COSMOPOLITICS OR MULTIPOLARITY?

Chantal Mouffe

When we enquire about the future of democracy at the world level one of the main trends today is represented by those who call for the establishment of a 'cosmopolitan democracy' and a 'cosmopolitan citizenship' resulting from the universalization of the Western interpretation of democratic values and the implementation of the Western version of understanding of human rights. According to such an approach, this is how a democratic global order could come about. There are different variants of this approach but all of them share a common premise: that the Western form of life is the best one and that moral progress requires its worldwide implementation. In this presentation I am going to take issue with such a conception because in my view, even if it is very far from the intentions of many cosmopolitan theorists who advocate it, it is bound to justify the hegemony of the West and the imposition of its particular values with the argument that they are the only rational and legitimate ones. Against the cosmopolitans I will argue in favour of a multipolar world order which recognizes diversity and pluralism and does not envisage the world as a 'universe' but as a 'pluriverse'.

Cosmopolitical Democracy

There are many different versions of the project of cosmopolitan democracy in political theory, but I limit myself to the version which Daniele Archibugi has recently proposed to call 'cosmopolitical' and which he has been elaborating jointly with David Held since the book they edited together in 1995 *Cosmopolitan Democracy. An Agenda for*

a New World Order. Archibugi defines their project in the following way:

> Cosmopolitical democracy is based on the assumption that important objectives -- control of the use of force, respect for human rights, self-determination -- will be obtained only through the extension and development of democracy. It differs from the general approach to cosmopolitanism in that it does not merely call for global responsibility but actually attempts to apply the principles of democracy internationally. For such problems as the protection of the environment, the regulation of migration and the use of natural resources to be subjected to necessary democratic control, democracy must transcend the border of single states and assert itself on global level.[1]

The cosmopolitical perspective asserts that there is no reason why, now that the democratic form of government is recognized worldwide as the only legitimate one, the principles and rules of democracy should stop at the borders of a political community. This calls for the creation of new global institutions. Indeed, it would be a mistake to believe that a set of democratic states automatically entails a democratic globe. Global democracy cannot be envisaged as the direct result of democracy within states, it requires the creation of special procedures and institutions that would add another level of political representation to the already existing one. Moreover, it is not a matter of simply transposing the democratic model as conceived as state level on to a world scale and many aspects of this model need to be reformulated in order to be applied globally. Archibugi and Held do not advocate the end of nation-states and they assert that a global level of representation could coexist with the already constituted states which would keep some of their political and administrative functions. According to Archibugi,

> …unlike the many world-federalist projects to which it is indebted, cosmopolitan democracy aims to boost the management of human affairs at a planetary level not so much by replacing existing states as by granting more powers to existing institutions and creating new ones.[2]

The time has come to imagine new forms of democracy derived from the universal rights of global citizens and he suggests that moving from national to global democracy means something akin to the conceptual revolution which in the eighteenth-century allowed the passage from direct to representative democracy.

Such a revolution would consist in the creation of international institutions allowing individuals to have an influence on global affairs, independently of the situation in their own countries. The demands of all the individuals, irrespective of their national origin, of their class, gender, etc. should be given a direct form of representation at world level. How is it to be done? Some information is provided by David Held who distinguishes between short-term and long-term objectives. To begin with, the following measures should be implemented the UN Security Council needs to be reformed to become more representative and a second UN chamber created jointly with regional parliaments. Next to that, the influence of international courts should be extended to enforce a cluster of key rights, civil, political, economic and social and a new international Human Rights Court should be established. Finally an effective and accountable international military force would have to be installed to intervene against states which are repeatedly violating those rights. In the long term, Held envisages a more radical shift towards global democratic governance with the formation of an authoritative assembly of all democratic states and agencies with the authority to decide all important global issues dealing with the environment, health, alimentation, economy, war, etc. In his view, there should be a permanent shift of a growing proportion of the coercive military capacities of the nation-state to global institutions with the aim of transcending the war system as a means of resolving conflict.

