

Richard Falk

because the cultural editor of the New York Times came to write a feature story on the activities of this research centre in the middle of Stanford University, and ended up just... He interviewed several people there and including myself and ended up devoting his column in the New York Times, to my proposed research, and that generated a lot of interest that unprecedented before or ever since, in the manuscript that I hadn't started writing, 22 publishers got in touch with me, and it was quite an overwhelming experience. But it certainly led me to try to work out my thinking about these issues. And

strong personalities from these various civilizational backgrounds, including Latin America, India, China, Japan, Soviet Union, and the strong German participant, and Johan Galtung, who was sort of non-territorial participant, myself. And we interacted quite, we were quite a congenial group, except for the organiser and the convener who continued to press his agenda, and which was resisted quite vigorously by the rest of us. And the value of the project was both this friction that showed those who participated that the US was not in a position to dictate the future of the world. You know, the future of that geopolitical and military, geopolitical hegemony and military capabilities could not easily be translated into political outcomes. And in my own learning experience, that was the, that remains the central unlearned lesson of the Vietnam War, that you can have total military superiority and yet lose the war. And understanding that puzzle. And reacting and adapting to it has been a systemic failure of policy planners in countries, including the US, including in my view, Israel, and some other countries that are involved in conflict situations. In other words, there's a new realism in the post-colonial world in which political outcomes are more determined by the perseverance of nationalist movements than they are by who is the better military hardware. That doesn't mean that the military hardware can cause massive suffering and devastation. But it does mean that it won't win the war. And finally, the intervening side gets tired of the losses without achieving the results and gets out, withdraws. And but, you see the unlearned, this, what I'm calling the unlearned lesson of the Vietnam War repeated in

territorial states with the excessive militarization of those that, those among these territorial states that are geopolitical actors. And I draw this distinction within the Westphalian framework between the sovereign states and the few states among them, that are geopolitical actors, such as, at the present time, the United States, China, and maybe Russia, and to some extent, the UK and France, in other words, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, they've enjoyed impunity in relation to international criminal law. They, they have a veto power over their security council decisions, which means essentially, that they only have to obey the UN Charter and international law when it serves their national interests. So you have this very strange constitutional arrangement in the world. That is embodied in the UN system, where the smaller states are accountable. And the weak, I mean, the weaker states are accountable, and the stronger states are operating according to their own discretion. They, so and they're the most dangerous, the most dangerous states are not governed by not, not even technically not governed by an obligation to uphold international law. So you have double standards throughout the system. And that means that you can't overcome these biases, that privilege, those national communities that have geopolitical leverage. So that includes not only the United States, but the states that are closely aligned with it. And the same thing for the other kind of states. And it affects, it goes back to World War Two, where, at the end of the war, only the defeated German and Japanese leaders were held accountable and the victors were given impunity. So they have double standards built into the essence of international law. And that is, despite the fact that one of the worst and most controversial legacies of World War Two was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that was never examined, except in a Japanese lower court from an international law point of view. And yet, if the Germans or Japanese had developed the atomic bomb and used it, and then went on to lose the war, there's little doubt that, that would have been criminalised and the whole attitude toward nuclear weaponry would have emerged in a very different manner. I'm not sure how successfully I answered your question. So ask me a follow-up.

Jessica Knezy 31:19

Very successfully. Thank you. I do have a follow up in terms of the rigidity of the Western bias within the UN Security Council and the sort of tendency to favour these western states and the power that they hold. How do you think that's contributed to the rhetoric of globalisation and the global North/South divide over the last 30 years through the structural readjustment programmes and where we are right now in terms of global polarisation of resources and ideologies?

Richard Falk 32:00

Yes, I think there's no question that it has been a contributing factor. Of course, it's been offset to some extent by the Asian resurgence. Because they, even though China is a member of the P5, until very recently, it didn't have much geopolitical leverage. And it didn't play a really important part at the global level. Now, in the last few years, it has, but the emergence of China in the face of this Western dominated economic system is quite extraordinary, because they took advantage of certain features of state socialism, as it was badly practised in the Soviet Union, and combined with good features of the market organisation of the economy, to achieve the greatest surge in economic development in all of history. You know, it was China, at the end of World War Two, and even quite a bit later, was viewed as a hopelessly overpopulated under industrialised basket case of the international, international society. And this incredible turnaround started in the about 50 years ago, half century ago, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, and the so called modernization movement in China really was a revolutionary

transformation that didn't really depend very heavily on Western ideas or Western technology, rather, it took advantage of certain needs of the Western economies to provide very attractive investment opportunities that accelerated its development speed, and other countries in Asia also did extremely well, even though they didn't adhere to the kind of Chinese model of what they called a market system with socialist characteristics. But China more than more than the rest, in one generation, eliminated extreme poverty for 300 million people, which is an amazing achievement and Vietnam has now more

