The law of the global economy and the spectre of inequality

Ingo Venzke

Drawing on my inaugural lecture, I argue that the spectre of inequality haunts international law. The presence of the spectre first of all draws attention to what is rotten in the global economic order: how the law of the global economy has contributed to high levels of inequality while, at the same time, abdicating responsibility for it. Second, like all spectres, international law’s spectre of inequality is animated by a spirit, the spirit of social justice. It points to forsaken paths, lost memories and conjures up past possibilities that were not realized. Third, the spectre endures unless we give in and break with current repetitions. It directs those in search of progressive change towards productive contradictions within global order. Those contradictions are indeed carriers of hope. They offer reason to believe that the future is open. Engaging with the spectre of inequality in international law turns out to be much less daunting than failing to do so.

A spectre haunts international law—the spectre of inequality. While inequalities of wealth and opportunity have drawn significant attention, the roles international law has played in contributing to this inequality have often been downplayed or cast in a rosy light. In the present contribution I therefore follow others in drawing out the ways in which the global economy’s legal structuring has contributed to increasing levels of inequality. It bears


repeating, briefly, that the richest one per cent were able to capture the largest part of growth over the past decades, so that they now hold half of all the world’s wealth.\(^3\) The very poor, conversely, were locked out of growth, while the income of the middle class in developed countries in fact declined, and that of the middle class in emerging economies increased. For those who have lost out, high levels of inequality have evoked a sense of injustice, mixed with feelings of alienation from the world—a feeling of impotence in the face of inhuman forces that tie the present to a bleak future.\(^4\)

Meanwhile, leading international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have abdicated responsibility for the distributive consequences of global economic arrangements. Other fields of international law, like human rights and labour law, may seem to be more open to acknowledging the problem, and pursuing social justice. They have, however, remained too weak and ambivalent, often coming too late to effectively redistribute what economic arrangements distributed unfairly in the first place.\(^5\) In addition, the way in which the law is fragmented into sectoral regimes and across multiple levels of governance, has superficially eased its contradictions and hidden its contributions to inequality. Dynamics of professional specialization and fragmentated perspectives have, in turn, reduced the apparent need for introspection and change. Problems, in short, always seem to lie on the other side of each specific regime and beyond the reach of each particular expertise. For the human rights lawyer, they rest with economic law, and for the economic lawyer, the opposite is true. And thus, they rest all comfortably in their self-absolution.

In the present contribution, I will show how the law of the global economy has distributed gains from economic globalization, how it has done little to cushion the losses, and how it could possibly be transformed through a genuine engagement with emancipatory, progressive politics.\(^6\) The argument is thus classically critical in the sense that it starts from an analysis of the

---

\(^3\) J Hickel, The Divide: Global Inequality from Conquest to Free Markets (Norton 2018); B Milanović, Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization (Harvard UP 2016) 31-33. Also see Credit Swiss, ‘Global Wealth Databook 2018’ (October 2018), putting the top one per cent’s share at 45 per cent of the world’s wealth; cf. World Inequality Database <wid.world> accessed 3 May 2021.

\(^4\) For a strong conception of alienation, see R Jaeggi, Entfremdung (Suhrkamp 2016).


\(^6\) While Katharina Pistor, among others, has analysed the role of private law in a similar vein, my focus rests on public international law. See K Pistor, The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality (Princeton UP 2019).
problem, continues via an inquiry into alternatives that have not been realized, to then arrive at a reassessment of possibilities in the present which help us to imagine a different future.\(^7\) My analysis here is inspired by one of the most famous ghosts of the theatre—that of the late King Hamlet.\(^8\) Just like the spectre of King Hamlet, international law’s spectre of inequality is also indicative of ‘something rotten’.

I thus argue, first, that—both by design and by omission—international law has contributed to high levels of inequality. It has done so by distributing value under the guise of maximizing it, and by confining the pursuit of human rights to the enactment of minimal standards of protection rather than structural transformation. These developments are not only opportunistic, but also rely on a larger, principled argument that I develop in the form of Friedrich Hayek’s dream.

Second, I suggest that the spectre of inequality is animated by a spirit, the spirit of social justice.\(^9\) It points to forsaken paths and lost memories, for haunting is always historical.\(^10\) It enacts the foundational moves of critical theory in its search for what could have been, and why it was not. In describing this aspect of the spirit, I offer some fragments from the history of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Trade Organization (ITO) which testify to prior expectations about how the economy could be embedded politically. I also show that human rights discourses, too, once had a more structuralist orientation. The normative programme underneath this mourning for the past may be expressed well with reference to Gunnar Myrdal’s gloom.

Third, I turn to the future and the daunting step of offering guidance for the way ahead. In its theatrical form, the spectre does not go away unless we give in to it, work with it, and follow its logic. Hamlet: ‘Where wilt thou lead me? speak; I’ll go no further’.\(^11\) So too, international law’s spectre of inequality demands of us that we stop and reconsider the present state of affairs. It takes us back to the past and, more specifically, towards contradictions within international law which may be the source of renewal. The ‘logic of the spectre’ eschews all-too-easy solutions that merely repeat the mistakes of the past—in the way that, for instance, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

---

8 I take further inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ and his reading of Hamlet in *Specters of Marx* (Routledge 1994). I take the gist of Derrida’s hauntology to be classically critical in the way I just described. It centres on problems of the past that persist unless they are revisited.
9 Derrida (1994) 4, on the spectre being animated by a spirit.
10 ibid.
11 ibid 10.
repeated those of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Instead, it places its hopes in productive contradictions as carriers of an emancipatory politics that searches for nothing less than greater freedom in a world that is our own. But do ‘we’ live in a world that is ours? Or rather: whose world is it? I conclude with three forward-looking suggestions that I develop by going back to Jean Rousseau’s ‘Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind’—suggestions focused on social freedom, beliefs in the legitimacy of what is legal, and future’s past.

