

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Roundtable Discussion

From the Global to the Planetary: A Conversation with Glenda Sluga, Stephen Macekura, and Jonathan Blake.

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Editors: Diane Labrosse and Damien Mahiet | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

### Discussants

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Jonathan Blake, Berggruen Institute  
Stephen Macekura, Indiana University  
Glenda Sluga, Toynbee/EUI

#### **Glenda Sluga:**

I've gathered us to discuss the importance of the concept of 'planetary' as a framing for environmental and political questions in the second half of the twentieth century (in the main).<sup>1</sup> We have all worked in some way on this idea because it's impossible not to if you study the shifting ways in which we imagine our world, and our place in it through the last century (at least). We will get round to discussing a chronology for this concept and its impact. In my own work it seems to really come to the fore as a concept in the discourse of international institutions and in the tackling of environmental questions, although not only those. Indeed, these are some of the issues we should take up in our historical discussion today.

Stephen, you are a scholar of US and global history, with a particular focus on US foreign relations, international political economy, development, and global environmental history—in that same context you have written about the planetary in the past, particularly in *The Mismeasure of Progress: Economic Growth and its Critics* (Chicago, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Jonathan, you are a political scientist who directs the Planetary program at the Berggruen Institute in Los Angeles, and you have just dried the ink on a new book (co-authored with Nils Gilman, forthcoming with Stanford University Press) on planetary governance.<sup>3</sup>

I am obviously engaging you both in the context of my role as president of the Toynbee Prize Foundation, but I'm also currently directing a new European Research Council (ERC)-funded research program on Twentieth Century International Economic Thinking (or ECOINT), which inevitably led me to the planetary, believe it or not! I discovered the 'planetary' via the sources. In the process of studying the history of global environmental governance I encountered the term in the exchanges of United Nations (UN) bureaucrats,

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<sup>1</sup> The editors would like to thank the Toynbee Prize Foundation for kindly sharing this conversation, which will be published as part of the Toynbee series, "Where is Global History."

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Macekura, *The Mismeasure of Progress: Economic Growth and its Critics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman, *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

women economists, and even self-declared ‘businessmen’ who attached themselves to the goals of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment. Indeed, in a recent article I co-authored with Ben Huf and Sabine Selchow on “Business and the Planetary History of International Environmental Governance in the 1970s,” we argue that, surprisingly, the early 1970s also marked a trajectory from a preference for the planetary to the global.<sup>4</sup>

I am also interested in how in the course of this history the planetary got taken up in UN discussions—whether with the imprimatur of the UN Secretary-General U Thant in the late 1960s; or the administrative head of the United Nations’ Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Philippe de Seynes, in 1971, as he talked about the difference between the planetary and “globalism”; or Aurelio Peccei, the Italian entrepreneur-founder of the Club of Rome and opening speaker at the 1972 UN Human Environment conference held in Stockholm. Finally, I also arrived at the planetary via the very recent Rockefeller/*Lancet* Journal’s engagement of the concept “planetary health.”<sup>5</sup>

The longer history of the planetary, it seems to me, provides an important framing for how we think about the world now. I often think historians have become a bit complacent in thinking about the significance of visual images of the earth in this period and their evocation of the globe, when it seems to me that it’s the metaphor of the planet that actually mattered. Indeed, the chronology of the planetary in this period, its significance, its corollaries, and its disappearance, interest me. What about each of you: how and when did you come across the planetary as an idea, and where has your interest in the planetary as a framing, in the past and present, taken your research and writing?

#### **Jonathan Blake:**

I came to ‘the planetary’ through my concerns with the present rather than historical study or even my academic training. I was introduced to the concept via Earth system science and debates about the Anthropocene as well as philosophical reflections on those scientific findings. I found the concept really helpful for understanding many of the pressing problems I saw in the world, climate change foremost among them. I never felt that the concept of ‘international,’ especially, but also ‘global’ adequately captured the dynamics of climate change and climate politics. So it really clicked for me when I read Dipesh Chakrabarty pointing out that the “globe” of globalization is not the same globe as the “globe” of global warming.<sup>6</sup> Distinguishing between the globe and the planet illuminated the nature of the problem and helped explain, to my mind, why political efforts kept failing: the problem is planetary but political institutions are national and global. Understanding the mismatch in this way clarified a lot about what I saw happening today, which brought me to write the book that Glenda mentioned on how we might better govern the planet. But though my work began in the present, it turned to trace these ideas through history, as we’ll discuss.

