

Globalization and the Crisis of Modern Democracy

(Draft, no footnotes and references included)

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Democracy as teleology and democracy as transitology

One of the myths perpetrated by the New World Order is the teleology of democracy. Following the Hegelian and Marxist tradition, democracy is advertised as the End of History, the final stop in the journey of the World Spirit. States who have reached the condition of democracy are supposed to live in post-history, while the rest of humanity is still coming to grips with history and modernity, and is “in transition” to democracy and the market. The very notion of “transition” therefore implies a certain teleology and determinism, as if the end stage were well-known and desirable.

Inviting a host of totalitarian analogies, such hegemonic discourse which emerged during the “third wave” of democratization, emphasizes the normative and ideological, not the functional and utilitarian side of democracy. It tends to disregard the issues of completeness of democracy (a typical fallacy of the “third wave” which has eventually suffered “death by a thousand subtractions” [Larry Diamond]), applicability of democratic norms and procedures in indigenous settings, and indeed the international and domestic legality of “promotion of democracy.” A democratic teleology emerges as a new totality, a global discourse of power, following the Foucauldian *surveiller et punir*, discipline and punish. This discourse, disguised as a normative civilizing project, in no way differs from the Christian discourse or the White Man discourse legitimizing the European colonialism of the past 500 years (Medvedev and Van Ham, 2001). As Fareed Zakaria wrote back in 1997, “Eighty years ago, Woodrow Wilson took America into the 20th century with a challenge, to make the world safe for democracy. As we approach the next century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world”.

A different approach would be to see democracy not as a *goal*, but as the very *process* of transition. To put the question in starker relief, democracy could be interpreted as a transitory phenomenon itself. This would shift the focus from discourses to instruments and uses of democracy, from democratization as teleology to democratization as transitology.

The Westphalian link

In the perspective of *longue durée*, democracy can be interpreted as a transitory form of governance which emerged at the height of the Westphalian period and remains vitally linked to the modern

nation-state. To date, there exists no evidence of sustainable institutionalized forms of democracy beyond the nation-state which still provides democracy's only political space. In a historical perspective, in order for democracy to take place, and prior to it, violence should have occurred in the form of constructing a state and defining the limits of sovereignty. First comes violence (a Weberian state), then comes democracy as a form of governance within this state. This "Westphalian link" between the nation-state and democracy, whereby the nation was largely providing for *demos* and the state for *kratos*, has remained mostly intact in the past 200 years.

Of late, however, this link has become two-way. From a mere *function* of the nation-state, democracy has grown to become its underlying *condition*, and its ultimate legitimating power. Towards the end of C20, democracy has become the legitimating discourse of the nation-state, and nations lacking in democracy, like Serbia under Milosevic, are increasingly denied statehood by the "international community." In the past, states were producing democracy (along with security), while today it is democracy and security that produce, write or invent states. It was the Weberian state that used to administer legitimate violence, and now, in a post-Weberian world, it is democracy that legitimates violence (e.g. in Kosovo) and exercises justice (e.g. in the Hague). This latest development has further reinforced the "Westphalian link", and bound together democracy, security and statehood.

The environmental crisis of democracy

The problem with democracy in today's world goes far beyond issues of the "third wave," the quality of new democracies, and questions of consolidation. The problem is systemic, shaped by the crisis of the nation-state project. The nation-state, defining the domain, procedures, and object of citizenship, has lost much of its sovereignty, undermined by the dynamics of global flows and trans-organizational networks of wealth, information and power. The state is increasingly losing its constituent monopoly on violence, and its commands cannot be fully enforced. Particularly critical for the state's legitimacy crisis is its inability to fulfill its commitments as a welfare state, because of the integration of production and consumption in a globally interdependent system. And because representative democracy is predicated on the notion of a sovereign body, the blurring of boundaries of sovereignty leads to uncertainty in the process of delegation of people's will (Castells, III, 377). In an increasingly stateless, borderless, networked world, democracy has a shrinking area of political habitat, and fewer ecological niches. There are fewer political spaces in which it could effectively operate, leading one to suggest the *environmental crisis of democracy*, i.e. the crisis of its operational environment, the nation-state, and of modern politics as such.

