

Chapter 4: Democracy

Case Study: Global Democracy

For a case study in the application of democratic ideas, I want to discuss the application of democratic ideas to international institutions. I have in mind institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, and many others. I propose also to consider the question of whether there are reasons grounded in the values that underpin democracy for creating a kind of global people's assembly. What I have in mind here is not a world state, but an assembly of representatives of persons around the world that makes some significant law and policy for the world as a whole. Many have recently proposed this kind of assembly with legislative powers and so it is worth trying to see what the implications of democratic theory would be for such an assembly.

To clarify, I will discuss an assembly of representatives of persons around the world; I will not consider whether the assembly ought to be elected on the basis of proportional representation or district representation. But the idea is that each representative would represent some particular number of persons. Suppose that each representative represents a million people: the assembly would then have roughly 6,500 representatives. The assembly would use ordinary rules of decision making, such as majority rule in many cases and perhaps supermajority rules in some selected cases. The assembly would also write legislation for a restricted set of issues. It would not replace national assemblies entirely; it would simply take over some decision making and leave the rest to the national forum.

What is there to be said for such a global democratic institution? It is often argued that global democracy or transnational democracy can be grounded in the fact that people's activities all around the world have effects on people in other parts of the globe. World trade, global

communications systems, environmental pollution and depletion, and other things are increasingly such that people have significant effects on the lives of people around the world. Because of this fact, each of these people should have a say in determining the processes that produce these effects. This argument has been put in different ways. Some have noted that actions of persons in one part of the world affect peoples in other parts of the world and that they all ought to have an equal say, and this idea might be called the ‘all affected’ principle. Others note that actions of persons in one part of the world engage and direct the actions of persons elsewhere. Another criterion is that actions of persons in one part of the world affect at least some of the fundamental interests of those in other parts of the world (Pogge, 2002).

But these arguments do not take into account a basic requirement for the desirability of democratic decision making, which becomes evident when we move from considering the nation state to a global political system. For democracy genuinely to treat people as equals, it is necessary that the combination of issues on which democratic decision making occurs is one in which individuals have a roughly equal stake. It is not enough that people are affected, or that some of their fundamental interests are affected; it must be that their fates are somehow mostly equally bound up with the issues with which they are dealing. If two people have an equal say in a matter that affects one person’s interests much more than the other’s interests and there are no other issues wherein the other’s interests are more implicated, then it appears that there is some unfairness in each having an equal say. The same holds for combinations of issues: if two people have fundamental interests in collective decisions over some combination of issues, but the interests of one are much more bound up with that set of issues than are the other’s, it does not seem fair to give each an equal voice. Indeed, it would seem that this would amount to a failure to treat the people in question as equals.

This is why democracy is particularly desirable at the modern state level in the modern world. At least in the normal case, individuals inhabit a world in common with others in a political

community in which nearly all of the fundamental interests are implicated and so there is a rough equality of stake for all of the individuals. As a consequence, giving each person an equal voice is a fair way of distributing power among them.

But this cannot be said of individuals in different states. Although their lives are mutually affected in a variety of ways, they are not mutually affected to the same deep extent as are the lives of members of a single modern state. Overall, my own interests, for example, are far more bound up with the interests of other persons in the USA than they are with those of persons in China, or even in Canada, even though there are clear ways in which we of different political societies influence each others' lives. More importantly, the extent to which people's lives are bound up with the international system varies greatly. In some societies, for example, only about 10–15 per cent of the economies are bound up with world trade, while in others, nearly 60–70 per cent is so bound up. Furthermore, international trade normally is primarily a regional matter, so states tend to trade most with their neighbours and only then with others. The same facts hold in relation to environmental degradation. We do not inhabit common worlds with all other people in the world and, as a consequence, there is an inequality in the effects that we have on each other.

So it is not clear that we have equal stakes in the decisions or the combinations of decisions that are made by transnational and global institutions. Thus the necessary condition for the intrinsic fairness of democratic decision making seems not to hold in the case of transnational or global institutions.