**HAUNTING: SOMETHING IS ROTTEN**

**Creating and distributing value**

I have said that international law is haunted by the spectre of inequality, even as it abdicates responsibility for the distributive consequences of the global economic arrangements that it helps to constitute. The IMF, the WB and the WTO recently published a joint report titled: *Making Trade an Engine of Growth for All: The Case for Trade and for Policies to Facilitate Adjustment*. It is all there, right in the title: on the one hand, *international* law and its institutions seek to generate growth by enabling trade. They increase the size of the pie. On the other hand, *domestic* law and its institutions that are supposed to take care of the attendant distributive consequences by adopting policies to facilitate adjustment. They redistribute the pieces.

The argument that trade is an engine for growth of course leans on the magic of the comparative advantage. A very brief background sketch is in order: Adam Smith taught a good while ago that ‘the tailor does not attempt

---


to make his own shoes, but buys them of the shoemaker.\textsuperscript{15} David Ricardo then refined this core idea in a well-known and lasting fashion:

It is quite as important to the happiness of mankind that our enjoy-
ments should be increased by the better distribution of labour…
Under a system of perfectly free commerce, each country naturally
devotes its capital and labour to such employments as are most
beneficial to each. This pursuit of individual advantage is admirably
connected with the universal good of the whole.\textsuperscript{16}

Ricardo opposed Great Britain’s Corn Laws with these arguments—those
laws which imposed high tariffs so that domestic farmers were protected
against competition from cheaper foreign goods.\textsuperscript{17} He used those tariffs as an
eexample to develop his general critique of rents, which distribute but do not
create value.\textsuperscript{18} Ricardo’s conception of ‘rents’ continues to have foundational
significance today. According to one, widely shared view, it is the main
function of international trade law to prevent precisely such Ricardian rent-
seeking through tariffs.\textsuperscript{19} The function of the law, this view suggests, is to cap
tariffs and prohibit discrimination, both between different foreign producers
and between foreign and domestic producers:

\textsuperscript{15} A Smith, \textit{The Wealth of Nations} (Hackett 1993) 457: ‘If a foreign country can supply us with a
commodity cheaper than we ourselves can make it, better buy it of them with some part of the
produce of our own industry, employed in a way in which we have some advantage.’


\textsuperscript{17} The Corn Laws allowed for prices of such heights that they led to the Great Famine in Ireland
(then in Union with Great Britain) and they are pivotal in the important shift from mercantilism
to classic liberalism. See B Semmel, \textit{The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy,
the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism, 1750-1850} (CUP, 1970) 203-29; D Kennedy, \textit{A World
of Struggle: How Power, Law and Expertise Shape Global Political Economy} (Princeton UP, 2016) 180;
Theory of International Law} (OUP, 2016); M Mazzucato, \textit{The Value of Everything: Making and

\textsuperscript{18} See A Krueger, ‘The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society’ (1974) 64 \textit{The American
Economic Review} 291; R Kaplinsky, \textit{Globalization, Poverty and Inequality: Between a Rock and a
Hard Place} (Polity 2005) 62-65. The notion of rent refers to a transfer of profit that stems from
limitations in the supply of a scarce resource. Import tariffs are Krueger’s prime example. Ricardo
notably offered an extensive account of rents with the example of landowners who could gain a
profit simply because they had a monopoly of a scarce asset, much to his dismay. Ricardo also
keenly saw that rents essentially worked due to legal titles and arrangements. He gets into such a
rage about landowner’s rent-seeking that he comes close to presenting claims to property as the
original sin. See Ricardo (1821) ch 2. See also Kennedy (2016) 11.

\textsuperscript{19} Other policies were thus put on the defensive, see DK Tarullo, ‘Logic, Myth, and the International
Countries Became “Special”: Developing Countries and the Construction of Difference in
While liberal trade rules benefit all consumers, import protection benefits only a few import-competing producers at the expense of other citizens. The democratic legitimacy of this indirect income redistribution is often doubtful, especially if it is implemented through administrative fiat without parliamentary control so as to accommodate ‘rent-seeking’ interest groups.20

As Kal Raustiala puts it, this prevailing view focuses on ‘enduring problems of collective action and rent-seeking, and sees international economic institutions as a corrective to the manifestation of these problems at both the international and the domestic levels.21 It is then deemed to be the overriding aim of the law to facilitate the re-allocation of resources to the most efficient producer and thereby to increase gains and growth. In this way, the field of international economic law is constituted in a way which not only excludes distributive consequences from view, but also places it immediately at odds with both social policy and economic planning, which are necessarily premised on discrimination of a certain sort.

A series of well-established critiques of growth through trade cast doubt on this unambiguous narrative. They show, for example, that trade benefits some countries more than others, and some actors within countries more than others across them—inevitably, it is by and large the stronger who reap the rewards disproportionately. In addition, critiques show that trade can also make some actors worse off.22 I do not wish to rehash those arguments here, though I would indeed embrace many of them. I only want to highlight one perhaps fairly obvious point, namely that Ricardo and others advocated an international division of labour at a time when Britain would benefit from such arrangements—at a time when it could indeed become the ‘Workshop of the World’, the centre of valuable production.23 Members of the British Parliament clearly saw this particular appeal of free trade: ‘foreign nations would become Colonies to us, without imposing on us the responsibility of


23 I Wallerstein, Historical Capitalism: With Capitalist Civilization (Verso 1983).
governing them’. The point, then, is that international law and its institutions have always played a dual role, both aiming to work as an ‘engine for growth’, thus increasing the size of the pie, and helping to distribute the pieces. Over time, however, the emphasis, and most important effects, have shifted towards the latter—from growth towards distribution. This development reflects the fact that the size of one’s own piece, not of the whole pie, has been the most important concern for many key actors.

