Review - Reinventing Global Democracy

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THERESA SQUATRITO, MAY 13 2014

'Reinventing Global Democracy'
By: Jan Aart Scholte
European Journal of International Relations 20: 1 (2014), pp. 3-28.

Scholte's Postmodern Global Democracies

In his recently published piece on "Reinventing Global Democracy," Jan Aart Scholte asks "what forms could 'people's rule' take in respect of transplanetary affairs? How can the publics who are affected by one or the other global issue participate in and exercise control over relevant policy decisions?" (4). Scholte proposes that global democracy is best envisioned through a new approach, which he labels "postmodern global democracies." His approach responds to what he identifies as the central inadequacies of two current strains of thought on global democracy – statism and cosmopolitanism. According to Scholte, statism is the view that "global democracy is best achieved through multilateral collaboration among democratic nation-states" (4), whereas cosmopolitanism suggests that "global democracy is optimally realized by elevating pillars of Western liberal democracy…from the national to the global level" (4). Among other things, Scholte contends that both of these perspectives fail to adequately account for the social structures and characteristics of global governance that dominate the current global environment. He argues that in the contemporary world, global connections are greater than ever before, collective identities are often non-territorially based, suprastate, substate and non-state actors as well as states are global regulators, and the Western-modern state is critically looked upon by some cultural views.

Scholte suggests that instead of the vision of global democracy put forward by statism or cosmopolitanism, global democracy should be built on five principles – transcalarity, plural solidarities, transculturality, egalitarian redistribution and eco-ship. Transcalarity recognizes that "democracy is not achieved at one or the other geographical 'level', but through fluid mobilizations across scales" (14). Plural solidarities as a principle tells us that "an individual can embrace multiple solidarities and that the relative weight of these attachments can fluctuate," and thus there is no one *demos* but a plural *demoi* behind global democracy (16). The principle of transculturality requires that within all cultures or life-worlds global democracy "be practiced in ways that are *meaningfully* democratic within each of these multiple life-worlds" (17). Egalitarian redistribution recognizes that truly democratic rulemaking requires not only legal and moral equality of persons, but also economic equality. Last, eco-ship "would embed democracy in a concern with ecological integrity" (20).

Scholte's argument is likely to have two sets of criticism. First, some might contend that Scholte has unfairly criticized statism or cosmopolitanism. In my view, Scholte's readings of these approaches are generally reflective of ideas espoused by scholars. That said, Scholte sweeps over some nuances in current research that are less at odds with his own perspective than he depicts. For example, many in the cosmopolitan camp try to identify methods by which the plurality of identities and cultures can be integrated into global democracy—for example, proponents of deliberative democracy and stakeholder democracy set their sights on democratic inclusiveness and recognize the non-territorially characteristics of social structures. At times Scholte's critiques, especially of cosmopolitanism, seems to paint broad strokes over a wide-variety of ideas without fully crediting those who agree that global democracy concerns governance at multiple levels of political activity, the representation of non-territorially defined identities and cultures, as well as aims for economic equality and environmental sustainability. Scholte however does

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admit that his treatment of statism and cosmopolitanism is "somewhat stylized" and that "the classification does not aim to do justice to every nuance of each thinker on global democracy" (5). I leave it to those who self-identify as statists and cosmopolitans to determine whether this disclaimer is satisfactory or if he fundamentally misrepresents their approach.

Second, sceptics may argue that "postmodern global democracies" is too idealistic and politically infeasible. Indeed, Scholte is ambitious in his normative reflections and hopes for the future. However, Scholte himself preempts this response, and argues that his purpose "is not to propose an immediately and fully realizable formula" and that "with respect to implementation, the article mainly operates on a longer time horizon of several generations" (5). Recognizing the tall order that he draws for us, I leave it to others to entertain concerns of the political feasibility of realizing "postmodern global democracies."

Missing Principles

Instead of constructing a response to Scholte that is based on either of these two strands of critique, the aim of this piece is to work with his concept of "modern global democracies." I try to envision how this normative framework would translate into practice. Through this exercise, several questions arise. As a result, I contend that the greatest constraint on Scholte's vision comes from under-specification. The principles Scholte identifies for building global democracy, are desirable on the face of it. Nevertheless, without specification of how these principles are balanced or how the principles translate into decision-making, we can ultimately not make broad assessments about the desirability of building global democracy on the pillars that Scholte identifies.

