Legitimate realism? On Tucker's *Global Discord*

Albert Weale

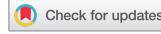Published online: 27 May 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

ARTICLE

Legitimate realism? On Tucker's *Global Discord*

Albert Weale

Department of Political Science, UCL, London, UK

ABSTRACT
Paul Tucker's *Global Discord* offers two principal claims. The first predicts a global order of alliances among nations who share some common values, forming a pattern of concentric circles. The second suggests that domestic and international legitimacy in such an order can be normatively understood in terms of David Hume's theory of conventions and Bernard Williams's theory of legitimacy. How far can this Hume-Williams programme be justified? Hume's theory can be questioned by noting that legitimate governmental systems typically need to transcend local conventions. Williams's theory relies on theorising government in a partial way as involving a public forum. By contrast, a modified contractarian theory, based on mutual advantage among parties with roughly equal power enables us to distinguish whether appeals to culturally specific values are made in good faith, as well as providing the intellectual basis for the virtue of political courage.

The Introduction of Paul Tucker's *Global Discord* tells the story of John Connally, Richard Nixon's Treasury Secretary, who, faced with European and Japanese reluctance to revalue their currencies to help reduce the US trade deficit, said: 'My philosophy is that foreigners are out to screw us. Our job is to screw them first' (Tucker, 2024, p. 2). This anticipation of the Trump 2.0 theory of government presciently sets the scene for Tucker's account of global discord. The speed with which the Trump administration has moved to implement this theory of international relations makes Tucker's analysis even more pertinent than when the book was written, not least with its anticipation of the recklessness of the United States seeking to prevail alone in a changing global order (Tucker, 2024, p. 242).

It is against this background that it is worth examining *Global Discord*. The book offers two principal claims. The first is a thesis in the empirical study of international relations. It claims that the world order is moving towards a pattern of concentric circles of relationships, in which states will only

cooperate beyond a minimum of peaceful coexistence with those states with whom they share some common values. Future patterns of possible cooperation might vary from a lingering status quo through super-power struggle, a new cold war to a reshaped world order of autarkic blocs. Nonetheless, whatever the pattern, the logic of inter-state relations based on concentric affiliation will prevail.

The second thesis is one in political philosophy. It asserts that a bringing together of the political philosophy of Hume and Williams, the Hume-Williams programme as it might be called, offers the most plausible theory of the domestic and international political legitimacy necessary for effective political action by states, particularly liberal states, in the emerging era of discord.

Readers will find much of great general interest in *Global Discord*. It is an excellent survey of recent developments in international relations. It provides a valuable summary of the intellectual forces that have shaped the modern world over the long term. Its observations are insightfully laced with the experience of a former career public servant with considerable experience in domestic and international financial and monetary policy. Nonetheless, *CRISPP* readers will be primarily interested in the political philosophy that lies at the heart of the book's second thesis, which will be the focus of this review.

For what it is worth, I happen to share Tucker's broad view of current international trends. In place of a globalised world in which countries play differentiated but interdependent roles, we are more likely to see power blocks each led by a hegemon. So, in focussing on the political philosophy I reflect in part a difference between those concerned with policy and those concerned with political theory. Whereas the former aspire to practical agreement despite underlying differences of philosophical principle, politics making for strange bedfellows, the latter revel in differences of underlying philosophical principle despite agreement in practical matters. However, I shall also urge that philosophical differences spill over into the empirical thesis. In particular, I shall suggest that social contract theory of the mutual advantage sort offers both a better understanding of a world of concentric international relations and of the understanding of political legitimacy than can be derived from the Hume-Williams programme.

Conventions, legitimacy and concentric ircles

How might liberal democracies make the right policy choices in a world of global discord, and what are the constraints on their freedom of action? In answering these questions, Tucker's key assumption is that, as a precondition for participating in international relations, states need to be able to secure safety and stability both internally and externally (Tucker, 2024, p. 269).

