
'Survival Research' and the 'Planetary Interest': Carrying Forward the Thoughts of John Herz

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Abstract

John Herz pioneered global thinking in international relations in the mid-twentieth century with his advocacy of 'survival research'. The 'planetary interest' reflects similar thinking. The 'vital planetary interest' identifies fundamental issues of human survival, emphasising legitimate global policy-making and enforcement power. Global policies require a pursuit of the 'legitimate national interest'. This approach to IR carries revolutionary implications for the traditional political process (national policy-making) and diplomatic method (international negotiating). The conceptual framework of the 'planetary interest' should be placed in a broader jurisprudential framework of 'global constitutionalism'. Further work is required to develop 'survival research' and the 'planetary interest'.

Keywords: *John H. Herz, human survival, planetary interest, survival research*

Introduction: remembering John Herz

John Herz was instrumental, throughout his life, in 'pushing the envelope' – extending the limits of academic research and philosophical thought in the theory of international relations. While he is best known for introducing the notion of the 'security dilemma', his later work focused on the relationship between the challenges to human survival and current political thought in our contemporary times – including a thoughtful proposal for introducing a sub-discipline to be known as 'survival research'.

Herz's proposal for 'survival research' drew from a conviction that 'in today's world, for the first time; the survival of all is in jeopardy'.¹ Such research would need to:

rise above the specific concerns, interests, even expertise, of any particular discipline, such as political science ... In doing so, it must mobilise experts in the various fields so as to make them recognise the *super-disciplinary* concerns of global survival to which priority must be given over and above (and possibly in contrast to) the more parochial concerns of this or that national, economic, religious or similar grouping.²

'Survival research' is essentially a signpost along the intellectual path taken by Herz through a long and rich professional career. It rests in particular on three pillars:

- his early involvement in demographic issues during World War II, reflecting a deepening concern over global population growth before it became widely acknowledged;
- a related concern over the relationship between population pressure and environmental stress – again ahead of the times;



The organisation Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) was born in the mid-1980s of the alarm caused by 'renewed Cold War' tensions generated by the Reagan revolution and US–Soviet rivalry, together with an unrelated concern over the continuing ineffectiveness of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The IPU, then, was an august yet somewhat toothless body, born of late nineteenth-century European idealism and determined in its formative years to remain aloof from the League of Nations, and subsequently the United Nations. It was, moreover, constitutionally structured to represent the institutions of national parliaments, and as such operated under continual institutional and political constraints.

In contrast, PGA was created on the basis of individual membership by members of national parliaments, which afforded greater political flexibility on issues of global concern. Its location in midtown Manhattan, involving daily interaction with diplomats and officials at the UN, also gave it a competitive advantage on the dynamics of global politics as played out month by month in the global body. The IPU's location in Geneva left it removed from the political dynamics of the UN as opposed to the technical issues of UN activity there.

In the 1980s PGA's initial focus was on nuclear arms control issues, an issue of deep concern to Herz, particularly the conclusion of a comprehensive nuclear test ban. But by 1990, the organisation had broadened its range of activities in other issues of global concern, to include peacekeeping and conflict resolution, ozone depletion and climate change, democracy and human rights. This led naturally to a search for a theoretical basis for its political action that could unite its various groups and activities. Thus did the concept of the 'planetary interest' emerge.

The 'planetary interest' has been articulated since 1989 through the medium of PGA's quarterly newsletter. Leading MPs and Secretariat staff also began using the concept – which in itself attracted attention in and around the UN. Thus, in 1991:

Our members, who represent the people who elect them through the democratic process, are committed to solving global problems from a global perspective, with the interests of the planet foremost in mind. The organisation approaches the problems of our time with a new political maxim – that the paramount value is no longer the national interest but rather the planetary interest.⁵

In 1993, PGA's president stated:

The hallmark of our organization is the 'planetary interest' – perceiving the world as a single whole, and responding, politically, with global solutions that reflect an enlightened national interest, not one that is narrowly conceived and competitively pursued.⁶

In the course of the 1990s, this broader philosophical notion began to gain currency, at least in New York. Significantly, the UN Secretary-General saw fit to declare in 1993 that 'the first truly global era' had begun.⁷ A year later, he asserted: 'States have always defined their national interests. Today States must be prepared to accommodate the concept of a common – global or planetary – interest.'⁸

