

Is cosmopolitan democracy desirable and feasible?

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JAMES SLOAN, MAR 21 2011

Is 'cosmopolitan democracy' a desirable and feasible ideal? Discuss with reference to the proposals of David Held

Liberal democracy has been the predominant form of nation-state governance in development throughout the 20th Century. At the same time, the second half of the 20th Century has seen the explosion of globalisation and thus the perceived removal of barriers between states in both business and politics. Transnational political, economic and defence groups have been created. The European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and the greatest body, one that covers the entire world – the United Nations, have all been formed, and nurtured in development through the second half of the 20th Century. However, despite their development, the way that democratic participation takes place at the level of nation-state, has barely altered, yet the power of such transnational bodies has increased to an unprecedented level, with states apparently superseding powers to grander institutions without the relevant democratic checks and balances applied. This essay shall look at the effect of the globalised world order, and how the institutions that have emerged have altered the relationship with the sovereign nation. By looking at the Cosmopolitan model of democracy, the aim of this essay is to critically analyse how feasible, or practical, a theory it is, by specifically looking at the ideas of David Held.

Liberal democracy has been the key concept of western states in the development of modern society, prevailing as the 'winner' from the end of the Second World War, and indeed the 'winner' from the Cold War. The basic presumption of the liberal democratic ideal is that citizens choose their representative by election and subsequently the representatives sit in an assembled Parliament, taking decisions for the nation, governing within the clearly defined borders of that state. The issue here however, are those nations that now have to take account of factors that affect their own state, but cannot be controlled exclusively by the individual government. The growth of inter-dependence in the world with countries relying on each other to a greater extent than ever before has thus created a situation in which globalisation has removed certain democratic links between the citizen and the state, and moved decision-making to a higher order. This has led theorists to talk of a new world in which a cosmopolitan order would see democracy flow across borders, and not be restricted to an individual state, thus creating a situation where transnational and supranational bodies would remain powerful, but have far greater democratic legitimacy from citizens. Questions remain over how to transfer the current settlement where democracy lies within the borders of the nation-state, to the authorities above the state.

The key concepts that Held promotes is that of removing the notion that democracy can only occur at a state based level, and wants to move to a model that sees a democratisation between states.[1] The key themes that this essay shall focus on are thus: the democratic legitimacy of transnational bodies; state sovereignty; and how such concepts can be interpreted in the cosmopolitan model.

In order to understand the theory behind cosmopolitan democracy, we must begin to look at the idea of state sovereignty. The basis for this shall be built upon using the Westphalian model, which has been the predominant theory used throughout the ages, not only in international political relations, but also international law. The theory goes that an individual state has the right to control its own affairs, without interference from other states out with that nations own borders. "States are legally equal, differing in capabilities...no sovereign has the right to intervene in the affairs of another." [2] The principles of this were drawn up in the 1648 Peace Treaties of Westphalia and Osnabruck

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thus “...establish[ing] the location of legitimate political authority within a polity...”[3] However, what was not taken into account, was the fact that within the global order, some states would exert greater influence than others. The cosmopolitan model would intend to eradicate such disparities, as will be discussed later.

As it stands, the current demos is placed inside a bordered polity – that of the state. Institutions, such as the EU, have democratic elements to them, but as shall be explained, is not a new form of democratic government; rather it is meddling with the current state based system, and applying it to a different type of non-state governance. Under the Westphalian system, states were “...sovereign...legally autonomous, territorial, political entities...with clearly defined and effective borders, but...engage[d] in regular...relations [with] one another.”[4] Whilst this predominant form of governance in the world still to this day holds credence, the cosmopolitan argument suggests that a new global order would be based on a development of the principle of the EU, spread across the numerous continents.

Cosmopolitan democratic theory has arisen in recent years as an answer to the changing world order in which the globalisation of political power has meant that parts of the Westphalian system are now no longer relevant. “It has been assumed that the state has control over its own fate...”[5] This premise would sit comfortably within the Westphalian ideal that what happened within that occurred within states borders were only of concern to the government of that territory. Aspects of the Westphalian model still matter; the basis of sovereignty has not altered despite the growth of transnational groupings. Yet, the changes in governance have not seen a change in the democratic principles in which states govern. Thus, there have been claims that such transnational organisations, including the likes of the EU, and the UN, have little democratic mandate from citizens, and thus have created a new black hole of democratic deficit. It could be said the Westphalian system had become unable to contend with the seismic change of power from within states, to power across states.

