense, but not a necessary condition.

To give you straight away the intuition that underlies this claim, let us transport our Stanley to the (ex-Belgian) Congo for a moment, and let him tell me : "Do you find it fair that you have all those cars, those roads, those books, that food in your country, while for us life drinking water is a daily challenge?" Can I simply reply: "Nonsense young man. You would have had a point fifty years ago, when the Congo was still a Belgian colony, because then we Belgians were at least pretending then to rule on your behalf and this committed us to some egalitarian distributive principle. But since then you have conquered your independence, and the end of your colonial status has also meant the end of our duties of distributive justice: Yupee!"?

No, I cannot get away with such a reply, and not just for fear of giving too brilliant an idea to all the richer components of all existing countries: "Just secede from your poorer neighbours. You will thereby be able to

become more just for less money. For most of us who strongly believe on the basis of this or other cases, that the meaningfulness of justice questions and claims, in the appropriate sense, cannot rise and fall with the existence of common political institutions, we must go out and look for another, more general relation that could provide a necessary condition for global justice to make sense.

### **A global system?**

After the global race, global community and the global state let me now turn to the global system, i.e. the sheer existence of interdependencies: wherever you live in the world, your fate depends to a significant extent on which decisions are taken (or not taken when they could have been taken), on which policies are adopted (or not adopted when they could have been adopted), on which institutions are created (or not created when they could have been created) by people living in other parts of the world.

I shall accept without further argument that this condition of interdependence, as interpreted, is a necessary condition for global justice to make sense. But is it a sufficient condition? Does the emergence of global system suffice to trigger the meaningfulness of global justice? Let me first mention two tracks which look promising enough at first sight, yet fail to provide the rationales for this sufficiency.

First of all, the existence of interdependencies creates a potential for cooperation, for mutual benefit. As soon as such cooperation is kicked off, one cannot avoid facing the question of the fair distribution of the cooperative surplus, of the just distribution of burdens and benefits between the actual and potential cooperators, namely the nations of the world. What this leads us to, however, is some notion of co-operative

justice between nations, with their current situation, or their no-agreement counterfactual situation, as a fall-back option below which it would be unjust for any of them to fall. With some pushing and shoving and an appropriate degree of personification of peoples, one may hope to drive nations behind a veil of ignorance and commit them to a bit more, distributively speaking, than what would follow from cooperative justice, namely something like the duty of assistance to burdened societies, not prosperous enough to be able to sustain decent institutions, as required by Rawls' *Law of Peoples*. But all this has very little to do as such with the inter-individual egalitarian global justice which we are talking about in the present context.

A second option looks more promising, as it does not get side-tracked into inter-national cooperative justice. Global interdependencies do not only open the possibility of mutual benefit between nations. They also open the possibility of harm being inflicted on people who are not members of our own nation. Thus, Thomas Pogge suggests that global injustice consists in the poor of the world being harmed by the global economic order, i.e. by the way these global interdependencies happen to be organized (or fail to be organized).

The problem I see with the second option can be formulated with the help of the following dilemma. Either we adopt a demanding sense of "harming", and hardly any population in the world today, if any, can be said to be harmed as a result of the global interdependencies. Or we adopt an undemanding sense of "harming", and then it is nearly always, perhaps even always, trivially met. To illustrate, take the current population of the Congo. Would that population be better off in the absence of global interdependencies. The answer is pretty uncontroversially no, since the bulk of that population would not have been born without a sharp fall in child mortality over the last decennia, no doubt one of the most striking outcomes of these interdependencies. The latter, therefore, can hardly be said to have harmed the Congolese people.

Nonetheless it is even less controversially true that, had the interdependencies been designed differently, the Congolese people could have been better off. Indeed, for any portion of the world population, however well off, there is presumably some way of redesigning global interdependencies that would make them better off than they currently are.