The international legal protection of intellectual property serves as an example that is both illustrative and topical in view of access to medical remedies amidst the global pandemic. Like tariffs, copyright and patents are a form of rent as they fend off competition and distribute value, above all from the consumer, who pays a higher price, to the producer, who can charge more. The impact of intellectual protection on the costs of medicines, for instance, is well documented. According to a wide-spread view, common across a number of disciplines, this protection has gone too far, stifling rather than sparking innovation. Thus, in contrast to the conventional picture of international economic law as a solution to the problem of rent-seeking, the example of intellectual property highlights the ways in which international law itself underpins rents and is thus part of the problem.

24 Semmel (1970) 8 quoting a Whig in the House of Commons with reference to the Parliamentary Debates, 3rd Series, LXXXIII of 23 February 1846, 1399-1400. For a nuanced discussion of the confluence between interest and principled argument in these debates, see ibid 206-210. See also Orford (2016).
26 It is of course another dubious beauty of Smith’s argument that the two are intrinsically linked: that the invisible hand turns the pursuit of self-interest into an advantage for all. A Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (CUP 2002) 215: ‘[The rich] consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by a n i n v i s i b l e h a n d t o m a k e n e a r l y t h e s a m e d i s t r i b u t i o n o f t h e n e c e s s a r i e s o f l i f e , w h i c h w o u l d h a v e b e e n m a d e , h a d t h e e a r t h b e e n d i v i d e d i n t o e q u a l p o r t i o n s a m o n g a l l i t s i n h a b i t a n t s , a n d t h u s w i t h o u t i n t e n d i n g i t , w i t h o u t k n o w i n g i t , a d v a n c e t h e i n t e r e s t o f t h e s o c i e t y ’.
28 Kaplinsky (2005) 79-81, who clearly appreciates that these rents are products of the law.
does not just create, but more importantly distributes, value. And, unsurprisingly, it does so in a way that makes the ‘haves’ come out ahead.

**Minimal protection**

I argued above that international economic law and its institutions wrongly abdicate responsibility for high levels of inequality while, at the same time, having a strong distributive impact. I now turn to the ways in which other parts of international law, in a familiar *pas de deux*, dissociate themselves from the underlying reasons for this and are too weak in their attempts to address the distributive consequences. The story of Robert McNamara and his start at the World Bank serves as a pathway into that argument. When McNamara became the President of the Bank in 1968, he identified inequality as the major problem of the times. A couple of years into his term of office, however, he drastically changed course:

> If we look objectively at the world today, we must agree that it is characterized by a massive degree of inequality. The difference in living standards between the rich nations and the poor nations is a gap of gigantic proportions. . . . Every indication is that it will continue to grow. . . . What we can do is begin to move now to ensure that absolute poverty is ended.

McNamara’s shift in position is emblematic of human rights discourses more generally. Over time, those discourses have come to focus on poverty rather than inequality, minimal protection rather than progressive distribution, and basic needs rather than social justice. This turn to poverty, minimal protection and basic needs remains profoundly problematic, most importantly because it sets aside the crucial question of why somebody may be poor or struggle to meet basic needs. In this way, a victim of a natural disaster is

---


wrongly placed into the same position as a victim of domination and exploitation—poverty is rendered as if it were a localized tragedy, not a result of planned misery, as Susan Marks has argued. But the claims of people in poverty are very different: in Rainer Forst’s words, ‘[i]njustice is one thing, fate and fortune another.’ He continues: ‘[o]ne owes it to victims of domination not to treat them as “weak” and miserable human being in need of “help.”’ And those who have benefitted from injustice should not be allowed to see themselves as acting charitably when they do help.

It may have been opportune, if not next to necessary, for McNamara to centre human rights on minimal protection. Institutional, material and discursive constraints may have pushed him to act in this way in spite of better knowledge—a dynamic which Marks sees at work in so much human rights related work. Fragmented law and specialized discourses have facilitated the search for solutions in human rights protection at a distance from the problematic economic practices that are their cause, but which are also legally structured.

But quite aside from this dynamic, there is also a more principled argument in support of focussing on minimal protection, and in the next section I turn to this, through the figure of Friedrich von Hayek. My point in doing this is to extend, explicitly, my analysis of ‘what is rotten’ beyond the realm of institutions and rules, into the realm of ideas and normative agendas, in the critical vein I outlined above. Not only is that realm one in which power is at work, it is also one of conflict and continued contradiction, a space which has helped to determine the path of international law’s development, and may yet provide resources for imagining how it might be otherwise.

**Hayek’s dream**

Hayek grew up in the Austro-Hungarian Empire while it was falling apart—a context that was formative for him, and continued to influence him throughout his life and work. He received his first doctorate in law and his second in economics from the University of Vienna. He then moved to the London School of Economics, abandoning any desire to return to Austria, instead adopting British nationality in 1938. On the brink of the Second World War,

---

37 Marks (2011).
39 ibid 18-19. See also Marks (2011).
40 Marks (2011) 75.
he published his remarkable article on the ‘Economic Conditions of Interstate Federalism’, dreaming of a new world of lasting peace and justice, a world in which nationalist rivalry would belong to the past and economic efficiency would work to the progress of all. Non-discrimination and minimal protection were the two main pillars of his dream, a noble dream that has been remarkably powerful in the world of international law and beyond.

Hayek had seen how economic frontiers and nationalist rivalries had gone hand in hand, creating contexts in which conflicts of interest become destructive conflicts between communities. His response was a radical individualism with cosmopolitan reach. Economic frontiers and nations, in his view, should be undone. There should be no discrimination between insiders and outsiders—between those who belong to a nation and those who do not.

For Hayek, it was not only inefficient but also unjust to subsidize the corn farmer next door if to do so made everyone else worse off, including the farmer across the border. If liberalization leads to inequality, he suggested, so be it. Stronger still, in his view, economic gains are impossible without inequality. But this was justifiable: growth would after all be to everyone’s advantage, and the poorest would ultimately be better off. Inequality, as a result, ought not to be a primary concern of policy. Social justice was, as a concept, entirely devoid of meaning for Hayek—a mirage, as he put it. If social justice were pursued, he argued, then it would lead down the road of serfdom towards arbitrary and oppressive policies.