Cosmopolitan democracy is essentially a theory that tries to show how transnational democracy would work, whilst keeping legitimacy enshrined with liberal democracy. Held describes his model as one that “...would involve the development of administrative capacity and independent political resources at regional and global levels as a necessary complement to those in local and national polities.”[6] Thus, the national political landscape would alter essentially seeing devolution from the central power in two directions – localisation and globalisation. [7] Greater reliance on local political participation is one area in which it is suggested that political change needs to happen in order for the greater global democratic legitimacy to occur.

Yet, how feasible is this idea of regionalism and globalised democracy, whilst retaining the nation-state as the centre periphery? It could be said that such a proposal would undermine the role of the central polity of the nation-state, and whilst greater political devolution can create greater accountability through smaller electorates, and bring citizens closer to the democratic process, this in turn can also cause problems. Smaller political groupings may be more representative, yet this has the potential to cause the fragmentation in the political make up of a state. It is true that “...we can no longer take the nation-state as the sole or dominant context for political theory.”[8] Whilst central government may appear to be distant or unresponsive at times, it can be said, that it in fact, the role of central government is to hold the geo-politics of the state together, and represent it at an international level. However, the issue that rankles here is the fact that Held suggests greater local political participation would justify a greater form of world governance.

Individuals, as it stands in the current political climate, may often feel a lack of connection to central governments. This can be due to a number of reasons, but it could be said that the primary reason would be the geo-politics of a nation. The land mass of a country may thus result in voters, often in more remote areas, feeling too disconnected from the decisions made by the central polity. However, the prospect of increased localisation could thus create a greater parochial vision of society, therefore resulting in a democratic shift, but would not aid those wishing to pursue transnational governance. Thus as this is the case, it could be said that this would prove problematic for Held’s idea of Cosmopolitan democracy, as a feeling of disenfranchisement from the nation-state is unlikely to result in a greater feeling of solidarity with members of another nation in a greater global government.

At this point, it could be argued that nations, potentially, could cease to exist. The transfer of powers to local, and then international organisations, would leave the question as to what role the central state would play. Held lays out a

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long term proposal that would see a global parliament having the ability to raise finance on its own accord.[9] “To the modern liberal mind, there is something inherently illegitimate about the idea of a single, dominant world power unconstrained except by its own sense of restraint.”[10] Thus, to counteract such a claim, the cosmopolitan model would attempt to alter such a mindset, through greater citizen participation.

Such a global governance system, as proposed by Held, would contain certain democratic controls that would have the ability to “...override states...”[11] in areas which would be deemed cross-border, and thus inappropriate for individual states to have control over. Areas, including the environment and terrorism would fall under such a category. In order to better conceptualise how a cosmopolitan world order would look and feel like, the case of the European Union can be brought in for consideration at this point.

The EU is a relatively unique body which encompasses twenty-seven states. The nature of the EU is numerous. It could be said to be a transnational organisation in the fact that as an organisation, it covers more than one sovereign territory. At the same time, it is also an intergovernmental body that has representation of the sovereign states under the Council of Ministers. Yet, whilst being a transnational grouping, it does not have the ultimate powers that individual states have to implement policy. Rather, such a step is a power that is left to member states.

The European Parliament contains a directly elected chamber, yet this, the only directly accountable European institution is not transnational – rather it operates within the current boundaries of the state. Indeed the Parliament is a form of governance as opposed to government. The Parliament has no power to form an executive, but does have the power to scrutinise and even dismiss the Commission – the true executive of the EU. When elections are held for the European Parliament, the results are based on individual voting within member states. In order for the EU to become a true cosmopolitan democracy, the emphasis from state based voting, towards European wide voting must occur. The likelihood of this seems slim. Sovereignty has been a key sticking point in recent years as the EU has developed. Issues of British opt-outs, Irish neutrality, and Danish referenda have caused headaches for those at the heart of the European project, and as such, further democratic change within the current model is likely to occur before any transnational voting would take place. The fact that “...much of the power associated with global government was taken or agreed first, and then legitimized afterwards”[12] also rings true with the EU. Direct electability of the Parliament did not occur until 1979, despite having been in existence in one form or another since the Treaty of Rome.

“...democracy has to become not just a national but a transnational affair if it is to be possible both within a restricted geographic territory and within the wider international community.”[13] It is here that Held argues for a democratic mandate to be extended to include more geopolitical organisations modelled on the likes of the EU.