#### **Stephen Macekura:**

Jonathan, your new book project with Nils sounds fascinating. I can’t wait to read it! I first came across “the planetary” as an idea while researching American and European environmental thinkers’ pursuit of global individuals in the years during and after World War II. In particular, I was studying individuals—such as the American environmentalist Russell Train, the British scientist and writer Julian Huxley, the German

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Huf, Glenda Sluga, and Sabine Selchow, “Business and the Planetary History of International Environmental Governance in the 1970s,” *Contemporary European History* 31:4 (2022): 553–569.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Horton et al., “From Public to Planetary Health: A Manifesto,” *The Lancet* 383:9920 (March 8, 2014): 847, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)60409-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)60409-8) and <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/from-public-to-planetary-health-a-manifesto/>; Sarah Whitmee et al., “Safeguarding Human Health in the Anthropocene Epoch: Report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on Planetary Health,” *The Lancet* 386:10007 (November 14, 2015): 1973–2028. *The Lancet* published the first issue of *The Lancet Planetary Health* journal in April 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

filmmaker Bernhard Grzimek—who worried about what decolonization augured for the many national parks and game reserves established under colonial rule. These thinkers often described wild flora and fauna as part of a “world” heritage or a gift to a universal humanity. Yet the concept of the planetary was already circulating among environmental thinkers at this time. For example, Fairfield Osborn, an American conservationist, published an alarmist book in 1948 titled *Our Plundered Planet*.<sup>7</sup> The introduction to that book juxtaposes the violence of World War II against the violence carried about by humankind against the earth and its resources. The book treats the planet as the object of conservation.

I started to notice a much wider use of the term ‘planetary’ among environmental experts (and some international development experts who had a keen interest in environmental protection) during the 1960s. Kenneth Boulding, who up until the mid-1960s had established himself as a successful if conventional macroeconomist, began to use “planetary” language as he tried to incorporate insights from ecology into economics: his 1966 essay on “spaceship earth,” a term which itself became quite popular in environmental circles during the time, focuses the earth and planetary-scale systems as the source of his concern.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 1960s, the ‘planetary’ was everywhere in these intellectual and professional circles. Barbara Ward used the “planetary” concept to generate a sense of camaraderie and solidarity across political divisions: the book, published to act as a kind of intellectual guide for the 1972 Stockholm conference, and co-authored by Ward and French scientist René Dubos, is titled *Only One Earth*.<sup>9</sup> By that time, to speak of ‘the planet’ as an object of political concern and metaphor for describing human interconnection had become prominent in environmental discourse.

#### **Jonathan Blake:**

Stephen’s right that the years after World War Two were a crucial moment in the history of the concept of ‘the planetary.’ I’d expand his mention of Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet* to include another important work of early environmentalism, William Vogt’s *Road to Survival* (also 1948), which spoke of humanity as forming “an earth-company.”<sup>10</sup> But we can also look to postwar political thought, such as those who responded to the Second World War and the atomic bomb with calls for world government. The *Preliminary Draft of a World Constitution* (yet again 1948) by Robert Hutchins and colleagues begins its preamble by invoking “the people of earth” towards the creation of “the Federal Republic of the World.”<sup>11</sup> The relevant subject here is the world. Of course, this constitution was born dead, and what was actually formed in those years, the UN, placed its interests elsewhere. The UN Charter opens with “We the peoples of the United Nations” (note ‘the peoples’ versus the World Constitution’s ‘the people’) and is framed in terms of ‘nations’ and ‘international,’ not the world, planet, or Earth.

So the post-World War II moment was formative, but now I get to do something fun as the only non-historian here and pull the ultimate historian’s move: we can go back even earlier! After the First World War, a planetary discourse began. In particular, I’m struck by the planetary vision that the Russian polymath Vladimir Vernadsky and the French paleontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin arrived at in the 1920s. Vernadsky, writing just before his death in 1945, in fact credits the Great War itself with having

<sup>7</sup> Fairfield Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948).

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth,” in H. Jarrett, ed., *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966): 3–14.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Ward and René Dubos, *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1972).

<sup>10</sup> William Vogt, *Road to Survival* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Hutchins et al., *Preliminary Draft of a World Constitution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948).

