

## **‘No one is illegal before god.’ An interview with Jan Pronk,<sup>1</sup> The Hague, August 2007**

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### **Introduction**

Global Ethics is a multidisciplinary field engaging with issues that have global importance from a moral point of view. The *Journal of Global Ethics* has made it an explicit goal from its inception to invite contributions from practitioners and regularly feature interviews with people who affect policies and public opinion on global issues, like Yakin Erturk and Noam Chomsky. In Dutch social democracy there is a strong intellectual tradition engaging with international and global affairs. However, in the 1990s we witnessed the establishment of a new dominant discourse in almost all European labour parties: ideological adherence to the socialist heritage, the traditional commitments to nationalization and limits to the gap between the highest and the lowest income were disregarded (van den Anker in Martell et al. 2001). With the increased emphasis on national security following the attacks on targets in the USA and elsewhere since 2001, it seems that next on the list of outdated ideals comes international solidarity. The international commitment to donate 0.7% of GDP was adhered to only by Norway and the Netherlands and now even those countries no longer reach the target (UNDP 2007).

Aid levels fell between 1990 and 2001 both as a share of rich countries' gross national income (GNI) and in normal terms. Official development assistance was only 0.25% of GNI in 2003. In 2006, the UN target to donate 0.7% of GNI is only expected to have been met by Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands (World Bank 2006). A general acceptance of increasingly xenophobic and anti-Islamic speech has taken hold of the previously exaggerated but internationally acclaimed spirit of solidarity in the Netherlands. Although there is a complex mix of explanations, one clear element influencing this phenomenon is the general perception that the liberal adherence to political correctness was a top-down normative requirement rather than an authentic collective tradition. Clearly the centre-left coalition governments in the 1990s were unaware of the real problems in neighbourhoods where economic deprivation pushed migrant communities as well as indigenous populations up against drug abuse, armed violence and petty crime. Overcrowding and visible 'otherness' felt threatening to the members of the dominant culture which often ended up in a minority in social housing

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estates. Despite policies on language acquisition, inter-faith dialogues, street parties or women's days in swimming pools and cultural centres, persistent youth unemployment, lack of creolisation through intermarriage and increasing criticism of the position of women in ethnic minorities led to a backlash that brought irritation with both the 'offensive' Moroccan youth and unaware politicians to the forefront. The effect was political capital made by several populist parties and the high-profile political murders of two famous Dutch figures: the politician Pim Fortuyn and the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. Although they were each mavericks and provocative in their opinions, the nation and the global media were in shock. This created space for still further inciting language towards the migrant communities although Pim Fortuyn's murder was committed by an environmental activist and as such had nothing to do with his outspoken position on immigration and integration.

Although these factors are specific to the Netherlands, they also fit in with a wider context of globalization, migration and ensuing issues of identity. The question of multiculturalism, both as an empirical phenomenon and a model of introducing group rights over and above the liberal model of individual right and collective toleration, is affecting politics in all receiving countries as well as in countries where a colonial legacy has left boundaries around several communities. It is also a major issue in transition countries of the former Soviet bloc, where Stalinist deportations have resulted in a patchwork of minorities across large geographical areas and where the movements of people after 1989 are still challenging xenophobic institutional arrangements on citizenship and rights to remain as well as xenophobic attitudes of governments and people alike (van den Anker 2007).

These developments would already be enough reason to listen to the views of someone like Jan Pronk. He has both held onto his ideals about global solidarity from the time he was a minister for international development co-operation in Den Uyl's government (1973–1977) while being a leading voice in the changing electoral programme of the Dutch labour party. However, Jan Pronk has also gathered important information and experience on his mission as Special Rapporteur for the United Nations in the troubled province of Darfur. In addition, he has presented his views in a collection of articles on globalization and the possibilities for social democratic politics. He is therefore a most suitable candidate to ask about the possibilities of Global Ethics to affect global policy making.

I chose to do this interview also because of my family history in social democratic politics. I realized by moving to England the importance of having learnt many of my values within the Dutch new-left tradition in the 1960s and 1970s. As preparation for publishing my theory of global justice, I felt it was appropriate to see whether my views defending a strong cosmopolitan and egalitarian perspective building on Hugo Grotius as well as Brian Barry, still fitted with the most recent statements in the political branch of this tradition (van den Anker forthcoming).