Another important aspect of Held's cosmopolitan framework is the entrenchment of democratic rights and obligations in national and international law. Here the aim is "to create the basis of a common structure of political action as constituting the elements of a democratic public law".[4] However, to be effective in the context of globalization, such democratic law must be internationalized, it must be transformed into a cosmopolitan democratic law. He argues that the aim of all democrats should be to establish a cosmopolitan community, ie. a transnational structure of political action, a community of all democratic communities. Discussing the consequences of such a transnational community for the nation state, he declares that it will 'wither away', not in the sense that it will become redundant but in the sense that

> …states can no longer be, and can no longer be regarded as, the sole centres of legitimate power within their own borders, as is already the case in diverse settings. States need to be articulated with, and relocated

within, an over arching democratic law. Within this framework, the laws and rules of the nation state would be but one focus for legal development, political reflection and mobilization. For this framework would re-specify and reconstitute the meaning and limits of sovereign authority. Particular power centers and authority systems would enjoy legitimacy only to the extent that they upheld an enacted democratic law.[5]

It is not in my intention to deny the noble intentions of the diverse advocates of democratic cosmopolitanism. But I think that there are many reasons to be more than sceptical about the democratizing impact of this cosmopolitical approach. To begin with, as David Chandler has argued,[6] serious problems arise from the attempt to extend the concept of rights beyond the nation-state, without a mechanism that would allow for making those new rights accountable to their subjects. Cosmopolitan rights, he says, are fictitious because they are outside the control of their subject given that the global citizen can only be represented through global civil society which acts outside the representative framework of liberal democracy. They are necessarily dependent on the advocacy of the agency of civil society institutions. The danger of those rights without subjects is that they may be used to undermine existing democratic rights of self-government as when civil society institutions challenge national sovereignty in the name of 'global concern'.

The cosmopolitical approach puts more emphasis on the legitimating function of human rights than on their democratic exercise, and I agree with Chandler's claim that the cosmopolitan construction of the global citizen partakes of the current attempt to privilege morality over politics. He notes that

In this respect, cosmopolitan theorists reflect broader political trends towards the privileging of advocacy rights over the representational democracy of the ballot box. Political activity is increasingly undertaken outside the traditional political parties and is becoming a sphere dominated by advocacy groups and single issues campaigns who do not seek to garner votes but to lobby or gain publicity for their claims.[7]

And he concludes that the new rights of cosmopolitan citizens are a chimera because they are moral claims, not democratic rights that could be exercised.

There is an even more serious problem, however, which is that, in exchange for those fictitious new rights, the cosmopolitan approach ends up sacrificing the old rights of sovereignty. By justifying the

right for international institutions to undermine sovereignty in order to upheld cosmopolitan law, it denies the democratic rights of self-government for the citizens of many countries. Here again Chandler is right to point out that

> Cosmopolitan regulation is in fact based on the concept of sovereign in-equality, that not all states should be equally involved in the establish-ment and adjudication of international law. Ironically, the new cosmo-politan forms of justice and rights protection involve law-making and law-enforcement, legitimized from an increasingly partial, and explicitly Western perspective.[8]

Remember for instance how Held presents his cosmopolitan commu-nity as a community of 'all democratic states'. Who will decide which states are democratic, and on which criteria? No doubt it is the West-ern conception of democracy that will be used. It is rather telling that Held does not see that as a problem. Indeed when examining how democratic law should be enforced he asserts

> In the first instance, cosmopolitan democratic law could be promulgated and defended by those democratic states and civil societies that are able to muster the necessary political judgement and to learn how political practices and institutions must change and adapt in the new regional and global circumstances.[9]

It is therefore far from clear how the cosmopolitan framework could increase the possibility of self-government for global citizens. The implementation of a cosmopolitan order would in fact result in the imposition of the liberal democratic model on the whole world and it would mean bringing more people directly under the control of the West. And one can only agree with Chandler when he declares that "Rather than furthering democracy, the premature declaration of a framework of universal cosmopolitan rights can, in fact, result in rights that people did have being further restricted".[10]

Which Governance?

