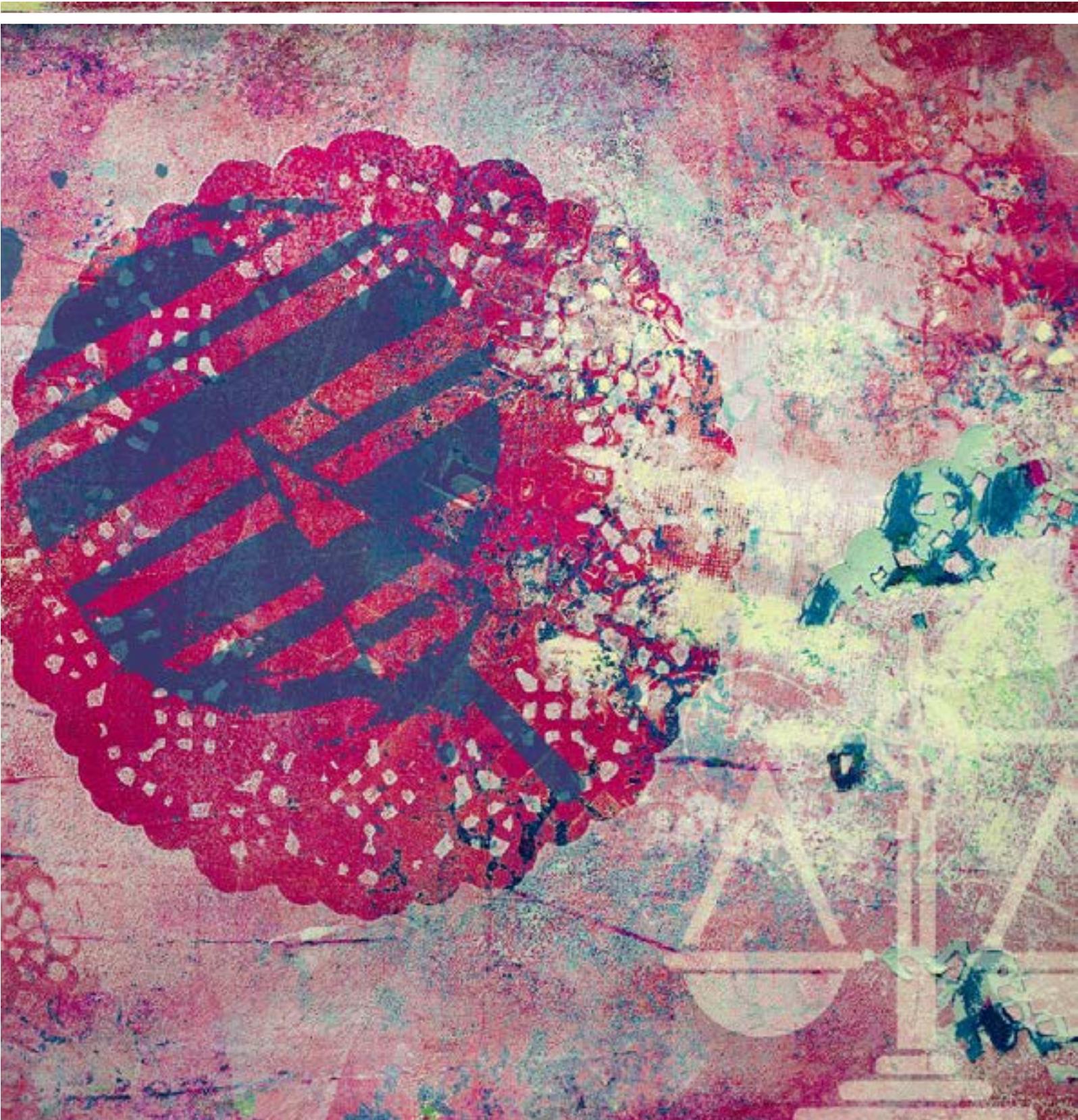


# Who Will Sustain Sustainable Prosperity?

by Miriam Ronzoni | March 2019





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# Who Will Sustain Sustainable Prosperity?

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Is sustainable prosperity an oxymoron? Can political communities live in manners that are both sustainable and prosperous, or does the former necessarily come at the cost of the latter (for instance—under the arguably dominant, resource-oriented understanding of prosperity—by curbing growth)? There are several ways to attempt to solve this puzzle. One is to invest in research on renewable energy and green technology which could enable us to maintain current levels of production and consumption (and possibly even emerging economies to catch up with us) without the disastrous effects of our current, oil-dependent and emission-heavy economies. Call this the ‘have your cake and eat it’ approach. Another is to *redefine* the very concept of prosperity, pulling it away from an understanding based on resources and consumption and towards less materialistic conceptions of wellbeing,

which *may* also translate into a strategy of ‘de-growth’ (see e.g. Jackson 2017 and 2018; Kallis 2011; Victor 2019), and Ingrid Robeyns’ attempt, in her contribution to this essay series, to show how prosperity is compatible with sustainability once we conceive the former in terms of capabilities, could also be interpreted along these lines (Robeyns 2017). Call this the ‘there’s more to life than cake’ approach. A third way still is to recognise that sacrifices in wellbeing must indeed be incurred for the sake of sustainability, but to insist that this is necessary to ensure an *adequate* level of prosperity for all—including, especially, future generations. Call this the ‘share that cake’ approach.