“radically changed my geological conception of the world.”<sup>12</sup> The destructive power of total war and the scientific work he did for the Russian war effort provided him with a new “conception of nature”: “a geochemical and biogeochemical conception embracing both inert and living nature from the same point of view.”<sup>13</sup> (In both the 1920s and 1940s, then, the experience of total war gave rise to planetary thinking.) This insight is critical to understanding the place and role of life on the planet, especially the realization that life—the biosphere—is a geological force, and, moreover, that it is a geological force that increased over time—that it had a history. Within that framework, World War I was part of what made clear to him that humanity was a “mighty and ever-growing geological force.”<sup>14</sup>

So in the 1920s already, Vernadsky was thinking in planetary terms. In 1926, for instance, he observed that “The face of the Earth viewed from celestial space presents a unique appearance, different from all other heavenly bodies.”<sup>15</sup> Decades before satellites and manned missions to space, he correctly predicted the striking and vibrant image of Earth that would be later confirmed in ways important to our conversation, as noted by Glenda, by photos like “Earthrise” and “Blue Marble.”

Teilhard, who is better known in the West today, came to a similar planetary perspective—indeed, the two of men collaborated in Paris while both living there in the 1920s. As a Catholic priest and a mystic, he brought a different set of commitments, but also conceived of life as it related to the various concentric layers and spheres of the Earth. Writing in the 1930s, he understood humanity—in particular our capacity for thought and ability to remake the world in the image of our ideas—as a source of “a change on the earth and a change of planetary magnitude.”<sup>16</sup>

And like Vernadsky, he took an extra-planetary perspective to reflect back on planetary characteristics of Earth: “to a Martian... the first characteristic of our planet would be, not the blue of the seas or the green of the forests, but the phosphorescence of thought.”<sup>17</sup> Yet this wasn’t just a spiritual statement: like Vernadsky, Teilhard was extremely interested in the planetary-scale material, geological, biochemical, etc., effects of human beings (via their brains) on the Earth. They both understood the “noosphere,” the concept they developed to capture their ideas about planetary-scale impact of human thought—what Teilhard called “the thinking layer of earth”—as the next historical stage of the biosphere’s evolution, one that was both of the planet and held the capacity to fundamentally change the planet.<sup>18</sup>

Both men also had direct influence on the post-1945 period. G. Evelyn Hutchinson, the father of modern ecology, was a champion of Vernadsky’s work. Teilhard was promoted by folks like Julian Huxley (already mentioned by Stephen), who wrote a forward to the 1959 English edition of *The Phenomenon of Man*.<sup>19</sup>

### Stephen Macekura:

I appreciate Jonathan’s intervention, and it helps us identify a couple of important aspects of Glenda’s questions. First, I agree with Jonathan that “planetary” discourse and thinking did indeed circulate prior to World War II. In addition to the thinkers Jonathan mentions, we can find elements of planetary discourse among enthusiasts of space travel and exploration during the 1930s and 1940s. The historian Stephen Buono wrote an excellent dissertation on how groups of intellectuals and amateur scientists worked through small

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir I. Vernadsky, “The Biosphere and the Noösphere,” *American Scientist* 33:1 (January 1945): 5.

<sup>13</sup> Vernadsky, “The Biosphere and the Noösphere,” 5.

<sup>14</sup> Vernadsky, “The Biosphere and the Noösphere,” 8.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir I. Vernadsky, *The Biosphere* (New York: Peter A. Nevraumont Book, 1998 [1926]), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959), 183.

<sup>17</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 183.

<sup>18</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 225–226.

<sup>19</sup> “Introduction by Sir Julian Huxley,” in Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 11–28.

associations such as the British Interplanetary Society while writers such as H.G. Wells imagined how interplanetary travel might reshape the nature of life on earth.<sup>20</sup>

What is striking about the outpouring of enthusiastic essays, novels, and radio shows on these themes is how often they led to calls for world government. Many believed that interplanetary travel—and even more basically, thinking about the finitude of the earth against the enormity of the universe—would compel leaders and lay citizens alike to put aside existing political divisions and seek cooperation at a very ambitious supranational level. During World War II and immediately after the war, these calls melded with other demands for varieties of ‘world federalism’ that sought to make new globe-spanning political organizations to govern human life (including the University of Chicago’s World Constitution project mentioned by Jonathan). Such organizations would not necessarily be democratic. H.G. Wells’s early thinking on these themes included calls for a kind of Anglo-American imperial hegemony as the basis for world order.<sup>21</sup> But the key idea was that the recognition of international life as fundamentally planetary meant that existing organizations and nationalist longings were insufficient and outmoded for the dawning of a new planetary age.

