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Global Crises and the Future of Transnational Democracy

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In order to say a few words about the future of transnational democracy and the potential role of modern direct democracy, I'd like to begin with some comments on the recent past. And so allow me to start with a few dates: 1989 (the triumph of democracy), 1999 and 2003 (the rise of global civil society), and 2008 (the challenge of global crisis).

1989: The Triumph of Democracy

The spring of 2009 marked the 20th anniversary of the pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, and November 2009 marked the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. These are two truly landmark events in the history of democratic movements world-wide – two events whose importance must at least be acknowledged at the start of any discussion of the potential for transnational democracy in the twenty-first century. While the events of Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989 failed to bring electoral democracy to China, the bloody spectacle of repression there did affect the response of many Eastern European leaders who were determined to avoid violence when they faced off against their own anti-communist movements that autumn. As Timothy Garton Ash puts it, “that Tiananmen Square happened in China is one of the reasons it did not

happen in Europe.”¹⁾ And, indeed, the peaceful fall of the Berlin Wall in November ushered in an extraordinary period culminating the third wave of democratization that by some measures had begun in the 1970’s.²⁾ By the end of the 1990’s, electoral democracies had spread through Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In “January 2000, Freedom House counted 120 democracies, the highest number and the greatest percentage (63) in the history of the world,”³⁾ leading some to see liberal democracy as having definitively won the great contest of history, making the very idea of transnational democracy a possibility for the first time.⁴⁾ This of course tells an incomplete story; simply holding elections does not make a government democratic, and we have seen how a number of countries have held elections while maintaining elements of authoritarianism.

1999 & 2003: The Rise of Global Civil Society

Ironically, around the same time that democracy appeared anyway to be spreading around the world, doubts about democracy’s traditional forms also began to grow. Democracy was more widely accepted than ever before. Yet, confronted by the forces of globalization, nationally based democratic institutions appeared to be increasingly over-run. While policy makers at the World Bank and in key capitals of Europe and North America touted the benefits of free trade and deregulated markets throughout the 1990’s, by the end of 1999 protesters had paralyzed the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, sounding an altogether different bell about globalization, one that rang a tone of warning, not celebration. Globalization, it was argued, was not spreading democracy as some supposed, but rather posing a mortal threat to it. The Battle of Seattle, as it became known, ushered in a series of transnational protests (e.g., in Genoa, Quebec, New York, etc.) and some argued that if globalization challenged democracy at home, global civil society was the necessary tool for democrats to respond abroad.

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- 1) Timothy Garton Ash, “1989!” *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 56, No. 17, November 5, 2009.
 - 2) Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1991).
 - 3) Larry Diamond, “A Report Card for Democracy” *Hoover Digest*, No 3 (2000). See also discussion in Archibugi, *The Global Commonwealth of Citizens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 31~35.
 - 4) Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Free Press, 1992).

Interestingly enough, it was not globalization that gave rise to the most significant instance of global protest, but the policies of an American president. On February 15, 2003 across North America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Australia as many as 30 million people took to city streets to express opposition to the planned invasion of Iraq.⁵⁾ It seemed an extraordinary moment for global civil society, perhaps for the first time living up to its name. The anti-war movement appeared to accomplish in a day what four years of transnational activism against neo-liberal globalization could not. It brought together constituencies from East and West, North and South into a broad-based movement with a common clear objective: stop the U.S.-led drive for war. The next weeks saw what was, in effect, a Pyrrhic victory for global civil society. The protests no doubt contributed to the Bush Administration's defeat in the United Nations Security Council. But in the end they also contributed to the heightened sense that the U.N. and global civil society were impotent next to the hegemonic power of the United States. President Bush made clear that the U.S. would follow its own course regardless of global public opinion. Global civil society seemed to constitute itself and reveal its limits at the same time.

2008: The Challenge of Global Crisis

Since then, with the extended fight in Iraq, the stubborn conflict in Afghanistan, and a weakening U.S. economy, the debate has shifted further: from globalization through empire to multipolarity and the emergence – or reemergence – of new powers punctuated by the events of August 8th, 2008 (8-8-08), as a lame-duck U.S. President watched the official “arrival” of China and Russia to a renewed international prominence, watching, literally, as a spectator at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, and figuratively, as a hamstrung bystander, while Russia invaded Georgia, a U.S. ally. At the same time, events have proven just how important globalization remains. As we know, an enormous financial crisis with roots in the U.S. housing market rippled across the world in 2008, precipitating an international credit crunch that by many accounts caused a global recession in 2009. They are calling it the Great Recession in the United States. The global economic crisis demonstrates both the challenge global forces have on national and even local institutions and the need for effective

5) Connie Koch, *2/15: The Day the World Said No to War* (Oakland: AK Press, 2003).

transnational responses. This seems to pose a dilemma. If there is no mechanism available to channel the will of the people on a global scale, it seems we would be forced to choose between democratic governance and global governance. But this is, I argue, a false choice.