In this contribution, I do not offer an argument in favour of one of the aforementioned three approaches, and against the other two; I seek, instead, to engage with a more fundamental question,

which needs answering whichever of the approaches one endorses. Even if the tension between sustainability and prosperity can ultimately be solved, how can we harness the *political will* for the institutional reforms that will be necessary to achieve it, and how do we ensure that political support for such institutions endures over time? In other words, how can we make sustainable prosperity *politically sustainable*? Although the answer to this question will vary depending on how exactly the tension between sustainability and prosperity is solved, each of the three strategies sketched below will have to address this question. This is the most fundamental puzzle for us—more so, in a way, than the issue of optimal institutional or policy design. As Slavoj Žižek notes about Thomas Piketty’s bold proposals for global taxation (Piketty 2014), “if you imagine a world organization where the measure proposed by Piketty can effectively be enacted, then *the problems are already solved* [...]. *We already won* [...]. The true problem is to create the conditions for his apparently modest measure to be actualized” (Žižek 2014, emphasis added).

In this essay, I examine how two prominent political paradigms fail to tackle the complexity of this puzzle seriously enough. Then, I suggest that the two concepts of *global background justice* and *transnational republican solidarity* might point in the right direction, for they both seek to conceptualize several problems of global justice—of which sustainable prosperity is clearly one—as having both a local *and* a global moral dimension. They might therefore allow us to ground the motivation to act towards global environmental goals (which demand us to think about our impact on distant, unknown others) in our own pre-existing commitments and attachments—thus

making the enterprise arguably both more feasible and more sustainable.

### Routes to sustainable prosperity: top-down or bottom-up?

In one way or another, the ‘have your cake and eat it’, the ‘there’s more to life than cake’, and the ‘share that cake’ approaches all involve major attitudinal shifts. This is most obvious for the ‘share that cake’ approach—which explicitly commits to making sacrifices; but is true of the other two, as well. The ‘there’s more to life than cake’ approach requires public opinion to endorse a different hierarchy of values than the one which is, arguably, currently dominant; and even the ‘have your cake and eat it’ approach entails changes in investment and industrial strategies which are likely to generate winners and losers, at least in the short run (like all previous major economic restructurings have)—and to encounter scepticism as a result. Granted, unlike the ‘share that cake’ approach, these two both carry the promise of an overall better future state of affairs—but transaction costs are required for both, and the problem of political motivation remains, therefore, extremely relevant. Of course, the three approaches require us to harness political motivation towards very different goals; but to the extent that they all require a significant shift in the set of priorities that typically motivate citizens towards political action, the issue of political motivation is crucial to all three.

Regrettably, this issue is not as central to political conversations about sustainability as it should be; one can, however, identify two broad, opposite directions of travel. The first sees the problem as a form of collective action failure of a fairly classical, game-theoretical kind. Like in a paradigmatic prisoner’s dilemma, it is in our collective

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endorse a different hierarchy of values than the one which is, arguably, currently dominant; and even the ‘have your cake and eat it’ approach entails changes in investment and industrial strategies which are likely to generate winners and losers, at least in the short run (like all previous major

long-term interest to cooperate on issues of environmental sustainability (with the issue of climate change obviously taking centre stage)—and yet so tempting to defect, hoping that others will do more than their fair share and thus allow us, truly, to have our cake and eat it, by avoiding the most disastrous effects of climate change without doing our bit to that effect. And again, like in a classical prisoner’s dilemma, if all interested parties reason like that, things turn out for the worse for everybody involved. This diagnosis is then followed by proposals of top-down institutional and policy measures: cooperation must be *enforced* by means of supranational regulations and institutions, much like the imposition of state institutions is a top-down solution to the problem of leaving behind the perils of anarchy in the state of nature. Some of these solutions are more comprehensive (involving the idea of a full-blown system of global environmental governance), whilst other (such as carbon-trading proposals) are more minimal; but the rationale that the prisoner’s dilemma must be unblocked via enforcement, or at least skilful ‘manipulation’, from above is the same.

The second option is the so-called *oikophilia* solution (Scruton 2011 and 2017). In his contribution to this essay series, Roger Scruton argues that an answer to the puzzle sketched at the beginning of this essay is more likely to be found “in the legacy of conservative thinking, than by adopting the standpoint of the top-down plan” (Scruton 2017). For communities to seek prosperity in a way that is compatible with taking care of the environment, they must see the environment as *their own* to take care of in the first place—otherwise, they will inevitably feel alienated by environmentalist agendas, which they will perceive as abstract ideals endorsed by an uprooted cosmopolitan elite.

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This sense of belonging—this *oikophilia*, or “love of home”—is only possible, however, if we recognise that communities arise spontaneously over time, through stratified, sedimented interaction and collective processes of meaning-formation; in other words, if we celebrate, rather than pass judgment on, people’s self-ascriptive *identities*, including and indeed especially cultural and national ones. The role model is the National Trust, not a global carbon tax.