Notwithstanding the increasing attention being given to the concept, the complexity of the global problems confronted by the international community⁹ in 'the first truly global era' clearly required more in-depth research and analytical rigour than that available to a small and impecunious organisation. Assistance to this end was offered in 1995 by

The underpinnings of such a modern philosophical-political notion are rooted in theology. It is a short step from the traditional notions of human–Earth harmony to their contemporary counterparts today. Gaia theory postulates that the Earth acts, in the broadest cosmic context, as a single 'self-conscious' organism with a homeostatic feedback system that possesses the capacity of self-correction. Humanity is, in this theory, perforce a natural component part of the terrestrial system and, moreover, entirely dispensable in the event that its anthropocentric interests and (excessively) anthropogenic behaviour get out of hand.

It therefore seems historically appropriate, and prudent to the times as well, to consider the merit of extending the notions of 'rights' and 'interest' beyond what has been perceived as acceptable in the Westphalian era. But if so, a distinction needs to be drawn between the legal theory of 'rights' and political theories of 'interest'. Generally, political thought allows for greater flexibility and creativity than does legal theory. Strictly the law accords rights only to animate creatures, and indeed only to humans. Consideration has, however, been given to extending that notion.¹⁴

If this is accepted, then it is proposed that the obverse also holds true – the planet, with its life-forms, can be accepted as having a claim on humanity for that stewardship. There thus arises a new responsibility imposed on humanity in the global era for ensuring the care and well-being of the planet and all its life-forms. It is then credible to postulate that it is 'in the interests of humanity' to recognise that the planet, on which it depends for its survival, should be accorded ultimate respect. That includes the 'right' of the planet to be left to future generations of humans in a comparable natural state to that when humanity first made its imprint felt. This, in turn, is but a step to the principle of inter-generational equity, enshrined in the Rio Declaration and Programme of Action from the 1992 Earth Summit.¹⁵ The right of the next generation to inherit an unaltered planet and the 'right' of the planet to be left in an unaltered state are essentially one and the same thing.

These ideas in fact find independent parallels in Herzian thought as well. His advocacy of an 'ethics of survival' was also on occasion referred to as an 'ethics of global responsibility'.¹⁶

If the concept of the planetary interest is to be politically efficacious, it must be amenable to ready comprehension by policy-makers and practical implementation by leaders. As with the natural interest, there needs to be a distinction between the 'vital interest' and other levels – best described as the 'normative interest'.

The 'vital' and the 'normative' planetary interest

Just as a nation-state identifies, in extreme situations, its 'vital national interest' as distinct from the 'normal national interest', so will the international community, in addressing global problems, be required to draw a similar distinction. The more severe global threats will evoke a perception of the 'vital planetary interest'. The less severe threats will evoke what could be termed the 'normative planetary interest'. A definition of these is as follows:

- The 'vital planetary interest' has to do with the survival and viability of humanity, contingent on maintenance of the physical integrity of the Earth and the protection of its ecological systems and biosphere from major anthropogenic change. It would be applied to issues relating to the 'fundamental health' of the planet, that is to say, the continuation of the planet in its state of natural equilibrium.

with a view to attaining the global objective. And in turn it agrees, with less unanimity and greater rancour, a series of national policies to implement the global strategy.

The first derivative: the 'legitimate national interest'

Once a global threat is identified, the planetary interest in overcoming it is expressed, and a global strategy is formulated, it remains for the international community to agree, through negotiation, on national policies. Provided these are genuinely consonant with the global strategy, this becomes the 'legitimate national interest'.

By definition of the planetary interest and through logical reasoning, there are 192 legitimate national interests for each global strategy. In the event that no global strategy is agreed, then unilateral policies do not constitute a 'legitimate national interest'. And, of more importance, once a global strategy is agreed, then a country's national policy is legitimate only if it is consistent with, and does not violate, the strategy.

The second derivative: 'legitimate global power'

A second concept is derived from the 'vital planetary interest'. In a related way, it justifies the notion of 'legitimate global power'. If the international community confronts a global threat, sees it as vital to its collective survival to combat it, identifies the global objective and strategy to that end, and successfully negotiates national policies to implement the strategy, then it follows that developing a global capacity for the collective enforcement of those policies is legitimate.