**In your book you analyse the possibilities for social democracy both on a national scale and globally to make a difference to one of the main issues of our time: global poverty. You start by describing globalization as the drive of new technology and the global market economy. How do you define globalization?**

Globalization of course is of all ages, it started already millennia ago. What I consider to be important is the present stage of globalization, the speeding up of the development of one world market due to technological and economic changes development of one world market with technological and information revolutions. Together with a revolution in the minds of people you may say that time and distance don't play a role any more. In previous stages of globalization time and distance were gradually fading away but now they simply don't exist anymore.

Despite the continued existence of provincialism, the structural factors of a global world market are completed. That is for me globalization.

Of course globalization is not complete: it is not global, but western because it started here. Secondly, it is partial. We have built a global market, institutions with regulations and international organizations who have facilitated the process but we have not done the same the social dimension of society, or the environmental dimension of human life. Therefore globalization is partial, it is lopsided. This has led to a value system which in old fashioned terminology is capitalist: it is all about capital, money, material progress and private profit. It is even more capitalist than in the previous phases. The earlier stages of capitalism were sometimes pure, sometimes modified, whereas now capital markets and money markets are unfettered because there is no world public sector which could create a balance.

**Do you agree with Martin Shaw (1999) that global institutions are part of the process of globalization?**

Yes they ought to be and they are but of course they are lagging behind. After the Second World War, we established the UN. That was a big step forward in civilization because at that time the decision was taken to base a new policy on the common-felt objective to never again have a world war or a Holocaust. In order to prevent another world war what we have to go for is not only new ideologies like democracy and human rights; we also have to stem the power of an individual nation-state, to make it impossible that it can impose its power on others, can use and abuse its power to the detriment of other nation-states and people within nation states. We need to create balance within a system on the basis of shared values. That could only be done because the most powerful nation-state at the time took the decision to share its power with others instead of overwhelming them. It was willing to restrain its own power in order to share it for certain public goods, like peace, security and welfare in the form of international co-operation. You could say that the new international order of 1945 was based on nation-states deciding to voluntarily share power.

That was implemented through the UN and other institutions, which created peace and welfare. It worked well, because for example decolonization only took place because of this system. We built all these institutions which helped translate the peace dividend into increased international trade, international cooperation, development aid and coordination for instance with regard to international food policies. However, in the 1990s we got into a stalemate. Yet, the institutions created in 1945 were very important. The process of globalization has positive consequences for many people and drawbacks for many others. You have to guide it, facilitate it, stem it and at the same time control it. This needs to happen on the basis of commonly shared public values, as was the case in 1945 and is no longer the case. I am therefore in favour of stronger, reformed global institutions.

**To what extent are there ‘irreversible decisions’ as you state in your book which led to the present state of globalization? In other words, to what extent has globalization been created?**

Globalization is man-made and not a natural phenomenon. Although it is irreversible, we need to slow it down and develop other spheres to become as important as the economic one so there is a better balance. This is a political choice. Nowadays, for instance in the Netherlands but also in many political parties in a number of the western European countries, politicians hold out that you can’t influence the process; it is just there. My view is completely different: of course you cannot control everything but you can guide it. I call on governments to please put your hand on the steering wheel because there are hands at the steering wheel that control it through

non-transparent power. I am not in favour of the realm of a world state but you need to get politicians involved in co-creating the next stage of the process; don't leave it to others.

The public institutions are picking up the pieces because globalization results in more violence, more inequality and more poverty. Since that is the case, then public institutions are presently asked to accommodate victims, through charity, relief aid, etc., rather than dealing with the root causes of the poverty and the violence. You have to create a process which makes fewer victims. You will always have some poverty in the world. The issue is that there is more poverty in the world now than ever. Too much inequality leads to conflict which is escalating into violence which cannot be controlled so you have to guide the process so there is less poverty, less inequality, better prospects for many more people.

