

Chapter 2

Introduction

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Abstract Contemporary theoretical controversies in moral, political and legal philosophy echo the political debates in the public sphere: multiculturalism, inequalities between men and women, climate change, wealth inequalities between nations, to state but four major predicaments, are political problems of global relevance before being academic topics in the international intellectual community. What is striking here is not so much that those issues have a historical context, but that the latter is a global one. Global issues have, indeed, been formulated in a common language—the language of rights and justice—the spreading of which has itself its own global setting: after the Cold War’s bipolarization, which biased all discussions about questions of planetary scope, there has been a short period in world history—between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Twin Towers—when there seemed to be an unprecedented opportunity for expressing world problems in terms of rights and justice, that is, not just in terms of power. The scope of the present volume, but also of the whole series on Applied Global Justice, is to take this opportunity seriously, all the more seriously, one could be tempted to say, since world affairs after 9/11 can appear as a powerful factual objection to an ethical approach to world predicaments. Instead of turning back to some form of *Realpolitik* analysis as soon as power re-enters the stage—but who said it had ever left it between 1989 and 2001?—we consider it is preferable to confront what actually happens in the field of power relations with a clear vision of what fair relations between states and citizens might be.

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2.1 What Is Global Justice?

Political philosophy had considerably extended its field of investigation when Rawls decided to concentrate on the normative question of social justice: although the relevance of the notion of justice was limited by the American philosopher to the realm of economical and social institutions, this limitation itself has given greater force to the normative conclusions of his *Theory of Justice*. Not only did this new theory propose an interesting (though contested) methodology for thinking about social justice by simply anchoring impartiality and basic equality in the procedure of contracting behind a veil of ignorance, but also the principles derived by Rawls could be reasonably recommended as a plausible foundation of a society of free and equal persons. Thus, even before the fall of the Berlin wall, the Rawlsian theory appeared to some of his followers as a possible way to reinvigorate the Kantian critique of a Hobbesian world-view (cf. Beitz 1979: 3–7). What Rawls had done at the domestic level, i.e., to define the theoretical basis for assessing societal basic institutions in terms of justice, was thought to be achievable at the global level: why not view, it was suggested, world institutions as Rawls had done with national ones, that is, not just as elements in a power game, but also as devices capable of being assessed in terms of justice? The end of the Cold War's ideological divide certainly gave credit to such a hypothesis, and the uncertainties of the post-9/11 era did not suffice to refute it.