Both options capture something important, yet also miss something equally crucial. On the one hand, the prisoner’s dilemma strategy jumps too quickly from cooperation to enforcement. The presence of a collective action problem at the core of the climate change crisis is undeniable; yet, top-down solutions are not, unlike what their name seems to suggest, *dei ex machina*. First, on the input side, they need political mobilisation to get them off the ground to begin with—think, after all, of what it took to put in place the top-down solution par excellence according to *laissez faire* liberals, i.e. the welfare state, in several countries.<sup>1</sup> In democracies, top-down institutional solutions are much more often the result of sustained political action than of sheer imposition from the elites—they are top-down in their execution (although to varying degrees at that) in that they require public institutions to be implemented, but not necessarily in how they come about. This does not mean that we should indulge in the romanticised, and equally mistaken, idea that every expansion of the public sector is the result of grassroots mobilisation from the bottom; it is, instead, much more often the result of coalitions between different social groups (say, workers and peasants in the rise of the universal welfare states in Scandinavian democracies)—coalitions, however, are precisely mechanisms to secure

broad consensus, and thus the opposite of sheer top-down imposition.

Second, if they are not perceived as legitimate and upheld over time, there is little hope of top-down solutions ultimately succeeding in their aims—regardless of how much power they confer to public institutions. In other words: once established, institutions and rules aimed at solving collective action problems need ongoing, sustained support. Thus, the solution to the prisoner's dilemma is for the interested parties to *understand* that they are better off cooperating, not for them to be *forced* to cooperate against their will—or at least, not if the issue which requires cooperation is one which endures over time, rather than a one-off emergency. Hobbes himself envisaged the Leviathan as a result of a *contract*—and even if that was only a metaphor, it matters which metaphor he chose.

Hence, identifying the global climate crisis, or other global issues of sustainability, as a prisoner's dilemma does not make the issue of political will frivolous—far from it. It matters that the roadmap out of a collective action problem be one that is perceived as legitimate by the interested parties, and continuously so. Ideally, new policies and institutions should generate their own support over time—people should come to 'get' why they are valuable and thus uphold them on an ongoing basis. Again, according to Bo Rothstein's prominent reconstruction, the model of the universal welfare state in Scandinavia was initially made possible by a unique coalition between traditionally antagonistic social groups, but then managed to ensure *ongoing and bipartisan support* for itself in a way that more residual, safety-net

welfare models (grounded on the idea that welfare support is only there in exceptional cases, for particularly needy subjects, thus instilling the doubt that every welfare user is potentially a scrounger) have not (Rothstein 1998).

The *oikophilia* solution, on the other hand, takes the concern for legitimacy very seriously, by pointing out that top-down

solutions can be alienating and thus rejected by the public. The suggestion is, instead, that sustainable solutions will mushroom spontaneously if we allow individuals to nurture their identity-based attachments to each other and to their

own environment. Let people express their "love of home", and they will find creative and surprisingly effective ways to protect the environment *by themselves*. This strategy, however, is short-sighted in three, tightly connected respects. First, quite simply, contemporary environmental problems do not exclusively concern scenarios where people do not take sufficient care of *their own* environment. On the contrary, they often entail the creation of negative externalities for distant others—such as the depletion of global resources, a negative impact on the climate of distant locations, or the use of more than one's fair share of emissions. Addressing such problems requires an appreciation of the unavoidable interconnection of different "homes" (see also Anderson 2017).

Second, and following directly, if this is the case, some communities simply *cannot* take care of their own environment in that spontaneous, bottom-up way—think of submerging islands or areas which are undergoing processes of desertification. Third and finally, understanding the first two points and being motivated to act on

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the basis of them inevitably requires a level of 'cold', abstract moral thinking which is somewhat in tension with the eminently concrete, spontaneous character of the *oikophilia* solution. To address most global environmental problems of the 21st century, following one's heart and expressing one's love of home simply will not do. People must, instead, come to recognise that their actions have problematic effects on distant, unknown others—and that requires moving away from the language of love and care and towards the abstract moral language of duties and obligations towards people with whom one shares neither a home, nor an identity. Alternatively, it involves expanding the concept of "home"

from the local to the global—which, from the point of view of everyday moral reasoning, amounts nearly to the same thing, in that it requires a significant exercise of abstraction.

To sum up, no black-and-white solution—either in the form of top-down imposition or in the form of spontaneous *oikophilia*—is available: people must instead recognize that they have duties towards distant others (including future generations) and be sufficiently motivated to act on the basis of that. What we need is thus a *via media* between these two approaches. Is this possible? I believe that intermediate routes are available, but that they are necessarily messy, tentative, and require acknowledging a multitude of tensions. In the remainder of this essay, I wish to suggest that the concepts of *global background justice* (Ronzoni 2009 and 2012) and that of *transnational republican solidarity* (White 2003; Ronzoni 2018) may allow us to gain some insights on this issue—if we remain modest.

### **A *via media*? Global background justice and environmental crises**

The idea of background justice was first introduced by the political philosopher John Rawls (1993). Background justice constitutes

a distinctive, alternative way of justifying classical principles of social justice (e.g. that everybody should have enough to lead a decent life, or that inequalities should not go beyond a certain thresholds, or that they should only occur if they benefit the worst of overall)—grounding those very principles not, say, in higher independent moral values, but in the imperative to preserve *just background conditions*, i.e. the conditions that allow agents to interact freely and fairly overtime. In other words: the point of these principles

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is not to realise, say, an ideal of equality that is considered independently just or valuable, but to create the *preconditions* for people to interact freely and fairly over time.