**In the book you sketch a way forward based on earlier calls by you to strengthen the public sector harmonious with multiculturalism but in your latest version you add a call for a shift in away from the power of the middle classes. You speak of the need for enlightened leadership and citizenship. Is enlightened citizenship the same as global citizenship?**

Yes, I talk about citizenship without borders. In my first book I said that global capitalist economic growth since 1945 has led to a lot of welfare increases yet of course there was also poverty. You may say that poverty was the collateral damage of growth. But at the same time there was an effort to reduce it and poverty eradication was never successful but we had basic human needs provision systems and so on. Welfare states were also not fully successful but you may say there was progress in the right direction with collateral damage. Since 1990 the world has never before in world history gone through a period of such high growth: in many countries two digits growth. So we accumulated wealth and welfare; we didn't invest it in poverty eradication it was just used for private accumulation, capitalism in a way. We created more freedom in economic terms; more private sector less public sector. This meant also that public savings and investments went down. One and a half billion live on less than one dollar a day. More than 2 billion people do not have a place to go to the toilet with major consequences for human dignity but also sanitation and health. This is pure poverty. And yet there is not enough investment in poverty eradication. Why not? Because we don't want it, we keep the money for ourselves in the middle class. In Sudan not a dinar is spent on girls' education in the rural south but there are perfect universities in Khartoum for people of the middle class. Poverty and inequality used to be the collateral damage of progress; now it is on purpose. To make it even better for ourselves, we leave others out. So if you're doing well, you're safe and healthy; you get education and money but if you're not, you don't have access to the basic needs of survival.

**You mention two ways we can go from here: we can opt for the protest/revolution route that often ends in violence or we can take the Open Society route with increased human rights protection and increased global governance. What is your view on the movement that is trying for an alternative globalization through the World Social Forum and what is your view of global taxation?**

How do we stop this exclusion of people? I go back to say the history of capitalism since the middle of the nineteenth century and look at what made it possible to create much more equality and less poverty, a social welfare state. Firstly, those who were exploited, fought back within the system through labour union tactics. The owners of the means of production came to the conclusion that it was much better to accommodate labourers and pay higher wages for two reasons. They said, 'It gives some stability politically which is good for our investments.' But even more importantly, they said, 'if we pay higher wages, they can buy our products'. It was economic enlightenment or self-interest.

This is now not possible in the same way, as people are not only exploited but also excluded. If you're excluded, you don't have anything to fight back with. Your labour is no longer needed. Either immigrant labour from people who don't dare to protest or technological progress, saving labour altogether, are used instead. The same is true of consumer power; it is no longer a means of action because in a global market purchasing power elsewhere can be tapped easily. This means that you can exclude the poor person around the corner in your city. This lack of connection to local poor people, who are anonymous in our own society, means we have to fight with or for them.

That means you need global citizens and a political system that is globalized to the extent that it is also multicultural, and takes values from people with different backgrounds seriously. That is not conventional wisdom at the moment. We need to return to the question of 'who is my neighbour?' from the Gospel of Luke. The answer in that story comes from Christ and is about the Good Samaritan: the individual citizen is a Samaritan belonging to the middle class or somewhat below. He forgets the rules and conventional wisdom and he helps. Why is that not being used as a guide for politics in the context of globalization? We speak about efficiency and effectiveness yet not the old question: 'who is my neighbour?'

If we don't give in to the demands of the excluded we have a problem because our society may be at stake. You may not only have to do it because it is your neighbour (ethics) but because it is wise (keep (global society together)). People feel excluded and say we are not being respected anymore. Others say we are being seen as belonging to a different human species as if we are guilty of our own situation; as if we are people who shouldn't exist, who are only a burden on society. They may turn their back on the system. They can then do two things: they can strengthen their own value system in religious terms or kick the value system of the others and that means violence and terrorism. Poverty doesn't lead to violence, but poverty together with inhuman treatment can lead to violence. If the response is to fight back through pre-emptive strike or security measures then there are many more who feel excluded and they start to retaliate; you can't control it. So it is much better then to say as leaders, bring down those fences, get them in, inclusive thinking, integration; leaders should give the example. I think many political leaders are giving the wrong example. Common people think that these wrong examples are the right way. In so many countries people feel justified because of leaders giving a bad example, they exaggerate tensions. Church groups working for 'illegal' immigrants tell me, 'You're not doing anything wrong, you're talking wrong. What you are saying as political leaders in The Hague is being inflated, escalated in the language on the street and it is polarizing.' In many African countries when different people are living together in one society and it starts to burn that is always the result of a leader who thinks it is in their own interest (based on class, religious or ethnicity) to incite violence.