other words, the US and the other G5 members had a lot of leverage outside the Security Council. But they couldn't block factfinding and investigative reports, other kinds of assessments, particularly in these secondary parts in the UN system, like the UN, Human Rights Council, or UNESCO, or the Economic and Social Council. But what they could do is block the implementation of any recommendations that came out of those initiatives. And so, again, going back to what I said earlier about the puzzle that military capabilities have lost agency, in relation to the political outcome conflict. It turns out that winning legitimacy wars, the phrase I developed, is often more important than winning on the battlefield. And so the UN is a definite important site of struggle in these legitimacy wars. And that's why for instance, Israel cares so much about being criticised at the UN or investigated by the International Criminal Court. And it's why the anti-apartheid campaign was so important in bringing the apartheid regime in South Africa to its knees, it wasn't through violent resistance, that changed the balance of forces, it was this change on the level of symbolic power. That's why I think people make the mistake, either of thinking, the UN is the saviour of a just world order, or just dismissing it as irrelevant, you'll find both points of view either a very legalistic point of view, that says that all we need to do to create a peaceful and just world is to uphold the charter, or the opposite view that says, since the charter isn't being upheld, the UN is irrelevant. So I've tried to articulate this middle ground of well, not middle ground exactly. But this understanding of what the UN can and can't do, and why what it can do is important but that from the point of view of people enduring a very bad situation, it's extremely difficult to modify behaviour. If it has the, if the status quo has the support of the geopolitical actors. Sometimes the UN can do too much, you can argue that its support for the Libyan intervention in 2011, because it had geopolitical backing was an excessive use of force that has produced a deterioration in the situation within Libya, it became a regime changing intervention that destabilised the country. It did eliminate Gaddafi, the authoritarian ruler, but it replaced that with an ongoing civil strife and chaos and that's happened too often in the aftermath of these interventions, sometimes advertised as humanitarian intervention. That it's extremely difficult in the post-colonial age, to use military power to alter the internal balance of forces within sovereign states.

Tom Pegram 44:41

The importance of symbolic power is something that perhaps gets under, is underappreciated in the kind of the paradigmatic understanding of where power resides within these systems. Yeah. Sam, do you have a follow up?

Tom Pegram 44:59

Yeah. So thanks Richard, it was a great perspective. And it actually reminds me of a previous episode. I guess we had Farhana Yamin who talked about her work in the UN and what it can and what it cannot do for in her case, climate change. And I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about the working on different levels, you know, that we talked about what the UN can do, and the agency that it can be afforded. But then on the more immediate struggles, for

Richard Falk 45:49

Yes, I think that's very relevant. The government's structure, even putting aside for the moment, the problem of geopolitics is one that is geared toward incremental change and the problems that are emergent, and not only climate change and biodiversity, but also global migration, to some extent, nuclear weaponry, these are problems that call for systemic response. And systemic responses can only I think, only arise out of, in two contexts. One is a world older catastrophe, especially a war, which creates more flexibility with regard to adapting the system, or as a result of, in a combination of governmental initiatives, but strong grassroots civil society pressure. And, for instance, the anti-apartheid campaign is a good illustration, where the UN was led to support the anti-apartheid movement but only after a very extensive grassroots mobilisation took place, particularly in the UK in the US, and overcame the objections of very conservative, Cold War oriented governments at that time, Reagan in the US and Thatcher in Britain, they were forced from below to give way to these pressures that were basically of an ethical and political character, but had very widespread support. And so I think climate change itself is something that illustrates this mismatch between a governmental reluctance to make systemic adjustments and the nature of the problem of the challenge, which requires systemic adjustments, in some ways, the young Swedish woman, Greta Thunberg, I thought, well summarise this in her talk at the UN where, where her most vivid takeaway line was, to the delegates whom she was addressing, "You will die of old age we will die of climate change." And I think that is suggestive not only of grassroots but of the importance of young people being considering themselves participants in the struggle for a viable future. And that consciousness that political consciousness is probably more vital in present time than ever before, governments are not, they are too subject to conflicting interests, to be capable of taking clear systemic positions except in circumstances of catastrophe or a power movement, popular movement.

Tom Pegram 50:15

I'm reminded a bit of Gramsci's notion of the interregnum. You know, "the old order is dying. The new is not yet born and in the interregnum arise, the morbid symptoms." Perhaps that's where we are at the moment. So I'm aware of the time, Richard, I do want to hand over to Zoe. Zoe has a question.

Richard Falk 50:36

Good.

Zoe Varenne 50:39

Kind of following on from that. I, my question is, what advice do you have for millennials or generation Z, trying to make sense of the drivers of systems or systems change at the macro global scale in 2021? And where they might fit in when it comes to ensuring our governance systems defer to planetary needs?

Richard Falk 50:58

Well, I think that's more question for me to put to you, than for you to put to me. But I mean, the essence of what I was trying to say in response to the earlier question is that it's an imperative, called activists, that the one thing that your generation cannot do is leave to it to the older generations to solve the problems that confront your society, your life, your future. And this could also have the additional benefit of revitalising our understanding of citizenship in a democratic society that it's more than

elections. And it's, it could be a more movement oriented understanding of citizenship, which creates new opportunities for policymaking to be more creative, less shaped by special interests, and more transnational. And the nature of these, nature of the policy agenda at the present time is caught between this persisting organisation of political community in terms of national territorial states, and the character of global problematique, which affects certainly regions, but in many cases, humanity as a whole. So it really encourages the development of a more complex notion of personal identity, that you may be British, but you're also European, and you're also part of humanity, and that all of those are relevant, you don't have to choose among them. So I think that we older people, look to you younger people to give us the creative direction to address the future.