Developing enforcement power at the global level is a sensitive issue, and for good reason. Successive generations have paid a high price over the centuries for the need for liberation and the ideal of freedom. Fundamental human freedoms have, with difficulty, been enshrined in national and international declarations and binding covenants. They will not lightly be relinquished. Such a guarded disposition underlies the intense suspicion, bordering on animosity, that US citizens, possessors of unrivalled national temporal power, harbour towards multilateral order and the UN in particular. The persistent oscillation in US policy between multilateralism and unilateralism remains to this day an ingrained characteristic of the US worldview – from Monroe through Wilson and McCarthy to Bush Jr. Suspicions of global powers are entertained equally by other major powers – China, Russia and India.

Nonetheless, the logical Hobbesian connection in political rationality from external threat or internal disorder to collective unity involving legislative and enforcement power remains potent. It will prove equally compelling at the global level, once the array of global threats and problems become manifest to the satisfaction of the peoples of the world, as it has at the national level. What is required, in these early days of incipient global thinking and emergent global society, is the conceptual link that offers a political justification.

The logic of global enforcement power has, in fact, been observed ever since the community of nations recognised the need to develop mechanistic structures for averting war. The League of Nations Covenant introduced the principle of collective security at the global level a century ago, but left enforcement to the voluntary discretion of all members, thereby condemning the experiment to early failure. It was this weakness, among others, that persuaded John Herz to search for a strengthened version of collective security in the mid-twentieth century.

Of even greater potential importance for the twenty-first century, the Council is now beginning to reflect, if not yet act, on the implications of non-military problems as a potential threat to peace. In 2000 it stressed that the HIV/AIDS pandemic, if unchecked, could 'pose a risk to stability and security'.²³ And in 2007 it held a thematic debate on the issue of climate change. The UK, as Council chair for April, sought a presidential statement on the matter and several member states regarded climate change as having the potential to threaten international peace and security. China and others opposed this, however, and no statement or resolution was adopted.²⁴

Implications of the concept: a new approach to political process and the diplomatic method

The idea of a set of national policies designed to attain a common global objective may be conceptually concise to a pleasing degree. Yet the 'planetary interest' concept turns on its head the traditional notion of political process (national policy-making) and diplomatic method (international negotiating).

The political process of national policy-making is challenged. In the past, and to this day, the government of a nation-state has been free, and naturally disposed, to perceive and pursue the national interest of its people in a competitive and 'zero-sum' manner. The government assumes an obligation, and is encouraged by its people to that end, to maximise its returns through international bargaining, irrespective of the consequences of the outcome for other nations. The locus of sovereignty still remains, on balance, with the nation-state. There is no constitutional obligation on any national leader to have regard for the interests of the overwhelming majority of humans on the planet who are non-citizens and non-voters.

Similarly, the diplomatic method of international negotiating is also challenged under the new conceptual framework. The traditional national-to-global approach has been for governments to issue to their national diplomats a series of briefs containing factual background and negotiating instructions designed to maximise the national interest in a competitive context with no concern for the outcome for others. A maximum outcome is envisioned and a minimum fallback position is identified. Little discretion is accorded to the diplomat to act – s/he is required to act within tight constraints agreed through rigorous internal bureaucratic processes at home, and has little opportunity to venture beyond them, doing so at some professional peril.

The only derogation from this profound rule of contemporary politics is mild in nature. Each of the 192 UN member states has signed and ratified the UN Charter. They thus bind themselves to use armed force only 'in the common interest', and also to harmonise their actions 'for [specified] common ends'.²⁵ This suggests that a national leader has an obligation to make national decisions regarding the use of national armed force with equal consideration for the interests of humans in all of the other 191 countries – the 'common interest'. S/he is also required to ensure that national policy and actions are harmonised to the common ends of international peace, friendly relations, human rights and socio-economic cooperation.

Whilst this is far from the reality, it happens to have been the theory since 1945. But does that amount to a constitutional obligation imposed on a national political leadership? That depends on the nature of the country's constitutional structure. European nations

'Global constitutionalism' could be defined as: 'the constitutional and jurisprudential framework for the international behaviour of nations that reflects a philosophical recognition of common interest, natural obligation, shared sovereignty and legitimate enforcement operating within the rule of law'. Global constitutionalism turns on the distinction between the single such 'global document' of our times – the UN Charter – and all other documents of international law. With full regard to its inchoate nature and its various imperfections, global constitutionalism represents a break with the past. The UN Charter represents the common aspiration of the comity of nations, and its provisions are of a qualitatively different nature from other international treaties. The UN Charter is acknowledged as the supreme document in international law.²⁸ Any (post-1945) treaty that is left unregistered with the UN Secretariat may not be invoked before any UN organ.²⁹