**I like the ways you talk about poverty and exclusion and therefore you talk both about class distinction, values and multiculturalism. I would still like to ask the question about global redistribution. In your book you mention De Gaay Fortman as one of your mentors. He proposes an approach to development based on basic needs; your party, the Dutch labour party, adheres to redistribution of income on a national level. In your view is there a need to move beyond these approaches and look into forums of global redistribution through global taxation?**

I am in favour of new international taxation schemes. That can not only be taxation of countries through, for instance, obligations with regard to development assistance. I am a believer in development assistance but that on its own doesn't work; it is a good instrument but not enough. I would support the proposal to have a tax on short term capital moves (Tobin tax-CA).

Global redistribution should not only be done in terms of money but also in terms of voting rights in systems on trade and financial investment policy.

**You make explicit references to human rights in your book which brings us back to values: human rights strengthen democracy but they have also been criticized for their western individualist origin.**

For me human rights are human rights. They are not as western as the leaders of non-western countries want to claim. They say so because they are oppressing human rights in their own countries. I have been nearly in all countries in the world. When I speak with a woman in Indonesia or in Chile who has lost her son because of torture and oppression by the dictators then I see as much grief as I see when I speak with people who have lost their beloved ones during the Holocaust. It is not different. The problem is that many western people think that people in the south have different feelings and they don't care much, which is so stupid. If that is the case then the rights of people born anywhere should be exactly the same.

What is a human right? The core is the right to live. The right to survive. To exist. To have a meaningful life. And to decide the meaning of your own life by yourself. And that is it. The same for everybody.

The Human rights doctrine is universal for several reasons. It is global, as it has been accepted by all countries when the UN was created. I don't think labour human rights should be the same in all countries in all stages of economic development so there are rights that don't belong to the core but the core is not western, it is human. And everyone who says that is not the case has a reason to deny those rights to their own people.

**And yet in your book you say that we need to defend western values but we also have to have open dialogue. How open do we need to be?**

We defend values which are part of our history, because we don't invent our own values; we get them from our parents, ancestors, traditions societies, so they are worthwhile to be defended. But of course defending does not mean impose them on others; no pre-emptive strike of values. And of course values are not absolute categories that cannot be changed. You need to discuss with others how to reinterpret your own values. That is dialogue, democracy, that is what I try to show.

So defend values but do it in an open fashion and respect values of others, have a dialogue and try to live together.

It is related to the issue of ethics without borders. A long time ago I was asked to do a sermon in a church and I spoke on the basis of specific parts of the new gospel, about immigrants and 'illegal' people. Already in the 1970s we had this discussion. I could only say, in the world as a whole there are no immigrants. There are immigrants in individual nation-states because we have made borders. But in the world there are no immigrants. For god there are no illegal people. I do not know how to translate that into political decision-making despite having been a politician and an administrator for decades, but you need to see that side as well. It is related to that question of 'who is my neighbour?' Politically my objective is inclusion of everybody. I can't accept a society in which there is also exclusion. Nobody can be happy as long as some people are unhappy. If you are part of a political movement which claims to be international like social democracy which talks about the global underclass, labourers of all countries unite, you cannot accept exclusion.

**Do you think international social democracy is still alive?**

It is not dead but it is paralyzed: meetings of the socialist international are now a ritual; they don't lead to decisions: people talk and listen to each other and then they go home. You see it everywhere: in the UN and nation-states and political parties; there are so few world movements you have to cherish them. The ecumenical movement of the churches doesn't exist anymore whereas it was a beautiful, ethical concept. The anti-globalization movement is not really anti-global but argues for a different character of globalization. As long as there are so few global movements, please cherish them.