<A>Persistent minorities

Another connected worry about international democracy is the problem of persistent minorities. If the issues on which a democratic international institution decides are such that discrete and insular coalitions tend to form, with some forming a majority and some forming minority blocs, then there is a significant chance that some groups will simply be left out of the decision making. This leaves

open the possibility that strangers will heavily determine their lives. It seems to me that the probability of persistent minorities in the international system is high. The globe is divided into distinct regions with distinct ethnic and cultural groups; these groups face very different problems and have very different interests. In some cases, there is still relatively little intercourse between these regional groupings of people. It seems, then, that there is a very real danger that one or more of these groups might be consistently left out of the winning coalitions in a global assembly. To the extent that this is a serious danger at the global level, it seems that there is a serious danger that a global democratic institution will be illegitimate in an important way.

This conclusion must be qualified in a couple of different ways. First, we do not know that the problem of persistent minorities would occur. What might happen instead is that groups of persons around the world might see common interests, so that groups that are persistent minorities in individual societies might form coalitions and form majorities in some circumstances. Sometimes, enlarging the size of a democratic entity actually diminishes the chances for persistent minorities (Madison et al., 1788; 1987: n. 10). Second, the problem of persistent minorities has been handled by democratic societies, with mixed success, by means of institutions that qualify majority rule, such as **consociational institutions**—that is, institutions that require consensus among the various groups in society to make legislative and policy decisions—or even **federalist institutions**—that is, stratified institutions that allocate some powers to legislative assemblies deciding for the whole and some powers to more local assemblies. It is not obvious that these solutions will arise in the case of global democracy, partly because of the weakness of civil society in global democracy. The idea is that, because of this weakness, states will take the primary role in mediating between persons and global assembly.

<A> Institutional incapacity of civil society

The last fundamental problem with democracy on the international scale is a problem of

fundamental institutional incapacity. By this, I mean that we do not have the institutions that can mediate well and for a wide variety of peoples around the globe that we do have for the modern democratic state. The first two considerations I described are essentially connected to the intrinsic worth of democracy, while this last one applies both to intrinsic and instrumental values of democracies.

In the modern democratic state, there are a great number of very powerful and representative intermediate institutions that mediate between state and citizen. Political parties, interest groups, and diverse media outlets all provide a fairly wide representation of views and provide means by which citizens can come to grasp what is at stake in collective decision making. The institutions that we know are deeply imperfect and do not represent as widely as they should, but nevertheless they do provide citizens with some sense of what is going on from a wide variety of standpoints.

The trouble in international politics is that the institutions of civil society, while certainly growing quite rapidly, are not anywhere near the capacity that is necessary to their acting as intermediaries between a very wide set of groups in international society and international institutions. The consequence of this situation in the international realm, were it to be democratized, would be a state of affairs in which elites would rule mostly without any serious check on their power. There would be only some groups—mostly representing selected Western interests and concerns—who would have some capacity to embarrass and shame states and international institutions (Dahl, 1999).

We can see evidence of this in the fact that, in the European Union—the most developed instance of international decision-making institutions—civil society is still quite weak. There are, for example, no mass political parties for Europe as a whole. There are no Europe-wide unions, although there have been some efforts in this direction. Associations represent the interests of certain select business groups, but the other interests are not so represented. Furthermore, that which citizens need to know about the European Union in order to participate effectively is even

greater and more complex than that which they need to know in the case of their own states. Each person's influence on outcomes is also considerably smaller than in the case of their own states. When we combine these facts, we see a situation in which citizens are at sea in a mass of information without the intermediary institutions that are necessary for them to process and make sense of it. These citizens also lack the necessary institutions for monitoring the activities of the major governmental institutions. As a consequence, some interests are likely to be well represented, while most interests and concerns will be quite poorly represented.

When we turn our attention to the global realm, all of these problems are greatly magnified. There are some large non-governmental organizations, but these groups have trouble enough even in monitoring basic human rights violations in many parts of the world. Citizens are likely to receive very little of the support that they need to perform their roles as equal citizens and very little is likely to be done in monitoring the behaviour of international institutions. Certainly, this will not even be close to enough to ensure anything like the broad-based representation of citizens that democracy requires.

So we face a number of basic problems in the case of international democracy. First, we face the problem of uncertain legitimacy, because it seems clear that the stakes in decisions are quite uneven. Second, there is a large chance of permanent minorities as a result of collective decision making. Third, we face the problem of the present weakness of any kind of democratic civil society, which can serve as intermediary between citizens and global institutions.