The coming of age of global democracy?

An introduction

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“Everyone”, according to article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), “is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized”. Philosophical and political discussions regarding the best form of government on the local or national level have a long history, but what should such an international or global order look like? What kind of arrangements do we need to secure basic human rights and protect our freedom to choose and revise our conception of the good life? Should we aim for a world state, a federation of free states, or a non-centralized network of states and supranational institutes and agencies? To date, no consensus exists within theory or practice on the best possible political arrangement of international relations.1

The possible scope of such a consensus is rather narrow due to severe differences in moral and political values. Not just in practice – in the day-to-day reality of international politics – but within the field of political theory as well, severe differences persist as to the outline of a global order to come. Even those political theorists who accept some version of moral cosmopolitanism – either in a weak or a strong form2 – tend to disagree on the institutional consequences that follow from their moral intuitions.

The number of possible shapes for the international order is of course reduced by the constraints economic, social and environmental circumstances impose upon us. Depending on our assessment of the material constellation, certain political arrangements will be viable, while others will not. Radical decentralization or international anarchy, for instance, will be hard to defend in times of a global financial crisis.
Even if we could find an agreement concerning the appropriate degree of centralization, however, the question would remain: what constitutional goals such an international order should pursue? Should it primarily oversee the enforcement of basic human rights and perhaps the ‘juridification’ of international relations? Or should it also attempt to “govern” – in a democratic way – over economic and environmental affairs, and perhaps even over social and cultural issues? That is, should the final aim be to mirror the classical nation-state, or not?

Looking at the fierceness with which the democratic deficit of WTO law, IMF governance or the Security Council’s use of force has recently been discussed, this is a highly relevant question. Independent of the lack of institutional advances, the de facto political integration of the world seems unstoppable. Many people, moreover, are dedicated to making the global set-up more ‘legitimate’, mostly by making it mirror more closely the political institutions of the classical nation-state. But can the same type of legitimacy really be recreated at levels beyond the nation-state? Are we able to export “democratic principles and practices […] from the domestic to the regional or global level” (Cabrera 2008, 223)? In short: is some form of democracy across and beyond national borders possible at all?

Some authors are fairly pessimistic in this regard. Robert Dahl, for instance, famously argued that global institutions “are not and are not likely to be democratic” (1999, 32). Others, such as Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss (2000; 2001), are more optimistic and propose a series of institutional reforms to democratize our world order. For them the idea of ‘democracy beyond borders’ is a litmus test for our basic ideas about democracy.

In this special issue, a number of renowned political philosophers and social scientists critically examine the assumptions behind the democratization of global politics and offer different models of global democracy. In this introductory contribution, we will briefly indicate why global democracy has become such a hotly debated issue within political theory, and survey some of the theoretical challenges and objections that proponents of global democracy often encounter.
I. RETHINKING DEMOCRACY IN A GLOBAL ERA?

Why should philosophers and political theorists be interested in the idea of global democracy? The most common and most plausible answer to this question insists that globalization has transformed the conditions under which our liberal democracies can function (McGrew 1997). Nation-states are no longer able, by themselves, to guarantee the successful realization of their basic principles of justice and democracy. To understand this answer and test its validity, we first need to explain what the idea of democracy implies and against which background this idea has been developed.

Traditionally, justification for democracy is based on the idea of popular consent. A law, according to this justification, “is not legitimate, nor am I bound to obey it or fulfill it, unless I previously have consented to [it] through myself or my representatives” (cf. Manent 2007, 72). More generally, democratic regimes are said to be regimes that are – ideally and in principle – willed by all members of society. We add ‘ideally and in principle’, because in the real world of politics not all citizens are either able or willing to voice their consent through elections or referenda, nor are all members of society entitled to participate in the process of political opinion- and will-formation. Democracy has a long tradition of exclusion, some forms of which can be justified while others certainly cannot. In theory, however, a symmetrical relationship is always presupposed between political decision-makers and the recipients of political decisions (Held 1995).

