



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 33
Issue 4 *December*

Article 3

2006

International Social Work, Globalization and the Challenge of a Unipolar World

James Midgley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Midgley, James (2006) "International Social Work, Globalization and the Challenge of a Unipolar World," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol33/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

International Social Work, Globalization and the Challenge of a Unipolar World

JAMES MIDGLEY

This summer, two international social work organizations - the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) - will again host their regular biannual conferences. IFSW will meet in Munich, Germany in July while IASSW will meet in Santiago, Chile in August. These meetings will bring social workers from many different countries together to share ideas and experiences, and to discuss issues of common interest. Social workers have been meeting under the auspices of these two organizations for more than seventy years and today both organizations play a vital role in promoting cooperation among social workers around the world.

As is customary, both conferences will be organized around core themes. The IFSW's conference theme is *A World out of Balance: Working for a New Social Equilibrium* while IASSW will focus on *Growth and Inequality*. While these themes have been chosen by the conference organizers to give structure and form to the meetings, they also reflect issues of wider interest to the profession. For example, the decision to highlight the problem of inequality at the IASSW meeting in Santiago reflects a renewed interest in the topic. Although inequality has been neglected in economic and social policy debates since the 1980s on the ground that inequality is of secondary importance to the goal of promoting rapid economic growth, it is clear that economic growth over the last twenty years has not brought prosperity to all. Indeed, in many parts of the world, growth has been accompanied by stagnating incomes for many ordinary people. On the other hand, those with high incomes have experienced unprecedented gains. It is highly appropriate,

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, December 2006, Volume XXXIII, Number 4

therefore, that the issue of inequality and growth should serve as the theme of the IASSW conference.

International issues and concerns such as these have engaged social workers at different times in the profession's history. At the time of the First World War, Jane Addams' pacifist campaigns were supported by many social workers involved in international activities. Similarly, in the 1950s, when rapid industrial development and economic modernization was believed to offer the best hope of achieving prosperity for the newly independent countries, some social workers urged the export of Western social work theories and methods to the developing world believing that this was compatible with the modernization process. These ideas were vigorously contested in the 1970s by social workers from the developing countries who called instead for the adoption of indigenous approaches they believed were appropriate to the social and cultural realities of non-Western societies. Although few social workers at the time were actively involved in these international debates, the profession has benefited from addressing these and other international issues.

Over the last decade, globalization has been a major topic for discussion in international social work. Articles on the subject have appeared in many social work journals and the issue has featured prominently at international gatherings. Like much of the social science literature on the subject, many social work scholars have offered a very pessimistic analysis of globalization. Many have argued that it has created unemployment, weakened traditional family values and community solidarity, created pressures on governments to cut social expenditures and undermined their ability to implement social welfare policies and programs.

A more optimistic school of thought that stresses the opportunities provided by globalization for enhancing international collaboration, promoting peace and increasing understanding between the world's different peoples and cultures has also emerged. Social work proponents of this view stress the multifaceted character of globalization, pointing out that it not only involves economic but demographic, social, cultural, political and other dimensions. While they are critical of speculative finance capitalism, exploitative trade relations

and the role of international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, they believe that it is possible to implement a progressive global agenda that will enhance the welfare of the world's peoples.

International social workers who take a more optimistic view of globalization also believe that globalization can foster greater international political cooperation and strengthen multilateral organizations such as the United Nations. Through the efforts of the United Nations and other international organizations, they argue that it may be possible to regulate economic markets, promote global well-being and address major social problems such as malnutrition, HIV-AIDS, ethnic and religious conflict and the exploitation of women, minorities and children. Above all, they claim that human rights, peace and social justice ideals can best be realized through global cooperative efforts.

These ideals reflect a centuries old cosmopolitan tradition in Western social and political thought that has long believed in the possibility - as well as the necessity - of international collaboration. Rooted in the ancient Stoic belief in a universal natural law that binds people of all cultures and nationalities together, the cosmopolitan ideal has influenced the theologues of Augustine and Aquinas and in the political theories of Machiavelli, Kant and Marx. It found practical expression in the creation of the League of Nations in 1919 and subsequently with the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. More recently it has been restated in the advocacy of admittedly nebulous notions such as "global citizenship", "borderless world" and "global governance".

Many social workers will be particularly interested in the practical implications of cosmopolitan thinking and in the ways these ideas can be implemented. In fact, many are already engaged in the practical task of promoting international cooperation. Many are helping to educate students and colleagues about the need for greater international engagement, and many are actively supporting international organizations, including civil society organizations, that campaign for global reforms. By actively responding to the challenges as well as the opportunities of globalization, they believe that the profession's commitments to promoting global social well-being and

social justice can be realized.

However, there are many who reject the cosmopolitan values reflected in these activities. For example, isolationists believe that international engagement should be minimized and that nation states are better off when they focus on domestic issues and avoid international entanglements. Nationalists believe that national identity (and loyalty) is the most important feature of social life and they have historically used international opportunities to promote domestic interests. Advocates of imperialism believe that powerful states will inevitably dominate weaker nations and that this is a natural and realistic way of organizing international affairs. Their views have been used not only to justify the exercise of diplomatic, military and economic power but the diffusion of values and institutions. These different ideologies pose a serious challenge to the idealistic cosmopolitanism that characterizes international cooperation today.