Hayek received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1974 and dedicated his acceptance speech to *The Pretence of Knowledge*, attacking the foundations of interventions into the market. How, he asked, could we possibly know the

---


44 ibid 257: ‘conflicts of interests tend to become conflicts between the same groups of people’.

45 In contrast to current practices, Hayek notably placed emphasis on the free movement not only of goods and capital, but also of ‘men’. It is not entirely clear, however, how far his cosmopolitanism reached then, at a time at which large parts of the globe were still colonized, or how far it would reach now. His federation was thought to be one of democratic states and his examples mentioned Europeans, North Americans, and South Africans. Ibid 262-63.


49 Hayek (1948) 255-72.
effects of those interventions down the line?\textsuperscript{50} By trying to know better than
the market, Hayek argued, economists (and the policy-makers who might fol-
low them) have in fact ‘made a mess of things.’\textsuperscript{51} During his dinner toast in
Stockholm he is reported to have remarked: ‘had I been consulted whether to
establish a Nobel Prize in Economics, I should have decidedly advised against
it’.\textsuperscript{52} For Hayek, the bottom line was that there is no certainty in economic
planning, so it is better to level the playing field by enforcing non-discrimi-
ation and protecting individual liberty.

Hayek’s dream turned foul for large parts of the world, as the promise of
the ‘rising tide’ did not materialise. Now, it is true that the world of inter-
national law is not shaped in Hayek’s image—but it does come remarkably
close, at least in some respects.\textsuperscript{53} An emerging body of scholarship is teasing
out the influence—of Hayek and others around him, ordo- and neo-liberals—
on international law,\textsuperscript{54} and there is no question that the focus of international
economic law on non-discrimination, and the emphasis of human rights law
on individual liberty, has strong resonance with a Hayekian vision of world
order.

Arguments about the influence of ordo-liberalism and neo-liberalism on
international law could be taken still further.\textsuperscript{55} As compelling and insightful as
it may be to tie legal developments to the rise of neo-liberalism, and to thereby

\textsuperscript{50} ibid 265-66.

\textsuperscript{51} F Hayek, ‘The Pretence of Knowledge’ (Nobel Prize Lecture, 11 December 1974) <www.nobel

\textsuperscript{52} B Caldwell, ‘Hayek’s Nobel’ (2016) 21 Advances in Austrian Economics 1, 6.

\textsuperscript{53} MW Doyle and JE Stiglitz, ‘Eliminating Extreme Inequality: A Sustainable Development Goal,
2015-2030’ (2014) 28 Ethics and International Affairs 5; Slobodian (2018); Moyn (2018) 191, with
reference to E-U Petersmann, ‘Time for a United Nations “Global Compact” for Integrating
Human Rights into the Law of Worldwide Organizations: Lessons from European Integration’
(2002) 13 European Journal of International Law 621, 629, arguing that economic
liberalization best serves the promotion of international human rights; J Shotwell, ‘The
International Labour Organization as an Alternative to Violent Revolution’ (1933) 166 Annals of
the American Academy of Political and Social Science 18; A Peters, ‘The “Great October Socialist
Revolution”: What Remains in and for International Law?’ (2017) MPIIL Research Paper Series No
9, 2-3.

\textsuperscript{54} E.g. J Hien and C Joerges (eds), \textit{Ordo-liberalism, Law and the Rule of Economics} (Hart 2017); N

\textsuperscript{55} There is some slippage between the two notions, ordo-liberalism and neo-liberalism. They differ,
especially with regard to the role of the state, which the former acknowledges and the latter
dissmisses. Though that dismissal may be more apparent than real, Hayek, while closely connected the
group of ordo-liberals in Freiburg, championed neo-liberal thinking. Cf. T Biebricher,
‘Ordoliberalism as a Variety of Neoliberalism’, in Hien and Joerges (eds) (2017) 103; PG Cerny,
European Review of International Studies 78.
expose and critique neo-liberalism’s trenchant operation, it is also true that
the varieties, ambivalence, and contradictions within the law tend to get
lost within this story, and possibilities of alternative legal arrangements along
with it. The law continues to be replete with tensions and remains to
some degree pliable, even whilst under the spell of a dominant political econ-
omy that is, after all, partially structured by law. Moreover, it is really
not that clear what neo-liberalism demands from the law. Struggles about
how to understand the demands of non-discrimination and liberty, and
how to translate them into legal command, must be part of any story of
neoliberalism’s influence on international law. No context speaks for itself,
nor are its boundaries given—questions of what counts as context, and how
to read it, are crucial sites of contingency. The future remains open, I will
continue to argue. But to get there, it is necessary to follow the spectre into
the past.

MOURING: POSSIBILITIES OF THE PAST

The spirit of social justice

For a while, the spirit of social justice was able to thrive on labour movements
that were sparked by the mournful spectacles of the Industrial Revolution.
Back then, a physician stood at Oxford Road, Manchester to observe the plight
of the workers as they left the mills:

The children were almost universally ill-looking, small, sickly, bare-
foot, and ill-clad. Many appeared to be no older than seven... Here I
saw ... men and women that were not to be aged, children that were
never to be healthy adults. It was a mournful spectacle.58

56 That is the case, for instance, with the otherwise most insightful account in Slobodian (2018). On
the downsides of law’s contextualization, which tends to lead to its fateful determination in that
context, see G Painter, ‘Contingency in International Legal History: Why Now?’ in Venzke and
Heller (eds) (2021) 44.

57 See GI Tunkin, ‘Co-Existence and International Law’ (1958) 95 Collected Courses 1, 47 (‘different
elements of superstructure mutually influence each other and they also influence the development
of the economic structure itself’).

