

Some Thoughts on Globalization and Democracy

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1. Among the alleged benefits of the complex process of globalization, its positive effects on the establishment and/or the consolidation of democracy, at the national and international level, is often mentioned. The truth of this assertion depends largely on whether or not it is possible *voluntarily* to *export* or *import* the normative and empirical prerequisites of democracy and transfer them to other nations or to the international system. Here, by ‘democracy’ I understand a system that guarantees the highest possible degree of equal freedom within an institutional framework that imposes effective restrictions on majority decisions while preventing minority despotism.

2. If one accepts – as I think one should – that democracy, thus understood, is the only ethically justifiable political system, then it follows directly that any process of democratization contributes to the effective implementation of moral values in the world. And if it were true that globalization increases the probability of national or international democratization, then it would also follow that, at least regarding political institutions, globalization is morally valuable.

3. Still, it would be premature to draw a *general* conclusion about globalization from this, because it might be the case that the process of globalization, even if it would indeed support democratization, has a negative effect on certain *cultural values* that constitute the national identity of individual states, or that it violates the political sphere that is exclusively reserved to each state. The first is argued, above all, by those who think that the *cultural* point of view is also the *moral* point of view. The second is the argument of those who believe in the qualitative analogy between respect for the sovereignty of states and respect for the autonomy of individuals.

Both positions hold that, however globalization is defined, it always involves the exercise of an asymmetric influence which, under the cover of a moralizing rhetoric, disguises the purpose of domination. Asym-

metric globalization is, in this view, nothing but an updated version of the old phenomenon of colonialism.

To these two objections of a moral-theoretical kind, a third, pragmatic objection can be added, in the sense that the so-called ‘export of democracy’ to countries with other cultural traditions has rarely been successful, particularly in the case of countries whose social and political institutional framework is deficient in certain ways.

Let us take a closer look at these three objections in turn:

4. *First*: Advocates of an extreme axiological relativism hold that any attempt to impose universal standards risks the destruction of cultural traditions which constitute a *necessary* background for the existence of individual and collective identities and for the formulation of moral judgments. This has prominently been maintained by Charles Taylor, but also, for example, by Pierre Krebs – one of the ideologues of the extreme right in Europe:

“A process of unforeseeable consequences aims at transforming the cultural and political human landscape of our planet. This process is ideological by nature, and it is probably stronger, more profound and more destructive than the consequences of a nuclear war of annihilation. [...] what Martin Heidegger called ‘the equalizing attitude of thought’ has now reached the proportions of a system. A system aiming at the slow, but relentless destruction of all ethnic identities and groupings. In short: the destruction of all the different human platforms on earth. This process is that of an egalitarian, or rather, equalizing global system – a system or instrument for genocide.” (Gilbhard and Goblirsch 1992:218)

5. *Second*: The strongest moral argument in favor of the principle of non-intervention is that the *sovereignty of states* is the political equivalent of *individual autonomy*. Just as one should not interfere with the latter even to promote a person’s virtue, one should also not intervene in the sovereign sphere of states to promote moral values. This was the well-known argument by Christian Wolff, Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill. More recently, Michael Walzer has reiterated it:

“In fact, of course, not every independent state is free, but the recognition of sovereignty is the only way we have of establishing an arena within which freedom can be fought for and (sometimes) won. It is this arena and these activities that we want to protect, and we protect them, much as we protect individual integrity, by marking out boundaries that cannot be crossed, rights that cannot be violated. As with individuals, so with sovereign states: there are things that we cannot do to them, even for their own ostensible good.” (Walzer 1977:89)

6. *Third*: Concerning the possibility of exporting and promoting democracy abroad, Latin America can serve as a sad example of a long series of historical failures:

“Between 1912 and 1932 alone there were forty episodes during which the United States, while primarily motivated by its own economic and strategic interests, claimed to be promoting democracy in Latin America.” (Light 2001:76)

These so-called ‘episodes’ consisted mainly in armed interventions in Central America and the Caribbean which, far from promoting democracy, left a legacy of bloody dictatorships, of personalities of the stature of an Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua or a Leónidas Trujillo in Santo Domingo.