International action presupposes domestic political legitimacy. For example, illegitimate governments do not raise willing military conscripts. Foreign policy is thus inextricably linked to domestic policy. We can think of this as a two-level game in which both domestic and international conditions have to be satisfied for cooperative action at the international level. Otherwise, as Tucker puts it, there is a tug of war between domestic and international norms (Tucker, 2024, p. 266).

How then is domestic political legitimacy to be achieved? Tucker's proposed answer is given by the Hume-Williams programme: Hume's theory of conventions provides us with an account of social stability, facilitating political security; Williams' theory of politics shows how political legitimacy requires those in power to offer a justification of the use of that power to each and every subject.

For Hume, conventions derive their stability from the mutual advantage that each of the participants in the convention enjoys. Those tempted to renege on their obligations under any convention will encounter resistance and retaliation from others and so will lose that advantage. Fear of adverse reputational threats will help keep knaves in line. In this sense, the equilibrium that characterises a Humean convention is self-reinforcing. These conventions do not derive their motivational force from a Hobbesian sovereign but emerge in repeated social interactions. For various reasons Humean equilibria may require augmentation by government action, but their real force lies in their being rooted in social habits. To this Humean base is added Williams' theory of politics and legitimacy. On this view, Hobbesian sovereignty risks being simply a form of tyranny, contrary to the character of politics. Governments who provide order also have to meet the obligation of a Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD). The exercise of power has to be justified to each subject.

The previous paragraph seeks to summarise Tucker's (2024) exposition of the Hume-Williams programme. The methodological ideal aimed for here is one of 'realism', which, according to Tucker, involves several elements. Realism makes security a precondition for justice, thus purportedly avoiding a morality-first political theory that makes justice the first virtue of social institutions; it takes the distinctive features of the practice of politics seriously, including the role of public opinion in policy choice; it avoids wishful thinking and the cultural imperialism that sometimes goes with it (think Iraq); and, in place of abstract generalisations, it accepts that the considerations that determine policy choice need to be rooted in the particular cultural values of different societies as they have evolved historically.

Tucker extends the demand for legitimation to relations among states. One consequence is that, despite the seemingly modest moral premises inherent in the Hume-Williams programme, he is able to derive some fairly stringent principles of international action. For example, he advances

something like the principle of the responsibility to protect, normally associated with cosmopolitan liberalism, a principle justified within Tucker's framework from the danger to some countries arising from uncontrolled emigration from other countries practising oppression. Similarly, he suggest that international action to combat climate change arises in virtue of the common existential threat it poses to all countries.

However, these are presented as relatively modest principles of prudence for liberal democratic governments. By contrast, the reach of thick moral principles, for example the protection of human rights, will be limited by cultural particularities. This is the principal reason why international relations among states will vary in their depth from issue to issue. For example, only countries in the broadly 'Western' tradition (defined to include South Korea and Japan) will be able to agree treaties for the effective protection of human rights, because they share enough to give rise to a common understanding of what rights protection might involve, a common understanding that, today, does not hold for the world at large.

So, in summary, only cultures sharing certain common elements can practice deep cooperation. Cooperation across cultural differences may be necessary for existential reasons, for example protection against climate change, but such cooperation will be necessarily relatively shallow. Hume's naturalistic and historical theory of conventions plus Williams' account of politics gives us a theory that is 'realistic and principled' (Tucker, 2024, p. xii) and one that explicates concentric circles of international agreement.

What are we to make of these claims?

Hume's conventions? Williams's legitimacy?

President de Gaulle is said once to have asked: 'how can you govern a country with more than two hundred and forty six cheeses?' Apocryphal or not (I have not found a reliable source for the quotation), the question states a profound truth about government. Close local bonds can often frustrate the exercise of a central political authority. Behind local or sectional bonds are Humean conventions. So conventions will only create the conditions for generalised political stability provided they are shared among the bulk of those who live under a political authority. No doubt a centralised political authority can tolerate a certain degree of serious dissent, as the British state did by not introducing conscription into Ireland during the First World War. But beyond a certain point of sectional difference, political legitimacy begins to break down. The creation of the modern nation-state is a triumph over such sectional difference and dissent. As the saying has it, a language is a dialect backed by an army.