58 Quoted in E Baines, The History of the Cotton Manufacture (Fisher, Fisher and Jackson 1835) 462.
(Broadview 2007) 20; EP Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Pantheon 1963)
329. See also E Griffin, Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution (Yale UP
2013), who cautions against excessive nostalgia for conditions of life in Britain before the
Industrial Revolution.
At the time, inequality soared. Like all histories, the history of labour movements reflects the confluence of both power and ideas—especially the power of labour in relation to capital, and ideas of social freedom as opposed to the negative freedom of individual liberty.

Otto von Bismarck would not have enacted the first social legislation in the 1880s, nor would the Treaty of Versailles have established the ILO in 1919, had it not been for a plausible fear of communist revolution. When the Treaty of Versailles claims that it ‘reflect[s] the belief that universal and lasting peace can be accomplished only if it is based on social justice,’ it expresses a belief that was shaped by the First World War as well as by the Russian Revolution.

The United States eventually joined the ILO after the Great Depression and in the context of Roosevelt’s New Deal. At the time, it was a commonplace, both within the US and elsewhere, that labour standards should be promoted globally so as to ultimately equalize costs of production and to erase sources of comparative advantage. The motivation was two-fold: to benefit both local and global labour conditions. Roosevelt supported his package of social legislation with the notable argument that ‘necessitous men are not free men—an argument that then turned into the idea of ‘freedom from want . . . everywhere in the world’. To be sure, one should treat this lofty rhetoric with some skepticism—after all, it glosses over imperialist practices and suggests, as so often, possibilities that may not in practice have existed. But the comparison with policy discourses in the present is striking and favourable.

---

59 On the importance of the Industrial Revolution, especially on inequality between countries, see Milanovic (2016) 119.

60 Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany (adopted 28 June 1919, entered into force 10 January 1920).


63 See Lamp (2020).


65 Roosevelt (1944), The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.’
The ILO helped enshrine the spirit of social justice within the Charter of the United Nations. The Charter’s preamble notably affirms the aim of ‘promot[ing] social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.’\(^\text{66}\) The ILO’s Declaration of Philadelphia (1944), which speaks of the ‘war against want’, assumes the language of human rights, and even takes aim at the global economy.\(^\text{67}\) But the ILO was too weak to really take on the task of re-tooling modes of economic production with a view to tackling global inequality. Instead, in the early 1970s, it ended up spearheading the focus on basic needs.\(^\text{68}\) In 1975, it moved to a new building and indeed left its premises on the lake of Geneva to the GATT (and subsequently the WTO). The place that once proclaimed that ‘labour is not a commodity’, now houses the regime that facilitates global production around commodified labour.\(^\text{69}\) The spirit of social justice has since been left wandering in some despair.

### Structural transformation

In contrast to basic needs and minimal protection, the spirit of social justice animates different, relational and material conceptions of state sovereignty and individual freedom. For a short period in the 1940s, this spirit could place its hope in the World Trade Charter and the ITO, which reflected a distinct concern for employment and economic development.\(^\text{70}\) But against expectations, the Charter ended in the dustbins of history and the ITO was never established.

Even so, the spirit lingered on and came to the fore during the 1960s in the push towards a New International Economic Order (NIEO).\(^\text{71}\) Former colonies found themselves entangled in an international legal order that

---

66 Charter of the United Nations (24 October 1945) 1 UNTS XVI Preamble.

67 Declaration Concerning the Aims and Purposes of the International Labour Organisation (10 May 1944) <www.ilo.org> accessed 3 May 2020. On the economic dimensions, see especially art IV.

68 On the focus on ‘basic needs’, see Dehm (2018) 878; on the limitations of the ILO, see Moyn (2018) 96.


70 This was not the least due to the influence of developing countries. For a glimpse into the debates, see in particular the contributions by the Indian delegate PS Lokanathan at the meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the International Conference on Trade and Employment, 14 November 1946, Summary Record of the Meetings, E/PC/T/C.I/PV/2, 17-18, 51-53. Cf. A Lang, *World Trade Law After Neoliberalism: Reimagining the Global Economic Order* (OUP 2011).

recognized their formal independence but entrenched their material dependence.\footnote{Cf. M Bedjaoui, \emph{Towards a New International Economic Order} (UNESCO 1979) 41.} In Mohammed Bedjaoui exemplary words:

\begin{quote}
international law has helped to make independence a completely superficial phenomenon, beneath the surface of which the old forms of domination survive and the economic empires of the multinational corporations, and the powers that protect them, prosper. \footnote{ibid 81.}
\end{quote}


It is true that many governments in the Global South had a poor record in improving the lot of their people—a record in which the North was at least occasionally complicit.\footnote{On this reason, see T Pogge, ‘Recognized and Violated by International Law: The Human Right of the Global Poor’ (2005) 18 Leiden Journal of International Law 717, 735. One might also ponder the killing capable African leadership: V Kumar, ‘The In/Security of Assassinations in International Law: Contingency, Emancipation, Decolonial History and the Case of Thomas Sankara’ (manuscript on file with the author).} One consequence was that the Global North could therefore conveniently reject demands for structural change and international redistribution.\footnote{See B Rajagopal, \emph{International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance} (CUP 2003); Pahuja (2011).} Rather than acknowledging complicity, these countries could
put good governance first, locating the problem in the governance capacities of the dispossessed themselves. This brings me back, once more, to human rights and basic needs.

A competing vision of human rights has focused not on poverty but on unjustified privilege. In this vision, rights are understood as relational rather than self-reliant and emphasis is placed not on safeguarding minimum standards, but on human rights as allies in political transformation. Recent research into the history of human rights has highlighted this structural conception, and how it was virtually lost in the 1970s. The next section seeks to recall it, via the figure of Gunnar Myrdal.

Myrdal’s gloom

The Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal was one of those who struggled to keep the spirit of social justice alive. Like Hayek, Myrdal first studied law and then turned to economics. In 1974, the two of them grudgingly shared the Nobel Prize for Economics. Their views could hardly have been more different.