It is in this regard that the concept of "unipolarism" has particular relevance for international social work. Popularized by the neoconservative journalist, Charles Krauthammer (2004), the term evokes a new global imagery which replaces earlier conceptualizations and classifications of the world's nation states. These include the bi-polar "East versus West" dichotomy of the Cold War and the tri-polar "Three Worlds" classification advocated by the leaders of the nonaligned movement in the 1950s. For the nonaligned movement, the world was divided into three major spheres of influence or "poles", namely the Western capitalist democracies, the Soviet Union and the developing countries. Subsequent formulations augmented this classification by adding a "Fourth World" of extremely poor developing countries or by viewing the world as a conglomeration of distinct cultural or "civilizational" spheres such as that envisaged by Samuel Huntington (1996) in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*. For many cosmopolitans, however, the world is best depicted not as a multiplicity of poles but as a community of equal, sovereign nation states bound together by international law and participating on a reciprocal basis in global, cooperative endeavors.

Neoconservative intellectuals and politicians scoff at this notion pointing out that international relations are not

characterized by idealism but by the hard realities of political and economic power. These realities rather than idealistic calls for mutual respect and reciprocity dictate events. The realist view was actively promoted by neoconservative writers such as Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol in the 1980s who urged that the accommodationist policies of the Cold War era be rejected, and that the government of the United States be utterly committed to the destruction of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology. Its destruction, they argued, was necessary to secure global peace and promote the social and economic well-being of the world's peoples. It was the dogged determination of the Reagan administration, they claimed, that brought about the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989. Subsequently, a new generation of neoconservatives including Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Kagan and William Kristol have articulated a vision for American diplomacy which proposes that the government of the United States accept its new responsibilities as the world's only Superpower and, in the new unipolar world, tolerate no opposition from any quarter.

Krauthammer's notion of the unipolar world found expression in the 1992 Defense Department's policy statement that urged that the Cold War strategy of "collective internationalism" be replaced with a new strategy of "benevolent domination". Drafted largely by Paul Wolfowitz under the supervision of then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, the policy statement urged the administration to declare the global hegemony of the United States and assume sole responsibility for international security. Although the policy statement received a hostile reception when it was leaked to the *New York Times*, its central premises were aggressively reiterated during the 1990s by numerous neoconservative thinkers with the support of leading right wing think tanks.

In 1997, a group of neoconservatives under the leadership of William Kristol and Gary Schmitt founded the Project for a New American Century which advocates the use of diplomatic, economic and military power to diffuse American values and ideals. Just as the Romans had shaped their world, so the leaders of the Project urged the government to remake the modern world in the American image. In 1998, leading neoconservatives sent an open letter to the Clinton

administration proposing an aggressive military and political strategy for overthrowing Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq. Calling themselves the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, the group included present-day luminaries such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton and US Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad. These proposals and the wider ideals they represent have subsequently been adopted by the Bush administration which has frequently declared its commitment to spread American notions of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism throughout the world. Of course, these beliefs were also implemented in the invasion of Iraq as legitimated by the doctrine of preemption. In his recent book, *The Case for Goliath*, Michael Mandelbaum (2005) offers a new and audacious commentary on these developments, arguing that debates about the advantages and disadvantages of American global hegemony have been rendered moot since the government of the United States has now, in fact, emerged (and been widely acclaimed) as the world's de facto government.

While this argument might be cynically interpreted to suggest that the cosmopolitanism ideal of world governance has now been realized, cosmopolitans would be appalled by the idea that one imperial power can effectively represent the interests of the world's diverse nations and peoples. Unipolarism dismisses the Post-World War II ideal, as exemplified in the United Nations Charter, that the world should be comprised of an egalitarian community of sovereign nation states cooperating with each other and living in peace under international law. Indeed, the advocates of unipolarism in the current administration and in neoconservative intellectual and journalistic circles, have not only ridiculed but campaigned to undermine this ideal. They have successfully urged the Congress to reject a variety of international treaties and human rights agreements and to scorn multilateral organizations such as the International Criminal Court. They are disdainful of the United Nations and other international organizations and have secured the appointment of neoconservative unilateralists to key positions in these bodies. Their attacks have also been directed at international non-profit organizations that pursue

agendas that are contrary to their own ideological preferences, particularly in fields such as gender rights and reproductive health. They have aggressively dismissed dissenters and, on national security grounds, advocated the use of surveillance and other methods that have the effect of suppressing dissent. They have urged the international adoption of values and beliefs that they believe exemplify American culture and have urged that international aid, diplomacy, economic institutions and even military means be used to achieve this goal.

The unipolar agenda presents a major challenge to social workers who believe in the ideals of international cooperation and reciprocity. Much international effort in social work has been based on these ideals. Over the years, social workers have formed national, regional and international professional associations that promote cooperation among social workers in different parts of the world. These organizations and the social workers they represent are respectful of difference and seek to understand and share rather than impose professional viewpoints. When these ideals are again affirmed at the two forthcoming international social work meetings this summer, social workers need to be mindful of the role of unipolarist ideology and the powerful hegemonic global forces that it has unleashed. These forces pose a major challenge to the profession's historic international ideals and commitments.

References

- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Krauthammer, C. (2004). *Democratic realism: An American foreign policy for a unipolar world*. Washington DC: AEI Press.
- Mandelbaum, M. (2005). *The case for Goliath: How America acts as the world's government in the 21st century*. New York: Public Affairs.