Similarly the fundamental principles of 'global constitutionalism' that might be seen as underpinning the 'planetary interest' (structural, thematic and behavioural) are laid out in the UN Charter. Some 13 can be identified, and they fall into three categories:

- The structural principles delineate the nature of the international community itself – the sovereign equality of states and the (relative) sanctity of their domestic jurisdiction.
- The thematic principles form the basis of any social compact on how members of a community expect to relate one to another – the use of force, regulation of weaponry, self-determination of peoples, their human rights and their aspirations to economic and social progress – all within the unifying fabric of universally recognised law.
- The procedural principles lay down behavioural guidelines for the conduct of nations – good faith, mutual assistance, mutual compliance – and introduce a new standard of professional behaviour – the independence of the international civil service.

Other fundamental elements of international behaviour not incorporated in the UN Charter may also be of a constitutional status. It is not that the UN Charter of the mid-twentieth century captured all the necessary elements of a global constitutional document – but rather that it identified those deemed relevant to the age and appropriate for effective collective action at the time. In recognition of the ineluctability of continuous change, the Charter contains an in-built mechanism for renewal, in order that it might keep pace with major transformations in the structure and functioning of the international community.³⁰

The concept of 'global constitutionalism' has been identified and developed, albeit through different wording appropriate to the changing times, primarily by the framers of the UN Charter. The Charter thus incorporates a dialectic between the sovereign equality and domestic jurisdiction of the nation-state and the universal rights and freedoms of the human individual.

The theory of 'global constitutionalism', however, has its contemporary roots in Hammarskjöldian thought. Operating at the highest level of diplomatic statecraft, Hammarskjöld developed a set of beliefs that comprised what he termed a 'constitutional framework for international cooperation'.³¹ The theory perceives the development of human society as part of sociological theory, involving the progression in social relationships from the individual through families, villages and tribes to peoples that eventually reach the stage of organised nationhood 'out of the self-consciousness of a people' and within a 'set of constitutional rules'. The nation-state, regarded by Hammarskjöld as the 'highest fully organised form of life of peoples', did not, in his view, comprise the 'end of the road

Diplomatic exchanges of this kind act as a proxy war over the more abstract struggle for legitimacy and sovereign power at the global level. Three sources of legitimacy in particular are involved today, influencing policy-making at the highest levels of statecraft including in the Security Council – secular universality; secular liberalism; and divine revelation. In this respect the 'planetary interest' concept assists in identifying the underlying sources of legitimate global power.³⁵

Conclusion: areas for further work

The conceptual framework of the 'planetary interest' is fraught with difficulty in contributing further to international relations theory. It faces resistance deriving from its political sensitivity. It invites scepticism from some in academia for its interdisciplinarity. And, at least in the eyes of some, given the intrinsic complexity of the subject matter, it is shameless in its intellectual audacity. This is perhaps as it should be.

Those dwelling on the planet today face challenges of survival of an unprecedented kind. We face global problems that, 20 years ago, were dismissed as unproven in scale and/or unconvincing in their alleged import. The general perception of global problems has fundamentally changed in the intervening years. There is no longer an automatic dismissal of concepts alien to the 1980s, when the Cold War forced theorists and practitioners to dwell on traditional notions of cultural animosity and national security fears. Today, the international community is generally of the view that, while the world remains fractious and fragmented politically, it faces problems that require unity of self-perception, rational thought and recognition of a common interest – in survival.

Both 'survival research' as a sub-discipline and the 'planetary interest' as a concept have not yet been accorded any significant attention in mainstream IR theory. It is time that this was rectified. As noted in the introduction to this article, the research and writing of John Herz lent a unique richness to both analytical and prescriptive thought on the evolution of global politics through the twentieth century. His work not only remains relevant to the twenty-first century; it has added significance as our global problems intensify.

It does not follow, however, that all questions are properly identified, even less that adequate answers are readily available. Among other considerations, the international community is also recognising that, perhaps for the first time, its political understanding and decision-making rest, to an unprecedented degree, on scientific knowledge and insight.