This leads me to one suggestion: that the rise of planetary thinking is inextricably bound to arguments on behalf of global governance. Planetary discourse has been used historically as an inspiration and motivation for making claims for new globe-spanning organizations to manage political life above the level of nation-state (as the world federalists suggested), and it could also be used as a justification for robust visions of global governance. As historians such as Mark Mazower, Or Rosenboim, and Samuel Zipp have shown, the widespread movements for world federation or some other form of world government during the late 1940s rested on planetary projects.<sup>22</sup> Figures as diverse as Albert Einstein, the international legal theorist John Herz, and writer E. B. White all endorsed varieties of world government.

These did not come to fruition, obviously, but framing human problems within the scale of the planetary often preceded calls for a more robust architecture of global governance within environmental circles during the 1970s. And here it is important to note that it is not just stereotypical environmental activists or ecologically-minded intellectuals making these arguments. In a 1970 article for *Foreign Affairs*, the American Cold War grand strategist George Kennan of all people recommended the creation of a vast new global organization that could serve as a “watchdog” for global environmental issues, complete with “international patrol vessels charged with powers of enforcement” to protect the global commons.<sup>23</sup> All of this followed from Kennan’s realization that “the entire ecology of the planet is not arranged in national compartments,” and thus national governments would be up to the task.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Barbara Ward worked with a group of environmental thinkers and reform-minded development practitioners to promote a new approach to global governance in the aftermath of the Stockholm Conference. The result, the 1974 Cocoyoc Declaration (named for the town of Cocoyoc, Mexico, where the group held a major conference), acknowledged that as a result of development, “the planet’s physical

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Bueno, *The Province of All Mankind: Outer Space and the Promise of Peace* (PhD diss. Indiana University, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> See Duncan Bell, “Founding the World State: H. G. Wells on Empire and the English-Speaking Peoples,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018): 867–879.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); Or Rosenboim, “State, Power, and Global Order,” *International Relations* 33:2 (2019): 229–245; Samuel Zipp, *The Idealist: Wendell Willkie’s Wartime Quest to Build One World* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> George F. Kennan, “To Prevent a World Wasteland,” *Foreign Affairs* 48:3 (April 1970), 405–406.

<sup>24</sup> Kennan, “To Prevent a World Wasteland,” 401–402.

integrity” may be “at risk.”<sup>25</sup> The declaration included Ward’s early working definition of sustainable development, a “new system more capable of meeting the ‘inner limits’ of basic human needs for all the world’s people and of doing so without violating the ‘outer limits’ of the planet’s resources and environment.”<sup>26</sup> But it also called for granting greater powers to the UN system, including a potential to set up a system of international taxation on any country or private firm that made profitable use of commons space (the proceeds of which would recycle to untethered foreign aid for development and environmentally-sensitive reforms across the Global South). In both Kennan and Ward’s thinking, planetary thinking meant robust global governance.

One reason that I do not think the planetary framework moves too far beyond environmental circles is that it coincides with the Global South’s attempts to reassert the primacy and inviolability of national sovereignty as the bedrock of international life. Released about six months before the Cocoyoc declaration, the New International Economic Order (NIEO) was an attempt to establish a much more meaningful and legally powerful national sovereignty as the organizing principle of international life.<sup>27</sup> While the NIEO declaration contains mentions of a “world” or “international community,” there is no mention of planetary or earthly cosmopolitanism. Rather, the document repeats in various ways the desire of the Group of 77 (G-77) developing countries to assert sovereign control over their national territories and all the resources that lay within those boundaries. The Cocoyoc Declaration included an admirable attempt to reconcile these divergent viewpoints. Ward and her colleagues end the declaration with a section that endorses the NIEO and the concomitant Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States (CERDS), but suggest that planetary thinking and robust new global organizations could be fruitfully used to serve the nationalist ends the G-77 demanded.

Obviously, here, too, the political will to develop such a system was lacking, as was any sustained discussion of how specific cases of global governance and national sovereignty would actually work out in practice. But I think one reason the planetary discourse did not gain a much wider public purchase—at least in the halls of power—is that it marked an obvious and often unpopular affront to national decision-making and conventional understandings of the boundaries of sovereignty.