### **A global forum?**

Hence, interdependencies do not trigger by themselves the meaningfulness of global justice, whether through kicking into existence all forms of international cooperation or through opening up the possibility of mutual harming. A global system is necessary, but it is not sufficient, for global justice to make sense. What else do we need? I told you already: all we need is to talk to Stanley. Or, less metaphorically, the sufficient condition we are looking for is the development of a *global conversation* gradually amplified, organized, structured into a global forum. These are no doubt pretty grand terms for what happened along the side of that chaotic street in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, amidst the beeping of the motorbikes and the stench of the gutters. Let me spell out what I mean.

Global justice starts making sense when, on the background of the interdependencies just mentioned, we enter into relationships with individual people across the world of a sort that was largely confined so far to individual people within our own societies. This fast-spreading new relationship is crucially different from three qualitatively different types of relationships with people in other parts of the world which do not have the same impact: (1) the diplomatic relationship between countries of the sort referred to earlier, which lends plausibility to claims of international cooperative justice or *Law-of-Peoples*-like international justice; (2) the

spectator relationship with individual people with whom we are unable to communicate and for whom we may sustain a relationship of pity, benevolence, sympathy more similar to the relationship we develop for animals able to arouse our sympathy than to the relationship that grows with other human beings with whom we can have an in-depth conversation; and finally (3) a narrowly, confined relationship for mutual benefit as mediated through the market. The conversational relationship I have in mind may have been preceded by each of these three more confined relationships. It may have grown out of them. But it reaches beyond them in being able to state differences between the conditions of the speech partners, qualify them as inequalities and frame them as modifiable states of affairs in need of justification.

The more people know about the world, the more they understand it as modifiable, the more they learn common languages in which they can talk about all this across borders, the more they meet in a context in which they can talk without fear, the more they structure their observations, analyses, arguments claims collectively, the more we move from a global fragmented conversation to a more or less structured, integrated forum, from random chats with the Stanleys of the world to a global network of Porto Alegres. But the crucial step is made as soon as we are able and willing to enter into conversation somewhere, somehow, with someone who has obviously less than ourselves of many things we both value, as soon as we are able and willing to listen to him or her ask us why he or she cannot have just as much as ourselves of those things, or at least not so much less.

A global system is not enough, a global race, a global community, a global state are not needed — even though the more they exist, the more they contribute to what is needed. What *is* needed for global justice to make sense is simply to really enter, smoothly or abruptly, a genuine conversation of the sort I described. Of course conversation of this sort is not exactly on absolute novelty, nor is it a universal experience. But the

more universal it becomes, the more numerous will be the people to whom global justice will make sense and the more massively, the more self-evidently it will make sense to them. For those among us who want to practice political philosophy for the 22<sup>nd</sup> century rather than for the 19<sup>th</sup>, for the 21st century rather than for the 20<sup>th</sup>, this should be sufficient to tell us where we are best advised to focus our energies, whether it is still worth bothering with distinctions between principles for domestic and global justice.

There is no doubt some more work to do in order to clarify the conditions under which global justice makes sense. But let us not exhaust all our drive on this auxiliary meta-ethical task. The real business consists in spelling out a consistent plausible conception of what global justice requires. My own answer to this question is simple: "Real Freedom for *all*", with "all" firmly, heavily underlined. But in this case too the simplicity of the slogan hides a number of tricky problems relating for example to transnational migration, the protection of intellectual property, and the diffusion of lingua francas, as well as to innovative supranational patterns of governance such as corporate social responsibility or the open method of coordination, which we shall increasingly have to view as instruments for global justice in the same league as representative democracy. It is perhaps not because Bono is right that the US Business Council should not have its way. Doing whatever is needed if we want global justice, not charity, may not require a world government.

Meeting the Stanleys of the world, listening to them, talking to them, will not solve all these problems. But it does help us think about global justice. It is definitely less cosy than chatting among dons in an Oxford Common Room, especially for those who loathe the stench of sewage and sweat. But it is worth the trouble. It may not only help us find out when and why global justice makes sense. It may also motivate us to do something about it.

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