This ‘traditional’ justification has, of course, been formulated against the background of a territorially delimited sphere. Decision-makers were usually accountable to the people “in a fixed, territorially-based community” (Held 2000, 18). To illustrate the main characteristics of this background, a parallel can be drawn with the society depicted by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). As is well-known, one of the distinctive features of this book is that the boundaries of Rawls’ well-ordered society are...
given by the notion of “a self-contained national community” (1971, 457). It is a society that is undivided in terms of language, culture or history, and isolated from other societies. It has no political or economical relations to other societies, and no need for armed forces.

Such an ideal fiction, however, describes neither a sociologically adequate picture of well-ordered peoples, nor a morally acceptable one. Moreover, it is indebted to a specific image of the international order – what Nancy Fraser calls: the Keynesian-Westphalian framework (2005, 69). This Westphalian political imaginary is characterized by three normative principles that have strongly influenced the shape of our political landscape in the past. First of all, states – the primary building blocks of the Westphalian order – have fixed territorial boundaries that determine the limits of political authority and legal jurisdiction. Secondly, within these territorial spaces, states are the highest political and legal authority; they have supreme power or ‘sovereignty’. Thirdly, modern territorial states have a claim to internal and external autonomy and are not subject to binding international law; the minimal rules of protection that are created by international law are only binding to the extent that states “consent to being so bound” (McGrew 1997, 3).

Whether or not these normative principles actually determined the political practice of interstate relations in the Westphalian order – Krasner for instance strongly denies this (1999) – makes for an interesting discussion, but is not necessarily relevant from a normative point of view. “The discursive force of the norms of the Westphalia System,” as Chris Brown argues, “is not ultimately dependent upon the extent to which they guide actual practice” (Brown 2002, 37). More important from our point of view, is the way these principles affect our understanding of justice. According to Fraser, the normative assumptions of the Westphalian order have decisive influence over how we apprehend moral issues. “[A]rguments about justice,” whether related to economic redistribution or legal or cultural recognition, “were [and are] assumed to concern relations among fellow citizens, to be subject to debate
within national publics, and to contemplate redress by national states” (Fraser 2005, 69).

In our globalizing and pluralizing constellation, however, this framework is rapidly losing its “aura of self-evidence” (Fraser 2005, 71). Over the last decades, important shifts have transformed the global political sphere and challenged our traditional concepts of political authority and decision-making. What transformations do we have in mind? At least three ongoing shifts can be identified (cf. Bach and Stark 2004, 104).

A first concerns the erosion of absolute sovereignty and the emergence of an international rule of law. Because of the expanding scope and reach of international law, the sanctity of state sovereignty has been replaced by a concern about the enforcement of universal norms. A second concerns the shift from government to so-called governance. The idea that the nation-state is the exclusive and most privileged site for political representation has been largely replaced by the image of diverse and competing systems of authority (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992). At the same time – and this is a third development – the classical idea of a political autonomous and culturally homogeneous nation-state has also been challenged from below. Modern democratic societies are multicultural and multi-ethnic. Their citizens are no longer united by shared religious, metaphysical or ideological beliefs and values. Identifications with subnational identities often prove stronger than identifications with the existent nation-states, and many minority social movements have claimed that they have been unjustly dominated by their states (cf. Young 2007, 149).

These transformations have had a substantial impact on the institutional balance of powers. An intricate and multicentric system of governance has emerged – sometimes with, but often without the explicit approval of existent nation-states – that interacts with and even competes against the state-centric system (Rosenau 2004, 32). At the same time, this novel order puts our traditional views of justice and democracy under severe pressure. The symmetry assumption that was central to past theories of democracy appears as naïve in the face of the current political
reality. Global public decisions – be it in the fields of finance, economic regulation, or climate change – are not only seldom accountable to all those affected, but it is also difficult to determine the identity of those affected in an inclusive manner. How can we accurately determine the relevant constituency, for example, when we think of typical “transboundary” problems like the migration of infectious diseases (Held 1995, 16-18)? In some cases, moreover, it is even difficult to determine the identity (if there is one) of those who are actually making the decisions.

Given these changes, political philosophers need to rethink the notion of democracy. They need to ask whether and how democratic decision-making and political participation are possible in a world in which various forms of global policy-making are emerging and states are no longer fully sovereign decision-makers. The guiding question for such an endeavour is rather straightforward: will the binding force of democratic opinion- and will-formation ever be able to transcend the traditional level of the nation-state (cf. Habermas 1998, 127)?