### **Jonathan Blake:**

I agree with Stephen about the relationship between planetary thinking and calls for stronger global governance. I know that I for one fit that mold: in our forthcoming book, Nils and I argue for new forms of what we call planetary governance (in part to distinguish it from existing modalities of global governance) precisely on the basis of new planetary thinking. We argue that emerging planetary sapience—our knowledge of the Earth system in all of its complexities, on the basis of advances in sensing, measurement, computation, theory, and the like—in fact necessitates new forms of governance that take this ontological reality into account. Just as nation-states emerged from the idea of the nation and global governance emerged from the idea of the global, planetary governance should emerge from the idea of the planetary.

Indeed, I’d argue that the failure of the planetary as a political project in the 1970s is linked to the fact that all the thinkers Stephen mentioned wanted to address planetary problems through the United Nations. But the UN, as I mentioned earlier, is founded on the principle of the nation and the international, not the planetary.

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<sup>25</sup> “The Cocoyoc Declaration, adopted by the participants in the UNEP/UNCTAD symposium on ‘Patterns of Resource Use, Environment and Development Strategies,’ Cocoyoc, Mexico, October 8–12, 1974,” *International Organization* 29:3 (Summer 1975), 893.

<sup>26</sup> “The Cocoyoc Declaration,” 896.

<sup>27</sup> U.N. General Assembly (6<sup>th</sup> special session), “Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, A/RES/3201(S-VI), adopted at the 2229th plenary meeting (May 1, 1974), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/218450?ln=en>.

It acts in the name and interests of its many member states, especially the powerful ones with Security Council vetoes. Moreover, the problems that it was designed to address, primarily preventing great power war, were and are inter-national. And to its credit, the UN has presided over many decades without a major power war (whether it was the cause of this is a different question). However, the problems that we, and the historical actors under discussion, are identifying as planetary, like “the planet’s physical integrity,” as the Cocoyoc Declaration put it, are far less amenable to institutions with a multilateral or international mandate and structure.

Another point that I want to make explicit is that one of the reasons I find the planetary to be such an interesting and useful category is that in our short discussion so far we have focused mainly on politics and political ideas, but we have also brought up several scientific disciplines, the environment, economics, space, and more—and there is still more to come, I’m sure. Planetary thinking requires interdisciplinary work. In particular, the planetary as a category puts what Richard Powers called the “humbling sciences” front and center, forcing a rethinking of so many other established ways of thinking.<sup>28</sup> The realizations and discoveries that have come from the macro-level, represented by Earth science, to the very micro-level, like the existence and importance of the bacteria in our microbiomes, are really jolting. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work on the relationships of Earth history and human history has been really critical to my thinking, and I’m especially struck by his deep engagement with Earth system science.<sup>29</sup>

**Glenda Sluga:**

Thanks so much—there is so much here to digest and discuss. Could we talk a bit more about how historians and political scientists approach the planetary and the international (amongst other things)? Stephen, what is your interest in the relation between the planetary and the international? I think political scientists do think of the international as fundamentally about nations (and sure all the international institutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were built on the edifice of national sovereignty); my own sense though of the 1960s and 70s, and what is interesting about them, is precisely the extent to which the planetary provoked or inspired reflection on (or by) the problem of nationalism—just how national sovereignty might be transcended. I was also brought to think of some earlier work by Jo-Anne Pemberton, an IR scholar, on global metaphors in which she canvassed the planetary too and its relation to the global.<sup>30</sup> I am as interested in how the planetary is overtaken by the global/globalism/globalization in the 1970s and 1980s, and what that shift in metaphors reveals about the expansion or contraction of political and other ambitions that the metaphors are meant to contain or foster.

**Stephen Macekura:**

I think historians and political scientists approach the issue in similar way.

**Jonathan Blake:**

I agree, though I would note that the concept is even less on the radar of political scientists than it is for historians. There is some work utilizing the concept and framing in normative political theory, but in empirical political science, which dominates the mainstream of the discipline, especially in the US, the planetary is outside of the discussion. I suspect this will change over time, as the political actors who are the key objects of study adopt the concept, but for now, “the planetary” is marginal.

**Stephen Macekura:**

I’m curious about why the concept of the planetary became so popular during the post-World War II years

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<sup>28</sup> “Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Richard Powers,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/28/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-richard-powers.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.