Popular Sovereignty and Global Governance: The Dilemma

Popular sovereignty represents the main idea of modern democracy: it means simply “the rule of the people.”⁶⁾ Popular sovereignty signifies the general principle that the people broadly defined play a central role in the constitution, steering, and occasional transformation of the laws and institutions that govern their lives. Globalization presents extraordinary challenges to this idea. This is not to argue that globalization is inherently a bad thing, but to recognize that the challenge is to make globalization and democracy compatible. There is no turning back the clock to some isolationist past.

But globalization is in fact a challenge for democracy because it bypasses the authority of the people by leading to the development of governing mechanisms far beyond their reach. It undermines the consensual foundation of democratic authority by limiting the transparency of power. That is to say, it becomes increasingly difficult for the common citizens to understand who’s in charge. As economic production and control become increasingly transnational it becomes more and more difficult to communicate to the public information about who or what is behind the forces that determine or influence their lives. Under such conditions, the national procedures for registering consent or dissent are increasingly limited.⁷⁾

Democracy has become more widely accepted than ever, yet, confronted by global challenges, nationally based democratic institutions appear increasingly insufficient. Not only the challenge of financial crises, but the realities of climate change, the threats of nuclear proliferation, the risks of globalized health pandemics (such as, most recently, H1N1), the corrupting activities of

6) Adam Lupel, *Globalization and Popular Sovereignty: Democracy’s Transnational Dilemma* (London: Routledge, 2009).

7) See Lupel, *Globalization and Popular Sovereignty*.

transnational organized crime, to name just a few, all require responses that outstrip the capacities of even the most powerful nation-state.⁸⁾ However, the problem for democracy again, is that there is currently no process underway that makes democratic global governance a possibility in the immediate future. That perhaps sounds pessimistic, but as may become clear, on these issues I could be accused of being an optimistic pessimist, which is maybe just another way of saying I am an idealistic pragmatist.

The dilemma of having to choose between global governance and democratic governance is a false choice. It is a false choice because we need better global governance, and in the long run effective global governance will have to be perceived as legitimate and thus, some democratic process of legitimation will be necessary. Of course, others would argue that effectiveness itself creates legitimacy. But I would respond that over time effective governance of any kind requires public oversight (to combat corruption or clientelism among other socio-political ills) and public input (to identify the problems most in need of attention). In order for globalization to continue without signifying the demise of democratic self-governance, new forms of democratic politics need to be developed.

Three Views of the Future and the Task Ahead for Modern Direct Democracy

Thus, the task is to develop mechanisms for *transnational* democratic practice. Now, you ask, what are the major opportunities and limitations ahead for establishing such a system? Very briefly, I'd like to present three views on this question – the optimistic, the pessimistic, and the pragmatic.

The optimistic view (opportunities)

The optimistic view is that there are many opportunities. Optimistically, one can say, many recent developments augur well for the development of

8) On the need to strengthen multilateral responses to global crises, see the IPI Blue Papers Series: International Peace Institute, *IPI Blue Papers* Nos. 1~11, Task Forces on Strengthening Multilateral Security Capacity, New York, 2009. Available at www.ipinst.org.

democratic politics beyond the national domain. For one, technological advances in information technology make the transnational communication of political ideas and identities, preferences, and petitions increasingly realistic. Satellite communications and the Internet shorten the distance between like-minded peoples and have the potential to reduce the opportunity costs of becoming politically involved. Such technological advances also increase the capacity for diaspora communities to maintain political networks that transcend the ties of territorially based political institutions; and they present opportunities for the development of transnational mechanisms of modern direct democracy through Internet voting, virtual public spheres, and the like.

Beyond such technological advances, political developments suggest a future when transnational politics will not be uncommon. The rise of interest in regional projects of various kinds around the globe suggests a readiness of national governments to accept that globalization requires cooperation. Meanwhile, the search for effective solutions to pressing problems requires making connections and establishing authorities of various kinds that transcend national borders. Most obviously, the continuing project of the European Union comes to mind. But developments on the African Continent are also significant, not just at the level of the African Union, but also at the sub-continental level, for example, the Economic Community of West African States.