A shrinking universe of the political is characterized by a crisis of traditional forms of political life, like ideologies, party affiliation, left-right divide, and classes as such. "Strategic games, customized representation, and personalized leadership substitute for class constituencies, ideological mobilization and party control, which were characteristic of the politics in the industrial era" (Castells, III, 378). Political modernity is unraveling, and this is the nature of "transition" to which democracy is currently subjected. It is not a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and from planned economy to the market, but a transition from politics of the industrial era, stemming from the ideas of Enlightenment and embodied in two competing Enlightenment projects, Communism

and Liberalism, to post-industrial networks in which the tenets of sovereignty, representation and democracy are put into question.

Democracy as brand name

Whilst the main opposition of the Industrial Age was the one between labor and capital, the main contradiction of the post-industrial era, the Information Age, is the one between the forces of globalization and the power of identity; between “McWorld” and “Jihad” (Benjamin Barber), between “Net” and “Self” (Manuel Castells). These two forces combine to unravel the fabric of societies, and political systems, thereby destroying the operational environment of democracy.

On the one hand, globalization, universalization and unification all hold the promise of peace, prosperity and unity, as symbolized by the “Big Mac theory” (two nations with McDonalds restaurants do not fight each other). Apart from the obvious naïveté of this presumption (indeed, it was brilliantly disproved by NATO war against Yugoslavia in 1999), the globalization comes at a price, namely at the cost of independence, community and identity. Indeed, the major victim is difference which becomes a much less obvious postmodern *différance* (Derrida), a “trace.” Instead of mountains, globalization offers monotonous “thousand plateaus”, instead of trees, the world of networks resembles one big “rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari). Even where difference exists, it becomes a market value, much like the CNN wraps up national cultures and customs in smooth one-minute videos called “Sights and Sounds”. Protest becomes commodified as well: Che Guevara’s beret, Arabic (“Arafat’s”) *keffiyah*, or knitted reggae hats are all fashion accessories for young people engaged in token anti-bourgeois revolt. They dare to *différer*, but not to differ.

Political values required by the market are order and tranquility. In a global marketplace, human rights are needed to a degree, but not citizenship or participation. As Barber observed, McWorld requires no more social justice and equality than are necessary for efficient production and consumption. Oil companies, the harbingers of globalization, are happily dealing with corrupt regimes as far as latter don’t make war on neighbors (Saddam’s fatal mistake). “In trading partners, predictability is of more value than justice.” The global market generates the culture of management, not representation; its values are bureaucratic, technocratic and meritocratic, but hardly at all democratic.

Globalization, along with uninhibited “promotion of democracy”, run a different risk. Global markets, global media, and the culture of virtualization hollow out the idea of democracy in a sense that they turn democracy into a brand name. In a post-industrial economy, where the name of the game is “seduction” (Jean Baudrillard), it is less the goods than the brand names that do the work, for they convey lifestyle images that alter perception and behavior. There is a host of brands in today’s global culture, from Adidas to Mercedes, from CNN to the Pentagon, from human rights to animal rights which are consumed, and interiorized, without being experienced. Democracy is one of those brands: an image, a status symbol, a trend, a matter of lifestyle and fashion. As far as it delivers recognition, legitimacy and a feel-good factor, democracy needs not deliver the “goods”, i.e. participation, the quality of governance, and generally, the quality of life. Rather than commodifying, the global market simulates democracy.

Mediacracy and the crisis of representation

In olden days, democracy thrived, or deteriorated, in public spaces. The exchange was largely physical, corporeal, involving citizens and bodies of the authority interacting via established channels of representation and/or repression. Today, the simulacrum of democracy exists in the virtual space of the media. As a matter of fact, the media is increasingly becoming the *only* space of politics, turning politics into a symbolic economy and democracy into “mediacracy” (Castells), or indeed mediocrity. By *framing* politics, the media also *shapes* political projects, and politicians, in particular ways, which have little to do with representation, and much to do with simulation.

“News concern the event, not the underlying condition; the person, not the group; conflict, not consensus; the fact that ‘advances the story’, not the one that explains it” (Gitlin). To paraphrase a saying, “good news is no news.” Only “bad news”, relating to conflict, drama, unlawful deals, or objectionable behavior, is making the story. “Since news is increasingly framed to parallel (and compete with) entertainment shows, or sports events, so is its logic. It requires drama, suspense, conflict, rivalries, greed, deception, winners and losers, and, if possible, sex and violence. Following the pace, and language, of sports casting, “horse race politics” is reported as an endless game of ambitions, maneuvers, strategies and counter-strategies, with the help of insider conferences and constant opinion polling from the media themselves. The media provide decreasing attention to what the politicians have to say: the average soundbite shrank from 42 seconds in 1968 to less than 10 in 1992.” (Castells, II, 321)

