

“Global Democracy”, Sovereignty, Power Relationships

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I. Global Democracy

Conceptions of a good global political order differ in many respects, but there seems to be a minimal consensus among those interested in the matter that we should not adopt as our ideal some single world government, be it democratic or not. “Global democracy” for most people refers not to a certain type of world government but rather to a world of cooperating democratic governments.¹ This consensus leaves plenty of room for differing opinions on the exact nature of the cooperating entities and on the character and kinds of their cooperation. For instance: Should we adopt as our ideal a world of sovereign states or rather a multitude of purpose-specific clubs with overlapping memberships? Do we think of cooperation by means of specific treaties among sovereign states or rather by means of more stable and general multilateral decision making institutions to which sovereignty is in part transferred?

Since the order, whatever its character, could not and should not be designed and imposed by philosopher kings or by any other power, a pertinent question is, of course, what order we might expect to evolve from the unhampered interaction of democracies which mutually respect their sovereignty. Will there be a tendency to get rid of the sovereign nation state and to replace it by something else or do we have reason to expect its survival? And if it should survive: What kind of politics among states can we expect? Is it mainly ‘cooperation’ or is it also ‘conflict’? What is the role of power and coercion in that world?

In the following I will discuss some of the answers to these questions. A short comment on the description of the hypothetical original setting is warranted: We will look at the interaction of democratic states which

¹ Cf. Only Held (1995), Plattner (2002), Vanberg (2000).

mutually respect each other as equally sovereign. The condition of democracy everywhere is somewhat optimistic when compared to the world as it is now – but without this condition the concept of global democracy would lose its meaning altogether. Of course we have to use a very modest concept of democracy, just to avoid the trap of wishful thinking. So no specific – liberal, pluralist, tolerant, universalist – political culture may be assumed, but only the bare institutional minimum: By ‘democratic’ not more is meant here than that governments are chosen for limited terms by general and competitive elections. It should be noted that even this not very demanding concept of democracy implies that certain constitutional restrictions on the actions of majorities and elected governments do exist and are respected – majorities/governments cannot disenfranchise people at will; they cannot prevent competition for power at will; they have to accept defeat at the ballot. That means that democracy is not possible without some basic ingredients of the *rule of law*. All democracies are liberal democracies in this strictly *institutional* sense or they are no democracies at all. That granted, democracies may be more or less liberal in any other respect. For instance, majorities may respect the ways of minorities or they may try to force their ways of living on them.²

What can we expect to evolve under such circumstances? Where do we think a world would go, a world which consists of political communities of this kind interacting in a lawful manner?

First, and trivially, we would expect no wars in that world, but rather some kind of democratic peace: States which internally respect the rule of law to at least some degree and which respect each others sovereignty will not live in a Hobbesian jungle but will naturally tend to solve their conflicts peacefully, by treaties, by bargaining, by arbitration. They will not need a supreme authority to keep this system working.

Second, we would expect a multi-level division of labor: Some issues – the provision of global public goods – will be a matter of global cooperation; other issues – the provision of non-global but still transnational public

2 Fareed Zakaria (2003), who makes ample use of the concept of illiberal democracy, is deplorably ambiguous in this respect: Sometimes he denotes by that term systems which are in fact thinly disguised autocracies (Zakaria himself calls them ‘sham democracies’); sometimes he denotes by the same term democracies where the majority tries to force its way of living on minorities. The difference, however, is by no means a small one - the first type of government is non-democratic by whatever standards we measure democracy, whereas the second one may indeed be a sort of democracy which differs in some respects from our ‘western’ notions but is nevertheless a democracy.

goods – will be dealt with on an inter-state regional basis; some issues finally will remain matters of state-internal decision making. Since the interests of the cooperating states will not be homogeneous, bargaining will be tough and cumbersome. However, some of the standard collective action problems will be mitigated since the number of actors is relatively small, the actors are not anonymous to each other and they are mutually transparent. No over- or under-representation of the demand for some public good is likely, free riding and shirking are easy to detect. Problem-related clubs of states, providing specific club goods, will emerge.³ These clubs may have their own constitution, where to a degree autonomy is traded for mutual control. If these clubs are multi-purpose clubs, something like a new level of government emerges with respect to the members of the club. The extremely improbable borderline case would be the all-purpose club where all states are members – the world government. Much more likely is a multitude of clubs differing in scope and membership.