One of the few countries that has voluntarily *imported* democracy with at least some initial success was Argentina, around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. But there was a problem. Juan Bautista Alberdi, one of the most important Latin American thinkers of the 19th century, has lucidly described it: He was sure – and always openly expressed this – that the institutional model that had been proposed for Argentina, namely the model of the U. S. constitution, did not fit the social realities in Argentina. Hence, the options Alberdi saw were either to change the model or to change the demographic composition of the country. Alberdi recommended the latter:

“It is purely utopian, it is a dream, it defies logic to think that our Spanish-American race as it has been shaped by its dark colonial past is capable today of establishing a representative republic. [...] *It is not the laws we must change: it is the people, the things.* We must exchange our people, who are incapable of liberty, for others who can handle it.” (Alberdi 1913:180, emphasis added)

And he adds:

“Certainly you cannot establish a republic with three million Indians, Christians and Catholics. Nor with four million Spaniards from the peninsula, because genuine Spaniards too are incapable of installing it, at home or here. If we must shape our population to the measure of the system of government, if we should rather fit our population to the proclaimed system than the system to the population, then we must strengthen the Anglo-Saxon population on our soil.” (Ibid.)

It may add to the skepticism of those who have doubts about the exportability of democracy that this Argentinian solution is practically impossible elsewhere, for instance in Africa or the Middle East.

7. But perhaps these skeptical positions can be countered with the following arguments:

a) Equating the cultural point of view with the moral point of view is morally and logically unacceptable. Not every difference deserves our moral respect; it is simply not reasonable to pretend that ‘anything goes’. And besides, unless you want to deny the naturalistic fallacy, it is logically impossible to make an inference from the *fact* that a society

has certain rules of conduct – as all societies do, by definition of society – to their *moral worth*.

b) Equating state sovereignty with individual autonomy is also fallacious. This has been discussed in an abundant literature to which I will not refer here. I just wish to draw your attention to one single point: *Sovereignty* refers merely to the extent of the jurisdiction of the legal norms of a state, whatever their content. *Autonomy* is the source of an individual's moral dignity. It must therefore not be interfered with, if moral perfectionism or unjustified paternalism is to be avoided. By contrast, the moral quality – or, to use another word, the *legitimacy* – of a political system may very well be heteronomously imposed. When the Republic of South Africa abolished *apartheid*, its political system gained in legitimacy *despite* the fact that this move was to some extent coercively imposed by the pressure of the international community, that is, in violation of the principle of non-intervention.

The moral and logical untenability of these first two arguments does not ensure, however, that they are not in fact used and that people would not be willing to fight for them. Moral and conceptual errors have very often been at the root of great historical calamities.

c) The argument regarding the *practical possibility* of implanting democracy in countries with little or no democratic traditions or with serious socio-economic deficits. This is one reason why the third argument deserves our special attention.

It is an undeniable empirical truth that the export of democracy usually meets with obstacles in the form of strong ideological, religious or other cultural convictions, in a broad sense of the word. The main problem therefore seems to be a *technical* rather than a moral question. Among other issues, this refers us to the difficult question of so-called humanitarian interventions with armed forces, as well as to the question whether *economic* globalization may be a necessary or even a sufficient condition for the global promotion of democracy. According to recent UNCTAD reports, for example, one consequence of economic globalization in Latin America has been a worrying triangle of democracy, poverty and inequality. Many other observers have noted that the implantation of democracy in countries with intensive economic ties to so-called 'Western' democracies but with strong or absolutist religious convictions of their own may be an impossible quest. To give you an exemplary illustration, let me remind you of a declaration of undeniable political relevance. In April 2000, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Saud Bin Faisal Bin Abdulaziz, regarding „alleged“ – as he said – viola-

tions of human rights, explained the position of his country with impeccable socio-cultural arguments:

“We do not believe that we violate human rights, unless one should think that these rights can be guaranteed in Saudi Arabia only if we change our laws. Concerning this, I am sorry, but we will not change our laws. Besides, our laws are of universal application: the *sharia*, the Islamic law, represents the faith not only of Saudi citizens, but of 1.2 billion believers. If what is at issue is the application of universal standards, then how could anyone assume that a law followed by 1.2 billion people is not of universal application?”⁶

In Latin America as well as in some countries of the Middle East, the effective implementation of democracy either seems not to have been helped by economic globalization or to confront impediments which globalization alone cannot overcome.