Therefore, whilst the EU is the closest model to Cosmopolitan democracy, as it stands at present, it is not a perfect example. Indeed, the reason for this is the imperfect form of democratic identification that voters have with the body. It is a transnational body in a strictly geographical sense. Politically, the EU is far off from being a cosmopolitan polity. This is down, primarily, to the fact that political participation does not cross borders. State sovereignty still plays a crucial part in the make up of the EU. Brussels has become the home of the EU, but not the capital of Europe. The issue of referendum across borders under transnational groups have numerous consequences. Could a previously sovereign state be outvoted in such a regional Parliament? If so, this could lead, not to greater political legitimacy, but rather a greater democratic deficit. Such deficits appear to occur when the number of individuals in a political grouping increases. However, this may be counteracted by the sense of localism, as discussed earlier.

This argument does indeed hold credence as a viable way of moving the idea of global governance onto a new level. Ultimately Held would like to see a greater form, as shall be discussed later, however as a step towards this, greater regional political blocks would entail a greater internationalism in political decision making. Not only would such a model provide greater international authority, but could potentially have a greater say on the global flows of business and communications, much more so than individual nations. Indeed, this may be beneficial as a democratic check on transnational organisations as “The nation-state...has lost much of its sovereignty, undermined by the dynamics of global flows and trans-organizational networks of wealth, information, and power.”[14] Thus in turn for the democratic legitimacy of politics to continue, the case goes that political power must flow from central governments outwards.

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The goal of global governance is discussed with reference to a reformed United Nations in which there would be “An authoritative assembly of all democratic states and societies...”[15] This utopian methodology becomes unstuck immediately when Held poses the question himself over how to allocate democratic representation to states.[16] The proposal put forward here would suggest that the old power politics of a few nations, and indeed the veto power held by the five countries in the UN ought to be banished, replacing it with a more equally balanced form of representation. Not taken into account however is that “...democracies often have diverging interests.”[17] Indeed, it would be fair to say that after using the EU as a basic example of how a regional based democratic group would look like, the idea that countries can get on, without rubbing each other up the wrong way may be impossible. Indeed, as the EU has enlarged so to have the differences between the states in terms of the political direction of the EU.

Self governance in an ever increasing inter-dependent world is the key concept in practice at the dawn of the 21st Century. Cosmopolitan thought appears to move away from this and claims that “...the future democracy will be centred exclusively on the international or global domain...”[18] There is, however, a technicality that Held does not seem to answer, and that is will the global democracy be of governance, or government? Global governance already occurs, bodies such as the UN, and NATO, use their current powers to guide policies, in terms of defence, aid and so on. Yet, Held seems to suggest that not only will there be governance at every level from local, to national, to global; but also suggests that there will be government present at every level. As a move towards cosmopolitanism, there is a suggestion that Held would appreciate greater democratic governance as a movement towards the possibility of global democratic government.[19] Whilst it could be argued that the creation of such global governing is good for participation at a local level, it would appear that no matter how much the global democratic order is revised, there will still remain a deficit “The more global the organization, the more likely regional considerations will trump democratic solidarity.”[20]

Questions are raised over whether “...cosmopolitan democracy [should be viewed] as an alternative to outmoded models of nation-centred democracy, or as a supplement to, and dependent on, nation-centred democracy.”[21] Here, Held is less clear. The central polity of the state would remain, yet the issue of sovereignty appears to become redundant. This does not mean that the issue disappears however. “...attempts to create a genuinely democratic form of transnational citizenship could have negative consequences for democratic citizenship at the domestic level.”[22] Indeed John Dryzek suggests that the removal of democratic borders would thus end the relationship between the central polity and democratic unity.[23]

Overlooked in the argument compiled by Held is the issue of unity. The larger the political grouping, the problems become two-fold. Greater representation of differing political voices is certainly one strength, ensuing that the greatest number of individuals are heard. Yet, this causes issues when it comes to consensus, and the creation of grander organisations may thus struggle to keep a dignified presence. As has been noted “NATO...is struggling to maintain its unity.”[24] thus, it would be unrealistic to expect a transnational government to keep a united front, without dissidents breaking off to their regional polities spreading truths, or even untruths, about the political organisation.

It has to be recognised that “...we need such [global] institutions to deal with issues of economic globalization, common environmental problems, and international security.”[25] Indeed, David Held promotes some interesting thoughts on how through democracy this could be achieved. Yet, there appears to be little realpolitik in terms of how such actors would behave in reality. Regionalism within nation-states is a positive move to link democracy back to the citizens. Yet, there is a fundamental issue here – regionalism does not ultimately equate globalised thinking. However, this is the premise that Held makes in order to support his theory. Increased democratic functions would need to occur before ever the mildest of Held’s proposals could become reality.

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Is cosmopolitan democracy desirable and feasible?

Written by James Sloan

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