A World Transformed

Harold Hongju Koh

Two decades ago, while Richard Nixon was President and the Vietnam War still raged, ten energetic Yale law students founded Yale Studies in World Public Order. The prologue to their first issue, painstakingly typed and multilithed, announced the journal’s commitment “to publishing articles which contribute to the understanding of [a] highly interrelated global process.”

The lead article, entitled The New Haven School of International Law: An Invitation to a Policy-Oriented Jurisprudence, observed:

The New Haven school does not describe the world’s different community decision processes through a dichotomy of national and international law, in terms of the relative supremacy of one system of rules or other interrelations of rules. Instead, it describes them in terms of the interpenetration of multiple processes of authoritative decision of varying territorial compass. . . . [I]nternational law is most realistically observed, not as a mere rigid set of rules but as the whole process of authoritative decision in which patterns of authority and patterns of control are appropriately conjoined.

The Journal’s intervening years have seen remarkable growth and change. Today, the masthead has grown to number 63 students, including 26 women and 21 people of color. Issues are now word-processed, desktop-published, and sent to the publisher in camera-ready copy from the Journal’s law school offices. As the New Haven School has evolved to employ new modes of analysis, the Journal has followed it. And as scholars in New Haven and elsewhere have come to study international law from perspectives other than World Public Order, the content of the Journal has widened to encompass new subjects and strands of thinking. In the last few years, for example, the Journal has come to examine international law through the lens of rational choice theory, environmental law from a regime perspective, labor law from feminist viewpoints, the concept of international obligation from...

† Gerard C. and Bernice Latrobe Smith Professor of International Law and Director, Orville H. Schell, Jr., Center for International Human Rights, Yale University.
Kantian perspectives, and international trade law from a variety of methodologies. In its tenth year, the journal changed its name to the *Yale Journal of International Law*, formally acknowledging that it had become "increasingly catholic in its choice of material," while "retaining at its core the distinctive character bequeathed to it by its founders."

As the *Journal* enters its third decade, it confronts a global landscape transformed by international law's tumultuous "fourth era." During the first, classical era, which preceded World War II and the erection of the United Nations/Bretton Woods system, international law occupied a simple, relatively limited structural form. Sovereign states were the chief actors within that system, with intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations playing relatively minor roles on the global stage. Custom and state practice formed the primary sources of international law, which served a largely interstitial, laissez-faire function, reflecting vested national interests and leaving large realms of unregulated state activity. The system was in important respects "monistic," inasmuch as international and domestic law together constituted a unified legal system, with domestic institutions — especially courts — acting as important interpreters and enforcers of international legal norms.

Following World War II, the architects of the postwar political and economic system posited in place of this loose customary web of state-centric rules an ambitious positivistic order, built on institutions and constitutions: international institutions governed by multilateral treaties organizing proactive assaults on all manner of global problems. This complex positive law framework of charters, treaties, and formal agreements reconceptualized international law as a creative medium for organizing the activities and relations of numerous transnational players, now expanded to include intergovernmental organizations with independent decisionmaking capacity regarding a broad array of planetary issues. In this new, intensely regulatory global framework, it was imagined, treaty would replace custom as the primary source of law and legal rules would reflect international systemic concerns, not parochial interests.

Almost immediately, however, the Cold War era and the intense bipolarity and political realism it fostered rendered this positivistic vision a Potemkin Village. With respect particularly to the international use of force, the Cold War order soon resembled a "revolutionary system," one "wracked by inexpiable power rivalries and ideological conflicts . . . in which

---


international organization is reduced to impotence as a force of its own."12
The system became increasingly dualistic, particularly in the United States,
as international and domestic law settled into separated systems, with little
interpenetration.13 At the same time, the fields of international law and
international relations became oddly estranged, covering much of the same
territory, but evolving independently, pursuing different analytic missions, and
reaching markedly different normative conclusions about the influence of law
in international affairs.

But all was not bleak in this third era of global law. Multinational
enterprises, nongovernmental organizations, and private individuals became
significant actors on the transnational stage. The oil crisis of the early 1970's
highlighted the interdependence of politics and economics in the new
transnational economy.14 Interstate cooperation persisted, and fed the growth
of formal and informal, public and nonpublic regimes, which promoted the
evolution of norms, rules and decisionmaking procedures in such areas as
international human rights, arms control, international economic law, and
international environmental law.15 Liberal institutionalists studying
international political economy began to focus upon "regime theory," the
notion that institutions, governmental, and private participants in a given issue
area will develop a set of governing arrangements, ideologies and
expectations, that both restrain the participants and provide means for
achieving their common aims. Their analysis created new theoretical space for
international law within international relations theory. For by shifting the
focus of inquiry from the functioning of international organizations per se to
the broader phenomenon of international cooperation — e.g., the regime of
"international peacekeeping" or "debt management" as they transpire both
within and without institutional settings — lawyers and political scientists
came to agree that legal rules foster compliance with regime norms by
providing channels for dispute-settlement, signaling and triggering retaliatory
actions, and requiring states to furnish information establishing their
compliance.

These developments triggered the fourth era of global law, in which we
now live. In this brave new world, transnational actors, sources of law,
allocation of decisional functions, and modes of regulation have all mutated
into fascinating hybrid forms. International law now comprises a complex
blend of customary, positive, declarative, and "soft" law. Sovereignty has
depended in importance in this "world of pluralism and diversity, a global
arena in which various participants — groups (territorial and functional,
governmental and intergovernmental) and individual human beings — constantly interact under ever-changing conditions. Decisionmaking functions are now executed by a complex tag-team match of nation-states, intergovernmental organizations, regional compacts, nongovernmental organizations, and informal regimes and networks. The system has become neomonic, with new channels opening for the interpenetration of international and domestic law through judicial decision, legislation and executive action. New forms of dispute resolution, executive action, administrative decisionmaking and enforcement, and legislation have emerged as part of an emerging “transnational legal process,” which influences national conduct, transforms national interests, and helps constitute national identity.

In the days just after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the future seemed unusually bright for this “New World Order.” Democracy was breaking out all over. Multilateralism resurfaced with the United Nations’ defeat of Saddam Hussein in Operation Desert Storm. The Cold War’s end left the United States as the only surviving superpower. The conclusion of the Uruguay Round of the GATT, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Maastricht Treaty all signaled new vitality for trade liberalization and regional organization. But like a cold shower, recent events have tempered the initial euphoria over the possibilities for new global law. As Communism has collapsed, states have fragmented, triggering violent waves of ethnic nationalism. Regional organizations like NAFTA and the European Union have faced new and taxing challenges brought on by the global recession. Failed states like Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti have faced crises of civil society and refugee outflows that have challenged our compassion and vexed our policymakers. Foreign policy values have come into direct conflict. In one commentator’s words:

in short, because the real world has not waited for international law to reach its full maturity, students of international law cannot wait to study a fully developed normative system. After all these years, we still need what in the years ahead this Journal will surely keep providing: scholarship that "give[s] us a functional critique of international law in terms of social ends,

17. See generally HENRY STEINER, DETLEV VAGTS, & HAROLD HONGJU KOH, TRANSNATIONAL LEGAL PROBLEMS 514-955 (4th ed. 1994) (providing examples of this interpenetration).
not an analytical critique in terms of itself, and above all that shall conceive of the legal order as a process and not as a condition."  