Both Nobel laureates argued against their background experience of the welfare state and its development in the decades following the Second World War. For Hayek, excesses in economic planning stood in the way of efficiency gains through increased liberalization. For Myrdal, in contrast, the welfare state was a role model for global economic governance.

Myrdal titled his Nobel Prize lecture ‘The Equality Issue in World Development’, arguing that the most egregious forms of inequality had been shielded from international scrutiny for as long as large parts of the world were colonized. In his view, decolonization had broken through the ‘isolating wall of inattention [and] ignorance’. In retrospect, of course, that was an overly optimistic view which underestimated the reluctance of those in the Global North to give up ‘the peace and quiet that injustice can and does offer’. The global division of labour seems to hide misery in the peripheries

82 J Shklar, Faces of Injustice (Yale UP 1990) 45.
just enough to ensure that ignorance and hypocrisy can continue to prevail in the centres.  

Myrdal’s main point of criticism was directed at the aid policies of developed countries, which he found not only insufficient and opportunistic but entirely ill-conceived. His arguments remain largely apposite today. His view of justice in economic relations, both locally and globally, was systematically relational. He was concerned with gains from privilege and domination, not with redistributing profits of some fictitious, fair competition.  

Myrdal further argued that that an uncritical emphasis on growth had painfully limited the horizon of economic policy-making. He confronted his audience in Stockholm with the ‘blunt truth,’ as he put it, ‘that without rather radical changes in the consumption patterns in the rich countries, any pious talk about a new world economic order is humbug.’  

Avant la lettre, he tied his argument on equality in world development to issues of sustainability. To Hayek’s outspoken dismay, Myrdal’s lecture fell on fertile ground and, among other things, created ripples in the Club of Rome, which had just published its report on ‘Limits to Growth.’  

Myrdal’s acceptance speech runs in opposition to Hayek from beginning to end: inequality is to be solved by political means and by changes in the institutional structures of governance; neither by aid, nor by minimal protection. Myrdal’s understanding of freedom is not the negative one of individual liberty, but a social one. He embraces the idea of social freedom that lets every human see that their freedom is not constrained by, but conditioned on, the freedom of others.  

In this section I have shown ideas and practices in respect of international law’s relation with inequality, that contrast with those of the previous section. The mourning for the past has followed the recognition that something is

84 Myrdal (1975) 14.
85 Myrdal (1975) 20.
86 For this close connection, see N Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate (Penguin 2014).
87 See Caldwell (2016). Many of the concerns about what would today be called sustainability then focused on population growth, not always free of racial undertones, see S Ranganathan, ‘Global Commons’ (2016) 27 European Journal of International Law 693.
88 K Marx, ‘Zur Judenfrage’ in Marx Engels Werke, vol 1, (Karl Dietz Verlag 2006) 347, 365 critiques the human right of private property because it leads to a society that lets ‘jeden Menschen im anderen Menschen nicht die Verwirklichung, sondern vielmehr die Schranke seiner Freiheit finden.’ On the notion of social freedom, see A Honneth, Das Recht der Freiheit: Grundrisse einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit (Suhrkamp 2011).
rotten in the present. But what happened? And what does it possibly take to make the ghost go away?

**RECOVERY: WORKING WITH THE SPECTRE**

**The logic of the ghost**

The presence of a spectre marks that something is foul and prompts questions about the past. It does so in a particular logic. The spectre of inequality starts out by pointing towards gaps between normative aspirations and a recalcitrant reality. Economic growth should lift all boats, domestic institutions should react to distributive consequences where necessary, labour law and human rights should help out, etc. That is how it should be, and yet it is not. An intuitive response might be to try harder to close that gap between aspiration and reality.

That, it turns out, is not the best strategy and is doomed to fail, as it has failed in the past. The spectre knows that all too well. An example my best explain why that is so. A lot of attention has recently centred on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—a lot of public policy and research claiming relevance connects to these goals. They followed up on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015 and, among other things, now claim in goal 10 to ‘reduce inequality within and among countries’.89 The path is clear, the direction set, we just need to get our act together and get there.

The logic of the ghost is different. The spectre knows that this path, which seems to only have a future but no past, will not arrive at the goal. It won’t work, not this way. The spectre knows because it has its eyes fixed on the mournful spectacles around the world. As Derrida exclaims after a quick dip into etymology, the spectre, it looks!90 And it sees that the problem does not so much, not even primarily, lie in the yawning gap between normative aspirations—the goals—and a recalcitrant reality—persistent inequality. The spectre inspects what has been going on all along and sees contradictions, between competing conceptions of international law, human rights, social policy and economic thinking, symbolized by the Nobel Prize split into two. It ultimately points to the most classic of all contradictions: that between autonomy and dependence, between formal rights and material conditions, between the


negative freedom of individual liberty and social freedom of flourishing in interaction.\textsuperscript{91}

It then is possible to see those contradictions underneath repetitive practices. Current repetitions include attributing responsibility for growth to international law and its institutions while abdicating responsibility for distributive impacts. Repetitions extend to the emphasis placed on increasing voice and representation, which have not led to shifts in power or policy.\textsuperscript{92} The SDGs notably remain entirely committed the current legal structures of the global economy, those same structures that have contributed to inequality in the first place.\textsuperscript{93} Sub-goal 10.b. encourages in the same breath official development assistance and foreign direct investment. It glosses over entirely the categorical differences between aid, on the one hand, and demands for justice, on the other.

Such repetitions are marked by a lack of learning from past wrongs. Getting out of them, the logic of the ghost suggests, requires working with contradictions (B.) and returning to the past (C.). It seeks change, not repetition. How so?

**Emancipatory politics**

Contradictions are carriers of hope.\textsuperscript{94} They can destabilize, open up what seems resistant to change, and work as a transformative force.\textsuperscript{95} In order to work that way, they must be given light and exposure and not be closed down prematurely. Some responses to inequality notably do follow the logic of the ghost, but only halfway. They carve out underlying contradictions and then resolve them too quickly. Let me highlight three of those responses. First are arguments following up on critiques according to which rights do more harm than good. Rights, those arguments go, abstract from concrete conditions of inequality in a way that not only leaves those conditions entirely intact, but

\textsuperscript{91} GFW Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (CUP 1991); Marx (2006).