On this reading, social justice *consists* in preserving the fair background conditions under which private actors (such as individuals and firms) can *reliably* interact in a free and fair way without fear of undermining the conditions for freedom and fairness over time. Problems of background justice arise whenever participants in a social scheme affect one another so deeply, and in such complex ways, that it is not possible for them to fulfil standards of justice just by adopting horizontal rules of conduct, i.e. by simply *behaving* justly towards one another (Rawls 1993, p. 266). Their interaction is bound to create unintended consequences that are detrimental to their own fair interaction in the future or to the fair interaction of other actors:

*The accumulated results of many separate and ostensibly fair agreements, together with social trends and historical contingencies, are likely in the course of time to alter citizens' relationships and opportunities so that the conditions for free and fair agreements no longer hold. The role of institutions that*

belong to the basic structure is to secure just background conditions against which the actions of individuals and associations take place (Ibid).

Ostensibly fair agreements may have unexpected implications for third parties; or, as a result of accumulated transactions, deep and unforeseen inequalities may arise that render some actors too poor and/or vulnerable to be able to interact with others on fair, free and equal terms on an ongoing basis—thus exposing them to domination and exploitation. For instance, in the absence of a robust safety-net of some kind, people can find themselves in situations of destitution through a series of perfectly voluntary choices—once they are there, however, and if their plight is sufficiently grave, others can arguably force them to accept things they otherwise would not have.

Thus, whenever a social scheme (and chiefly the state) raises problems of background justice, its participants have a mutual obligation to establish and sustain *public rules and institutions* capable of preserving just background conditions among them. Such institutions will preserve the conditions under which agents enjoy the secured and ongoing conditions for their free and fair interaction over time—by, for instance, robustly protecting agents from domination and exploitation, or ensuring that “no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself” (Rousseau 2004[1762], p. 33). Fleshing out what these just background conditions amount to exactly would probably be the object of reasonable disagreement, and

change from social scheme to social scheme (depending on the specific vulnerabilities at stake)—in other words, it would depend on an analysis of *what it takes* to preserve fair background conditions in a given social scheme.

What should by now be clear, however, is that maintaining just background conditions means, in one way or another, implementing *standards of social justice* of some kind—namely standards aiming at distributing resources, burdens and benefits, and at protecting certain individuals or groups from specific threats. These may range from an unconditional safety net to more demanding and strongly egalitarian requirements; either way, however, the relevant public institutions would do way more than enforce ostensibly fair and free contracts and agreements, and make coerced ones void.<sup>2</sup> Their task would be to make sure that all participants in a given scheme always enjoy the preconditions to interact freely and fairly with others over time—in a robust, reliable way. Thus, background justice is a *justification* for a specific account of social justice: the correct principles of social justice, whatever these are, are those which are necessary to preserve just background conditions.

Background justice, so conceived, differs both from minimalistic, libertarian conceptions of justice and from more traditional egalitarian ones. It differs from the former for it is grounded in the idea that agents will use their freedom—sometimes deliberately, but often not—to undermine the preconditions of one another’s freedom over time—and that this must be countered. There is an invisible hand, but one which does harm rather than good. It differs from the latter because it

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does not posit that, say, absolute destitution or excessive inequalities are unfair or unjust *as such*—say, because they are undeserved, or incompatible with human equality, etc.—, but argues instead that demanding standards of social justice can be defended on the basis of freedom alone: if you care that people be free, you must ensure that they can reliably be so over time.

In so doing, it shows appreciation for the two, different sets of intuitions which sustain the prisoner’s dilemma and the *oikophilia* view respectively. On the one hand, like the *oikophilia* view, it does not vindicate a superimposed idea of how people should live together; however, like the prisoner’s dilemma view, it acknowledges that respecting how people wish to live their lives does not always spontaneously lead to the best solutions—far from it. We might say, in a way, that it calls for public institutions to solve a major collective action problem—but the collective action problem in question is that of allowing agents to carry on living *as they wish*. Therefore, it carries the promise of being able to attract consensus, for it does not vindicate a demanding conception of social justice on the basis of rich concepts and values which people may or may not endorse, but rather on the basis of preserving the preconditions for the freedom of all over time. Within the realm of climate justice, carbon trading *might*, for instance, be justified as a measure to ensure background justice; carbon-trading does not prescribe that people should embrace the philosophy of greener lives, but merely that they internalise the externalities they might impose on others by doing so. Importantly, though, the emphasis in background justice arguments is on *robustly ensuring* that just background conditions are preserved over time—thus, as a market mechanism necessarily open to uncertainty and volatil-

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ity, carbon-trading could only be *part* of a strategy to secure background justice, rather than the only strategy. At a minimum, we would need carbon-trading with a reliable back-up plan.