**Development is another subject that comes up in the book quite a lot. Now there is post-development literature. How do you view this idea position that development is in itself a form of colonialism?**

I think it is semantics. All words turn against themselves and you have to find new terminology. Development was seen in the 1960s by leftist authors in contrast with the process of colonialism which was leading to underdevelopment, magnifying the process of development.

Firstly, my understanding is that development is not simply economic; it is holistic. There are quite a number of elements that influence each other positively or negatively so you have to find a balance; people have to find a balance themselves, not someone outside the process.

Secondly, when not speaking of personal development but development in a society when can you say there is holistic development? I use three criteria: first, there should always be change because the status quo benefits some and not others. Change is only development if there is progress. What constitutes progress, people have to decide themselves if they participate in the process. That may be economic, social, freedom whatever they consider to be important themselves.

Thirdly, development needs to be progress for everybody. As soon as some people have progress on the basis of their own criteria and on the same criteria others get worse off this doesn't count. Increasingly there should be more and more people benefiting from progress, then you have development.

By definition this has to be decided by people participating in the process, not by scientists or policy-makers looking at it from the outside.

**In the context of humanitarian assistance you argue in your book that you need to be quick, not bottom up; how would you like to strike the balance between bottom up and top down initiatives in development?**

I learnt through all those years what the consequences are of that development concept I just set out. You only have progress development if it is by the people not for the people. You can do it with them, but they have to do it so it is by the people. Many people have to benefit so the process has to go as deeply as possible, from below. They should themselves take the decisions so that means: ownership, democratization, bottom up, which is the new philosophy of the 1970s which became the politically correct language in the 1990s. You need to take your time for such processes.

Now imagine a completely different situation: not development but a war. The whole country is devastated and there is nothing there anymore. There is no elite, no state, no nation — it has just broken down. Then from my view it is better to set aside the politically correct principles of development policy but to say we have to be catalysts to bring something in that is seen as improvement. This needs to be done quickly in order to create a new situation which shows people that there is a peace dividend. That could mean it is done top-down. So in

the period between the war, where we only gave relief assistance, and the period of stability which allows us time for long term development; in between these two in the period of reconstruction it is crucial that you do it fast and well. Otherwise people come to the conclusion that it doesn't mean anything and may resort to violence again. You see it in Sudan for example and so many other places.

**You mention in the book the links between analysis and policy and between theory and practice as very important; in some of the chapters in the book on your intellectual inspirations you show this and you reiterate it in your whole way of talking which combines analysis and practical experience. What should the role be for global political theory and global ethics in influencing politics and how can we create an intellectual community including both sides of that divide?**

I think a society is flourishing if there is a frequent and open debate on value systems and policy options. For that you need a good press and a dialogue between the cultural elite but that is not efficient. You need a good quality press which can foster a discussion about the options which are being put into practice: a constant critical attitude. You need investigative journalism and a parliamentary democracy where politicians are held accountable. That is the obvious answer.

I go one step further: as a politician I also want to put reflection in myself, not only to manage being criticized by press and parliament but to develop my position. That is why I always try to find time to study. I am still curious. Introspection for me is not a psychological factor but study of the context and options.

**What role do you see for academics to assist politicians to reflect like that?**

Be intellectuals. Academia is different from managerial business education: it is Philosophy, Humanities, Social Sciences. I think it is wise for intellectuals to step into the policy-making world and then to step out again. I love reading but I know right away if there is somebody who has never felt the heat and is just commenting from the sideline and then, I'm sorry, I don't take it as seriously as it should. So academics need to step in and step out.

I learned from and I admire those politicians who are willing to change. It is important sometimes to distance yourself from your own constituency. Mandela is a good example of someone who built a bridge to his enemy. It is risky but important to distance yourself a little from your people. One criteria for doing this successfully is to show that you have suffered. With Mandela that is clear. So it was, too, for Willy Brandt; everyone knows he had to flee and lived in exile.