Areas for further research into the necessary conditions for the identification, operation and enforcement of the 'planetary interest' against the recognised global problems are likely to include the following:

1. The 'planetary interest' and the 'legitimate national interest'

Global security

- What might be the enforcement capacity of the UN Security Council to govern the world without the presence of nuclear weapons?
- What could be the credible basis for the proposition that major powers can be reconciled to security relationships at the global level with purely conventional weapons, given their retention of nuclear knowledge?

- 8 United Nations, Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, address to the Argentine Council for Foreign Relations, 14 March 1994, *UN Chronicle*, XXXI(2), June 1993, p. 3.
- 9 In this article, the phrase 'international community' is taken to mean the grouping of states at the United Nations. While some national leaders are disposed to arrogate the term for political purposes, it retains meaning in the academic context used here.
- 10 Kennedy Graham, 'The Planetary Interest', Occasional Paper No. 5, Global Security Programme, University of Cambridge, September 1995, reprinted in Arabic, French and Spanish.
- 11 The Rockefeller Foundation, New York, Special Projects Grant, 1996–7.
- 12 Kennedy Graham (ed.), *The Planetary Interest – A New Concept for the Global Age* (London: Taylor and Francis for UCL Press, 1999; and New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999) (hereafter, *TPI*). The analysis in the first part of this article is partly drawn from the methodology employed in the book.
- 13 *TPI*, p. 7.
- 14 See C. Stone, 'Should Trees Have Standing?', *Southern California Law Review*, 45, 1972, p. 450. Also C. Stone, *The Gnat is Older than Man* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Also, *Sierra Club v. Morton* 405 US 727 (1972); dissent by Justice Douglas.
- 15 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, A/CONF.151/26, vol. 1, 12 August 1992, principle 3.
- 16 John H. Herz, *Vom überleben* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1984), p. 183. Herz's argument here is similar to the notion of a 'principle of responsibility' developed by Hans Jonas.
- 17 *TPI*, p. 9.
- 18 The concept of 'well-being' is intended here to apply primarily to the fulfilment of basic human needs. While the realisation of universal human rights is potentially a component part, there is greater scope for differing cultural perception in this area, and inevitably a longer time-span involved.
- 19 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Article X. The criteria for withdrawal, specified under the Treaty, are 'extraordinary events ... [which] have jeopardised [its] supreme interests'. While the withdrawing party is obliged to notify the Council of such events, there is no explicit authority granted to the Council to judge the merits of the party's decision to withdraw or its grounds for doing so. Yet in the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1993, the Council took note of the depositaries' joint view that Pyongyang's reasons for intended withdrawal were not sufficient. In 'exercising its national sovereignty' over preserving its 'supreme [national] interests' under Article X, a state party today confronts the countervailing force of the 'vital planetary interest' of the international community. The force of the latter, however, proves less potent in respect to Article VI.
- 20 Preparatory Committee for the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, first session (Vienna, 30 April–11 May 2007). Withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: European Union Common approach working paper submitted by the European Union. NPT/CONF.2010/PC.I/WP.25, 10 May 2007, paras 7–9 (hereafter, 1st Prepcom for 2010 NPTRC).
- 21 Statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Article XII.C.
- 22 UN Charter, Article 99.
- 23 S/RES/1308, 17 July 2000. This does not amount, however, to a determination of a 'threat to international peace and security' that would trigger binding powers under chapter VII.
- 24 UN document SC/9000, 17 April 2007.
- 25 UN Charter: 7th preambular paragraph, and Article 1.4.
- 26 In the case of New Zealand, for example, parliament has entered only Article 41 pertaining to economic sanctions into domestic law (United Nations Act 1946). No implementing legislation has been entered for Article 42 pertaining to the use of force 'in the common interest'. This unsatisfactory situation has been mindlessly overlooked for 62 years now.
- 27 See *TPI*, chapters 4–11 for a detailed elaboration of this analysis.
- 28 'In the event of a conflict between the obligations of Members of the United Nations under the present Charter and their obligations under any other international agreement, their obligations under the present Charter shall prevail.' UN Charter, Article 103.
- 29 UN Charter, Article 102.
- 30 UN Charter, Article 109.
- 31 Dag Hammarskjöld, Address to University of Chicago Law School, May 1960. Hammarskjöld described this speech as a 'confession of faith' – an attempt to set out 'my philosophy regarding the United Nations and the work we are all of us pursuing'.