

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 33 | Issue 2

Article 2

11-22-2021

Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

University of Massachusetts Boston, padraig.omalley@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Padraig (2021) "Editor's Note," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol33/iss2/2>

This Editor's Notes is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

University of Massachusetts Boston

Several of the articles in this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* have a global focus, identifying threats to humanity's future, some existential, that can be addressed only through unprecedented levels of international cooperation and new ways of thinking. But the global future is uncertain, whether because of conflict, extremism, the rise of nationalism, the retreat from democracy and its underlying value system, or moribund multilateral institutions and lack of leadership, much of which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than humanity coming together to face a common existential threat, countries retreated into their national silos and put their own national interests first. All the articles provide policy prescriptions that might either reverse present negative trends or identify new ways of thinking that the authors stress we must adopt if we are to navigate the world through the uncertain future.

The most imminent challenge is climate change, requiring massive restructuring and reorientation of economies, huge changes in national attitudes and human behavior, sacrifice, and global consensus.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) met in Glasgow, Scotland, from October 31 to November 12, 2021, once again to discuss the trajectory of global warming, once again to pass resolutions calling on countries to urgently meet the emissions targets they agreed on in December 2015 in Paris, once again to have countries renew their pledges and announce new targets to hold warming at no more than 1.5°C over preindustrial levels. For any hope to contain warming to 1.5°C, greenhouse emissions will have to be halved by 2030, a mere eight years away, and reach net zero by 2050. The omens are not good.

Since the first COP (Conference of the Parties) in 1995, called because of a sense of crisis, when there were 360 parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere, 80 points above the pre-industrial level of 280, half of all the carbon ever released by humans since the dawn of humanity has been dumped into the atmosphere. The planet had already warmed by 0.6°C since preindustrial times; today it is at 1.2° or 1.3°C.¹

Since Paris, as one year after another has become the hottest on record—global carbon dioxide emissions were at their highest level ever in 2020, at 420 parts per million, 70 points above the 350 parts per million estimated in the 1990s as the “safety” threshold to limit warming to less than 1.5°C, and too few countries met their emission targets, including the two most prominent climate polluters, the United States and China—there has been a nuanced change of emphasis. Whereas in Paris the goal was to keep the temperature “well below” 1.5°C, the goal now is to limit warming by no more than 2.0°C and even that goal is increasingly problematical because it calls for massive changes in the way we live and work, an almost total reliance on new energy sources, the closing down of the fossil fuel industry and a wholesale shift to electric cars, and a degree of global cooperation that does not exist in the present toxic mix of international relations.

Padraig O'Malley is the John Joseph Moakley Professor of Peace and Reconciliation at the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston.

According to the UN report released in the week before COP26, which UN Secretary- General António Guterres called “Code Red for humanity,” if current policies are pursued, the temperature will put the world on the path to 2.7°C of warming by 2100. The potential range lies between 2.1°C and 3.9°C, that is, between the catastrophic and the apocalyptic.

Unsurprising, therefore, that at COP26 there were dire warnings of the risk to human civilization unless warming is halted and in years to come reversed. The year 2021 has been catastrophic for the impact of global warming in countries as geographically distant as the United States and China, Turkey, Siberia, India, Germany, Nigeria, Uganda, and Greece, with fierce wildfires, blistering heat waves, crop-killing drought, intense precipitation, huge floods, hurricanes and typhoons of immense strength, tornadoes across the US Northwest flattening whole communities, all leaving in their wake death, economic and social devastation, climate refugees, and human tragedy. If COP26 does not result in a coordinated global response to warming, it is unclear what might.

The United Nations has repeatedly called attention to the almost unimaginable consequences of rampant warming, the death knell for whole civilizations, perhaps for humanity itself, an outcome in some future time if feedback loops make warming self-reinforcing, impervious to what humanity might do to alter the outcome too unbearable to envisage, too distant in the future, and thus not easily discounted as being an imminent and immediate threat. We are not wired to deal with long-term threats, just those that are immediate or short term. Even now, many of the impacts of warming are still stored in the atmosphere. If all emissions were reduced to nothing overnight, these effects will be felt through 2050 at least.

Pledges were made: country pledges to cut emissions by 50 percent by 2030, putting question marks along their credibility; a declaration to end deforestation by 2030; ninety countries, accounting for two-thirds of the global economy, to cut methane gas emissions by at least 30 percent by the end of the decade; forty countries to phase out coal-fired power by 2040 but not among them the biggest coal polluters—China, India, the United States, and Australia.