<sup>30</sup> Jo-Anne Pemberton, *Global Metaphors: Modernity and the Quest for One World* (London: Pluto, 2001).

(especially the 1960s and 1970s) and how people used the concept to inspire or justify reforms to international order and global governance during the time. There are a couple points here worth drawing out in a bit more depth.

First, I am interested in exploring the extent to which the framing of environmental problems (air and water pollution, fears of resource exhaustion) as fundamentally transnational and planetary in nature led to the idea that national sovereignty should be transcended. In other words, how and why did thinking in a planetary scale lead some to make normative statements about the downsides of nationalism and national sovereignty as an organizing principle?

Here George Kennan's 1970 essay that I mentioned might be useful to ponder: Kennan argues that redressing environmental degradation requires an organization that "sees things from a perspective which no national body—and no international one whose function is to reconcile conflicting national interests—can provide."<sup>31</sup> That indicates a kind of national determinism; nation-states have interests, and leaders of those states will naturally pursue their interests first and foremost. In turn, that means that there is no hope for nation-states to serve as the basic unit of a political order that can manage global environmental problems.

These kinds of assertions about the fundamental limitations of nationhood and nation-states lead to my second key interest in these questions. Once someone has established that national sovereignty ought to be transcended, then what would a planetary global governance organization look like? Jonathan will surely have plenty of ideas about that, but I am struck by just how many conferences, conversations, international initiatives, and publications this question inspired during the 1970s. Kennan's vision was an elitist and technocratic organization governed only by ten or so industrialized countries (capitalist and communist) that could send representatives from private scientific bodies within their countries to staff a global environmental research and observation agency. Its scope would be planetary in nature, but needless to say, Kennan's organization would not meaningfully represent the interests of most people on the planet.

Many of the environmental and development experts I have written about acknowledge that there is a clear tension here between creating a truly planetary organization capable of redressing threats and creating an organization that reflects values about democracy, participatory decision-making, respecting national sovereignty, and much else. The collapse of Bretton Woods and the oil crisis of 1973 showed that seemingly fundamental parts of international economic life could change dramatically in a very short period of time. For many environmental thinkers during this age, the recognition of the planetary scale of environmental degradation, which was later reinforced by the growing prominence of climate change as a problem—similarly suggested that new organizations needed to be constructed, and they had to be free of the limitations posed by nationalism and national governmental power.

But the alternative architecture of a new order was harder to imagine in a way that would garner widespread international support. It was also a challenge to make planetary organizations that were far less exclusionary than the kind that Kennan had in mind. That issue was especially vexing for environmental thinkers such as Barbara Ward who deeply sympathized with the plight of the Global South and wanted to recognize (and support) the Global South's collective assertions of national sovereignty at the same time they saw national sovereignty writ large as a hindrance to effective environmental governance.

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<sup>31</sup> Kennan, "To Prevent a World Wasteland," 408.



I'm curious about Glenda's suggestion that the global/globalization eclipses the planetary during the 1970s. Why, Glenda and Jonathan, do you think that occurs when it does? And what might be the political consequences of adopting the global as an organizing metaphor for international life?

**Jonathan Blake:**

This is really well put, Stephen. To answer your question about timing, I suspect that there are similar underlying reasons why there were conceptual paradigm shifts in both the 1970s and today: the breakdown of the old orders and their attendant concepts. In the 1970s, Glenda's work on the role of business in mainstreaming "global" rather than "planetary" is really illuminating.<sup>32</sup> And thinking more broadly about the era, massive transitions, like the end of Bretton Woods that Stephen mentioned, were underway that unmoored the old conceptual order. If we think about the preceding decades, a world ruled by several world-spanning European empires transitioned quite rapidly to a world of nation-states. So we go from a world of empires to a world of states: from the imperial to the national. And the key concepts of the post-World War II years are all about that transition: nationalism, anti-imperial, post-colonial, economic development, independence, sovereignty. Though the postwar project is mainly inward-facing and national, there was a lot of South-South cooperation and solidarity, epitomized by the Bandung Conference in 1955. In other words, postcolonial nationalisms often started out with a very international flavor.

