

Globalization and Democracy

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Before the widespread use of the term Globalization, and following the end of the Cold War, the field of international relations was briefly dominated by the short-lived concept of a New World Order. Fashioned in stages, this concept initially described a new economic world order sought mainly by developing countries during the 1970's. Late Algerian president Houari Boumedienne offered a notable defense of the concept in his historic 1974 address at the United Nations' General Assembly when he spoke in the name of all nations aspiring toward industrial development.

The concept later shifted to the domain of international information relations, becoming known as the new information world order. This was also instrumental to developing nations attempting partake in forming information and disseminating news internationally. Former director of UNESCO Amadou M'Baw, an active supporter of such broader participation, made this a pivotal issue during his term in office.

The concept of a new economic world order vocalized the Third World protests of the unjust distribution of wealth among nations and prodded leading industrial nations to recognize the gravity of the prevalent inequality and to subsequently desist from actively attempting to the lower prices of poorer nations' raw exports. Similarly the concept of a new information world order, defended vigorously by UNESCO in the 1980's during a wave of hope in the Third World that economic, political and cultural liberalization could curb the monopoly of news agencies controlled by industrialized nations, brought forth new challenges to directing and providing information for the world over.

These successive waves of protest by poor nations against the prevalent world orders instigated the industrialized nations to respond with their own economic and

military solidarity, building an exclusive alliance within the framework of NATO. The United States vehemently refused any re-working of the then-dominant order of international relations and labeled the effort to build a new information world order as another Communist conspiracy to censor and control free speech and free press. In protest, the United States withdrew from UNESCO and exerted substantial pressure on Amadou M'Baw to resign. This radical secession by the United States, along with a general reluctance by other industrial nations to reconsider the current situation, quickly dashed any hopes of opening international and multi-lateral negotiations on issues vital to all of humanity. Such censure of any debates on development, the exchange of knowledge, technical expertise or the redistribution of wealth and resources deeply undermined the validity of a world order as a conceptual framework open to research and questioning.

Nevertheless, the concept of a world order was quickly revived and energetically injected into the domain of international relations, this time in a stronger position than before. For following the end of the Cold War and in tandem with the Western coalition's war against Iraq in the early 1990's, the concept once again took center stage, donning, however, a new appearance and claiming a new content.

Shifting from economic and information issues to political and geo-political ones, the concept, now refurbished, became a device employed by the industrial nations to exert pressure on developing nations, rather than the other way round. In the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait this new world order, proclaimed by President George Bush following French President Francois Mitterrand, meant not a redistribution of wealth and capital -- be it financial, technological or informational -- but rather an implementation of the so-called rules of international law which prohibited nations from attacking each other.

In practical terms, this new world order no longer worked for change, but rather for fixing and stabilizing the existing political and geo-political situation. By controlling the UN Security Council -- whose decisions are considered the foundation of international law -- the powerful nations actually controlled and inhibited any political or geo-political change that could have erupted in response to the preceding period.

The wealthy industrial nations now could claim themselves as the guardians of a New World Order and the guarantors of international stability.

Around the same time, it was also argued that with the end of the Cold War, this New World Order would open new horizons for a world now safely guided by the United States and other powerful industrial nations. By halting the arms race, it was claimed, a surplus of capital could now be redirected toward developmental projects across the globe, especially for poorer nations. It was also argued that the end of the Cold War would result in the spread of democracy, as tensions in international relations were reduced and the illusions once vested into totalitarian regimes disappeared.

But hopes in this New World Order were short lived. The industrial nations did not increase assistance to poor nations, nor did they coordinate their efforts to help face the pressing needs of the poor. Democracy did not spread, and international law was not implemented.

On the contrary, the advent of Bush's New World Order saw the spread of ethnic and internecine wars in many poor nations, as the more affluent nations continued to vie ever-more greedily for larger shares in Third World markets, partially in an attempt to assuage the rise of unemployment within their own societies. It also became quite clear that no uniform standard was applied in implementing the so-called international law. All this led the many critics of the industrial nations to depict such biased policies not as a New World Order, but rather as a system of Neo-Colonialism.

And so, gradually, the deployment of the term Globalization gained currency, initially limited to specific circles and domains, but eventually replacing the concept of a New World Order.

