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Theories of global public goods: reflections and reconstruction

Globalization is a two-directional process of convergence and integration. The global problems caused by globalization partly arise from the “spillover” of domestic problems across borders, and some are rooted in the failure of international institutions, such as the international financial crisis, non-humanitarian interference, and nuclear proliferation.

To resolve global problems, solutions cannot be separated from the supply of global public goods.

A collective action dilemma

In the field of global governance, the transnational supply of global public goods is not simply an economic and technical issue, but also a political issue involving the balance between different nation-states’ domestic and international interests.

For many years, Western academia has systematically analyzed the connotations and types of global public products and the logic in their supply. However, the mainstream theory is mostly based on the logic of economics, which leads to the

fact that the supply of global public goods now faces a collective action dilemma.

This logic focuses on the problem lying in supply—the “failure of the economic market,” but ignores the problem of competition incurred by “failure of the global political market.” In fact, the supply of global public goods is not completely carried out in line with traditional economic theories, but also involves the distribution of legitimacy and competition for leadership among multiple suppliers.

Fairness required as the focus

First, there is an imbalance between supply and demand for global public goods. Since there is a possibility that potential beneficiaries would benefit for free, and that most beneficiaries do not share costs, the cost of investment assumed by suppliers may exceed the benefits they gain. In addition, sovereign countries attach different degrees of importance to global public goods. For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a global public good,

which benefit all actors. However, some countries may not urgently need to obtain this benefit, or the target for the benefit is not a priority in their decision-making preference list, which makes cost-sharing quite complex.

The global supply of public goods should thus focus on fairness. Fairness means that with a variety of consumers, interests should be shared in an indiscriminative way under the principle of inclusivity. For example, international wireless global commons and dividends of technological innovation will benefit the whole world, however, to differentiated degrees and scope. Consumers living above the poverty line and affluent consumers have different access to superior public goods, which can result in potential inequality among opportunities.

An implicit premise of mainstream theories is that all people are treated fairly within the community. But in fact, the political attribute of global public goods means that fair consumption calls for an institutional and political guarantee. It not only

requires fairness in the material sense, but also demands attention is paid to equal opportunities.

Legitimate supply as the basis

Providing global public goods is an important way for supplier-countries to exert their international leadership and attract the support and recognition from other countries. Excellent leadership can integrate different countries in a shared and mutually beneficial way. Whether leadership is performed effectively depends on the legitimate supply of global public goods, which is an important basis for winning the trust of other countries.

Generally speaking, the legitimate supply of global public goods is affected by two major factors. The first is the supplier’s purpose and capacity. The purpose of supplying global public goods is to meet public demand and solve global public problems. Under the state of anarchy, the supply of global public goods is inseparable from the political leadership of major countries, and small countries can barely afford to pay for it.

In history, global public goods were mostly produced by hegemonic powers. For example, the US took the lead in establishing the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system in order to restore the post-war international order, which filled a vacuum of global public goods and underpinned the legitimacy of American hegemony.

However, any country with hegemonic power is not an omnipotent champion in the global supply of public goods. Even with advantages in structural power, it cannot necessarily gain recognition on all issues in the legitimate sense. When a hegemonic power chooses to play the role of a selective supplier, under the pressure of its own national interests and domestic political pressures, it will undoubtedly be condemned by international public opinion concerning some issues. This is determined by the nature of international political interests.

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Evidence-based reasoning and debate in academic research

In the process of conducting academic research, both significant evidence-based reasoning and effective debate should take “minimum consensus” as their starting point. The two sides in disagreement may, by properly retreating, find common ground by building upon facts or views that they can jointly accept.

Evidence-based reasoning

Contrary to common sense, truth is often fragile. Given this fragility, it is more worthy of treasure. The British philosopher Karl Popper pointed out that truth is often difficult to reach and, once discovered, is easy to lose after having got it. For intellectuals, they should be especially committed to the truth.

Unique views require evidence-based reasoning. Proposing a view that radically subverts commonly held beliefs can be respectful—if it is supported by strongly persuasive evidence. Novel ideas and theories that are strongly supported by evidence help enrich our perceptions, and they are beneficial. Only on the eve of the “scientific revolution,” when the accumulation of such anomalous ideas reaches their peak, will the consensus once regarded as the paradigm of a particular field gradually become suspicious. The accumulated doubt underlying a consensus will erode the explanatory and predictive power of the existing paradigm bit by bit, which leads the “scientific revolution” toward a



The famous debate between ancient Chinese scholars Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan in E-Hu Temple Photo: NetEase

new paradigm.

“Examples” and “data” also often serve evidence-based reasoning. Taking examples or quoting others’ opinions can satisfy our curiosity and preference for specific descriptions and vivid details, but this is often not an effective method for presenting an argument. A judge from the judicial branch, by quoting legal provisions, can become coercive in terms of actions, but not thoughts. Serious data can provide support for effective arguments, but data also requires reliable sources and correct interpretation. Data misinterpretation tends to be more common than we think. As the world is developing and changing at a fast pace, data is constantly fluctuating. At the same time, data manipulation is often much easier than we think. A reliable source means that someone is responsible for the data, so that it meets the basic requirements of be-

ing complete and authentic.

The significance of the data often lies in the way we interpret it. For example, the average number, as an indicator of the extent of data’s concentration in the distributed pattern, is only meaningful when the overall data set is distributed in a particular context. But for a set of data with huge difference between each node in the distribution pattern, using the average indicator is usually not as valuable as using the median data. Therefore, in the face of the same objective fact, there may be quite different interpretations based on different positions, and these interpretations may all be reasonable. Sometimes, data can serve specific values. In this case, merely relying on data alone may not explain anything.

Debate and consensus reaching

In academic research, evidence-

based reasoning generally assumes a non-specific object or reader, but debate tends to revolve around specific points of view or target specific opponents. Debate requires respect for one’s opponent and adherence to the rules of logic, and the goal is to achieve a new consensus. It begins with a consensus, advances with understandings, and ends with a new consensus—this is the meaning of debate. Debate is conducive to the formation of consensus and new knowledge.

In Chinese history, the two great philosophers and educators from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan once conducted heated debate with each other as they tried to perceive and explore the means to best explain cosmological principles and the truth of the universe. In the meeting held at the E-Hu Temple in 1175, the two continued to debate this topic for three days, which, however, failed to fulfill the expectation of Lyu Zuqian, the organizer and initiator of the meeting, who hoped that the two would agree upon each other’s opinion and reach a consensus. But the two deepened their understandings of the merits and defects of each other’s theories through continuous debate and subsequent letter writing. Six years later, when they met again in Nankang, Zhu invited Lu to preach the doctrine of Confucianism, and greatly praised Lu’s ideas on the relationship between

righteousness and profit. In this example, we see “debate promotes consensus” in Chinese history.

Criticism in the academic field should be based on solid understanding and interpretation. In this way, wholesome conversations can be conducted with both historical figures and contemporaries. When we study historical figures in conducting current academic research, we need to consider the times they lived in, the situations they experienced, and reality of life they encountered. We need to return to the scene of history—to read their works, to penetrate into their lives, to uncover their feelings. The differences between different times are so great that the understandings that truly transcend the times are thus precious and scarce.

Sometimes, the two sides of the debate greatly differ from each other, in cognition and other aspects, and the debate process is also a process in which conflicts between deep values gradually unfold. As a compound of systematic ideas, values are difficult to change from the outside; real change often comes from within. Debate requires empathy and independent thinking, which is the basis for debate, and more importantly, an intellectual guidance for scholars.

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