But by the 1970s, the post-colonial world of states was failing: civil wars, economic stagnation or worse, dictatorships, etc. In the New Economic International Order (NEIO), we see an attempt to revive the old concepts and double-down on Third World sovereignty and development, but that did not go anywhere. Instead of Third World internationalism, the result was border skirmishes and other violent conflicts and lack of cooperation among post-colonial states in the 1960s and 70s. As this era of post-colonial nationalism and internationalism fell apart, people sought out a new concept. Two emerged: the planetary, with an environmental/ecological bent, and the global, with an economic/capitalist bent. Both were interested in worldwide phenomenon and flows and both saw nation-states as inimical to their worldwide vision. In the end, 'global' won, but they both emerged from a moment when the nation-state was failing at home and internationalism was failing abroad.

Today, we find ourselves in a similar moment of conceptual exhaustion. The global and globalization did not provide the promised economic benefits (at least not in an equitable way) and are thus under assault from the 'populist' right and left. At the same time, it has wreaked havoc on the atmosphere and many other features of the planet. We thus see two paradigms emerging as possibilities. The first is a reassertion of the national that comes in a Trumpist/Brexit flavor, but also in a more left-wing version that looks to national green industrial strategy, like the Biden administration's major legislative achievements (the Inflation Reduction Act, CHIPS and Science Act, and Bipartisan Infrastructure deal). The latter, while not opposed to internationalism (like the former is) is still causing international tensions, as seen between the US and EU. The second paradigm that came out of the collapse of 'the global' is, of course, the planetary. It offers a vision that builds on the cosmopolitanism of globalization without emphasizing cheap consumer goods and maximizing shareholder value.

This conversation has so far focused on earlier manifestations of a planetary consciousness. I wonder how you see the older versions as similar or different from the current version. In so doing, we can try to articulate what's old and what's new in the planetary today.

**Stephen Macekura:**

I appreciate your use of the phrase "conceptual exhaustion." But it is striking to me how at least some of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ben Huf, Glenda Sluga, and Sabine Selchow, "Business and the Planetary History of International Environmental Governance in the 1970s."

current attempts to reimagine world order draw explicitly from past precedents. The Progressive International, for instance, seeks to mobilize and organize progressive political coalitions through and across borders to create a world that, inter alia, “respects planetary boundaries.”<sup>33</sup> And recently they have begun a project of contemplating what a NIEO might entail to help achieve those broader goals of transforming the world. But here, too, there remains some degree of tension between a respect for national sovereignty (if not a thorough reassertion of its primacy) and a recognition of shared planetary interests and the possibility of new forms of transnational connection (including the Progressive International itself) to share ideas and strategies. In this sense, it strikes me as similar to earlier forms of workers’ association and scientific internationalism that brought together intellectuals, activists, and regular citizens into transnational engagements during the late nineteenth century. I’d be curious if Glenda wants to push that comparison any further, or if you, Jonathan, see any other similarities. It is also important to note the distinctions in the structural conditions between the mid-1970s and the mid-2020s, too, that might hamper the current push for a new NIEO with a presumed stronger planetary framing (Nils has made a similar point).<sup>34</sup>

**Jonathan Blake:**

Right, and we might also look to a wider range of contemporary political ideas that draw, even if unknowingly, on conceptions of the planetary. We are starting to see scientific findings about our planetary condition trickle into new visions of politics and governance institutions. Some follow the 1970s model and look to the UN (like much of the research that comes out of the Earth Systems Governance group). But others are drawing on these scientific ideas to imagine something new: very different thinkers, like Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright in *Climate Leviathan*, E.O. Wilson’s Half-Earth proposal, or Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*.<sup>35</sup> The key thing that I find really exciting in all of these ideas is how directly and intensely they are learning from the sciences and building a new political vision from them. Whereas past political paradigms tried to overcome Nature or ignore our inescapable Earthliness, planetary thinking forces us to reckon with the fact that we live on a planet. Coming to terms with our planetary nature is one of the big collective tasks of the coming years. (And this is why I find the extra-planetary escapist proposals by certain plutocrats so repulsive.)

**Stephen Macekura:**

I’m also struck by the place that the United Nations has occupied in these aspirations for a new world order. The NIEO and related reform attempts of the “planetary” 1970s, such as the Cocoyoc Declaration, were premised in part that the United Nations needed to be strengthened to bring about a more just order. This emphasis served a couple of purposes. For one, the UN, as an intergovernmental organization, had clearly enshrined national sovereignty as a core feature of international life. So it would not represent the kind of elitist and exclusive technocratic governance that Kennan had championed. But the UN still had the capacity to operate as a coordinating and organizing force for political and social projects that produced global knowledge, especially its specialized agencies. The historian Perrin Selcer has written about early UN projects, such a creating a “map of the world” based on different soil types, which inspired alternative ways of seeing objects of governance (such as ecosystems) that naturally transcended national boundaries.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The Progressive International, “Our Vision,” accessed May 15, 2023, <https://progressive.international/about/en>.