II. MODELS OF GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

Several normative and policy models have recently been developed to deal with the growing interconnectedness of the world. Within the field of political philosophy, the model of cosmopolitan democracy is probably the best known. Taking their cue from classical democratic theory, cosmopolitan democrats like David Held, Daniele Archibugi or Richard Falk start from the intuition that security, respect for human rights and autonomy can only be obtained by developing democratic public law. Unlike classical democratic theorists, however, they believe that the civil constitution of nation-states is only a first step, and that democratic law can only prevail if it is also established between states and, ultimately, at the global level (Held 1995, 227). At all these different levels, citizens have a right to be involved in decision-making (Archibugi 2003, 8-9).
Within the field of the social sciences, on the other hand, the model of network governance has been influential. There are several versions of this model. Slaughter (2004), for instance, envisions a new world order in which traditional government agencies – as a consequence of the disaggregation of state sovereignty – operate as part of global networks. Others point to the extensive involvement of NGOs in an emerging global public sphere and propose global issue networks (Rischard 2002; Rosenau 2004, 47-8).

There are many other models worth mentioning, such as directly-deliberative polyarchy (Cohen and Sabel 2003), a world polity without a world state (Habermas 2006), a federal world republic (Höffe 1999), consociational democracy (Moore 2006), a multipolar world order (Mouffe 2005), a global peoples assembly (Falk and Strauss 2000, 2001), to name but a few. What most of these proposals share, is that they seek the best institutional translation for the requirements of moral cosmopolitanism, i.e. the idea that human beings are the ultimate units of moral concern.

Surveying the literature, McGrew distinguishes between four ways of thinking about democracy and the world order: realism, liberal-internationalism, radicalism and cosmopolitanism (1997, 16-21, 241-252). A different typology is offered by Carol Gould. Using the political level, where participation is to be organized as a criterion, she differentiates between international models, transnational models, and global models. Whereas international models focus on the relations between states and transnational models centre on democratic associations beyond the state level, global models posit a unified political framework at the supranational level (Gould 2004, 173).

Rather than going into the details of the different models on offer we would like to investigate, in the remainder of this article, a number of counterarguments that are typically levelled against proposals for a global or a cosmopolitan democracy. Limiting ourselves to the most ‘standard’ objections, we will discuss: the objection of size, the no-demos
objection, the objection of necessary exclusion, the objection of non-universality, and the objection of utopianism.

III. THE OBJECTION OF SIZE

The question of the right size for a democratic (or a republican) government, is a perennial question of political philosophy. Is there a scale beyond which a democratically structured polity is no longer feasible? This issue has been taken up by authors ranging from Montesquieu and Rousseau to Robert Dahl. For many centuries, there was a tendency to believe that a democratic regime – that is: a regime in which citizens can recognize the collective power as their own – was appropriate only to small societies, such as Greek city states, agrarian communities, or the cities of Switzerland. Somewhere during the nineteenth century, however, the outlook started to shift and gradually the nation-state came to be seen as the natural unit of (representative) democracy.7 Should we now envisage another change of mind, from nation-state to global democracy?

In light of the tradition of political philosophy, it is to be expected that proponents of global democracy face the counterargument of natural limits (in terms of territory or populace) to democratic modes of government. Whether or not this counterargument is convincing depends, of course, on one’s conception of democracy. The right scale for a council democracy, for instance, will be different from that of a representative democracy: New England style town meetings will never be the centre of political decision making in a democracy the size of a continent. Robert Dahl’s calculations anecdotally corroborate that there is a considerable price to citizen participation; a price high enough to make direct participation in all collective decisions of a large state a priori unfeasible.8 Yet even if one embraces a less participatory and more representative conception of democracy, one will have to accept that an increase in the population of a political unit leads to an increase in the amount of power that is transferred
to government officials or delegates, while it decreases the influence of every individual citizen.

The law of time and numbers, however, is counteracted by the law of system effectiveness. As Dahl notes, the pooling of more power at the centre, even if it limits the opportunities for direct participation by citizens, at the same time increases their collective capacity:

The smaller a democratic unit, the greater its potential for citizen participation and the less the need for citizens to delegate government decisions to representatives. The larger the unit, the greater its capacity for dealing with problems important to its citizens and the greater the need for citizens to delegate decisions to representatives (Dahl 1998, 110).