Third, also the internal structure of the states will be affected, since strong institutional competition among them will take place. Since the mobility of productive resources – all kinds of human and physical capital – is comparatively free under the rule of law, no jurisdiction can afford legal insecurity, corruption, or maintaining inefficient institutions. So everywhere some independence of the courts from political power will prevail in the end, discretionary political power will be limited by the law, the citizens will be equal before the law and have recourse to the courts not only in cases of conflict with other citizens, but also in cases of conflict with the authorities. Taxes will have an upper limit everywhere, and higher than average tax burdens can only be imposed where compensating advantages of a jurisdiction exist (you may tax firms higher than other jurisdictions if, e. g., the schools in your jurisdiction are better than theirs⁴).

Finally, we might see some segregation: As far as issues are concerned about which people have different opinions (‘position issues’ as opposed to the ‘valence issues’ focussed on in the last paragraph) people may tend to move to places where they find people with similar tastes and therefore see better chances to obtain their preferred mix of policies.

It seems to be only a small step from here to the dissolution of traditional political entities altogether: Jurisdictions are similar in vital as-

3 Buchanan (1965), also Zintl (1997).

4 Cf. in particular Sinn 1992, Vanberg/Kerber (1994), Vanberg (2000).

pects – therefore leaving is not painful; no deeper loyalties develop; and if membership is nothing else but the choice of a specific consumption bundle – why not give people the opportunity to opt for individual custom-made bundles of policies? So the final stage of the cooperation of free societies seems to be the dissolution of multi-purpose agencies like the nation state and their replacement by problem specific clubs with overlapping memberships, sometimes without any territorial basis. The concept of citizenship will be thoroughly transformed.⁵ And with this transformation, of course, the idea of sovereign states will lose any real meaning.

Is this what the world would look like in the end if everything went smoothly?

II. The Demand for Protective Sovereignty

Government as seen from a classical liberal point of view is an agency which provides first law enforcement (i. e. security of rights) and second those goods and services which are not provided adequately by the voluntary cooperation of autonomous individuals (public goods). Seen this way, the state is an institution which is subsidiary to the market.

If that is all that the citizens expect from government, then the evolution just sketched should indeed be normatively and factually plausible among democratic states. The only resistance to this evolution could come from those who under present conditions enjoy the power and prestige of public office and whose status would be threatened by the vanishing of the traditional nation state. Since these people are agents and not principals in democracies their resistance to change would not be legitimate and should legitimately be overridden.

But certainly this is not the whole story. What is missing in the picture presented so far is the fact that the political arena is also the place where mutual *solidarity* among the members of a community is enforced by means of collectively binding decisions.⁶ Call it duties of solidarity,

5 Frey (2003), also Frey (1997); also Guéhenno (1995).

6 Note that also Frey's (2003) concept of citizenship involves mutual obligations but clearly they are obligations of reciprocity, not of solidarity (101). Basically they regulate an exchange process, namely the exchange of taxes against the use of public services. Obligations of solidarity, by contrast, involve duties towards those in need without direct or indirect reciprocity (they hold also in cases where the recipients will never be able to pay back). Probably the idea of solidarity is much closer than ideas of reciprocity to the core of the concept of *demos* – a concept which is typically used in arguments against the conception of multiple citizenship. Cf. only Plattner (2002).

political income guarantees or even social justice⁷ – the democratic state as we know it is an agency aiming at protecting all its citizens against the risks of life and in particular against some of the risks endemic in the arena of voluntary cooperation. This solidarity implies duties for everyone and involves transfers, but it should not be confounded with the plundering of the rich minority by the poor majority. In working democracies, where no social group is in definite possession of power, the interest shared by all is much more an interest in creating stable income expectations for everyone⁸ (whereas the use of political power to rob people of their income and property is typical for nondemocratic systems – exactly because some people have power and other people don’t). Not majorities gone wild are the typical problem of democracies, but rather the petrification of societies, brought about by an implicitly conservative and protectionist distributional coalition among all powerful groups.⁹