My contention is that the concept of background justice (and its counterpart, namely background injustice) is particularly well suited to address the issue of sustainable prosperity on the face of global environmental crises, for three reasons. First, it is particularly fruitful to conceptualise negative environmental externalities in terms of background injustices. Ostensibly, there may be nothing coercive about our decision to engage in a mutually agreed, emission-heavy, productive enterprise; however, us doing so might affect, for instance, your capacity to engage in any productive activity in the future—even a relatively ecological one—because any further emissions would lead to catastrophic consequences. Alternatively, the (for us) unforeseen consequences of our enterprise might be such that distant others may lack the preconditions to engage in even the most basic free and fair transactions, because, say, their environment is already too devastated by the emissions we generated.

Appreciating this might justify fairly centralised environmental regulation without grounding it in rich, controversial notions such as equality, the value of restraint, and the goodness of protecting the environment—but in the protected freedom of all over time, instead.

Second, background justice can justify, not only the expansion of the role of public institutions vis-à-vis ‘minimal state’ views, but even the establishment of *new* authoritative institutions altogether (Ronzoni 2009 and 2012)—such as a supra-national, binding regulation of harmful tax competition, or (more pertinently) a system

of global environmental governance. Social justice is realised, Rawls argues, when the structural and institutional background against which we interact maintains the conditions for our free and fair interaction over time—thus leaving us free to interact on the basis of our interests and aspirations, secure in the knowledge that such a structure is in place. If this is the case, institutional regulation aimed at preserving or establishing background justice is called for every time problems of background justice arise—not only within an already established institutional setting. Often enough, background injustice arises precisely because we interact in a non-institutionally regulated setting, but the nature of our interaction is such that calls for (new) institutional regulation. In the case of measures to

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tackle environmental crises, this facet of the background justice approach might help understand why interactional solutions—such as non-binding reciprocal commitments and codes of conduct, but also, to a certain degree, proposals for carbon-trading when these are not accompanied by insurance and protection mechanisms were carbon trading not to meet the desired goals—are doomed to fail. Crucially, the attitudinal change background justice requires is comparatively modest, for it requires people to understand that they *need* (centrally implemented) fair background rules to carry on doing what they already intend to do, namely lead their lives without harming or deceiving anyone.

Finally, and following directly from the second point, background justice is particularly well suited to capture certain dynamics of *transnational* and *even* global reach in particular—of which many environmental crises, and climate change in particular, are one clear example. The not yet existing authoritative institutions that it

may call for are, therefore, often institutions *beyond the state*. Under contemporary global circumstances, we can erode one another’s fair background circumstances beyond and across borders. What is more, this applies not only to individual projects (such as market interactions), which are the most typical examples mentioned in background justice discussions, but also to collective ones. The former phenomenon occurs when private actors affect the fair background conditions for the agency of other private actors across borders—such as when the heavy emissions of individuals or firms in country x lead to an accelerated desertification of specific farmlands in country y, which threatens the very agency of many individuals in that country (by limiting their access to water, making farming prohibitively hard, etc.).

The latter occurs when, for instance, macro-economic decisions made by country x bring the overall level of global emissions to a point where all other countries must become extremely cautious and risk-averse in order to prevent a global environmental catastrophe, thereby having their economic self-determination severely limited. In this latter cluster of cases, we might say that background injustice occurs *between states*, or between political communities, rather than between private actors: states can no longer interact with one another without eroding the background conditions that enable their ongoing free and fair interaction as independent, self-determining political communities over time. Our desire to maintain a generous welfare state might be affected by global capital flight and tax competition; our desire to protect our own environment might be, quite directly, made prohibitively hard by climate change. The concept of background justice was first devised to address issues of primarily socio-

economic concern, and it is therefore not surprising that the most often mentioned examples of global and international background injustice also relate to the global economy, rather than to environmental problems—such as harmful tax competition or the global race to the bottom in labour standards. However, as the hypothetical examples above illustrate, environmental choices can very well lead to scenarios of global background injustice. Indeed, there is no need to venture into hypotheticals: when emerging economies lament that they cannot pursue the same, emission-heavy route to development as OECD countries, their complaint can be very well cashed out in terms of background justice between states — the self-determining macroeconomic choices of some countries make it impossible for other countries to freely pursue their own path to economic development without leading to an environmental catastrophe, so background rules are required to ensure the capacity for economic self-determination of all political communities.

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Thus, framing the issue of climate justice in terms of background justice is, in my view, particularly helpful. Can the background justice approach, however, also offer a *via media* between the prisoner’s dilemma and the *oikophilia* approach? I believe it can. First of all, as we have seen, the background justice reading does not entail a radical shift from a motivation of defection to one of cooperation. Background injustice can arise even when all interested parties wish to do the right thing—it simply arises because the situation is such that they cannot do the right thing simply by *behaving* fairly. Doing the right thing means accepting the authority

of institutions and public rules which will maintain background justice. This, however, is not enough. If this is all that distinguishes the prisoner’s dilemma solution from the background justice approach, then the latter runs the risk of coming across a prisoner’s dilemma solution-lite: the interested parties still have to undergo the *Gestalt* effect of accepting new forms of regulation and enforcement which they would otherwise be reluctant to do because this is, in spite of appearances, in their long term interest.