What are the possible consequences of this dynamic for a democratization of international political arrangements? Dahl is very sceptical. Although there are good reasons to organize political decision-making at levels beyond the nation-state – for example, to expand the protection of human rights or control the negative effects of globalization – he insists that regional associations like the European Union or international organizations in general “are not and are not likely to be democratic” (1999, 32). “The greater the number of citizens,” Dahl writes, “the longer and more indirect must be the channel of communication for the citizen to his top political leaders” (1967, 957). Inevitably, it becomes less and less likely that these politicians can be held accountable.

A similar argument can also be made without reference to citizen participation. Many philosophers have claimed that the advantages of centralization – a more effective delivery of public goods – are counterbalanced by even greater disadvantages when political structures become too large. “For as a ship may be built too large to be conveniently managed,” we read in Hugo Grotius’s *The Rights of War and Peace* (1625), “so an empire may be too extensive in population and territory to be directed and governed by one head” (2005, 271).
One way of sidestepping the objection of size, is by pointing at the dissimilarities between the national and international realm. One could admit that large, supranational political structures are unable to simply adopt the modus operandi of classical democratic states, but deny that this is a problem. The competences that are transferred to supranational organizations, after all, are typically such that they are less demanding in terms of democratic legitimacy and citizen involvement. Andrew Moravcsik, for instance, explicitly warns us not to use the ideal of the democratic nation-state as the evaluation standard for larger political entities:

Rather than comparing international organizations to idealized ancient, Westminster-style, or imaginary political systems, the baseline should be the real-world practices of existing governments acting imperfectly under complex constraints (Moravcsik 2004, 27).

Applying this kind of real world analysis to the EU, he comes to a surprising conclusion:

[A] failure to view democracy realistically, as well as the failure to take into account the empirical idiosyncrasies of the European case – notably its limited mandate and the continuing strong role of national governments – has given critics the impression that the EU is undemocratic. In fact it is merely specializing in those aspects of modern democratic governance that typically involve less direct political participation (2004, 27).

In line with this argument, Moravcsik sees little evidence for the often trumpeted “democratic deficit” at the EU-level. However, as the fierce reactions against his views on European democracy already make clear (cf. Follesdal and Hix 2006), many authors in the field of supranational democracy do not believe that there are “natural” limits, in terms of size, to democratic modes of government. For them, the transfer of competences beyond democratic control can never be justified, and always carries within it the risk of despotism.
IV. The no-demos objection

A second objection, and one that is closely related to the objection of size, concerns the problem of identification or allegiance. This objection cannot be easily dismissed. Some of the core achievements of currently existent democratic nation-states were possible only because these states, beyond being mere organisational structures for collective problem-solving, were also nations. They formed “imagined communities” – in Benedict Anderson’s (1982) felicitous phrase – that provided citizens with a sense of belonging. It is the citizens’ sense of commitment to the shared project of a particular nation-state that allowed representative institutions to be experienced as truly representative. It also generated a degree of solidarity that allowed the nation-states to become and remain welfare states. It is not obvious that a global political order can function if the citizens do not identify – in this strong sense – with the global community, nor is it certain that such an identification can ever be created. For the time being, it is clear that there is no global ‘demos’ that identifies itself as such and that could form the purported subject of a global ‘democracy’.

The unlikelihood of transposing citizens’ national commitments to the supranational level, is what inspires liberal nationalists’ scepticism towards the global democracy project. Liberal nationalists believe there to be a strong, irreplaceable link between the idea of democracy and the principle of national identity. Although liberal nationalists will not necessarily deny that we need international institutions to cope with the negative effect of economic globalization, they seriously doubt that “such political units can inspire the identification and allegiance – the moral and civic culture – on which democratic authority ultimately depends” (Sandel 1996, 339).