Since the use of politics to protect income expectations (and *Lebenswelten* in general) is an essential part of democratic politics, whether we like it or not, we have to expect resistance against the changes described above. People are not interested in the evaporation of the state as they know it. They have a definite interest in its control over its internal situation, i. e. the preservation of some of its sovereignty. And what is more, in democracies people do not only have that interest but can also effectively demand the protective use of sovereignty. We see it everywhere.¹⁰

Now again this is not yet the whole story. Protecting incomes against the risks of competition can only be accomplished by somehow restricting or dampening the dynamics of competition. Wherever a society is not

7 Social Justice not conceived of as the correction of market ‘injustice’ (an idea rightly criticised by von Hayek) but seen as a property of an encompassing system of institutions which combines the legitimate reciprocity of voluntary exchange with the legitimate solidarity of helping where help is needed.

8 This is not the case in societies with deep and lasting cleavages. In this situation the majority may permanently discriminate against the minority – but this is the pathological case where democracy is in danger of breaking down, and not the typical working of democracy.

9 Cf. in particular Olson (1982). There is some tendency among libertarian writers to deplore these rigidities under the heading of unfettered majoritarianism, whereas in fact they are nearly the opposite.

10 Certainly this diagnosis is no news to communitarian thinkers (cf. only Walzer (1983), esp. ch. 3); and probably it will please communitarian thinkers more than libertarians – but the question is not whether one likes it but rather whether it is plausible.

completely closed *vis à vis* the rest of the world this will lead to competitive disadvantages compared to societies which practice less restrictions. So protection is costly. This leads to a difference between the immediate or short term interest of the people (an interest in as much protection as possible) and the enlightened and long term interests of the people (an interest in preserving competitiveness). The resulting choice problem can be articulated in the political process. The outcome is indeterminate – sometimes the protectionist interests will prevail, sometimes not. In any event, we will see some pressure to liberalise, to open up to competition and therefore also to emulate the standards practised elsewhere. At this point therefore we cannot take the initial scenario of institutional competition and assimilation as plainly refuted – this evolution may run into obstacles but it is by no means clear that the obstacles will block it altogether.

But then, all this applies to matters where we have in fact interdependence among different political communities. What can we expect for those areas of our life which are not under any competitive pressure? Here the protectionist impulse, if it exists, is not checked by whatever long term or enlightened interests. It can be successfully articulated in politics. Where this is the case we should expect a two-sided picture of the evolution: On the one hand, in the realm of interdependence and competition, we find pressure to adapt to the environment – this means a reduction of sovereign self-control of political communities. On the other hand, where what might be called the individuality of a political community can be preserved without cost, it will be preserved. It may well be the case that the tendency to do so will intensify as interdependence grows. If issues can be found which fall into this group democratic politicians competing for votes will obviously have reasons to present protectionist programs.

Such issue areas exist: Life styles, cultural and religious traditions and collective identities are ideally suited to this kind of politicization. At first this assertion might sound absurd, since exactly here globalization seems to be most irresistible – the notorious ubiquity of Coca Cola, Nike, MTV seems to prove the point. But we should note the fundamental difference between the dispersion processes at work here and the dispersion processes discussed above: The dispersion of tastes and habits, be it the taste for Coke or the taste for liberalism or pluralism, is a process which is not driven by competition as are the dispersion processes we dealt with before. All of it, where it happens, happens voluntarily, not driven by some logic of the situation but by tastes. Other people in the same society may stick to different tastes and they may wish their tastes to be

dominant. When they decide to make this a political matter, e. g. by declaring some practice the identity-preserving tradition of the community, they can do so at no cost; no built-in equilibrating negative feedback will tame the impulse. This politicization of culture or religion, when it happens, works in autocracies as well as in democracies: Autocracies have at least to appease these appetites, whereas in democracies there is a strong incentive to do even more than this – namely, to mobilise them, and to try to build majorities on them.¹¹

Having global democracy then does not mean by itself having or getting a culture of pluralism and tolerance. The contrary might well be true: The enforcement of more and not less internal cultural homogeneity, the investment in collective identity, may be the price that has to be paid for refraining from protectionist policies in other areas, especially the economic sphere.