However, the global background justice solution carries a further promise, in that it allows for sufficient *diversity* between different political communities—and, in so doing, envisages the possibility of a world where communities might regain their capacity to act on the basis of *oikophilia*. Recall that background justice must ensure that background circumstances are just, so that private agents can pursue their own plans “secure in the knowledge” (Rawls 1993, p. 266) that this background adjustment

is in place, and they do not have to worry about it in all the decisions they take (which, by definition, would be a futile exercise anyway). *Mutatis mutandis*, global background justice allows political communities to pursue different collective visions—of democracy, justice, common living, the good life, prosperity—secure in the knowledge that they are not thereby standing in the way of other political communities doing the same. If, say, harmful tax competition is securely tackled, country x can still pursue a policy of low taxation; countries which do not wish to do that, however, will not *de facto* be forced to follow suit due to the imminent threat of capital flight.<sup>3</sup> *Mutatis*

*mutandis* again, securing global background justice on environmental matters does *not* mean replacing local, bottom-up environmental agendas with a blanket top-down approach—what it aims to do is rather to create the preconditions for *all* communities to be able to practice *oikophilia*, secure in the knowledge that other communities are *also* capable to act on the basis of love for their own home. We are not, in other words, envisaging a world order where each state must pursue the same environmental policies (and policies of other kind) through and through, but rather one where each makes their choices within certain publicly implemented constraints — the functional equivalent of standards of social justice in the original, Rawlsian discussion on background justice.

It remains to be established how much exactly it is possible to secure background justice whilst leaving a lot of room for diversity within it in each and every policy area—and how much so in global background justice on environmental matters in particular; this, however, is and remains the promise that the language of background justice carries. When environmental background conditions are just, different communities can cultivate their own *oikophilia*—nurturing their own environment according to their own values and collective identities, and in a bottom-up fashion—secure in the knowledge that this is compatible with other communities doing the same.

Now, one objection could be raised at this juncture: surely, given the gravity of the current climate plight, this is wishful thinking? In other words, the level of background adjustment needed to prevent the most catastrophic predictions concerning climate change is such that would allow for little local variation.

Whether this is true or not is—unlike the issue of whether human-caused climate change is real—a far from settled empirical matter. If it is, however, the problem that would follow is by no means specific to the background justice approach: if climate change requires immediate, radical and especially blanket-style measures, then these simply *cannot* be implemented in the slow, painfully laborious way that the practice of democratic consensus-shaping requires.

We simply would have reached the level where emergency measures might be justified, and where we might need to get our hands dirty and force them through in ways that are deeply unpalatable for liberals and democrats—as Elizabeth Cripps puts it, we would be past the stage of hard choices, and in the territory of tragic ones (Cripps 2015).

If, however, we are not quite there yet, then the language of background justice remains a particular promising way, both of conceptualising the issue as such, and of ‘selling’ it to the public—using it as a way of supporting environmental global reforms might stand a chance at attracting political support, for global background justice only requires us to accept the background public rules that are necessary to allow us all to do our own thing, in the way we want to do it, whilst not preventing others from doing the same. This, of course, does not equate the background justice approach to an ‘anything goes’ view—especially in cases such as climate change (but also in others, more purely socio-economic areas), background justice-based regulations inevitably constrain our capacity to act freely on the basis of our preferences alone (for instance, how much we fly). They do not, however, ask us to abandon them and embrace, instead, an altogether

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different set of values and priorities. Much, of course, will depend on how exactly we cash out what background justice entails in terms of climate governance, how extreme current circumstances are, and which of the three ‘cake’ approaches we endorse (a point to which I will briefly return in the conclusion). My contention, here, is merely that a background justice approach carries the promise of having a better chance at creating consensus and political traction, because it starts from people’s existing values, preferences and attachments, rather than asking citizens to completely change them.

### Solidarity and global environmental action

I have so far tried to offer some support for the view that the background justice approach might be a helpful *via media* between the prisoner’s dilemma take and the *oikophilia* take on the problem of sustainable prosperity. I have suggested that it does so on substantive grounds and that, because it constitutes a promising intermediate route on substantive grounds, it carries the promise of getting enough political traction. How can we, however, set that in motion? In particular: what is the kind of *political motivation* that individuals and peoples need to have in order to work towards the aims of background justice on environmental matters?

My suggestion is that a further concept from the literature on social and global justice might be particularly helpful here: that of *transnational republican solidarity*. Transnational republican solidarity is, according to White (2003), the kind of mutual solidarity expressed by patriotic movements in the struggles for national independence and republican reform which swept through Europe over the 19th century. In a time where nationalism was brandished as a progressive

political category, these movements were grounded in a set of overlapping, if not always identical, motivations: the desire for national unification (wherever members of the same ‘nation’ lived under different rulers in either small states or larger empires), for national independence from foreign rulers, and for emancipation from the system of the *Ancien Regime*. The struggle for national unification and independence and that for the transformation of absolute monarchies into republics (or at least into constitutionally constrained regimes) were largely perceived as one and the same. By definition, therefore, these movements did not have a cosmopolitan or European federal mission,<sup>4</sup> for supranational political authority was largely equated with imperial rule rather than freedom. Hence, they were not united by the kind of solidarity that people have with one another when they are fighting for a truly common purpose. However, they did recognise that they were fighting, in a more complex and two-levelled

way, for one and the same thing: national independence and republican emancipation against the empires of the *Ancien Regime*. As a result, they were and acted in solidarity in a multiplicity of ways (giving each other military, ideological and strategic support; helping each other when in exile; creating strategic and intelligence networks, etc.). Republican patriotism was deemed thoroughly compatible with caring for the liberty of other polities—whereby caring did not mean striving towards a world polity, but actively supporting the establishment of free polities everywhere through forms of mutual solidarity and collaboration. This is a kind of solidarity that can motivate, and has motivated, transnational political action, not only in the national movements of the 19th century but also in the Spanish Civil War, in anti-colonial struggles in neighbouring