Perhaps the easiest principle to translate into a specific policy proposal is that of transcalarity. The transcalar pillar suggests that we would abandon policies which ascribe democracy to a single level of political activity, and instead pursue democratic governance at all levels and spheres and in all combination of spheres. Thus, in practical terms, the ambition would be to simultaneously "build democracy" in "households, workplaces, districts, provinces, countries, and regions" as well as at the global level. In addition, Scholte envisions "fluid mobilizations across scales" (14), or some system of cooperation among levels of political activity to address global concerns. However, Scholte does not explain how this method of cross-scale coordination will be obtained. What ordering principles would adjudicate between levels of political activity? Would there be any guidelines for governing conflicts among scales? For example, if a household democratically decides upon a policy which is not reconcilable with what a workplace democratically decides, how are we to adjudicate between the two democratic decisions? In current circumstances, principles such as a margin or appreciation or subsidiarity serve as rules of deference to govern such conflicts between scales of political activity. Scholte tells us, however, that "no scale is *a priori* privileged" and we should "refuse a subsidiarity principle." Yet, without principles to structure deference among scales, Scholte's "postmodern global democracies" runs the risk of being no more democratic than the current state of affairs, as power and interests are likely to serve as the central determinants of how to adjudicate between scales of political activity in the absence of rules of deference.

By my understanding, the pillars of plural solidarities, transculturality and eco-ship translate into broad inclusiveness in global governance. All forms of identity, whether territorially-based, class, gender, age, religion or ideology, should be represented and expressed. All cultural or life-views should likewise have voice. Similarly, ecological integrity should also be among the concerns incorporated into decision-making. Such inclusiveness, while desirable at first glance, raises important questions about the limits and balancing of inclusiveness. How are solidarities, cultures and eco-ship to be balanced against one another? For example, some cultures would not recognize the inclusion of women as essential to a meaningfully democratic order. How then should women be served alongside such life-worlds? In other words, by what principles would minority identities and cultures be protected when according to some views they are not essential to democracy? Is it desirable to incorporate absolutely any and all perspectives no matter what ideas they espouse? Are there any absolutes or truths, aside from the preference for democratic rule, which are to be held above transculturality, plural solidarities, redistribution, or ecological interests? Defining the boundaries of inclusiveness and how to balance among identities, cultures and ecological integrity is essential to building democracy. In my view, without further specification of how to govern and balance amongst solidarities, cultures, and ecological interests, it is difficult to determine how such principles would translate into desirable global

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governance.

Similarly, another way in which Scholte's "postmodern global democracies" begs for further specification relates to how voice translates into democratic decision-making. It is clear that Scholte envisions a process whereby all solidarities and cultures and ecological integrity have voice in governance. But, how are decisions actually to be made or arrived at? This is an essential question to ask in order to determine the desirability of the principles put forward by Scholte. Ultimately, the desirability of these principles is conditioned by whether one speaks of democratic rule-making according to majoritarian, deliberative, or representative practices. For example, if Scholte envisions democratic rule-making to develop from deliberative practices, transculturality may be less problematic than if decision-making were to be majoritarian (without minority protections). In the model presented in Scholte's article, it is unclear how inclusiveness goes from the consultative aspects of governance to the actual rule-making phase. By what principles does decision-making occur? How does providing voice for all identities, cultures and ecological concerns manifest in rule-making? Without a clearer sense of how decision-making can actually function according to the principles of "postmodern global democracies," it is difficult to make assessments of how desirable this model of global democracy actually is.

Scholte's "postmodern global democracies" invites several questions. His vision of building global democracy based on the principles of transcalarity, plural solidarities, transculturality, economic redistribution and eco-ship, in my view, is far from complete. As I have discussed, the absence of principles to balance among identities, cultures and ecological interests and to translate inclusion and participation into rulemaking makes it difficult to assess the desirability of this vision. Nonetheless, Scholte provides a solid starting point for how to reinvent global democracy in the face of the complexity of today's world.

About the author:

Theresa Squatrito is a Political Science Post-Doctoral research fellow at the PluriCourts Center of Excellence, University of Oslo. She previously worked as a postdoc at Stockholm University on the Transdemos research programme (funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond of Sweden), where she researched transnational actors in global governance. She received her PhD from the University of Washington, Seattle in political science. Her recent publications include The Opening Up of International Organizations, Cambridge University Press, 2013 (with J. Tallberg, T. Sommerer, and C. Jönsson).