Where that happens societies emerge which have two faces: The one face is standard economic modernity, assimilation, global homogenization. The other face is a growing and politically instigated intracommunity cultural homogeneity (which does not rest only on suppression but is supported in some ways by globalization itself, inasmuch as enhanced mobility supports segregation: it provides more exit options for those who otherwise might have stayed and voiced dissent and thus possibly would have kept the society from transforming into a closed society).

The world in which these societies coexist grows more uniform in economy-related aspects but not necessarily in other respects. In particular, we might find not as many liberal democracies as we would like. Cultural heterogeneity could be more and more an intersocietal and not an intrasocietal phenomenon. The difference is not only a difference of degree but a difference in kind: Diversity practised inside a society rests on some tolerance and pluralism; diversity as an intersocietal property presupposes no tolerance and pluralism. Intolerance and resentment against pluralism may not pose a danger to peaceful relations among societies – as long as the convictions behind these feelings remain particularistic. If the claim is universalistic, the situation will be more complicated. What we have to expect then is not only a combination of convergence and divergence but also a combination of harmony and conflict – more convergence and possibly harmony where economic forces are at work, more distance and maybe growing hostility where identity politics are at work.

11 Cf. for a general picture Barber (1996), for specific cases Schendel/Zürcher (2001).

The first and preliminary answers to our questions concerning the face of “global democracy” are: Assuming democracy, the rule of law and voluntary cooperation among states we have reason to expect multi-level cooperation and substantial convergence, but there is no compelling argument why the nation state as a compact multi-purpose sovereign entity should vanish. A withering away of the state and its replacement by a flexible political geometry and multiple citizenship is not outright impossible, but most likely it will not be practised on a global scale, but will be confined to clusters of societies which are already highly integrated, where national emotions are not too intense and where a political culture of restrained protectionism, cultural pluralism and religious secularism exists. Towards the outside world these islands will behave as any other state does - as sovereign and protective entities. There is no reason to expect them to grow incrementally and to integrate the rest of the world piece by piece: More likely they will, for the sake of preserving the level of integration which they have achieved, tend to become exclusive.¹²

At this point a feature of the system of states re-enters the picture which we have completely neglected so far: the enormous differences among states in their economic and military capabilities. These differences would have become less and less salient if indeed the state were becoming obsolete. Since that is not so, we have to look at the differences among states and their meaning in our system of “global democracy”.

III. Power, Unilateralism

If governments see it as their prime obligation to protect the interests of the particular group of persons whose agents they are they will perceive it as their duty to use all legitimate means to accomplish this. They will not refrain from using their capabilities and the bargaining power which these capabilities give them when they negotiate with other governments about the terms of cooperation. Governments may well use and also accept universalistic arguments in these processes,¹³ but they will certainly not tend to be generous, since this would violate their role as agents. The cooperation among states will be conflict ridden and the terms of cooperation will depend on relative bargaining positions.

12 And if they grow, they will, as the case of the European Union shows, be tempted to produce an internal differentiation between a highly integrated core and a less integrated periphery.

13 Cf. Benz/Scharpf/Zintl (1992).

The bargaining power of a state depends to a substantial degree on the costs which non-cooperation causes for this state. If a state can easily provide a desired good on its own or if it can easily bear the burden of being left out of some cooperative venture of other states, then this state's bargaining position is strong. This strength varies with the territorial size and with the economic and military capabilities of the states.