In fact, there are at least two reasons why liberal nationalist are very critical of proposals for global democracy or supranational citizenship. First of all, they claim that proponents of global democracy are far too pessimistic about the prospects of domestic citizenship in a globalizing world. By exaggerating the impact of globalization on the elbow room of
nation-states to pursue their own socio-economic policies, cosmopolitan political theorists systematically downplay the importance of the nation-state in a globalized world. Moreover, cosmopolitans tend to exaggerate the effect of globalization on our feelings of allegiance towards the nation-state as a “political community of fate” (Held 1999, 102). Kymlicka defines such a community as follows:

People belong to the same community of fate if they care about each other’s fate, and want to share each other’s fate – that is, want to meet certain challenges together, so as to share each other’s blessings and burdens. Put another way, people belong to the same community of fate if they feel some sense of responsibility for one another’s fate, and so want to deliberate together about how to respond collectively to the challenges facing the community (Kymlicka 2001, 320).

Kymlicka’s definition serves to demonstrate that the boundaries of a community of fate are not decided by the scale of the global forces that impact our lives. They are determined rather by the willingness to react to these forces in a common way. Thus, the geographical expansion of economic interdependence is no reason to expand the boundaries of the community of fate. This is also carried out by political reality, where it can be shown that, so far, globalization has hardly eroded citizens’ sense of commitment towards their existent community of fate.

Another important reason why liberal nationalists are skeptical of proposals for global democracy is because they believe there is substantially less room for optimism regarding democracy beyond borders than cosmopolitan democrats claim. Cosmopolitan democrats, it is said, ignore the empirical conditions of genuine citizenship and democracy (Miller 2000, 81, 96). The best version of democracy is one in which people do not merely vote according to personal self-interest, but where they are committed and responsible citizens, where they are “ready to listen to the views and consider the interests of others, and modify their own opinions accordingly” (Miller 2000, 3). Such a ‘deliberative democracy’, with its corresponding ‘republican’ view of citizenship, requires an amount of
trust, solidarity, and common understanding that can only be generated in nationally bounded communities. A national identity, in other words, is indispensable to the proper functioning of a liberal democratic regime.

The liberal nationalists’ analysis of the precondition of democracy and citizenship is, of course, neither new nor highly original. Looking back at the history of political philosophy, one can find a similar analysis in Tocqueville’s *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835, 1840) or Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). According to Tocqueville, a common language and shared moral beliefs are among the informal preconditions for the success of American federalism. Mills adds to this the importance of a shared national identity:

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative government cannot exist (Mill 1991, 428).

It is not difficult to find even older historical sources for this same idea. The current absence of common identification at the global level, and the difficulties that will most likely remain with creating a sense of political commitment towards international and world-wide decision-structures, can lead to different conclusions. One possible conclusion would be a plain rejection of the idea of democracy beyond borders. A more interesting conclusion is suggested by Jean-Marc Ferry in his contribution to this special issue. Ferry claims that proposals for supranational democracy are not meant to replace national citizenship, but rather to supplement it with other forms of citizenship. Accordingly, it is not certain that the preconditions for transnational citizenship are identical to the preconditions for successful self-government at the national level.

Using the European Union as an example, Ferry starts by arguing that a “legal community” cannot exist without a “moral community”, which he defines as a “context in which citizens acquire a sense of belong-
ing as citizens”. Despite his emphasis on the need for a certain degree of identification with the political order, however, he resists the conclusion that supranational integration should be modelled on national integration and identity. The essentially nineteenth-century process of nation building, in other words, is not to be repeated on a different scale in the twenty-first century. Instead, identification with this new common framework should happen through citizens’ identification with their own political unit. Even if supranational political cooperation requires a shared political culture, Ferry does not believe that this involves a complete merging of different states’ public culture. Thus, rather than treating everyone’s political history as if it is one’s own history, civic education should focus on the shared historical memory of different nations, that is: a history of international conflicts and disputes, but also (even if Ferry himself does not emphasize this) a history in which multiple modes of peaceful supranational cooperation have been developed and tested.

Another way of countering the objection that a global political order would lack the corresponding global political commitments is suggested by John Dryzek’s contribution. He argues that deliberative democracy simply does not require a shared identity or a strong adherence to a common public culture. All that is needed is a shared problem (or set of problems). According to Dryzek, the need to collectively solve problems is sufficient to generate a discursive engagement on the side of all those concerned. In other words, the functional pressure of collective global problems might, by itself, create the necessary motivation to keep reciprocal modes of problem-solving going at the supranational level.