The non political character of the cosmopolitan perspective is clearly brought to the fore when we examine one of its central concepts, the concept of 'governance'. Pointing out the difference between 'gov-ernment' and 'governance', Nadia Urbinati notes

Governance entails an explicit reference to 'mechanisms' or 'organized' and 'coordinated activities' appropriate to the solution of some specific problems. Unlike government, governance refers to 'policies' rather than 'politics' because it is not a binding decision-making structure. Its recipients are not 'the people' as a collective political subject, but 'the population' that can be affected by global issues such as the environment, migration or the use of natural resources.[11]

Speaking of global governance tells us a lot about the type of actor which the cosmopolitans see as being active in their model. The central issue in global governance is the negotiation among a diversity of associations and interest groups with specific expertise, intervening about particular issues and trying to push forward their proposals in a non adversarial way. This implies a conception of politics as resolution of technical problems, not active engagement of citizens exercising their democratic rights thanks to an agonistic confrontation about conflicting hegemonic projects. To be sure, some of those associations are motivated by ethical concerns and not merely by interest but their approach is not a properly political one. Their aim is to reach a compromise or a rational consensus, not to challenge the prevailing hegemony. Such a perspective, no doubt, chimes with the liberal understanding of politics and it fits perfectly the consensual vocabulary dominant today. But in what sense can this form of governance still be considered as democratic?

Robert Dahl clearly answers that it cannot and he criticizes the celebration of international organizations by cosmopolitan advocates who see them as a further step in the long march of the democratic idea from the polis to the cosmos. For Dahl, this is a view of democracy that leaves aside the fact that all decisions, even those made by democratic governments are disadvantageous to some people because if they produce gains, they also have costs.

If the trade-offs in advantages and disadvantages were identical for everyone, judgments involved in making collective decisions would be roughly equivalent to those involved in making individual decisions: but the trade-offs are not the same for everyone.[12]

Costs and benefits are therefore distributed unevenly and the central question is always who should decide and on whose criteria? Hence the importance for those decisions to be open to contestation. If this is already difficult at the national level, it becomes almost intractable

when one considers the case of a hypothetical international demos where great difference exist in the magnitude of the population and the power of the different states.

Dahl argues that if we accept that democracy is a system of popular control over governmental policies and decisions, one has to conclude that international decision-making cannot be democratic. This does not mean seeing international organizations as undesirable and negating their usefulness. But he claims that there is "no reason to clothe international organizations in the mantle of democracy simply in order to provide them with greater legitimacy".[13] He proposes instead to treat them as 'bureaucratic bargaining systems' that might be necessary but whose costs to democracy should be acknowledged and taken in to account when decisions are made about ceding them important national powers.

Mary Kaldor is also sceptical about the idea that democratic procedures could be reconstituted at the global level. But, contrary to Dahl, she endorses the cosmopolitan project and she suggests an ingenious solution: to envisage global civil society as a functional equivalent to democracy. According to her, once we acknowledge that the central issue in parliamentary democracy has always been one of deliberation, not representation, the difficulties linked to the establishment of a global representative democracy can be ignored. Participation in a global civil society could replace representation by providing a place for deliberation about the range of issues affecting people in different aspects of their lives. Besides the privilege that it attributes to advocacy groups, the problem with such an idea is that mere deliberation without the moment of decision and the mechanisms to enforce those decisions means very little. In the name of adapting it to the age of globalization, her proposal risks depriving the notion of democracy of one of its important dimensions. To be sure, Kaldor defends a very activist conception of civil society and she stresses the need for a redistribution of power. Her views are on several points very radical but her approach is clearly consensual According to her, civil society is the locus of a type of governance based on consent, a consent which is generated through politics conceived as 'social bargaining'. She believes in the possibility of

> a genuinely free conversation, a rational critical dialogue" and is convinced that "through access, openness and debate, policy makers are more likely to act as an Hegelian universal class, in the interests of the human community.[14]

As should be clear by now, the central problem with the diverse forms of cosmopolitanism is that they all postulate, albeit in different guises, the availability of a form of consensual governance transcending the political, conflict and negativity. The cosmopolitan project has therefore to deny the hegemonic dimension of politics. In fact several cosmopolitan theorists explicitly state that their aim is to envisage a politics 'beyond hegemony'. Such an approach overlooks the fact that since power relations are constitutive of the social, every order is *by necessity* a hegemonic order. To believe in the possibility of a cosmopolitan democracy with cosmopolitan citizens with the same rights and obligations, a constituency that would coincide with 'humanity' is a dangerous illusion. If such a project was ever realized, it could only signify the world hegemony of a dominant power that would have been able to impose its conception of the world on the entire planet and which, identifying its interests with those of humanity, would treat any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its 'rational' leadership.