The term Globalization was alleged to provide a conceptual framework with which to understand the domain of international relations in its constant permutations under a barrage of new information techniques and technologies. But once again, the same issues of importance to poor and developing nations returned: Will Globalization present greater opportunities for economic and social development and thus lead to democracy?

The second part of the question was and remains a matter of debate, resulting in two camps, broadly-speaking. The first side argues that the more Globalization lessens the grip of the **nation-state** on cultural and communicational arenas, reduces its capacity to maintain a strong base of political clients and connects internal development to the global market, the more it will increase the likelihood of democratic change in the Third World.

The other side, upheld by a wide spectrum of movements critical of Globalization and coming from a tradition of Marxist, leftist and **critical thought**, tends to argue the opposite position. As Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann, authors of *The Global Trap*, contend in what has become a reference on the subject, Globalization constitutes the largest threat to democratic systems, not only for the developing nations but also for nations with a long tradition of democracy, namely industrial nations.

Their argument is that as the logic of a globalized economy -- namely the total search for the greatest profit -- spreads through society, the principle of political sovereignty loses its essence and its capacity to act. Political sovereignty is then reduced, according to the authors, to a mere stage upon which stands a crowd of

alienated people as the state, caught in the trap of Globalization, capitulates its democratic legitimacy. Authority is then held by a minority, consisting of international speculators, business men, international mafias and multinational corporations, who in turn monopolize international markets and impose their policies on national governments. Briefly said, succumbing to the logic of international economy empties democracy of its essence and surrenders authority to the narrow interests of **businessmen.**

Democracy requires not only the legality of the state, but also an ethic of liberty. Successful democracy includes a variety of political and social balances constantly checked by political parties, syndicates and other coalitions from civil society, as well as a minimum amount of solidarity and a fair distribution of wealth and resources. All this cannot be accomplished under the dire consequences of globalization, like the marginalization of the public and increased unemployment.

And so the question returns: Does Globalization offer the hope of a better future for democracy, or is it, rather, a major threat to democracy?

Those who subscribe to the first point of view argue, firstly, that the leading democratic nations do actually seek a democratization of developing nations. For it is through such a process that these nations can promote and disseminate their own socio-political model, along with their values concerning individual freedom. They argue, secondly, that market capitalism, already dominant the world over, requires a similar and reciprocal political market based on the principles of competition among the individuals of the social elite. All of which means, they claim, that as the spread of economic liberalization promoting the West's influence and control of world resources increases, so will the odds of anchoring democracy in developing nations.

And yet, one could argue in response that there are no historical or logical reasons to support these assumptions. For although democratic nations, allegedly worried by the **hegemony** of totalitarian, fascist and communist regimes, speak often of spreading democracy, there is nevertheless no reason to believe that they are willing to prioritize such political ideals when dealing with other nations.

For all nations, whether big or small, poor or powerful, do not base their politics on acts of good-will, or the development of living conditions, or the just governance of other nations, but rather on the basis of their own strategic and economic interests.

Moreover, after the demise of the largest totalitarian regimes, there are no longer any serious and extant threats to the current democracies and their interests which could have been used to justify an organized response. Rather, the maintaining of weak, unpopular and authoritative regimes which can easily be guided and manipulated is much more lucrative to powerful nations than the presence of real democracies; especially as such political systems cannot but reflect and express the longing of Third World populations for international justice, development and equal participation in world politics.

The 20th century abounds in unfortunate examples of how modernizing projects in developing nations -- whether successful or not -- seldom accomplish capital growth within the framework of international competition without implementing harsh measures to maintain low wages. For here in the Third World, economic liberalization undeniably requires an usurping of political authority.

This is still evident today among the so-called "Asian tigers and dragons" like China and in any other nation seeking expedient capital accumulation in the current age. The epoch of concordance between the system of economic freedom and the system of political freedom is long past. And yet the major world powers show no compunction

when painting a veneer of democracy and cultural diversity over what are essentially authoritative and repressive regimes -- regimes ruled by a small minority of agents who depend on outside forces and outside intelligence agencies to maintain stability and order. This beautifying veneer, which hides a rule of brutality, has become a necessary component of the now dominant world order, as it is also a specious requirement for gaining international legitimacy.