Following the rules of news casting, contemporary politics focus on the image, rather than the word; on the personality (or charisma, or simply on the face) rather than on the program; use character assassination rather than informed debate. In the “society of the spectacle” (Guy Debord) politics becomes theater, representation is replaced by performance, and parties turn into theater companies. “Captured into the media arena, reduced to personalized leadership, dependent on technologically sophisticated manipulation, pushed into unlawful financing, driven by and toward scandal politics, the party system has lost its appeal and trustworthiness, and, for all practical purposes, is a bureaucratic remainder deprived of public confidence” (Castells, II, 343). The postmodern semiotics speaking of symbolic exchange and the crisis of representation can also apply as the crisis of political representation, and the emergence of non-referential democracy. From the “fourth power”, media has turned into alien power, and a potential threat to democracy.

Alienation by integration

Political unions do not result in people’s unity, and integration, a corollary of globalization, does not endow people with greater representation. Rather to the contrary, it leads to the creation of yet another bureaucratic tier, this time above the nation-state, ever further alienated from the people. A case in point is the European Union, and the well-known “democratic deficit” in the European institutions. The bureaucratic guild in Brussels has developed rules and language of its own, and firmly shielded itself from public scrutiny, so that the 1999 revelations of corruption and

mismanagement in European Commission, leading to the resignation of the entire body, came as a shock. Regular elections to the European Parliament should deceive no one, as constituencies for the European “parties” have yet to take shape, as well transnational societal interests leading to such cross-border constituencies.

The main problem here, as pointed out by Castells, is the lack of “European conflicts” on a social level. Democracy is not only built on the process of representation and consensus-building but also on democratically enacted conflicts between different social actors vying for their specific interests. True, there are many conflicts between bureaucracies, elites, industries and national lobbies in the EU. However, apart from farmers perpetually asking for more subsidies and occasionally littering the streets of European cities with their produce, there are no *social* conflicts in the European polity which could have contributed to a living democratic process (Castells, III, 358).

This begs the question whether the existing or proposed institutions of global governance could do any better. Attempts at creating a more just, equitable and democratic world would inevitably entail media hype, and the creation of bureaucratic controlling units. Both media and bureaucracy would likely reproduce totalitarian patterns, and alienate the project from the people. Any “improved” governance would have to be based on a certain political technology, and in a media world, any technology runs the risk of turning representation into manipulation.

Democracy versus identity

A protest against globalization holds equally little promise for democracy. A McDonalds restaurant vandalized by anti-globalization protesters in Gothenburg or Seattle looks as sinister as the totalitarian consumer culture that McDonalds tends to symbolize. Ironically, protest against globalization takes on increasingly global forms, and offers a different brand of totality: While McWorld means the totality of unification, new resistance identities engender totalities of parochialism, primitive tribalism and coercive collectivism. New resistance identities are an oxymoron: a globalized provincialism. Turkish Kurds demonstrate in major European cities, the Mexican Zapatistas and Chechen separatists go online, and Old Testament-style policies of Sharon have supporter groups in the United States and Europe.

Benjamin Barber has aptly named the various guises of resistance “Jihad”: a global identity war against globalization. Jihad is not simply Islamic, it is a generic anti-democratic anti-civil protest against the crisis of traditional values, the crisis of the family and gender roles, against the crisis of traditional (agrarian and industrial, but also state-supported intellectual) forms of labor and traditional ideas of justice and equality. Finally, it is a protest against the coercive practices of global democratization: More often than not, Western pressure to “democratize” Serbia, Cuba or Iraq only increases internal support for local authoritarian regimes (it is far too early to judge whether Serbia was a success story). In the non-Western world, democracy (or rather Western crusade for the promotion thereof) is increasingly opposed to identity, resulting in the rise of anti-democratic, anti-civic identities. Like in the earlier centuries local identities were formed in response to European colonialism or Communist totalitarianism, they are now emerging as a resistance to “promotion of

democracy.” “Identity *against* democracy”, or at least this perceived opposition, is one of the tragic, if uninvited, outcomes of the West-supported democratization.

“New wars” (Mary Caldor) in Chechnya, Kosovo the Middle East and Somalia are all forms of Jihad, in which identity groups, war lords, criminals and “entrepreneurs of violence” (Georg Elwert) from the Chechen, Albanian, Palestinian and Somalian sides offer one kind of anti-global protest, and Russia, Yugoslavia, Israel and the United States respond with reviving the atavistic militant nationalism and racism, also kinds of Jihad.