**“ A further concept from the literature on social and global justice might be particularly helpful here: that of transnational republican solidarity.**

countries, and in solidarity strikes against colonial oppression or the *Apartheid* regime.

This kind of solidarity—whereby different actors understand that they are struggling for *the same thing*, but not with the ultimate aim of enjoying that same thing *together*—

seems particularly apt to tackle cases of global background injustice, and in particular challenges to sustainable prosperity where what different communities ultimately desire is to regain the capacity to exercise *oikophilia* towards their own environment. Again, it is perhaps easier to understand how this might play out in more standard cases of background injustice, which

usually fall within the socio-economic domain. Think, for instance, of how the domestic political power of labour and trade unions is largely weakened in the current global economic setting through threats such as “if you do not accept these less favourable labour conditions, we are going to relocate to country x.” This is how

transnational corporations can play different sets of workers against each other through the threat of capital flight. These workers do not necessarily share a desire to establish a universal *cosmopolis* or even a global rule of law which may grant the very same protections

to all of them—they may very well desire, however, to regain a fairer bargaining power against capital *within their own jurisdictions*. In spite of being put in mutual competition by capital, therefore, they share a common goal for which they can act in mutual solidarity—of a kind that resembles transnational republican solidarity. This is where transnational union networks and

transnational solidarity strikes could help both block such specific vicious circles based on relocation threats, thus re-empowering both the labour force and the citizenry more broadly.

Reiterated cases of transnational political action — whenever these political dynamics occur — can, in the long run, create pressure towards suitable reforms to, for instance, realign the mobility of capital and labour to similar levels, thus decreasing the disproportionately superior bargaining power of the former. These forms of political action, however, would be aimed at creating some common *background*

*rules* to empower labour in each and every country, rather than at creating uniform, global labour protections for all workers. This is why the modalities and logic of transnational republican solidarity is particularly apt for them. Contemporary examples of this kind of solidarity—as the largely 19th century cases I have mentioned so far illustrate—are

quite hard to come by. In part, this is precisely the problem: contemporary progressive forces seem largely stuck in the binary choice between making their case in either purely domestic terms or purely cosmopolitan terms. Some attempts to create transnational bonds between

different anti-austerity forces in Southern Europe (the attempt to create a network between the Spanish *Podemos* and the Greek *Syriza*; the pan-European campaign to propose Alexis Tsipras a candidate for President of the European Commission in 2014; the birth of Diem25 as the first self-declared “transnational list” aiming at running for European Elections), however,

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can be interpreted through the lenses of transnational republican democracy. With clear variations (Diem25, for instance, seems to have a slightly more globalist vocation), these attempts do not aim at offering a full-blown pan-European vision, alternative in content to the dominant one but similar in its offering blanket solutions for all European people. They do, instead, aim at capturing the idea that certain countries within Europe have been unduly constrained in their self-determination by the prevailing austerity agenda, and that they must act in solidarity with one another in order to *regain* it.

Transnational solidarity of this kind is arguably easier to get off the ground than full-blown cosmopolitan solidarity based on creating common rules for all—yet there are major obstacles to it, particularly in times of ascending populist sovereignty like the ones we are currently witnessing. Being motivated by this kind of solidarity still requires recognition of the fact that some of those whom we might perceive as adversaries (asylum seekers, workers in different countries, citizens of countries pushing for bolder action on climate change)

can actually be our allies. For cases of capital flight, these may be vulnerable workers in different jurisdictions, set against one another by the threat of relocation. Populist politics encourages us to dismiss this kind of insight, by insisting that we should protect *our own* first and

foremost. Yet, my intuition is that, if any kind of anti-populist discourse is going to succeed, this is the one: not one which opposes sovereignty with yet more ‘elitist’ liberal cosmopolitan arguments, but one which points out how the struggles for political communities and marginalised groups

within them to regain self-determination which populist politics interjects actually need this level of solidaristic attitude—for, if the background justice approach is correct, self-determination cannot be regained in one country only.

For environmental politics in particular, the challenge is to figure out which social and political actors to activate

to set this kind of solidarity in motion, and how to get on board those who are set to lose the most in the short run—such as workers in emission-heavy sectors of the economy, and in mining in particular.

The dynamic, however, would bear structural resemblance with the examples made above: identify groups who, in spite of appearances, have a joint interest in tackling background injustice on environmental matters—not in order to accept any thick form of global environmental governance, but so that they can each go back to caring for their own environment, secure in the knowledge that others can do the same. This still requires winning the battle against populist and sovereignist rhetoric, and that still remains a tall order—but it is a battle where the stakes are not quite as skewed as if we were to point

our feet and insist that liberal and cosmopolitan values are just more enlightened and civilised. It is a way out of the sovereignist rhetoric which takes seriously some of its most central concerns around subsidiarity and disempowerment.

