

Critical Assessment of Cosmopolitan Democracy

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DARIA JARCZEWSKA, JAN 22 2013

Critical Assessment of the Scheme for Cosmopolitan Democracy as Put Forward by David Held and Others

This essay is an attempt to critically assess the scheme for cosmopolitan democracy as outlined by David Held and Daniele Archibugi, in contrast to the views of such academics as Martin Wolf, and Michael Saward. As a theoretical framework, it takes on the transformationalist view of globalization (McGrew, 1997, p.13) and the concept of legal pacifism as expressed by Daniele Archibugi (Archibugi, 1995, p.124). This essay's main argument is that it would be highly beneficial to free the concept of democracy of its territorial, state-bound constraints and work towards a more democratic global order; however, it is more feasible to achieve this goal by working within existing regimes, especially the UN (Archibugi, 1995, p.122), rather than creating a new global geopolitical structure.

Introduction

"We live today at a fundamental point of transition," states David Held when introducing his scheme for cosmopolitan democracy (Held, 2006, p.304). In this transitional phase, he sees a vast discrepancy between the globalised conception of power and the ideals of democracy, and a danger of democratic politics resigned to adapting to the global market forces. A remedy to that he sees in "the entrenchment of democratic autonomy on a cosmopolitan basis; deepening and extending democracy across nations, regions and global networks" (Held, 2000, p. 305). Underlying this vision are beliefs that the dividing line between the domestic and foreign sphere of politics, if ever existed, is being more and more blurred (Mc Grew, 1997, p.13), and that the notion of state sovereignty is no longer indivisible and unchallenged (Rosenau, 2005, p. 73). In the academic debate, the notion of democracy came to be inextricably linked with the concept of a state (McGrew, 1997, p. 5, Held, 2006, p.290, Holden, 2000, p.4). However, the scheme for cosmopolitan democracy presupposes that the ideals of democracy do not necessarily have to be confined to the borders of a nation-state. Quite the contrary: it is desirable that they take on a form of "a powerful international ethos" (Archibugi, 1998, p. 246). This broader view of democracy allows us to apply its premises on the transnational level, what, ultimately, could lead to a more just, accountable and humanitarian international system.

Theoretical Flaws and Benefits of Global Democracy

The normative stance that is behind the schemes of cosmopolitan democracy is a very strong one. It emphasises the importance of individualistic morality, where each individual is of equal moral worth (Coates, 2000, p. 90). It also stresses the extent of goals and threats that are common to humanity as a whole (Held, 2006, p. 304). Indeed, if one accepts Ulrich Beck's view that we now live in "a civilizational community of fate" (Beck, 2006, p.7), it is vital to enhance the democratic character of the international organizations responsible for handling global issues.

Held also rightly argues that in the global order as it is now, the national interest often prevails over some of the global concerns, which could prove problematic in the long run for the international community. The USA's blunt refusal to sign the bio-diversity protocol in Rio in 1992 (Birch, 1993, p. 31) could be taken as an example of the helplessness of the international community in enforcing a common environmental agenda: hence the need for a more binding legal framework of international institutions (Held, 1995, p. 83).

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However, one could find more efficient ways of securing accountability within existing structures, and the project of the global parliament as proposed by Held (Held, 2006, p.308) seems unfeasible and unnecessary. He supports his view that the decision-making process is currently democracy-deficient with an example of the question of non-renewable resources and transnational finance regulation (Held, 2006, p. 292). It is, however, questionable whether the citizens of individual states feel that they lack means of expressing their views of those matters, or that they wish to have greater influence on them. It is often the case that the people are mostly concerned with the issues that affect them directly, and the breadth of which they can grasp easily (Analysis, 2011). Also, now, a great challenge to democracy is the lack of interest in the national politics, as the continuously low voter turnout proves (UK Political Info, 2010). Arguing that such a global parliament would foster a greater sense of cosmopolitan identity is of questionable foundation, too. Birch states that it is much more realistic to describe the EU as an elitist institution, rather than democratic, since it lacks majority support and individual national identity is still much stronger than a European one (Birch, 1993, p.33). That being the case, it is only reasonable to see how far we are from constructing any form of a universal, cosmopolitan identity. The question of non-democratic states definitely represents a tremendous hurdle to overcome in the project of the global parliament. If states are not embedded in the democratic traditions, we can hardly expect them to adhere to democratic values on the global level. Still, David Held remains incorrigibly optimistic here.