Bin Laden’s Holy War and US plans of building the NMD, *Sendero Luminoso* and the Russian Mafia, *Aum Shinrikyo* and the Moon Sect, Scientology and Herbalife, patriot militias in Montana and David sect in Waco, Texas, the neo-Nazi in Germany’s Eastern *Länder* and same anti-globalization protesters at G8 summits are all desperate projects of resistance to globalization, displaying a universal sense of loss in the face of inescapable incomprehensible global world. Their common denominator is belligerent provincialism, intolerance and rituals of enemy-construction, fraught with fanaticism, radicalism and war. These are all communal identities, forms of pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* which have nothing to do with the civil democratic interactive *Gesellschaft*. Identity without civility, identity opposed to democracy is no different from tribalism. As put by Castells, “Instead of transformed institutions we would have communes of all sorts. Instead of social classes, we would witness the rise of tribes. (...) People’s experiences would remain confined to multiple, segregated locales, subdued and fragmented. With no Bastille or Winter Palace to be seized, outbursts of revolt may implode, transformed into everyday senseless violence.” (Castells, III, 383) One has to look no further than Genoa last weekend.

E-democracy or e-hegemony?

Advocates of globalization are quick to point out the potential benefits of the information economy for democratization. The network as a non-hierarchic organizing principle can possibly endow hitherto disenfranchised individuals and groups with new resources and greater freedom of expression. Indeed, the Internet, and network information technologies can be seen as windows of opportunity for the world’s poor. In the Industrial Age, as in the late modern society, the measures of value (physical resources and capital) were always in short supply. As objects in the power play, they were distributed hierarchically. Automatically, the losers ended up in poor neighborhoods or benighted countries. But in today’s world, when prices of hardware decline every year, and software becomes virtually free through aggressive marketing (e.g. MSIE) or illegal replication at almost zero cost, skills and learning can be acquired much more easily. Indeed, computers, fed by the Internet’s global flow of information, could turn out to be among the most powerful social equalizers of human history.

From the point of view of democracy, too, the Internet could possibly enhance political participation and horizontal/network connection between individuals and groups. Citizens could form political and ideological constellations, bypassing established political institutions and manipulation mechanisms of the media, thereby creating a networked, flexible, adaptable political field: e-democracy.

However, this technocratic idealism can turn out to be naïve. For technical, infrastructural, social and cultural reasons access to post-industrial networks is likely to remain limited to the “golden billion” of the world population in the foreseeable future. Information networks can turn out to be the means of social differentiation and alienation akin to technologies of the industrial era, resulting in a kind of “Athenian democracy” in which a few connected rule, and those who are not wired, are increasingly excluded from social exchange and political life, “switched off” in the most literal sense.

The socializing powers of the Net are also grossly overstated. As much as it unites, the Internet separates individuals, each sitting in front of the computer screen in perfect solitude, in full control of the medium, often hidden behind a nickname, or initials, in an anonymous chat room. The social becomes an option, not the daily environment. The flesh of human exchange had disappeared, and it is precisely this “meat” of personal intercourse, with all its uncontrollability and imperfection, that makes up the body of the society, and the workings of democracy. Internet is the experience of solitude. It runs the risk of atomization of the society, while online politics could push the individualization of politics, and of the society, to a point where integration, consensus, and institution building would become dangerously difficult to reach.

Finally, the Internet is also a controllable medium, like the press. Software suppliers, content providers, and especially service providers and search engines exert an increasing control over users. A user almost never goes online “bare”; there is always an interface between him and the web resources: a browser window, or a service provider menu. The name of the game is preselection: from the channels built in the Internet Explorer to AOL or Compuserve, or CNN.com, the user is permanently suggested an “easy” shortcut to the information he needs, or the information he does not need at all, and is therefore seduced into submission. The invisible switches between you and the data you are searching can reroute, or filter, or modify your request in numerous manipulative ways.

The humanitarian market

Yet another democratic opportunity brought by globalization could be transnational issue mobilization, the emergence of elements of the global “civil society” around transnational pro-active causes, mostly of humanitarian nature. Well-known cases are Amnesty International, *Médecins sans frontières*, Greenpeace and others. Situated between social movements and political actions, addressing directly to citizens, asking people to put pressure on public institutions and private firms, they bypass traditional political agencies (parliaments) and forms of representation, and create a new, issue-oriented, non-partisan, non-political polity.