If states are highly unequal in their capabilities, then a constellation can arise where the power distribution is not a matter of degrees but dichotomous and where bargaining does not take place at all: Some states have the means to unilaterally fix the kind or level of provision of a public good, other states have to accept this and have to live with it. Sometimes the latter may find this constellation agreeable – this is well known as the exploitation of the big providers/consumers of a public good by those who are small.¹⁴ The not so agreeable side of the coin is important in our context:

The big providers/consumers may choose policies on their own and in just the way which suits them best without caring for the interests of the other states in the matter, since the potential contributions of these small consumers to the public good are not worth considering compromises. Sometimes the small states have a *take-it-or-leave-it* choice, sometimes not even this – namely, if the unilateral action creates a new environment of choice and all are forced to adapt their behavior to this environment. In this case unilateralism has a *hegemonial* quality.¹⁵ Acting unilaterally is a problem for the integrity of a cooperative system, since unilateral action is not just the autonomous action of a state in matters which are considered to be its own business, but is its going alone in a matter which is considered by all concerned states as an interjurisdictional business.

In matters of vital interest states will tend to be multilateralists where they are or feel weak and they will tend to be unilateralists where they are or feel strong. That smaller states are generally more multilateralist is only natural and not a sign of a higher level of conscience. The governments of Germany and France have shown no restraint to treat smaller European countries in the same way as the US government treats the rest of the world.

Thus, the cooperation among democratic states is not a cooperation among equals even if all respect the sovereignty of each. The system as

14 Especially in the literature on military alliances. Cf. Olson (1965).

15 Hegemony is not Empire. In Germany the role of the US in the world is sometimes denoted as „Weltvorherrschaft” and not “Weltherrschaft” – this is exactly the difference.

a whole will be thoroughly impregnated by unilateralist and sometimes also hegemonic asymmetries of different scopes, partly overlapping.

In most policy areas unilateralism and especially hegemonial unilateralism will be hard to accept and somewhat humiliating for those who are passively exposed to it and it will make the cooperation difficult, but will not put the cooperation in jeopardy. In one special policy area, however, unilateralism is not simply hard to accept but highly dangerous for global cooperation in general. This field is, of course, the field of border-crossing military or police action.

Nowhere is multilateral decision making and due process more important for the viability and the integrity of the global community. Not surprisingly, a vast and complex system of rules and procedures exists which works in many instances reasonably well. International police cooperation as well as international military cooperation to prevent or stop major human rights violations are examples. Since many defensive alliances exist and since military aggression is deemed a crime all over the world, things should go smoothly and should evolve in the right direction with the evolution of global cooperation. One of the things which certainly have to be on the list would be a legal procedure for regime change in cases where a regime violates human rights in systematic and grave ways – since that is not what sovereignty was invented for. As we all know, however, that road has become very bumpy recently. Why is this so?

The origin of the problems lies in the peculiar character of terrorist activities, which are non-state activities but nevertheless have a close connection to territorial states. “Harboring terrorists” is mainly a sign of the weakness of these states, of a fragile internal balance or of a loss of control altogether, not of the aggressivity of a state. Military action against a terrorists-harboring state is in a sense fighting crime by means of war. As crime fighting it is defense and at the same time, as war, it is aggression, where the immediate target of the attack typically pleads not guilty. Since the situation is not clear cut and since many states have themselves internal problems of coping with social, cultural and religious conflicts (some of them may be, as we saw, consequences of globalization), it is difficult to get multilateral action going. At the same time the protective urge is strong, much stronger than in economic matters. If the state whose citizens are victims of terrorist attacks has the means “to go it alone”, then to use military means unilaterally is obviously not a remote option.

It is controversial what the legal status of such actions is and it is also controversial whether such actions are wise. However one might judge

this, at least it should be admitted that they are not plainly illegal and unwise: Self defense is legitimate in principle; and whether or not the use of force leads to an escalation of terrorism depends to a good deal on the character of the terrorist challenge itself: If for instance terrorists try to provoke violent state action to ‘unmask’ a purported hidden brutality of the attacked government, then they have indeed won if the provocation is successful. If on the other hand, terrorists aim at proving the weakness and decadence of some culture or type of society, then being patient might be exactly the wrong answer. There is at least some evidence that the terrorism of Al-Qa’ida is of the second type. Of course one may be mistaken and find out later that the action was a failure or made things worse – but that does not mean that the action was irresponsible *ex ante*.