Considering the difficulties inherent in the project of global parliament, it may be more beneficial to shift focus of analysis towards existing institutions and making them committed to the equitable treatment of all segments of our population, and providing equal engagement of all relevant non-state and state actors on the global stage.

The moral aspects of Held's vision are worth taking closer look at: the unequal representation of the world citizens in the IGOs is against the cosmopolitan notion of each person having equal moral value (Held, 2010, p. 40). Still, there are grounds to believe that there is no contradiction between the shape of the current international system and the values of cosmopolitan morality. Andrew Hurrell argued that many non-state actors, i.e. NGOs, transnational social movements, "harness a growing sense of cosmopolitan moral awareness" (p. 145). Similarly, the UN adheres to the ideals of global democracy to a great extent, as Jean-Philippe Thérin and Madeleine Dumontier argue (Thérin, Dumontier, 2000, p. 356). There have been efforts to enhance the participation and role of non-state actors within its structures (Boutros-Ghali, 1996, 25), such as calling into existence the Non-Governmental Liaison Service in 1975 to further incorporate NGOs into policy-making processes and strengthening cooperation between the UN agencies and civil society groups (Boutros-Ghali, 1996, 365). Yet another democratising trend within the UN is the introduction of global partnerships, such as the Millennium Development Goals that involve various actors, both state and non-state.

Despite numerous criticisms on Held's part of the UN, it has been argued that its efficiency is at its height since its inception in 1945 (Wolf, 2004). Even though Held acknowledges the differences between individual countries and their locations within various power blocks (Held, 2006, p. 294), he fails to see that the notions of power and sovereignty cannot be constructed irrespective of contemporary realities of power (Wolf, 2004), and the UN organs must take account of them accordingly.

If the UN is to perform its function of global governance, which was its primary goal (Archibugi, 1995, p.122), it needs to be strengthened and given more scope to perform this role (Boutros-Ghali, 2000, p.105). That could be achieved, as Daniele Archibugi suggests, by rebuilding its constitutional structure (Archibugi, 1995, p.123), especially by reforming the International Court of Justice and aiding it with executive mechanisms. Norms without measures of enforcement will remain solely of symbolic value, which is not enough to prevent international conflicts and crimes against humanity from happening (Archibugi, 1995, p.126-127). It is only when its jurisdiction is made mandatory and upholds the principle of individual responsibility for war crimes (Archibugi, 1995, p.148) that it can be rendered a real guarantor of justice worldwide, and transform the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights into a piece of enforceable international law.

In 2005, at the UN World Summit, the UN undertook the scheme of Responsibility to Protect. It states that governments must protect their populations (not only their citizens) from crimes and violations, and should they fail to do so, that will result in collective action through the Security Council and in cooperation with various organisations

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(Bellamy, 2010, p. 143). Such new steps can make the goal of an accountable international community more achievable.

Conclusion

The statement by Will Kymlicka that “the only forum in which genuine democracy occurs is within national boundaries” (Kymlicka, 1999, p. 124) is a simplification. If we conceive of democracy as a set of ideals that can be implemented to varying degrees, there is indeed a possibility to democratise the international order, as Held argues. It could be done by strengthening the UN system and the international law regimes. Thus, it is reasonable to conceive of applying ethical values to international relations (Coates, 2000, p. 87). It is of paramount importance to make international law more enforceable, and broaden the scope of responsibility of the ICJ according to the principle of individual responsibility. Since “international society is both a society of States and a society of individual persons” (Boutros-Ghali, 2000, p. 105), it must be the UN’s goal to protect both in equal measure. Focusing on enhancing democracy within individual states and existing IGOs, like the UN, will move the scheme for global democracy within the realm of possibility (Saward, 2000, p.34, Archibugi, 1995, p.122). That is not to say that one should give up the very distant vision of a borderless, cosmopolitan world order. Still, it is much more attainable to ask what could be done now to bring more accountability and justice into the global system.

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Date written: January 2012