In deeply divided societies sectional loyalties are the primary source of political affiliation. This is most obviously true where the cultural conventions

take the form of linguistic differences, but it also applies to differences of religion, ethnic group or territorially distinct forms of economic activity. Attempts at constitutional construction is such societies require that representatives of divided social groups step back to some degree from their sectional attachments so that they are able credibly to commit to an agreed constitutional order that represents on all sides an acceptable balance of power. Experience shows that some understanding of reciprocity and other virtues like patience are often necessary in order to reach viable constitutional agreements in these circumstances (Horowitz, 2021). The exercise of these virtues is not of course a universalistic moralism, but it is a transvaluation of previously sectarian values involving something like a norm of fair play. Here, morality is not prior to politics, but emerges from the practice of politics when sectional groups find themselves needing to cooperate with others for mutual advantage.

There is a parallel to this emergence of a norm of fair play in Hume's theory of conventions. Conventions like promising and property for Hume are justified by the general recognition by the members of society of their public utility underpinned by the sentiment of sympathy. In the Hume-Williams framework, this appeal to reflective sympathy is replaced by Williams' BLD and the idea that justifications for the use of state power should survive critical reflection. One obvious difficulty here is that, until the code of evaluation that informs the critical reflection is made clear, the justificatory force remains empty unless it is simply a claim about the extent to which practices conform to presumed cultural values rather than a critical examination of those values.

The hard-headed realist might say at this point that legitimation within the limits of existing cultural values is all that can be expected. However, an even more hard-headed realist might reply that it is more than can be expected, since 'realism' of the Williams' variety has a lot of normativity built into it, most notably the condition of justification to each subject and the condition of actions and policies surviving the test of critical reflection (Tucker, 2024, p. xiii).

Why, however, should a test of justification to 'each subject' be an aspect of a supposedly realist account of legitimacy? In his history of government, Finer (1997, pp. 38–58) makes one principal division of governments between 'palace' and 'forum' polities. The former rely on authoritarian forms of legitimation in which the political authorities merely need to carry the court or the military or the religious elite, but not the people. Forum polities, by contrast, derive their authority not only from popular election, which could be of a plebiscitary character consistent with authoritarianism, but also from continuing accountability periodically exercised. The Williams definition of politics restricts it to politics of the forum variety. However, if we are being realist about government, this seems to be a piece of persuasive definition that is not very persuasive. Many

governments are palace polities. Perhaps it is an empirical truth that forum polities can cooperate more deeply with other forum polities than with palace polities. But the latter need be no less legitimate for the purposes of international agreement. To insist otherwise is to smuggle a certain type of procedural moralism into the definition of legitimacy. It would be better to have the moralism out in the open and drop the critique of so-called morality-first approaches.

So if we cannot rely upon the combination of Humean conventions and Williams' BLD, are there other frameworks that a theory of global discord can employ? What of social contract theory for example?

Why not social contract theory?

Tucker is critical of Rawlsian social contract theory, and makes some telling points about the implausibility of the principle in *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls, 1999) that excludes very powerful outlaw states from international cooperation directed at peaceful coexistence (Tucker, 2024, pp. 298–99). Yet, one intriguing feature of *Global Discord* is its occasional use of social contract language. The post-war international order is said to be predicated on 'grand bargains' among states (Tucker, 2024, p. 9) and the constitutional independence of states, it is said, can be thought of as a gift from other states. There are even hints of re-contracting in the reference to re-legitimation moments. More substantively, much of the analysis parallels social contract theories based on the principle of mutual advantage. Such theories are focused on the supply of public goods (Buchanan, 1975) or with the control of spill-over effects (Gauthier, 1986). Indeed, if one allows that Hume can be reinterpreted as a contractarian as Gauthier (1979) once suggested (a stretch no doubt but not absolutely to be ruled out), then these connections become closer.