The pessimistic view (limitations)

The pessimistic view is that for every opportunity there are many limitations. Pessimistically one could argue that the technological advances just mentioned are normatively ambivalent. They are tools that may be wielded by anti-democratic tendencies as well as the democratic. As the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close we can see that the end of the Cold War did not result in the end of history with the triumph of liberal democracies the world over. Populism, religious based-politics, authoritarian capitalism, all represent strong anti-democratic tendencies in the world today. Furthermore, while the regional projects we are seeing in development may have the potential for democratization in the future, currently they suffer from well-known democratic deficits. The European Union, again, is the furthest along, but, as struggles over the proposed constitution and the Lisbon Treaty suggest, many still see it as an elite project.

However, the biggest limitation to the potential constitution of transnational democracy is that currently, none of the principal actors in the international arena – not states, not peoples, not capital – can be counted on to recognize an immediate interest in the transnational democratization of power. For example, a new level of regulation and oversight is always antithetical to the libertarian instincts of capital. While capital benefits from international legal agreements guaranteeing property relations and processes of exchange, it tends to oppose regulatory procedures that might restrict labor or trade policies in the name of social interests. States, as the major actors in the international arena, have a strong interest in maintaining their *de jure* sovereignty; sovereign status remains the foundation of state identity and agency in the international arena. This is never given up lightly. And, perhaps most troublesome for the cosmopolitan vision of transnational democracy, while individuals are set to benefit the most from the institutions of transnational democratic law, *peoples* are often the most reactionary forces regarding notions of world community and transnational solidarity. Popular opinion is often more nationalistic and parochial than that of political, social, and economic elites. This was evident in the campaigns to reject the European constitution in France and the Netherlands and in general attitudes about the United Nations in the United States.

The pragmatic view (one step at a time)

The pragmatic view, which I have come to favor, says we need to take things one step at a time. Pragmatically speaking, the great range of challenges the world faces today require that we concentrate on the tasks at hand. Further crises and global challenges require better global governance. Successful global governance requires legitimacy. This will require a process of inclusion, so that the governments and the peoples affected by the purview of governing institutions feel a sense of ownership. To be successful over the long term global governance will have to avoid being perceived as having been imposed from abroad. But how to consider incorporating popular participation or democratic representation into the process of global governance depends upon the form of rule-making structure being addressed. When discussing the potential of transnational democracy at the regional level, such as in the case of the European Union,

efforts may still be focused on a well-defined and relatively centralized authority. However, when considering broader issues of global governance there are multiple centers of often overlapping authority to consider: states, international organizations, private industries, and multilateral arrangements of many kinds, for example. Thus, the proper object of popular participation is more diffused and unclear.

On the occasion of the U.N. International Day of Democracy, one can admit that the United Nations – the closest thing extant to a universal centralized institution for global governance – is not currently a democratically structured organization, even though it is important to recognize the principles of democracy and especially human rights lie at its very core as regulative ideals, pole stars guiding it into the future. To be realistic, at least since the efforts of 2005, it has been clear that a wholesale democratic reform of the global governance system is not in the immediate offing. Thus, the pragmatic view suggests that building legitimate global governance needs to be done on a case by case basis, through clear and well-defined channels of authority. There are precedents to suggest this is a potentially fruitful endeavor. It is widely recognized that popular participation and global civil society played a pivotal role in providing the momentum for the establishment of the International Criminal Court, in the process that led to the Ottawa Convention Banning Landmines, and in the establishment of the U.N. framework on Children and Armed Conflict.⁹⁾

Less than the immediate idealistic overhaul of international institutions or the constitution of new global bodies, the pragmatic view of transnational democracy focuses on the strengthening of popular sovereignty at the local and national levels in communication with regional institutions and networks of a growing transnational civil society in order to find the best responses to the worst problems. Over time, real-world responses to real problems can shift transnational norms affecting elite opinion in key capital cities, making the practical transformation of international institutions more likely.

9) For a series of examples of how civil society can contribute to the establishment of global regulatory frameworks, see James Cocayne, et al., *Beyond Market Forces: Regulating the Global Security Industry* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2009).

Transnational challenges require transnational solutions. The challenges of climate change, financial crisis, nuclear arms, pandemic disease, and extreme poverty, among others, cannot be addressed by a go-it-alone politics. Recognizing the challenges globalization poses for democracy should not force a choice between democratic governance and global governance, but rather encourage the search for innovative, legitimate solutions to the practical problems that are common to all. Thus, the task ahead for Modern Direct Democracy is to develop mechanisms to incorporate democratic deliberation into this process, to register the consent, dissent, fears and aspirations of all affected by the processes of transnational politics, to subject global governance to democratic authority as it is being constituted by actors providing immediate responses to the demands of our time. This is an extraordinary challenge in itself. But how this challenge is met has great consequences for the world in the years to come.