In line with this view, Dryzek argues that there is no immediate need for grand constitutional designs at the global level. Indeed, the EU’s failed constitutional adventure is a clear warning for all future, premature attempts at constitution-building. While there is a tendency to see a society’s constitutional structure as its foundation and to see its ‘moeurs’ as its surface, Dryzek reminds us – in true Tocquevillian fashion – that things are rather the other way around. Accordingly, he proposes that
those interested in global democracy should pay due attention to the
global society’s “informal understandings” and “discourses”. It is at this
level that the substance of a society is to be found.

V. THE OBJECTION OF NECESSARY EXCLUSION

Beyond the liberal-nationalist objection that democracy requires limited
communities that are united around a common feeling of national belong-
ing, the idea of creating a global political community is sometimes
objected to in somewhat cruder terms, namely by stating that identification,
by definition, requires boundaries. The core of this objection is not
that feelings of political commitment are necessarily bound to specific,
local, cultural or linguistic elements, but rather that feelings of belonging
to a certain group are essentially feelings of not-belonging to certain other
groups. In other words, political identifications can only be generated by
drawing borders.

In his criticism of the project of European political integration –
which he decries as an attempt at a ‘pure democracy’ – Pierre Manent gives
an interesting account of this objection:

Pure democracy is democracy without a people – that is, democratic
governance, which is very respectful of human rights but detached from
any collective deliberation (Manent 2007, 7).

Manent’s critique, however, is not another version of the ‘no demos’
thesis. The problem is not the absence of a common language or shared
history (shortcomings that, at least within the European context, are not
insurmountable). What he criticizes, is the ideal of a completely unified
humanity. Most proponents of the European version of democratic
empire, according to Manent, have forgotten that collective differences or
“separations between and among human groups” (2007, 7) are not only
inevitable aspects of politics, but also essential ones.
Similar arguments can be found within a wide variety of political philosophical positions: liberalism, communitarianism, agonism, deliberative democracy, post-structuralism, and so on. At the heart of their arguments is the assumption that collective self-determination implies a distinction between members and non-members or, in Carl Schmitt’s terms, between friends and enemies. Even Habermas seems to defend a version of this idea:

Any political community that wants to understand itself as a democracy must at least distinguish between members and non-members. The self-referential concept of collective self-determination demarcates a logical space for democratically united citizens who are members of a particular community (Habermas 2001, 107).14

In a similar vein, Chantal Mouffe talks of the “democratic prerequisite of drawing a frontier between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Mouffe 2000, 48).

Why do collective identity formation and democratic politics necessarily presuppose a distinction between insiders and outsiders? The main reason, according to Benhabib and Habermas, is because self-legislation necessarily presupposes a “clearly defined self” to which one can ascribe collectively binding decisions (Habermas 2006, 76). Self-legislation is always also self-constitution:

‘We, the people’ who agree to bind ourselves by these laws, are also defining ourselves as a ‘we’ in the very act of self-legislation. It is not only the general laws of self-government that are articulated in this process; the community that binds itself by these laws defines itself by drawing boundaries as well, and these boundaries are both territorial and civic (Benhabib 2004, 45).

The consequences of this dynamic for global democratic politics are rather straightforward. Since there is no ‘external other’ for a global political community, global democracy in the literal sense of the word is conceptually impossible. Taken to its extreme, this position implies
that it is *a priori* impossible to fully democratize the global forces of domination.

This objection – which can be called ‘the objection of necessary exclusion’ – will not be further discussed in this special issue, yet a possible line of rebuttal might be understood along the following lines. Even if one admits that the formation of identity requires the drawing of a boundary, one can still question why this boundary should be thought of in spatial terms. Why does collective identity formation presuppose a geographically external other? Difference and otherness could just as well be constructed imaginatively and temporally. A global identity could develop, as suggested by Arash Abizadeh, “on the basis of difference from the values of a past historical identity from which one wishes to mark one’s distance” (Abizadeh 2005, 58). To his credit, it should be added that Habermas is aware of this possibility and at one point explicitly mentions that a cosmopolitan consciousness might adopt “a concrete form by a delimitation of the temporal dimension” (Habermas 2001, 84). While impediments of different kinds will probably hinder its immediate realization, this line of thought might at least debunk the idea that a global political community is a conceptual impossibility.

