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Universalism is a dream

But not an impossible one

At the cusp of a new year, the global outlook appears increasingly grim. Escalating conflicts and resurgent authoritarianism are undermining domestic and international institutions alike, while rising wealth inequality is deepening economic insecurity and eroding social cohesion.

Perhaps the most dispiriting development is the growing hatred of the 'other'. In country after country, political leaders increasingly dehumanise migrants and refugees, casting people fleeing poverty, persecution and conflict as a mortal threat.

Such rhetoric brings to mind W. H. Auden's 'Refugee Blues'. Written on the eve of World War II – a period when refugees were similarly blamed for economic insecurity and social decline – the poem depicts a speaker at a public meeting who warns, 'If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread.'

The rise of xenophobic populism is not occurring in a vacuum. It is at least partly driven by a profound structural shift that is often overlooked by social scientists who assume the inevitability of the nation-state.

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It is easy to forget that the nation-state is a relatively recent idea that emerged when travel was slow and limited. At the time, it made sense to imagine the world as a collection of communities, each responsible for the welfare of its own members. Governing these units effectively required the cultivation of a shared identity, and nationalism emerged to fill that role.

But globalisation has put this arrangement under growing strain, as the freer movement of goods, money, information, and people – together with the digital revolution – enables firms, workers, and consumers to connect across borders. Paradoxically, it is precisely that fragility that is fuelling the current wave of hyper-nationalism, which represents a rear-

guard effort to revive a model the world has outgrown.

We have seen this before. Claims of racial superiority were once considered normal but now provoke widespread revulsion. While it remains common for people to declare their countries the greatest on earth, assertions of national primacy will, in time, come to sound just as crude and indefensible.

The contours of this shift were already visible decades ago. In his 1992 book *The Twilight of Sovereignty*, former Citigroup chairman Walter Wriston predicted that national governments would gradually lose relevance. Our collective fate, he observed, increasingly rests with those who 'interconnect the planet with telecommunications and computers' and the bankers who move capital across a 'new global electronic infrastructure'.

Just as the rejection of slavery and racial supremacy was essential to building a more just world, so, too, may be shedding the hubris of nationalism. This view is central to the work of the late philosopher John Rawls, who argued that a fair society must be designed from behind a 'veil of ignorance', setting aside accidents of birth like ethnicity, gender, and nationality that would otherwise shape moral judgments.

But even if we accept the moral case for universalism and recognise how deeply interconnected the global economy has become, the question remains: Is a borderless world feasible?

The moral case for universalism is not the sole preserve of academic philosophers. Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, repeatedly imagined a world free of borders. In a 1917 essay, he argued that while the nation-state remained a practical necessity, we must ultimately aspire to a day when our primary identity would be simply human. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, recognising the force of that vision, wrote that 'nationalism is a narrowing creed' and credited Tagore with pushing his compatriots to reject its intellectual constraints.

But even if we accept the moral case for universalism and recognise how deeply interconnected the global economy has become, the question remains: Is a borderless world feasible? After all, nationalism has often provided a powerful incentive to strive and excel, thereby helping to drive growth and innovation.

Here, the Greek Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Soli offers a useful

perspective. Writing in the third century BC, Chrysippus lived a life of legendary simplicity and often turned to competitive sports as a metaphor for a moral life. As American philosopher Tad Brennan puts it, he advocated a 'no shoving' ethic, according to which competitors should strive to win, but only within the rules of the game. Under such conditions, competition can coexist with friendship, cooperation, and shared purpose.

To be sure, a truly borderless world remains a distant dream. For now, what we can do is strengthen existing supranational organisations, including the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the International Criminal Court. At a time when nationalism is once again weakening the foundations of international cooperation, their resilience is of critical importance.

As a new year begins, we must nurture aspirations for a world in which no one is treated as 'other', and refugees and migrants are not dehumanised as the ones stealing our bread. Universalism is a dream, but not an impossible one.

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