Towards a Multipolar World Order

Contrary to what the cosmopolitans claim, the end of the bipolar order of the cold war far from having opened the way for a cosmopolitan democracy, has led to the emergence of new global antagonisms. I submit that it is within the context of the unipolar world, resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unchallenged hegemony of the United States, that one can make sense of the recent wave of international terrorism, a situation that could easily usher in a new type of war, a sort of global civil war. The absence of a real pluralism in the international arena entails the impossibility of finding legitimate forms of expression for dissensus and this is why, when antagonisms emerge, they take extreme forms. It is therefore the lack of political channels for challenging the hegemony of neo-liberal globalization which is at the origin of the proliferation of discourses and practices of radical negation of the current order. Even liberal cosmopolitans like Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss acknowledge the link between terrorism and the present world order when they say

> With the possibility of direct and formalized participation in the international system foreclosed, frustrated individuals and groups (especially when their governments are viewed as illegitimate and hostile) have

been turning to various modes of civic resistance, both peaceful and violent. Global terrorism is at the violent end of this spectrum of transnational protest, and its apparent agenda may be mainly driven by religious, ideological and regional goals rather than by resistance directly linked to globalization. But is extremist alienation is partly, at the very least, an indirect result of globalizing impacts that may be transmuted in the political unconscious of those so afflicted into grievances associated with cultural injustices.[15]

Falk and Strauss believe that the solution to our present predicament lies in a 'democratic transnationalism' whose core would be constituted by a Global Parliamentary Assembly (GPA) providing a global institutional voice for the people of the world.[16] They present the mission of such an assembly -- whose powers should always be exercised according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights- as contributing to the democratization of global policy, not only in its formulation but also in its implementation. We need, they say, an international framework capable of democratically accommodating the growing institutionalization of civic politics and this Global Parliamentary Assembly could provide the beginnings of a democratic form of accountability for the institutional system.

Theirs is a version of cosmopolitanism which relies mainly in the role of civil society and sees the state as the central problem. It asserts that citizens groups and business and financial elites are beginning to recognize that they have a common interest in mounting a challenge to states which should cease to act as their representatives in the international arena. According to them, many of the leading figures in world business, like those who meet at Davos, have an enlightened sense of their long term interests and are very sympathetic to the idea of democratizing the international system. The organized networks of global civil society and business should therefore be able to impose their democratizing projects to the reluctant governments. The objective is to establish a global institutional democratic structure enabling the people of the world to bypass the states and have a meaningful voice in global governance, thereby creating a peaceful global order.

While agreeing with Falk and Strauss on the importance of establishing an institutional framework that would allow for the expression of grievances, I find their solution completely inadequate. It is not only that their hope in the enlightened self-interest of the business elites is thoroughly unconvincing. My main quarrel with their proposal is that they can only envisage democracy at the world level

as the globalization of the Western model. Their 'global civil society' is composed of citizens, visualized as liberal individuals, fighting to defend their rights, against possible encroachment by the state. This is a typically liberal vision which does not show any sensitivity to different cultural traditions and takes the individual 'Western style' as the highest form of achievement. Now, it is precisely against the imposition of such a model of society that we are currently witnessing strong resistances.

It is high time to acknowledge the pluralist character of the world and to relinquish the Eurocentric tenet that modernization can only take place through Westernization. We should challenge the idea that moral progress consists in the universalization of liberal democracy with his specific understanding of human rights. I contend that liberal democratic institutions and the Western language of human rights represent only one possible political language game among others and that it cannot claim to have a privileged relation to rationality. We should admit that there is a plurality of legitimate answers to the question of the 'good regime'. Let me stress that, contrary to what many rationalist would certainly object, such a pluralist approach does not entail any relativism. This is not an 'anything goes' approach which would be unable to make any distinction among existing regimes. According to a pluralist perspective some ethico-political conditions need to be fulfilled in order for a regime to qualify as just. Here the idea of human rights could play an important role, provided that it is reformulated in a way which allows for a pluralism of interpretations. For instance in order to pass the test of a good regime, a political form of society would need to be informed by a set of values whose role in that regime corresponds to the one played in liberal democracy by the notion of human rights. This means that we would have to look for what Raimundo Panikkar calls 'homeomorphic', ie. functional equivalent of the notion of human rights. According to Panikkar, when we look at Western culture we see that human rights are presented as providing the basic criteria for the recognition of human dignity and this is why they are seen as the necessary condition for a just social and political order. And he argues that we should examine how other cultures give different answers to the same question. Once it is acknowledged that what is at stake in human rights is the dignity of the person, the possibility arises of envisaging different manners of answering that question and we can also realize that what Western culture calls 'human rights' is a culturally specific form

of asserting the dignity of the person and that it is presumptuous to declare that it is the only legitimate one.