An example that may perhaps be seen as going in the right direction is the ‘Green New Deal’, for—by combining a green agenda with one of renewed investment in job security and dignity in work—it aims at making an environmentalist political agenda more palatable to those very social groups which are currently most

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alienated from it (as the *oikophilia* solution denounces). Of course, the Green New Deal is a domestic project so far, but it is not too hard to imagine how its logic could be internationalised, perhaps under the aegis of a Green Bretton Woods of sorts—namely a system of global economic governance not wholly inimical to globalisation, but aiming at enabling it only insofar as, and to the extent at, it serves the purpose of re-establishing domestic democratic and socio-economic self-determination within green constraints.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the concepts of global background justice and transnational republican solidarity provide us with valuable resources in trying to address the challenge of making sustainable prosperity politically sustainable. The former enables us to see global environmental problems as problems that we have reason to address on the basis of *our own* pre-existing attachments and the value we place in our own communities and environment. We must act on a global scale to tackle those problems, so that we can each go back to living our more local collective identities in full—be that regaining control over our own local environment, over domestic democratic processes or over national economic and financial policy. This way of conceptualising global political problems flips the “think globally, act locally” slogan around: we must take global action on the basis of the things that we care about at the local and national level. The concept of transnational republican solidarity, instead, enables us to think of a way in which global action of this kind might get political momentum—for such model of solidarity is based, not on the

ideal of replacing local loyalties with global ones, but on acting in solidarity with other communities and groups who, like us, are struggling to act on the basis of *their own* local aims, so that we can each be able to do so again. It is, therefore, a potential form of global solidarity that is more likely to generate political motivation—not only because it is thinner than full-blown cosmopolitan ideals, but because it is thinner *in the right way*, in that the fundamental reason for action it gives us is rooted in local identities and projects, albeit with a recognition that we *all* have a claim to pursue these.

Of course, several crucial problems remain unanswered: let me finish this essay by acknowledging two in particular. First and foremost, it is far from clear that we can succeed in producing a vision of global background justice that people from deeply different parts of the globe and of different political persuasions might converge on.

By definition, background justice intends to remain compatible with variation and diversity, but could there not be intractable disagreement on what *background justice itself* might entail? After all, as I have suggested, safety-net models and generously egalitarian welfare models are both, in principle, compatible with

the logic of securing just background conditions. Similarly, people could vastly disagree on what globally just background conditions on the handling of climate change might be—ranging from thick forms of global environmental governance to more hands-off proposals (such as a global system of carbon-trading supplemented by a more robust back up plan should that not do the trick). This essay is not the place to answer the question of whether such disagreement could be overcome, let alone which exact set of proposals could do so. What I have tried

to suggest, more modestly, is a way to *frame* political proposals on the issue so that they may stand a better chance of getting political traction.

Second, it remains to be seen whether the background justice approach really is neutral between the three ‘cake’ approaches I have sketched at the beginning of this essay. As the Green New Deal/Green Bretton Woods examples have illustrated, it may sit easily with the ‘have your cake and eat it approach’ (although, as we have seen, in spite of its name this approach requires transaction costs, as well) but maybe not so much with the other two. In particular, insofar as the ‘there’s more to life than cake’ approach requires us to *redefine* our very understanding of prosperity — and sometimes radically so—it may seem to be in stark tension with an account that requires us to take fairly transformative action, but on the basis of our pre-existing attachments and values. This is certainly part of the story, but perhaps not the whole story. The same social groups which might currently feel alienated by prevailing forms of green politics typically cast their complaints not necessarily in terms of purely monetary impoverishment (although that is important, too), but in terms of *loss of control*—over their job, their democratic institutions, their communities, and their life in general. A Green New Deal/Green Bretton Woods need not, therefore, be informed by the imperative to pursue further, perpetual growth at all costs, and to make environmental sustainability compatible with it. Of course, many doubt that redistribution and emancipation for disadvantaged social groups is feasible at all without growth, so that is a hurdle that the ‘there’s more to life than cake’ approach will have to face at some point anyway. What I have tried to do in this essay is to argue that *all* green political agendas—including the ‘there’s more to life than cake’ approach—stand better chances to gain political traction and momentum by framing their concerns

in terms of global background justice and political action in terms of transnational republican solidarity.

## Notes

1—Unions and Social-Democratic or Labour mass parties played a crucial role in the formation or expansion of the welfare state in the post-war environment in all Western countries. Even in Germany, where the welfare state was first invented and indeed introduced top-down by the Bismarck administration in the late 19th century, mobilisation from below was essential to its significant expansion to current levels in the post-war era.

2—In Robert Nozick’s language, they would not only enforce *historical* principles, but also *patterned* ones (Nozick 1974).

3—For ideas on how to tackle harmful tax competition without leading to de facto global uniformity in taxation, see, for instance, Dietsch and Rixen (2012); Ronzoni (2014); and Van Appeldoorn (2016).

4—For an exception, see Mazzini (1866), pp. 26-34.

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### About the Author



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