You should also try to reflect on what you have done. I admire Bob Macnamara, who was minister of defence during the war in Vietnam. He had his fights with Johnson but he stayed on and was fully responsible. He wrote a brilliant book in which he describes the whole process of decision-making and gives evidence from policy documents. He comes to the conclusion: 'I am accountable, although I did it for good reasons, I was totally wrong.' He goes around universities and is being scolded by Vietnam veterans and others.

**Has your work in Darfur been taken seriously? Has something been done in response? Do you have any other comments about the UN and other actors involved?**

I tried to combine my diplomatic and political skills and analytical skills. In the end I failed because I gave the leaders in the country the possibility to oust me. At the same time I still believe in what I told the Security Council: care for people is a scarce commodity in Khartoum. There are so many victims. That still continues.



The present situation, not even a year after my report, is that there is a force to keep the peace without the peace existing yet. It has been watered down; yet it is better than nothing. So the challenge now is to implement this plan as well as possible. I deplored the fact that the UN is getting weaker. I blame some countries for it but that is what we have to live with for the time being. Yet I have the feeling that the people in Darfur are being forgotten by everybody. Of course there is a lot of humanitarian assistance and that will continue but that doesn't open any perspective for the longer term.

**And the role of the UN? Has the Genocide Convention been blunted by the whole discussion about calling what happened in Darfur a genocide?**

I am a bit mild about that debate: with 200,000 people killed, 2 million driven out of their houses, I think it was a major humanitarian crisis. It was in the terminology of an expert committee of the Arab League of Nations mass rape, mass slaughter, mass violence, a mass violation of human rights. That was enough reason to have a humanitarian intervention but nobody wanted to do it. The members of the Security Council are guilty by negligence as well. There was no political decision that it was not genocide, only a legal discussion. Kofi Annan asked a committee of international lawyers who were very well-respected and they said it was 'not genocide but as bad as genocide'. I don't care much if it is genocide or not but if it is a mass violation of human rights, mass killing, you have to do something.

Because of the interpretation of the genocide convention there now has to be genocide before people start to act which is the opposite of what was the original intention. I could justify the opinion of the legal experts; Professor Cassese was one of them. On the basis of the text of the genocide convention there should have been intention which couldn't be proven. What I saw in Darfur was in particular cleansing of whole areas for economic and political reasons. 'Lebensraum' creation for some by oppressing and killing others. They didn't have to kill everyone as people were terrorized and started to leave themselves. I don't blame the UN for not saying it was genocide, as that was not a political decision for the UN. I blamed the UN (that means here the Security council) for waiting one and a half years before putting it on the agenda as people had been killed. There is no point really in having the discussion on whether or not it was genocide afterwards. You have to act while people are being killed.

**Are you hopeful about multilateralism?**

No, it is being eroded. I come with a political answer to it. As I said the UN was the beginning of a new international order. We can only strengthen it by reforming it as it is now too lopsided, for instance the composition of Security Council. The problem is: you need the votes of the west to change power position of the west. That is not going to happen easily. Everything got eroded after and because of the invasion of Iraq; they just wiped aside the UN. And I blame them for that. As I said in the beginning I was very positive about the US giving the right example in 1945. Without them it would never have happened. We have to thank them for that. They took the first step of a powerful country in world history in the interest of world society as a whole. Of course there was some pragmatism but that doesn't matter.

The most powerful country should restrict using its power in order to protect the world system. They took the decision not to take it serious anymore and to neglect it. The country that ought to have put the most restraint didn't do so. It does not matter if the Seychelles don't do so; that doesn't have a major consequence for the system. But if the US doesn't restrain their use of power, everyone else has a right to do so.

The future needs a system so you need the reform. You only get the reform and a strengthening of the UN with the US. So I am a pragmatic politician. Ask them on which terms they are willing to stay in and to accept a majority vote; which is begging on your knees but without it they will always have the option of opting out, building their own coalitions of the willing or just use the system as a continuation of a 'picking up the pieces approach'. Yet, they have reform demands which I share. It is nonsense that Libya is chairing the HR committee.

### Note

1. Jan Pronk is a former minister of overseas development as well as of environmental affairs for the Dutch Labour party and former Special Rapporteur for the United Nations in Darfur, Sudan. He is currently professor at the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague.

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