One reason for pressing the relevance of contract theory is that mutual advantage theorists have devoted a great deal of effort to identifying the conditions under which credible commitment to an agreed arrangement is possible among different actors pursuing cooperative ventures. One important condition is the ability for actors to monitor compliance, a condition that shows up also in empirical analyses of collective action (Ostrom, 1990). It is an interesting question prompted by contract theory as to whether monitoring is easier or harder among those who share a common culture. One alternative is that the capacity to monitor crucially depends on the availability of monitoring technology, for example the ability reliably to count greenhouse gas emissions from different countries. To the extent to which technology is crucial, international cooperation across cultural boundaries should be easier.

A standard objection to mutual advantage theories is that they cannot give an account of justice (Barry, 1989) since mutual advantage may be secured only above an initially unjust baseline. If mutual

advantage theories were fatally flawed in this way, their use might simply underscore the sort of tyranny that concerned Williams. However, suppose we stipulate that the baseline for mutual advantage is one in which those negotiating the social contract have approximately equal power, a view of justice that goes back at least to the Sophists (Weale, 2013, pp. 3–5), and one that is echoed in Hume's circumstances of justice, then we can think of just mutual advantage arising in those conditions.

The test of mutual advantage under conditions of approximately equal power can also provide a useful corrective to the dangers of cultural relativism to which the internalism of Hume and Williams is subject. If we say, for example, that thick concepts of human rights may be unavailable to political representatives of certain cultures, we need a way of testing whether the plea of cultural unavailability is made in good faith or not. Perhaps, for example, some defenders of China's communist state will say that the political rights of free association do not form a part of Asian values. Yet, the repression of protests in Hong Kong does not look like an expression of cultural values, for example the maintenance of an ideal of social harmony, but more like the assertion of political power to maintain one-party control. Such one party rule would not be the outcome of a constitutional contract made under conditions of approximately equal power. Mutual advantage social contract theory provides us with an external perspective by which to assess the good faith of those who invoke cultural values as the defence of their political actions.

Of course even those convinced of the injustice of certain political regimes may have to live with the fact that those regimes cannot be changed. But that is a far cry from the claim that those regimes have legitimacy from their own internal point of view. As I read *Global Discord* my mind repeatedly went to Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer, asking God to give us the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that must be changed and the wisdom to know the difference. Tucker's work provides us with much wisdom. I wonder, however, whether in tying itself so closely to the Hume-Williams programme, it provides us with the intellectual foundations for the requisite courage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Albert Weale is Emeritus Professor of Political Theory and Public Policy in the Department of Political Science UCL. His Modern Social Contract Theory (OUP), a study of contract theories since 1950, was published in 2020. It contextualised his earlier Democratic Justice and the Social Contract (OUP, 2013). He is currently embarked on a social contract theory of constitutional process.

References

Barry, B. (1989). *Theories of justice*. Harvester-Wheatsheaf.

Buchanan, J. M. (1975). *The limits of liberty: Between anarchy and leviathan*. University of Chicago Press.

Finer, S. E. (1997). *The history of government from the earliest times volume I: Ancient monarchies and empires*. Oxford University Press.

Gauthier, D. (1979). David Hume, Contractarian. *The Philosophical Review*, *88*(1), 3–38. https://doi.org/10.2307/2184777

Gauthier, D. (1986). *Morals by agreement*. Clarendon Press.

Horowitz, D. J. (2021). *Constitutional processes and democratic commitment*. Yale University Press.

Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.

Rawls, J. (1999). *The law of peoples*. Harvard University Press.

Tucker, P. (2024). *Global discord: Values and power in a fractured world order*, paperback edition with a new Preface. Princeton University Press.

Weale, A. (2013). *Democratic justice and the social contract*. Oxford University Press.