\textsuperscript{92} The first set of concrete policies that sub-goal 10.4 mentions are notably those of individual countries, ‘especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality’.

\textsuperscript{93} See sub-goal 10.a.

\textsuperscript{94} ‘Widersprüche sind die Hoffnungen.’ That is how Berthold Brecht opened the lawsuit over turning his *Beggar’s Opera* into a movie. A 2018 movie centres on how Brecht’s original movie was never made, now enacting parts of the original script.

\textsuperscript{95} On such a dialectic of social developments, notably for better or worse, see Adorno (1990). On the reason to hope—between certainty and wishful thinking—that change would be emancipatory, leading to greater freedom rather than domination, see TW Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (EFN Jephcott tr, Verso 1974) 97-98.
even entrenches and justifies them.96 Doing away with rights, however, stands in contrast with many concrete struggles for justice at both individual and collective levels.97 For Bedjaoui, ‘international law has long concealed flagrant economic inequalities between States under the cover of sovereign equality’.98 But at no point would he want to give up that hard-fought sovereignty, which he, like others, valued as an asset in the further struggle towards real emancipation.99 Doing away with individual rights or collective sovereignty resolves contradictions without gain. That this contradiction can indeed be productive is supported by the next two examples.

A second way of dealing with contradictions does not take aim at rights per se but at particular conceptions of rights. It takes aim at false universals, questioning the baseline for what is universal, or ‘normal’, and what is not. That prong of critique has been particularly strong in feminist and TWAIL scholarship. It has shown, among other things, how rights have contributed to maintaining a division of the private and public spheres that is aligned with male privilege.100 More generally, it has critiqued ill-guided abstraction and called for situated, concrete analyses, given that the abstract point of view has so often turned out to be that of the presumably rational and white man.101 In international law, too, all are formally sovereign and equal, and substantially different. It is then fairly easy to see how the emphasis on non-discrimination in international economic law makes the policy preferences of developed countries the norm while it delegitimizes policies that developing countries might find useful.102 It also becomes clear that the emphasis on

---


97 S Žižek, First as Tragedy, Then as Farce (Verso 2009) 49. See also H Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Beacon Press 1969); Shklar (1990). For an argument on the relative absence of rights in social movement, however, see B Rajagopal, International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance (CUP 2003) 245-49.

98 Bedjaoui (1979).

99 ibid 90, 95, 244. For related discussions of law’s transformative potential, see R Knox, ‘Marxism, International Law, and Political Strategy’ (2009) 22 Leiden Journal of International Law 413, 429-32, and with skepticism about sovereignty’s emancipatory potential because it remains judged against Western standards, see R Buchanan and S Pahuja, ‘Law, Nation and (Imagined) International Communities’ (2004) 8 Law Text Culture 137.


non-discrimination has not touched measures such as the protection of intel-
lectual property, which, like all property, is discriminatory. The principle of
non-discrimination turns out to be a false universal. But there is a productive,
dynamic tension here between claims to universality and their particular
expressions—a tension that may be one of the main drivers towards greater
freedom.\textsuperscript{103} If that is so, then a categorical rejection of universals, apart from
such a rejection’s philosophical difficulties, may also be questionable
strategically.

A third variant of critique focuses on the relationship between those parts
of the law that shape economic conditions and those that are concerned with
equal dignity as well as specific identity. In other words, it focuses on the rela-
tionship between the law of development and the law of recognition in the
way that Emanuelle Toume-Jouannet has spelled out in her work. She ultim-
ately comes close to dismissing the law of recognition as symbolic and as dis-
tracting from the underlying economic reasons for injustice.\textsuperscript{104} But even if
recognition may seem cheap and sometimes inconsequential, redistribution
does not happen without it.\textsuperscript{105} Recognition is, once more, a valuable asset in
struggles to break through durable inequality that also persists through beliefs
in inferiority and superiority.\textsuperscript{106} The tension between both—the law of devel-
opment and the law of recognition—is again productive. It is also true that
different sets of rights stand in a symbiotic relationship. It is not possible to
fully enjoy political rights on an empty stomach; and a lack of political rights
will probably mean an empty stomach for longer.

The spectre cautions not to resolve tensions quickly—be it by prioritizing
the law of development over the law of recognition, or by harmonizing differ-
ent sets of rights into one coherent whole. It bears repeating that the reason
for keeping contradictions open, to savour and work with them, rests upon
the idea that they may sustain hope in the changeability of global economic
conditions and their legal structuring.\textsuperscript{107} It is impossible to capture the nature

\textsuperscript{103} A Honneth, \textit{Der Kampf um Anerkennung: Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte}
(Suhrkamp 1994). On freedom as the point of emancipation, see also R Forst, \textit{Normativität und
Macht} (Suhrkamp 2015) 15, 37-81; and already J Habermas, ‘Knowledge and Interest’ (1966) 9
scholarship is emancipatory, it frees the subject from dependence on hypostatized forces.’

\textsuperscript{104} E Toume-Jouannet, \textit{What is a Fair International Society? International Law Between Development
and Recognition} (Hart 2013) 204.

\textsuperscript{105} G Therborn, \textit{Killing Fields of Inequality} (Polity 2013), presenting recognition as a cheap panacea.
See, more generally, A Honneth and N Fraser, \textit{Redistribution or Recognition?} (Verso 2003).

\textsuperscript{106} Seminally, F Fanon, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} (C Farrington tr, Grove 1963); generally C Tilly,
\textit{Durable Inequality} (University of California Press 1998).