8. Finally, for the international system too, it has been assumed that globalization may contribute to its democratization. But this would require the satisfaction of at least three necessary conditions:

First, the democratization of the members of the international system, and that means basically: of the UN member states.

Second, the democratization of the UN itself, which is today, as many have observed, an oligarchic organization, at least regarding one of its most important organs, namely, the *Security Council*. And as for the *General Assembly*, its democratic nature remains seriously impaired as long as a substantial number of its members represent non-democratic governments, that is, as long as the first condition is not satisfied.

Third, all states must give up their claims to a position of factual sovereignty within the international community.

The difficulties with the satisfaction of the first condition I have already mentioned. The same applies, by implication, to the possible democratization of the General Assembly.

The constitution of the Security Council, particularly the veto right of the permanent members, may have been adequate when the UN Charter was written. But today, where we are concerned about global democratic representation, it does not look very satisfactory. Despite the fact that most of the permanent members of the Security Council are democratic, it is unlikely that they might be willing to give up their veto privilege or to increase the number of permanent members.

And even if the first two conditions would be satisfied, there would still be the difficulty of the third condition. The establishment of a

6 Cf. El País (Madrid), April 16, 2000.

unitary world-state seems hardly feasible (nor would it be desirable). It will certainly not be in the interest of great powers with hegemonic inclinations to accept, for example, Security Council decisions that would constrain their sovereignty.

Rather, attempts to establish a unipolar rule come dangerously close to the imposition of a government of the strongest, the imposition of one single *de facto* sovereign who as such will be above the law. For conceptual reasons, such a 'sovereign' state striving for exclusive domination *must* pursue a course of action that disregards all legal constraints. A sovereign in the strong sense of the word *cannot* be subject to legal restrictions. It is, therefore, no accident that in their decision-making, powers aiming at global sovereignty shun the criteria of legality prescribed by an international law that is, in any case, only weakly effective. For reasons of conceptual consistency, a sovereign cannot accept constraints such as, for example, the legal restrictions of the UN Charter.

Now, at least two kinds of reasons that speak against such a system of unipolar domination of a global sovereign can be given:

(i) On the one hand, the stability of such a system that is imposed in disregard of all legal restrictions is likely to be precarious. However, this is a thought that will probably not be able to convince a power which feels sufficiently strong to impose its will on others.

(ii) On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that a system in which the conduct of people or states is regulated merely on the basis of some actor's will, unrestricted by norms and above all by moral reasons, is tantamount to *despotism*.

From the moral point of view, despotism is of course unjustifiable. As Leibniz said, not even God can merely impose his will – even God must respect moral reasons if he is to be distinguished from the Devil.

There can be no doubt that globalization in the legal sphere has strengthened the rejection of massive human rights violations – those crimes that, to use the formulation of Lassa Oppenheim, “*shock the conscience of mankind*” (Oppenheim 1948: 279, quoted from Singer 2002: 121). The alleged legal sovereignty of states in which such crimes are committed has been increasingly considered less important than the – legal and moral – duty to stop such atrocities. But as in the case of Leibniz's God, states that intervene in other states for such reasons must do so within the confines and in respect of international law.

For liberal democrats, the times ahead will not be easy. We will have to cope with a world in which the economic interests involved in the

globalization process and the desires of huge numbers of people for a more decent life, under conditions of equal liberty – and that means above all: under conditions of democracy – will not always point into the same direction.

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