The United States “would aim” to cut greenhouse emissions by 50 to 52 percent over 2005 levels by 2030 and to zero levels by 2050. Given the level of political polarization in the United States and the fact that one-third of the population continues to deny climate change, what transitioning from the oil and gas industries to wind and solar power and other renewables will involve and how the wholesale embrace of electric cars will be accomplished make these goals more aspirational than credible. In China and India, emissions will continue to rise through the twenties. In China, from peak emissions in 2030, the goal then will be to get to zero emissions by 2060; India did not set any emissions goal. Many, especially young people, came away from Glasgow disheartened. It seemed to them that their elders still could not match their words with actions that reflect the massive scale of the problem: 2030 is half a lifetime away. The one statistic to make it away from the conference is the projection of the Climate Action Tracker that even if countries live up to all their pledges, the temperature of the earth will soar to 2.4°C by 2100.²

On this score, Sundeep Waslekar, in “Reinventing Multilateral Order,” argues that the outlook, at least in the short-to-medium term, is not optimistic. The multiple crises of our time—the COVID-19 pandemic, an accelerating nuclear arms race, and climate warming—he points out, are severely aggravated by a breakdown of the multilateral order.

By mid-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic had already infected two hundred million, killed four million across two hundred countries, brought the world economy to a standstill, disrupted global supply chains, and forced millions to live in isolation, tearing apart the fabric of society. Countries competed for HP59 masks, developed their vaccines and travel protocols, and side-lined the World

Health Organization. While rich countries hoarded their vaccines, poorer countries were forced to do with leftovers or a vastly insufficient number of donated vaccines and lacked the distribution infrastructure that would have allowed them to reach the bulk of their populations. By late 2021, only 2 percent of Africa had been vaccinated. The global situation was slowly evolving, accentuating the divide between rich and poor, into vaccinated and unvaccinated countries, with restrictive protocols governing travel and accessibility. What should have been a wake-up call for humanity that its unpreparedness to respond in multilateral cooperation and global collaboration to the consequences of a sudden event—in this instance a global pandemic that threatens its survival not at some future date but in the here and now—underscored the dysfunctionality of international institutions, especially the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council. Instead, countries closed their borders and prioritized self-interest.

Once again, a seemingly out-of-control nuclear arms race looms with the development of supersonic missiles that can travel several times the speed of sound and carry nuclear payloads, making the doctrine of nuclear deterrence obsolete. Russia has its Avangard that travels at twenty-seven times the speed of sound, carries an ICBM, and determines its own flight path, making it not detectable by the United States' missile shield; China has the DF-17 that travels five times the speed of sound; and the United States, playing catch-up, has tested a supersonic vehicle that can carry nuclear bombs. Without any treaty in place that might avert the threat of nuclear annihilation, humanity is at a crossroads: at present any event, even accidental, could trigger the use of these missiles once they become fully operational. There are no warning mechanisms in place, they evade radar defense shields, the impact is virtually instantaneous, and the targeted countries have minutes or less to respond. It could well be that humanity wipes out itself or a large portion of itself because of a simple accident.

Waslekar makes his case for a new form of global governance on the grounds that existing multilateral institutions have become dysfunctional, too eroded to prevent catastrophic risks, including a military confrontation between superpowers. The weakening of multilateralism is due in part to the corrosive growth of hyper nationalism in many countries. The alternative is devastation or perhaps termination of the human race.

In "The White Supremacist Penetration of Western Security Forces: The Wider Implications," Kumar Ramakrishna examines the exponential growth of white Christian nationalism as an international phenomenon and the degree to which it has penetrated the security forces in different countries, especially Germany and the United States. Of the 650 individuals charged in connection with the January 6 assault on the US Capitol building, almost 1 in 10 served in the military. That only 7 percent of US adults are military veterans demonstrates starkly how overrepresented people with such a background were implicated in the violence that day.