VI. THE OBJECTION OF NON-UNIVERSALITY

Even if we can argue convincingly that the idea of a global political community is not impossible on conceptual grounds, further problems remain nevertheless. In his contribution, Dryzek touches upon a fourth problem, namely the problematic “universality” of liberal democracy and human rights. We naturally think of global democratization as a progressive process, whereby the political forms of our Western democracies are gradually extended to a global level. However, and in spite of their universal calling, the genesis of these values is a fairly local story. They originate in Western philosophical traditions, and are by and large bound up with a
typically Western, “individualist” vision of human existence. As Dryzek reminds us, this individualism is difficult to reconcile with the more community-centred political culture that is dominant, for instance, in many East-Asian countries.

Similarly, Chantal Mouffe, in her contribution to the present volume, argues that the universality of democracy and human rights, as we understand them, is all too often taken for granted. Western politicians and political thinkers alike see it as an all-or-nothing matter: democracy and human rights are to be literally adopted, in the very same way as they are known in Western Europe or North America. All deviations from this model are by definition morally suspect. They thereby overlook the fact that other societies might have developed institutions that are dissimilar to the ones we know, but that are similar in the degree to which they respect human dignity and create social justice. In other words, they fail to imagine that the “good regime” might come in different forms and versions.

The idea that there is no universal form of democracy is also a topic that Frank Cunningham discusses in his contribution on MacPherson. Working at a time in which colonial attitudes had not yet been radically questioned, MacPherson analyzed the democratic potential of peoples that were, in Western eyes, still deemed too immature for self-government. MacPherson’s theoretical framework was particularly suited to such an endeavour, because his definition of democracy did not focus on narrow institutional characteristics. Democracy, according to MacPherson’s broader definition, designates a form of society that gives all individuals the opportunity to develop their “truly human potentials”. Taking into account that the list of “human potentials” cannot be defined in advance, MacPherson was well placed to understand – as Mouffe suggests we should – that non-Western political regimes can be valuable in ways that are easily overlooked by the Western observer. According to Mouffe, this plurality of political forms does not only warn us against projecting our own political institutions on the global order, but it also questions the very project of trying to bring such a global democratic order about.
In her view, the creation of one political order that encompasses the entire world, would inevitably imply a hegemony of one type of regime. Thus, rather than arguing for the development of a democratic world state, Mouffe puts forward the model of a multipolar world order, which leaves room for a pluralism of regional political blocks, each with its distinct political culture. In this way, the non-universality objection naturally leads to an objection against a cosmopolitan order as such.

VI. THE OBJECTION OF UTOPIANISM

A final objection, and probably the one that is heard most often, does not concern the normative desirability of global democracy or global institutional reform. It concerns rather the way political philosophers tend to approach this goal. Because of a perceived lack of understanding of empirical questions and real world politics, proposals for global democracy are often dismissed as purely utopian or facile. Cosmopolitan and global democrats, it seems, fail to live up to the dictum formulated by Rousseau, that of “taking men as they are, and the laws as they can be” (1997, 41). In this regard, they find themselves criticized for the same reasons as the first advocates of a perpetual peace project. The reception of people such as William Penn, the abbé de Saint-Pierre, or Jeremy Bentham, serves to illustrate the point in this regard. Their proposals were often seen as little more than the pompous daydreams of utopian political philosophers. Twentieth century political realists tend to accuse their internationalist contemporaries of a similar naiveté:

What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behaviour of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations. Failure to recognise the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought (Niebuhr 1963, xx).15
Given the constraints imposed on politics by the egoistic passions of human beings, the self-interested motivation of states and the anarchical nature of the international order, it is very unlikely that a stable form of democratic decision-making will ever exist. And even if global political relations were to be democratized one day, the formulation of ambitious philosophical theories will most likely not be among the causes of such a development.