However one should not, as many critics do – making them correct only in principle -- apply suppositions valid for industrial nations on developing nations. For even if Globalization does threaten democracies in industrial nations, this does not necessarily mean that it threatens developing nations in equal or similar terms. True, Globalization threatens democracy in industrial nations, as it tends to destroy those spaces once open to freedom for both political activity and civil society -- and indeed democracy created these individual and societal spaces.

Yet Globalization does not constitute the same threat to societies which never witnessed such spaces of freedom, let alone democracy. In such societies, Globalization is bound to damage some of the fortresses of the state that imprison much of society. In such cases Globalization would actually promote the creation of different and newer spaces, slightly less likely to be subjugated by the apparatuses of censorship, control and group punishment.

Therefore it is incorrect to simply state that the effects of Globalization on democratic systems and authoritarian regimes are one and the same. Nor is it correct to reductively claim that Globalization is marching along, with all societies, toward democracy. Rather, Globalization -- regardless of the nature of the society -- has two contradictory impacts: In dismantling the nation, Globalization shakes the foundations of the ethics of liberty and the state's legality as it encourages systems of social, racial,

religious and sectarian discrimination. Also, through increased polarization it destroys social, political and national accountability as it entrenches instability and tension within societies. Moreover, by centralizing wealth and resources in the hands of a few, and within a limited number of locales, it stops the economy from growing in tandem with demographic changes and deepens the chasm that separates North from South, leading to increased unemployment, or even famine.

And yet, by opening up national spaces -- internally by breaking the monopoly of a system of political feudalism, and externally by connecting formerly separate spaces to each other -- Globalization promotes a unification of standards. This creates a shared world consciousness of the challenges facing humanity. In other words, it deepens the democratic consciousness, making democracy a common reference for all inhabitants of the earth. Moreover, Globalization gradually allows for the construction of an unprecedented network of international solidarity from which common solutions to common problems can be fashioned.

The obvious discrepancy lies in the fact that Globalization promotes the demands of an international democracy, while it weakens the objective conditions for establishing viable national democratic systems.

What prevails is a Globalizing democracy that functions in different registers and on different levels, and possibly transforms the classical concept of individual freedom into an illusion. Therefore, the effect of Globalization is contingent on the nature of the effected societies. Globalization can rattle the old authoritarian regimes, as it can destabilize the classical democratic systems. And although we will continue to witness oligarchic regimes employing a merely executive and formal democracy, the contradictions will continue to loom larger, thus digging an unbridgeable gap between the high principles of democracy and the prevalent dysfunctional realities.

These situations will necessarily lead to changes within the system of Globalization itself. For Globalization does not, in fact, increase or inhibit the chances for democracy. Rather, it undoes the foundations upon which the classical concepts of democracy were erected.

Therefore it will no longer be possible to reconstruct democracy without an international perspective, one that surpasses the limited national/ethnic principle which once permitted the social solidarity with which national democracies were built. And yet, we ask again: Will globalization allow the building of coalitions among international, political and social groups capable of accomplishing an international solidarity, and thus a surge of national democracies?

The answer is affirmative. For in as much as the now dominant system of liberal Globalization promotes the destruction of democratic structures and disseminates chaos in international and social relations, it will also exacerbate and instigate various movements of protest. It will give birth to various forces able to resist the dominant order -- but only as long as they can construct a strategy for an international alliance able to regain the values of democracy in tangible and actual reality.

The future of democracy in the globalized world, and with it the future of human societies, hinges on the outcome of the struggle between two forces. There are those who put politics and society -- i.e. the logic of humanity and solidarity -- at the top of their political agenda and look beyond national borders for solidarity. And there are those forces which deploy the logic and priorities of economic expansion, undermining the relevance of the nation state, dismantling the structure of society and promoting the monopolies of financial agglomerations and the few sham governments that collaborate with them for the sake of expedient profits.

Building an international democracy will not come about without the tenacity to face this conflict based on the gradual accumulation of the successes of international solidarity movements.

Only such a diligent resistance can control the unchecked flow of globalized capital and redirect it away from the logic of unrestrained market competition and into the logic of a human society founded on the primacy of an ethics of solidarity, cooperation and concordance.

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