However, their impact on the process of democratization could be limited. On the one hand, issue mobilization could easily turn into totalitarian communalism, the creation of secluded communes that construct their identity by being alternative, and by opposing themselves to established institutions for the sake of the opposition. E.g. Greenpeace has been often accused of totalitarian patterns of mobilization and action. For all the help it provides, internally the MSF has evolved into a secluded

hierarchy. Eco-fascism, or humanitarian sectarianism are not just contradictions in terms, but plausible political scenarios.

On the other hand, all “internationals” display a remarkably market behavior. One has to realize that there exists a thriving market for humanitarian action, environmental activism, human rights campaigns, etc, with substantial resources, sponsors, and information flows. The competition is tight, vested interests are high, and like in any market, the mechanisms of lobbying, PR and image wars are in use. Whenever a conflict occurs anywhere in the world, especially the one involving human rights violations, all sorts of “internationals” enter the scene. INGOs (international non-governmental organizations) provide help, gather information or sponsor developments, which they think desirable. They are acting locally, but they are using resources from their international sponsors. Newsmakers and image distributors bring the conflict, as soon as it becomes an “event,” to the attention of audiences all over the world. And then, journalists, international relief organizations, human rights activists, press officers and supporters of identity groups in conflict all flock in the place, ready to provide their selection of facts to an international audience. (Zürcher) This is purely market activity, very remotely related to democracy.

The imperative of devolution: “Democracy with a human face”

The logic of globalism appears to be overwhelming, commodifying, marketizing, totalizing or virtualizing even potentially democratic developments like information networks or transnational activism. Globalization is much rather about power, markets, media manipulation and virtual reality than it is about representation, participation and human rights. Declining in national settings, democracy has not yet found its place in the world of globalization. Indeed, the very idea of evolution of democracy into a form of global governance, providing for a more just and equitable world, is probably unrealistic, as any such project is likely to be taken over by bureaucracy, the media, and vested interests of the elites, and will turn out to be a new hegemony.

All of this leaves the *devolution of democracy* as probably the most sustainable option. According to Tocqueville, “The spirit of liberty is local;” in fact real democracy has flourished in diminutive settings. State is downsized in the Information Age; regional and local governments dot the world with their projects, build up constituencies and negotiate with national governments, multinational corporations and international agencies. “The era of globalization of the economy is also the era of localization of polity. What local and regional governments lack in power and resources, they make up in flexibility and networking. They are the only match, if any, to the dynamism of global networks of wealth and information.” (Castells, III, 388)

Devolution of the nation-state leaves open the confederal option; as a matter of fact many of today’s nations can only survive as confederations. For Barber, the textbook of “decentralized participatory democracy” is not the US Constitution or the French Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, but the Articles of Confederation written by the thirteen American colonies. The future would see “a confederal union of semi-autonomous communities smaller than nation-states, tied together into regional economic associations and markets larger than nation-states – participatory and self-determinating in local matters at the bottom, representative and accountable at the top.”

A major strength of devolution is that by seeking out indigenous democratic impulses at lower level it could possibly *reconcile democracy with identity*, thus resolving a key dilemma of democracy and globalization. E.g. parliamentary systems in post-Soviet Central Asian republics could be mere tokens of democracy, but much more democratic mechanisms called *mahallah* (the neighborhood council) exist at the grass root level in cities. Unleashing the local initiative could bring representation back into democracy. Another example are referenda in the Swiss cantons and communes, forms of direct democracy which have survived through the centuries and, surprisingly, still do not show signs of absenteeism and voter apathy. For the Swiss, especially in Protestant cantons like Zurich, their direct democracy *is* identity. This is made possible precisely through the existence of a devolved confederal state like Switzerland.

In the future, one could imagine a possible division of labor between three levels of governance. *Economy* is bound to become ever more global, transnational and networked, calling into existence various international regulating agencies. *Security*, for all its trans- and subnational challenges, is still likely to remain the prerogative (possibly the last recourse) of the nation-state, and a domain of action by individual states, or by alliances of states. Finally, *democracy* is likely to remain on the local, subnational level where it could be coupled with autonomy and identity. Using the Prague Spring analogy, this could be “democracy with a human face”, democracy with identity. In order to survive in a globalising world, democracy has to abandon its global ambition, proselytism, and a civilizing discourse. It has to stay low, humble and minimalist – or else risk becoming extinct together with the dinosaurs of modernity, like industrialism, statism, and Communism.