Is this objection justified? Should all attempts to outline the contours of a global democratic order be rejected as utopian and therefore irrelevant? A first thing to note is that, in the course of the past centuries, utopian ideas have influenced world politics, often for the worse, but sometimes for the better. Looking at the early proposals for an international political order, Daniele Archibugi urges us to remember that:

[The writings of Hugo Grotius and Émeric Crucé informed some of the ideas approved at Westphalia; that Saint-Pierre was physically at the gates of Utrecht; that President Wilson was acquainted with the peace projects of William Penn and William Ladd; and that Hans Kelsen prepared and circulated drafts for a new League of Nations statute long before governments agreed on the founding of the United Nations (Archibugi 1998, 199).]

In other words, one should not be too quick to dismiss ‘utopian thinking’ as toothless. Ideas, moreover, are patient. Often, the passing of time and a change of wind suffices to make realistic those proposals that were deemed utopian not so long ago. At the time of Penn’s *Essay towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe* (1693), nobody would have thought that his proposal for a European League would one day turn into reality. The same applies to the ideal of a *foedus pacificum* or league of peoples that Kant developed in *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795).

In a warning against overzealous utopianism, John Rawls (1999) argues that proposals for perpetual peace are acceptable only if they are “realistically utopian”, i.e. if they take human nature and the concrete characteristics of our political and socio-economic constellation into account.
Similarly, one could argue that models of global democracy should “be grounded on an understanding of empirical questions” (Gould 2004, 180).

Looking at our socio-economic constellation, however, the most pressing question that does tend to arise at different levels and in different forms, is precisely the democratization of the global forces of domination. Although the empirical hints of such a democratization to come (from the calls for a more accountable WTO to the expansion of global civil society) are still separated by a large and wishful leap from the vision of a fully-fledged global democracy, there is no reason why reflection on global democratization should start at the latter side of that divide.

This is precisely the position defended by Michael Saward in his contribution to this special issue. Against the tendency to set up grand utopian designs for a global world order, he advises us to look at concrete, ongoing practices. Rather than starting from a complete blueprint, those advocating a global political integration should take their cue from tendencies that are already present in political reality.

In support of this position, Saward points at the many unknowns on the path towards a democratization of the international political order. According to Saward, this makes it a priori impossible to anticipate what a possible global democratic practice will look like. It might well be totally different from anything we can think up now – and perhaps even for the better.

WORKS CITED


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NOTES

1. For an interesting discussion of seven possible arrangements of international society, see Walzer (2004).

2. See Miller (1998) for the distinction between weak and strong cosmopolitanism.

3. See also Andrew Kuper’s book with the same name (Kuper 2004).


5. See Held (1995, 78) for a longer list of criteria.

6. Brown adds, however, that if they “had no influence at all it would be hard to hold this position” (Brown 2002, 37).


8. Dahl notes that if every citizen of a democratic community of ten thousand enfranchised citizens has a right to thirty minutes of discussion time during committee meetings, this would require a total of 625 eight-hour working days per session (Dahl 1998, 106-107). Dahl, of course, warns his readers that his calculations are too simplistic, because not all discussions will take place in the formal setting of the committee meeting.

9. ‘Liberal nationalists’ are those nationalists who believe that the nationalist concern for cultural membership, trust and solidarity can be reconciled with the liberal concern for individual liberties and personal autonomy. In other words, they want to foster “national ideals without losing sight of other human values against which national ideals ought to be weighed” (Tamir 1993, 79).


12. See, for instance, Augustine’s criticism of the Stoic notion of the cosmopolis in his *De civitate Dei* (413-426).

13. Compare Habermas’s remark regarding the democratization of the UN: “[a] negative consensus would suffice in place of civic solidarity, namely, shared outrage at the aggressive warmongering and human rights violations of criminal gangs and regimes or shared horrors over acts of ethnic cleaning and genocide” (2006, 109-110).

14. Compare Walzer: “if we recognized no distinction between members and strangers, we would have no reason to form and maintain political communities” (Walzer 1983, 64).
15. John Mearsheimer has recently repeated this claim with much vigour: “Many in the West seem to believe that ‘perpetual peace’ among the great powers is finally at hand. [...] Alas, the claim that security competition and war between the great powers have been purged from the international system is wrong. Indeed, there is much evidence that the promise of everlasting peace among the great powers was stillborn.” (2003, 1-2)