So up to this point our description of a system of global cooperation among democracies has lost much of its initial charme, yet it did not break down altogether. But maybe we have taken the temptations of power not seriously enough.

IV. Empire?

If one State is not just somewhat stronger militarily and economically than the other states but has the capacities to dominate the rest, then this state faces an obvious temptation: the temptation to use economic power not only for some arm-twisting and to use military power not only in the defensive ways we discussed so far, but simply to get whatever it wants by force and threats. This temptation is real, as could be witnessed in the years 2002 and 2003: Starting from a prevention doctrine which already stretched the logic of self defense the US government by late 2003 finally decided that regime change is a goal which can be pursued in unilateral fashion and as a matter of will. Not a legal procedure but the result was taken in retrospective as a sufficient legitimation.

As this actual example shows, worrying about the temptations of power is not a far fetched academic fancy. Nevertheless there are good reasons not to take this example as the harbinger of things to come. There are better reasons to see it as an experience which might even prompt a development towards more earnest multilateral cooperation.

First, it should not be forgotten that Iraq was considered a real problem not only by the US but also by the United Nations and that at the same time the seriousness of the UN’s multilateral proceedings could be

reasonably doubted.¹⁶ The US decision to act unilaterally did not clearly neglect a working multilateral procedure but could well be seen instead as filling a vacuum.

Second, the logic of the “democratic peace” plays its role in powerful states no less than in small states: If a community is used to the rule of law and has adopted universalistic norms, then it does not lightly use force to promote its interests. Any behavior towards the outside world which would be considered unacceptable inside the community leads to internal conflicts. A constitution works like a conscience. It does not make sinning impossible, but it erects a threshold against it.

Third, as has been argued by many in advance and as has become all too visible later, military power is useful against military threats but it does by itself give no secure control of a country.¹⁷ Military victory is at best a necessary condition of security, never a sufficient one. As far as more ambitious aspirations like regime change or more profane aspirations like making profits are concerned, the use of military power is not even a necessary evil, but definitely counterproductive. At least under modern conditions conquest is far less productive than cooperation, trade is more profitable than pillage and the extortion of tributes. A state may have overwhelming capacities and still a rational government will feel no temptation to conquer the rest of the world. Only a state which is run by mad ideologues will find that option attractive. No one can exclude the possibility of governments becoming insane or falling into the hands of criminals – but this is a possibility we have to live with anyway. However, luckily it is not very likely that such a government runs its country well enough to provide a serious imperial threat.

For all these reasons the problems generated by great military inequalities among states may not be as grave as they look at first sight. Deterrence and the balance of destructive capacities are not the only way to tame military power. Among democracies the need of and the interest in cooperation work far better (whatever a European army might be good for, it should definitely not be conceived of as a counterweight against the US military power, as is sometimes suggested).

16 The most visible sign of an absence of serious multilateralism was the declaration of the German chancellor that Germany would not take part in any military action – whatever the results of the UN-led investigations of Iraq. The tendency to act unilaterally and without paying much attention to multilateral procedures was ubiquitous.

17 For a sample of views on the matter cf. Ikenberry (2002), Mearsheimer (2003), Mann (2003).

Since the promotion even of narrow national interests requires cooperation, multilateralism might have a bright future as soon as the lesson of the recent events is digested everywhere – multilateralism is not only in the obvious interest of the weak, but also in the enlightened interest of the strong and even the strongest.

V. Outlook

The dissolution of the nation state system into a complex network of clubs providing selected collective goods is not to be expected and it can be doubted whether that dissolution should be considered as an ideal state of the world. We have also no reason to expect globalization to produce global harmony. Cultural diversity will persist and it is well possible that a globalized world becomes culturally more segregated. People then may have more opportunities to choose their own way of life, while at the same time tolerance and pluralism do not spread. The relations among the states will still be power relations – but not so much relations of coercive power but rather relations of bargaining power, created by an encompassing interest in cooperation. This is not a liberal paradise, but it is not too bad either.

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