<sup>34</sup> Nils Gilman, “The NIEO as Usable Past,” The Progressive International, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://progressive.international/blueprint/e7bc30e1-d565-47de-a19f-80ad1bce9969-gilman-the-nieo-as-usable-past/en>.

<sup>35</sup> Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2018); E.O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016); Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Hachette, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment: How the United Nations Built Spaceship Earth*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

I raise this to ask a related question about comparing past and present, but with a different valence for you, Jonathan. To what extent can the kind of “planetary governance” you’ve called for come through existing international organizations premised on national sovereignty? Is there a place for the UN in the planetary future, perhaps a more supranationally empowered one? Obviously the political obstacles to planetary organization are vast and deep, but I am curious how much you expect and would like to see in terms of continuity between existing and potentially new institutional forms of cooperation.

**Jonathan Blake:**

That’s a good question. I don’t think that the UN or other existing international organizations can produce planetary governance. They are structurally incapable of it, because they are responsible to their member-states, not the planet. The UN tries to deal with planetary challenges, but largely unsuccessfully, as the history of climate diplomacy and concurrent rising emissions makes evident.

An important book that makes this point (and many others) well is *All Under Heaven* by the Chinese political philosopher Zhao Tingyang.<sup>37</sup> He argues that the UN cannot serve as the foundation for planetary politics or governance because it is irredeemably tainted by national sovereignty and the ideology of internationalism. “The UN is merely a mechanism for international negotiations rather than an effective means for exercising world political power,” he writes.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, he points out that the UN has less political power than any of its member states and therefore that “the UN remains a long way from being an exemplary model for world governance and has no real power to be transcending the international system set by sovereign nation-states.”<sup>39</sup>

For Zhao, a true world politics, or what we’re calling planetary politics, requires a break from the system premised on nationalism and internationalism. “International politics,” as he puts it, “are not carried out for the sake of world interests, but only for national interests on a world scale.”<sup>40</sup> But planetary governance has to be carried out for the sake of planetary interests. As a result, the UN isn’t the right starting point. This of course makes imagining what planetary governance institutions could look like or what the political pathway to their creation is much more difficult tasks, but I believe it’s worth trying.

**Glenda Sluga:**

I am so excited by the different directions this conversation is taking. There is so much here that I think we could explore in a series of investigations—not least whether the discursive rise of globalism or ‘globalization’ marks the demise of ambitions associated with the planetary? Is it an Anglophone phenomenon? Is there a global history of the planetary—if not a planetary history? How different or distinctive is the planetary of the past from the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century planetary discourse, and how deep does it go? Indeed, we need to talk about ‘Planetary, past and future’.

**Further Reading:**

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<sup>37</sup> Zhao Tingyang, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Zhao Tingyang, *All under Heaven*, 199.

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<sup>40</sup> Zhao Tingyang, *All under Heaven*, 186.

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### Participants:

**Jonathan S. Blake** directs the Planetary Program at the Berggruen Institute, an independent, non-profit research center headquartered in Los Angeles, California. He is the author of *Contentious Rituals: Parading the Nation in Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and, with Nils Gilman, *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises* (forthcoming with Stanford University Press).

**Stephen Macekura** is Associate Professor of International Studies at Indiana University-Bloomington. He is the author of *The Mismeasure of Progress: Economic Growth and its Critics* (Chicago University Press, 2020) and *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). He is co-editor, with Erez Manela, of *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

**Glenda Sluga** is Joint Chair in International History and Capitalism, in History and the Schuman Centre at the European University Institute, and ARC Kathleen Fitzpatrick Laureate Fellow and Professor of International History at the University of Sydney. She is most recently the author of *The Invention of International Order* (Princeton University Press, 2021), *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (ed. with P. Clavin, Cambridge University Press, 2018). In 2020, she received a European Research Council Advanced Grant, overseeing a 5-year research program on "Twentieth Century International Economic Thinking and the complex history of globalization." She is also currently president of the Toynbee Prize Foundation.