\textsuperscript{107} Compare Adorno (1974) 97-98 (on the conception of hope and its basis).
of the spectre in a single take: it is both ideal and material, both imagined and real, both present and not present. The spectre cannot be reduced to either one or the other; instead, it asks that productive contradictions be put to work towards political emancipation—that is, towards greater freedom in a world that is our own. Do ‘we’ live in a world that is ours?

Futures past

I mentioned at the outset that levels of inequality have evoked a sense of injustice, mixed with feelings of alienation from the world—a feeling of impotence in the face of seemingly inhuman forces. The spectre may ultimately ask that current policies break with their current path that seems only to lead towards greater levels of inequality in the future. That is the reason why the spectre appears. It intervenes and prompts us to stop. Hamlet: ‘Speak; I’ll go no further.’ The spectre asks that we work for change by doing history. Why?

Here, a critique comes in that focuses on law’s role in rendering the present state of affairs more natural, necessary and even just. I will develop this last component of my argument in light of Rousseau’s critique of the rule of law, which he offered in his ‘Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind’. Three points stand out for me in that

108 Derrida (1994) 63, who notes that the spectre exceeds the binary, which differs from my more dialectical interpretation of the spectre. In fact, I bring it close to ideas of immanent critique that start from establishing contradictions. See R Jaeggi, Kritik der Lebensformen (Suhrkamp 2013).

109 The assumption that ‘we’ inhabit the same single world in a sociologically meaningful way is in fact rather shaky. Moreover, the degree to which particular individuals and groups believe to determine their own circumstances and fate notably varies widely. It is, by and large, particularly high among white, male elites, and low among those who are on the receiving and of discrimination and economic exploitation. See respectively for the emphasis on gender and social strata H Charlesworth, ‘International Law: A Discipline of Crisis’ (2002) 65 Modern Law Review 377; Marks (2009) 14, noting that ‘to those at the less comfortable end of social relations … the pattern of privilege and deprivation will be quite plain’. See also ASR Manstead, ‘The Psychology of Social Class: How Socioeconomic Status Impacts Thought, Feelings, and Behaviour’ (2018) 57 British Journal of Social Psychology 267.

110 See Jaeggi (2016).


114 J Rousseau, A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind (R and J Dodsley 1755).
classic treatise. First, Rousseau offers a strong argument against the negative freedom of individual liberty. He argues that in any society we need each other to be free. In his elegant phraseology: ‘Of what service can beauty be, where there is no love?’ Appreciating the social conditions of freedom offers a pathway into the structures of the global economy and towards empathy within it. It may work against those theories, ideas and legal orderings that sustain the abdication of responsibility that I described above.

Second, Rousseau famously wrote of ‘the first man, who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, “This is mine,” and found people simple enough to believe him.’ Rousseau continued:

How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that man have saved the human species, who should have cried to his fellows: Be sure not to listen to this imposter; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and the earth itself to nobody!

That element of belief is most interesting, just as well as the ambivalent role that law plays in naturalizing the current state of affairs. In Coding Capital, Katharina Pistor draws out the ways in which law creates wealth and buffers the critique of inequality. The practices that have led to the state of affairs are, after all, tolerated by the law, even enabled by it. ‘But it’s legal!’ is capitalism’s strongest defence, Pistor notes. On another occasions, I have started to further tease out the social effect that the law—and the way we teach and do law—has in that regard. There is indeed a wide practice of rationalizing legal analysis that grants the present state of affairs a naturalizing gloss. However, thinking counterfactually—thinking about what could have happened—can make the law and the present look less natural, less likely and less just. A lot remains to be done in studying how law shapes social beliefs and in

115 ibid 17.
117 Rousseau (1755) 18.
118 ibid.
119 Pistor (2019).
120 ibid 6, 161.
teasing out the repercussions that this has also for the way in which law is taught and practiced.\textsuperscript{123}

The third and final lesson that stands out for me is that Rousseau wants to go back, rather than forward. He wants to proceed by ‘discovering and following the lost and forgotten tracks.’\textsuperscript{124} The lovable and hopeless romantic that he is, Rousseau is nostalgic for what there supposedly was before the rule of law. The spectre of inequality also carries with it a longing to return to the past, just for a moment, not to dwell there. The spectre is everything but nostalgic. It wants to return to the past and suggests working with contradictions in order to get out of the ever-moving present that seems to leave no choice.\textsuperscript{125} Revisiting the NIEO or structural conceptions of labour and human rights law is neither an expression of nostalgia nor naïveté. The point is rather to give an open future back to the past, the past of the present and of the future.\textsuperscript{126} The future will have been open.\textsuperscript{127} As Marx already knew, emancipation requires ‘not a great stroke of thought between past and future, but a consumption of ideas of the past. It will finally be shown that humanity begins no new task, but consciously consummates its old task.’\textsuperscript{128} The task, as I also see it for international law, is to follow the spirit of social justice into the past towards a different future.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{123} Notwithstanding the fact that a lot has been done, cf. L Eslava, ‘The Teaching of (Another) International Law: Critical Realism and the Question of Agency and Structure’ (2020) 54 The Law Teacher 1, with further references.
\bibitem{124} Rousseau (1755) 33.
\bibitem{125} R Koselleck, ‘Von Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte’ in: 
\textit{Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte} (Suhrkamp 2010) 9, 18.
\bibitem{126} R Koselleck, 	extit{Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time} (Columbia UP 2004).
\bibitem{127} Cf. Žižek (2009).
\bibitem{128} K Marx, 	extit{The Letters of Karl Marx} (Prentice Hall 1979) 32. In German in K Marx and F Engels, 	extit{Werke}, vol. 1 (Karl Dietz Verlag 1976) 337, 346: ‘Es wird sich zeigen, daß es sich nicht um einen großen Gedankenstrich zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft handelt, sondern um die Vollziehung der Gedanken der Vergangenheit. Es wird sich endlich zeigen, daß die Menschheit keine neue Arbeit beginnt, sondern mit Bewußtsein ihre alte Arbeit zustande bringt.’
\end{thebibliography}