"The white supremacist movement," he writes, is "a complex, continually evolving, if fragmented, phenomenon." Quoting from an article he wrote earlier, he goes on to describe it as "'a bewildering amalgam of White nationalists, some White Christian evangelicals, racists, anti-government militias, misogynists, anti-globalisers, and anti-vaxxers, amongst others,' seeking to exploit the 'global social and political upheaval'—including the current pandemic—to 'promote intolerant ideas and at times inflict violence.'" Most attacks are lone wolf, carried out by individuals who use live streaming of their impending actions or post manifestos online before perpetrating their acts of violence. This online presence creates an international network where lone wolves in different countries take inspiration for their actions from one another, often perpetrating copycat attacks. The movement is leaderless but has major enablers and influencers, including institutional ones, such as Breitbart News and the Fox News network in the United

States, that give voice to prominent white nationalists. And though the movement lacks an organizational hierarchy, it is growing stronger, mostly with the interconnecting motif that the West is under an existential threat from Muslims, migrants, and others who do not share a white Christian identity—the great replacement theory, which finds its most fanatical adherents in Europe but also increasingly in the United States.

In Europe the theory is simple: the white Christian population is shrinking and the population is aging, a situation that will not reverse itself. There is an acute labor shortage requiring immigration that comes mostly from Asia and Muslim countries in North Africa. The great replacement theory speaks for itself. Muslims and others, most conspicuously Jews, are supplanting white people; white Christian culture and core values are under attack from alien religions and a culture that espouses values that are antithetical to those of the West. In the United States, where demographic trends are following a similar pattern—a declining white population and a growing Hispanic population—the country will move from majority white to one of pluralities by the mid-2040s. In California, the country’s most populous state, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Maryland, and Hawaii this has already happened. The percentage of whites dropped from 90 percent in 1950 to 60 percent in 2018 and will drop below 50 percent in the mid-2040s.³

In recent years these replacement ideas have gradually entered the political mainstream. What were once peripheral extremist views, the province of mostly white nationalists, now find expression, sometimes subtlety, in mainstream political discourse, including that of the AfD party in Germany, Marine Le Pen and the right-wing pundit Eric Zemmour’s candidacy for the presidency in France, and Viktor Orban in Hungary. The rise of English nationalism was responsible for Brexit, the Leave vote mantra, “Take back control,” to foreshadow a Global Britain, a Singapore on the Thames.

In the United States, the alt-right has found a footing in the Republican Party’s base. As Ramakrishna notes, quoting from an article in Time.com, during his announcement that he would run for office in 2016, Donald Trump declared that “Mexico is not our friend” and disparaged Mexican immigrants by saying that “they’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” His repeated warnings during his presidency that caravans of migrants were trekking from Latin and Central America to the US border to invade the United States played into the fears of whites and found a huge audience. Trump, Ramakrishna writes, “framed migration as an evil, existential threat to white American Christian cultural identity.” In contrast, representatives of the Biden administration, in a Senate hearing, described “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, . . . specifically those who advocate for the superiority of the white race,” as the “greatest domestic threat facing the United States.”⁴

Among the remedies Ramakrishna advocates is the construction of the German, American, and perhaps other Western national identities to transcend narrow culturalist understandings and strengthen shared creedal values. He quotes Francis Fukuyama: “a creedal nation is based not on any particular ethnicity, race, or religion but rather the common political principles of constitutionalism, the rule of law, democratic accountability, and equality.” Fukuyama asserts, for example, that the Protestant work ethic should no longer be seen as the sole preserve of “Anglo-Protestant culture”—as what some conservative public intellectuals and, for that matter, more avowedly white supremacist ideologues might say. Instead, such an ethic has “become detached from its particular ethno-religious origins” and is today “the common property of all Americans.”

Mohammed Sinan Siyech, in “An Introduction to Right-Wing Extremism in India,” also addresses the rise of right-wing extremism but in the context of India. Hindu nationalism, he writes, quoting from another source, “an ethno-national fundamentalist belief system with a religious

sheen that legitimizes the structural violence of Hindus . . . against Muslims, Dalits, and secular liberals,” is India’s right-wing extremism, which has gathered strength since the 1980s and is now the pervasive political ideology in the country.

India, too, is slipping on the democracy scale and is curtailing religious freedom, particularly for Muslims. In its 2020 annual report, the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom called India “a country of particular concern,” noting that the legal systems there had “begun to disenfranchise non-Hindus in India.” Also, in 2020, Siyech observes, India’s rankings fell in the 2020 annual Varieties of Democracy report, which measures democratic ideals: “The report notes a steep decline in democratic freedom in India facilitated by the current government [of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party] and points out that the Hindu nationalist agenda is among the reasons for the decline.”