At the moment when the United States are under the pretence of advancing civilization trying to impose their system and their values to the rest of the world, this kind of reflection is more pressing than ever. In order to create the channels for the legitimate expression of dissent, we need to counter the universalist globalist with a call for a multipolar world order, a pluralistic world order where a number of big regional units could coexist with their different cultures and values and where a plurality of understandings of human rights and forms of democracy would be considered as legitimate.

At this stage in the process of globalization, I do not want to deny that we need a set of institutions to regulate international relations but those institutions should allow for a significant degree of pluralism and they should not require the existence of single unified structure. Such a structure would necessarily entail the presence of a power centre which would be the only locus of sovereignty. It is vain to imagine the possibility of a world system where power relations would have been overcome thanks to a supposed 'Reign of Reason'. Such a reign of reason could only be the screen concealing the rule of a dominant power, which having been able to present its interests as identical with those of humanity could therefore treat any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its 'rational' leadership.

This in my view is a recipe for disaster, leading straight to the clash of civilization announced by Huntington. It is indeed crucial to realize that, to a great extent, the universalist approach contributes to this clash. By attempting to impose the Western conception of democracy, deemed to be the only legitimate one, on recalcitrant societies, it sees those who do not accept this conception as 'enemies of civilization', thereby creating the conditions of an antagonistic struggles between different civilizations. It is only by acknowledging the legitimacy of a plurality of just forms of society and the fact that the liberal democratic model is only one form of democracy among other possible ones that conditions can be created for an 'agonistic' coexistence between different regional poles with their specific institutions. To be sure this multipolar world order will not eliminate conflict but those conflicts are less likely to take an antagonistic form than in a world that does not allow for a genuine pluralism. Peace is more likely to be secured when some sort of equilibrium is reached between a plurality of regional poles than by a single hyper power imposing its order.

What is really at stake in my critique of the cosmopolitan approach is their negation of the dimension of the political and the belief that the aim of politics is to establish consensus on one single model. We should relinquish the illusion that antagonisms could be eliminated thanks to a unification of the world achieved transcending the political, conflict and negativity. To acknowledge the permanence of the political is to realize that it is vain to aspire to an order beyond hegemony or beyond sovereignty. But this should not be a cause for apathy or for pessimism. There is an objective that we can work towards, to create a multipolar world so as to pluralize hegemony, to pluralize sovereignty and in that way to make the world more amenable to democratic contestation and to the respect of a plurality of voices.

NOTES

1. Daniele Archibugi, "Cosmopolitical Democracy", in D. Archibugi (ed.), *Debating Cosmopolitics*, (London:Verso 2003), 7.

2. Daniele Archibugi, "Demos and Cosmopolis", in *Debating Cosmopolitics*, opus cit., 262.

3. David Held, "Democracy and the New International Order" in Daniele Archibugi and David Held (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Democracy. An Agenda for a New World Order*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 1995) , 111.

4. David Held, "The transformation of political community: rethinking democracy in the context of globalization" In *Democracy's Edges*, I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), 105.

5. Ibid.., 106.

6. David Chandler, "New Rights for Old? Cosmopolitan Citizenship and the Critique of State Sovereignty", *Political Studies*, Vol. 51, 2003, 332-349.

7. Ibid., 340.

8. Ibid., 343.

9. David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 1995), 232.

10. Chandler, opus cit., 347.

11. Nadia Urbinati, opus cit., 80.

12. Robert Dahl, "Can international organizations be democratic? A sceptic view" in *Democracy's Edges*, opus cit., 25.

13. Ibid., 32.

14. Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society. An Answer to War*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2003), 108.

15. Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss, "The Deeper Challenges of Global Terrorism: A Democratizing Response", in D. Archibugi (ed.) *Debating Cosmopolitics*, (London: Verso 2003), 206.

16. Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss, "Towards Global Parliament", *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2001.