The othering and demonization of Muslims, in particular, has been accompanied by violence, hate speech, and demonization on social media. Violence against Muslims, including lynching, are on the increase—with implicit tolerance on the part of Hindu leadership who for the most part remain silent when incidents of violence occur. Such is the extent of the othering of Muslims that it has, in echoes of the great replacement theory, given rise to its own variant—that the Hindu population will be overtaken by Muslims, “as expressed in the phrase *Hindus khatre main hain*.” The phenomenon that has been described as “majoritarian insecurities,” “the idea that a majority community can be destroyed by the minority,” Siyech writes, is not confined to India but finds an expression “in other countries of South Asia, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh.” In India it has facilitated a “further otherization of the minority and the justification of crimes committed in the name of protecting the Hindu community from the existential threat of Muslims.”

Siyech also addresses the role of the caste system in perpetuating the dominance of the Brahmins, who account for 20 percent of the population. To preserve their position of dominance since independence, they played a large role in the promulgation of a “Hindu only national identity.” Rallying the lower castes around the threat of Islam and of Muslims destabilizing India, they insisted on the necessity of maintaining the caste system to thwart the Muslim threat. “The unwillingness of the current government to tackle right-wing extremism,” Siyech argues, “could facilitate the rise of fringe groups that will eventually turn against the government for being too soft.”

Richard Caplan’s “Challenges for Multilateralism in a Pre-Post-COVID World” reiterates themes from Waslekar and Ramakrishna—the toxic impact of rising nationalisms and illiberalism among authoritarian regimes in once comfortably democratic countries. Noting that of 165 countries surveyed by the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EUI) Democracy Index for 2019, just 22 were “full democracies”—the lowest number since the EUI was launched in 2006 and more than a third live under authoritarian regimes—Caplan addresses how these trends either individually or in combination undermine multilateralism, especially global bodies such as the United Nations and its ancillary agencies, and the European Union, with Brexit and the illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland. (According to a 2018 survey of ten European countries by the Pew Research Center, he notes, “an average of 62 percent of those surveyed said that the European Union ‘does not understand the needs of its citizens.’” It is faulted for its preoccupation with rules rather than the welfare of its citizens.)

One idea propagated by UN Secretary-General Guterres that would give the global public a better understanding of the work of multilateral institutions and how it impacts their lives is “inclusive multilateralism,” a phrase he used in an address to the General Assembly in 2019. Caplan writes: “If multilateral institutions seem remote and out of touch with the public, [Guterres]

stated, then more should be done to include the public in the work of these organizations. That means ‘closer contacts with businesses, civil society, and other stakeholders.’” Caplan suggests that achieving this goal might involve the use of digital technologies that now “offer unprecedented opportunities for various constituencies to weigh in on a whole host of issues, as the pandemic has made clear.” He continues: “But to be effective these constituencies need to feel that their voices genuinely matter. The difficulty is that states are often reluctant to yield space to nonstate actors.”

In “From Conflict to COVID: How Shared Experiences Shape Our World and How They Could Improve It,” Harvey Whitehouse provides a detailed account of the research being conducted by Oxford University’s Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion (CSSC) on identity fusion, the “visceral sense of oneness with the group.” Personal identity is completely sublimated to a group identity and the two become one. Carefully replicated studies of fusion in groups as widely diverse “as Melanesian cargo cults, revolutionary insurgents in Libya, football hooligans in Brazil, and Muslim fundamentalists in Indonesia, as well as populations that hadn’t really thought of themselves as groups before disaster struck, ranging from the random victims of terrorist attacks around the world to those affected by the COVID pandemic” have yielded similar conclusions. They show that shared suffering, whatever the cause, can lead to fusion and extraordinary acts of cooperation and self-sacrifice, a “social glue” that dissipates in the wake of civil wars: absent the conflict that gave meaning to the group and its purpose, fusion between personal and group shrinks. “If only policy decisions were more fully informed by the scientific research on shared experience and group bonding,” Whitehouse argues, “we could potentially harness social cohesion, in consensual ways, to heal divisions in society and motivate forms of cooperation essential to future peace and prosperity.”

The motivators of fusion are primarily fear and love, but of the two love is the more powerful. “From the professional soldier who throws himself onto a grenade to protect his fellows to the suicide bombers of Al Qaeda, willingness to lay down one’s life for the group may be rooted more deeply in bonds with the in-group than by fear of any form of external inducement, threat, or coercion,” Whitehouse points out. He describes a growing body of research that suggests that the “relationship between fusion and pro-group action is mediated by a range of other factors, including the kinds of norms that the group valorizes.” CSSC research has shown that “fusion can be harnessed in a wide range of peaceful forms of prosocial action, from giving blood to supporting wildlife conservation.” It can also exacerbate divisions. Brexit and the Trump presidency are two prime examples.

Fusion research also strongly suggests that efforts to tackle violent extremism—to deradicalize would-be terrorists—proceed from the misguided premise that “ideology is the main motivation behind violent self-sacrifice” and that “challenging people’s ideologies and group identities is the wrong place to start.” Whitehouse postulates instead “a more productive approach might be to focus on challenging the *sharedness of self-shaping experiences*,” which, “if done with the involvement of other in-group members, it is more likely to lead to lasting defusion.”

Fusion research, Whitehouse concludes, has “profound implications” for public policy in meeting global challenges, among them global warming, too often seen as a problem posed by, and perhaps best solved by, the scientific community. The most important changes, however, “depend on global cohesion and collective action aimed at changing behavior.”

Steve Killelea also addresses global challenges in “Peace Is the Answer for Our Post-Pandemic World.” He advances the concept of “Positive Peace, combined with systems thinking as a new theory of change, a new way to conceptualize how societies function, and a new approach to solving the world’s most intractable problems.” Global threats that are putting humanity at risk

demand global solutions. But peace, he points out, is a prerequisite. “Without peace, it will not be possible to achieve the levels of trust, cooperation, and inclusiveness necessary to solve these challenges”; thus, the urgent need for new ways of conceptualizing problems and new ways of thinking.

The Global Peace Index, a measure developed by the Australian Institute for Economics and Peace, which Killelea founded, shows a world that is less peaceful than it was ten years ago. In the decade leading up to 2020, eighty-one countries became less peaceful, while seventy-nine became more peaceful. In the past decade, incidents of civil unrest around the world doubled. But “even before the widespread demonstrations seen in 2020,” Killelea notes, “social and political instability had been on the rise in the West, with nearly seventy violent demonstrations recorded in 2019, compared with only nineteen in 2011.” Measures of societal resilience are falling in many advanced economies, a trend, he argues, that will continue because of their extended lockdowns due to COVID-19. Countries where the Positive Peace Index is high are better positioned to emerge from the COVID-induced global recession. The eight pillars of Positive Peace are “well-functioning government; sound business environment; equitable distribution of resources; acceptance of the rights of others; good relations with neighbors; free flow of information; high levels of human capital; and a low level of corruption. It is these same factors that create resilient and adaptive societies that can pre-empt conflict and help societies channel disagreements productively.” The challenge is to harvest the socioeconomic behaviors and institutions that characterize the most peaceful countries and facilitate or retailer their replication in the less peaceful countries.

“At the heart of a sustainable future,” Killelea concludes, “is the recognition that we are part of a system, not independent of it. Without a clear understanding of the systemic nature of peace and the factors that support it, it is impossible to determine what policies work best and what programs need to be implemented to support a more peaceful environment. Humanity needs new paradigms; the combination of Positive Peace and systems thinking provides a factual framework for us to apply to our shared global problems.”

Notes

¹ David Wallace-Wells, “Avoiding Apocalypse: COP26; Doomsters, Deniers, Deal-Makers and Dreamers,” TLS, October 29, 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/cop26-climate-crisis-book-review-david-wallace-wells/>.

² Fiona Harvey, “Far from Where Cop26 Needs to Be: Dismay at 2.4C ‘Reality Check,’” *Guardian*, November 9, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/09/shock-at-24c-reality-check-prompts-dismay-at-cop26?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

³ Dudley Poston and Rogelio Sáenz, “The US White Majority Will Soon Disappear Forever,” *Chicago Reporter*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/the-us-white-majority-will-soon-disappear-forever/?amp=1>.

⁴ Eileen Sullivan and Katie Benner, “Top Law Enforcement Officials Say the Biggest Domestic Terror Threat Comes from White Supremacists,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/us/politics/domestic-terror-white-supremacists.html>.