

Note on “Cosmopolitan Democracy as Global Governance”

by Chuck Rosenberg

One of our study circle participants in New York, who is mother to a very aware 20-something and den-mother to several more, mentioned to them that she was looking deeply into One World and cosmopolitanism and global governance. Their response was, “Oh, great. The Davos crowd will run the world.”

And of course that is a key objection, or at least grounds for skepticism, from many quarters...fear of an all-powerful supranational entity that will be in charge of everything, “for everyone’s good”. It need not be that way, but the shape of democratic global governance remains vague...how would full participation be attained? Would the ultimate solution supplant or augment existing instruments such as states or intergovernmental bodies? How do we get from where we are, with powerful nation-states dominating global decision-making and controlling the lion’s share of the world’s resources, to a peaceful, sustainable, and just future that puts the needs of all of the world’s citizens first?

There are a group of thinkers who are working through this very problem—they include, notably but not only, Mary Kaldor, David Held, Richard Falk, and Daniele Archibugi. Of these, Archibugi is perhaps first among peers in developing the kind of analysis and advocating for the kind of incremental but substantive actions that would move us along the path toward a genuinely democratic system of global governance.

Daniele Archibugi (Rome, 1958), an Italian social scientist, works on the economics and policy of technological change and on the political theory of international relations. Together with David Held, he has been a key figure in the development of cosmopolitanism and of cosmopolitan democracy in particular.

Archibugi has an extensive academic resume that includes working and teaching at the Universities of Sussex, Naples, Cambridge and Rome, and he has advised senior leadership of the EU and the UN. He is currently professor of innovation, governance, and public policy at the University of London, Birkbeck College, and a research director at the Italian National Research Council in Rome. His most recent book, *The Global Commonwealth of Citizens: Toward Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2008) is the closest thing we have to a road-map of the real-world issues that confront the project of cosmopolitan democracy.

The book is challenging for a non-specialist. It is dense, closely reasoned, and because Professor Archibugi writes in English, not his native tongue, and uses a fair amount of jargon and terms of art from international relations and political science, it is a bit more accessible to his colleagues and graduate students than to the rest of us.

Immediately below is his own brief invitation to read the book, from his posting in *The Globalist* e-zine (www.theglobalist.com). After that is my own attempt to summarize the book’s most important points; however, his is a rich treatment of a variety of intriguing collateral topics—such as the problem of democracy in a multilingual society, the potential for international juridical bodies to take on more mediation duties, a cosmopolitan perspective on the self-determination of peoples, and so on—be assured, the book is well worth the patience required to take in the whole.

Prospects for Cosmopolitan Democracy

By [Daniele Archibugi](#) | Thursday, April 02, 2009

In a world gripped by political turmoil, democracy has become harder to establish. While world leaders have largely failed, is it possible that citizens might be able to change things? In his book, "The Global Commonwealth of Citizens," author Daniele Archibugi discusses the perfect political subjects for changing the face of democracy.

We cannot expect fresh changes in world political life to come solely from the top down, in the form of a sudden epiphany that enlightens the minds of the rulers.

Rulers often succeed in eluding public scrutiny in the democratic countries, and to an even greater extent in foreign policy, as is shown by the farce of the weapons of mass destruction.

The hope that a radical transformation will occur in world politics lies in the entry onstage — in a more structured and institutionalized fashion — of a new political subject.

This can be the only political subject that possesses democratic legitimacy: the citizen. (Italics Ed.) Only by creating a global commonwealth of citizens who will express themselves in world politics can some changes be achieved. Empowering the citizen of the world means to build up, at the global level, those checks and balances that have nurtured the evolution of democracy.

To demand a role for the citizens of the world does not mean replacing what individuals already have in a growing number of countries, but merely supplementing it. It is necessary to take into account the increased quantity and quality of the interactions among distant communities by means of increased participation.

The huge body of information of which global society is composed and the interactions and repercussions of the events that have spread across the continents still have no channels through which to be transformed into a forum of political decision making. Only a minimal part of the energy released by globalization is converted into the mobilization of global civil society.

The public opinion is capable of only sporadic, spasmodic action. Many have overemphasized the capacity of global civil society to effectively correct action by governments — and, indeed, over the past decade, global movements have emerged as the most original political actor of our era.

World public opinion and global movements are not always guided by unified intentions. Indeed, it often happens that the objectives pursued differ, or are even contradictory.

Nor is there any reason to expect that among such different subjects there can be a greater unity of intentions than that which exists within each separate state. World public opinion does not have the function of expressing a single totalizing view, but rather represents a counterweight vis-à-vis the choices made by the governments.

The function of world public opinion is not to converge on a single objective but to contribute to creating (a) better and (more) transparent context for policy making. My suggestions may be summed up in three keywords: Inclusion, responsibility and impartiality. (*See further explanation below. Ed.*)

The application of these principles entails moving on from the politics of the *polis*, founded on borders, to that of the *cosmopolis*, founded on sharing.

A cosmopolitan democracy will certainly not result from a preconceived plan but will perhaps be the outcome of contradictory actions that take place on the stage of history. Above all, it will not be necessary to employ evil means even to achieve desirable ends. Each step toward a cosmopolitan democracy is, at the same time, a means and an end.

Many political subjects may be interested in applying in everyday practice the principles and proposal discussed herein (*i.e., the book*). The international organizations can strengthen their channels of participation, also opening up to subjects that are not states.

The states themselves can become champions of cosmopolitanism not only by participating in and supporting the action of the international organizations but also by acting inside their own borders to include those who are different, whether they be minorities, immigrants or refugees.

Above all, it is the individuals who must today move on from their fragmented condition as subjects of globalization and become and act daily to build their own commonwealth of citizens.

So this book introduction comprises a call to action, but what are the key ideas that Archibugi is espousing?

First, he identifies a standard for democracy, and insists that nation-states that claim to be democratic can and should be evaluated against that standard.

Secondly, he faults democratic countries for failing to implement and uphold democratic standards in their external relations.

Third, he proposes a set of criteria for cosmopolitan democracy, as distinct from democracy in general, and suggests a menu of actionable items in the reform of both intergovernmental institutions (the UN, the EU, etc.) and global civil society that would move us incrementally to a condition—call it the “halfway house to cosmopolitan democracy”—that begins to satisfy his criteria. The last point and the menu of proposals that accompany it, is

what makes Archibugi's work most distinctive and valuable. He is showing a way forward...one which can be argued over and refined, to be sure, but measures that can be advocated for, planned, and, given political mobilization, carried out.

Taking up his key ideas in order, then:

Democracy: can we say what it is?

Archibugi rejects the relativistic idea that “no one can agree what democracy is, and no one can judge another country's adherence to democratic principles.” Rather, he follows criteria developed in the thinking of political scientists Norberto Bobbio and David Beetham, namely that true democracy is based on three cardinal principles: **nonviolence** in the way public choices are made; **popular control** over public decision making and makers; and **political equality** among citizens in the participation and exercise of control. He notes that democracy has many other important features, such as the right to vote, periodic elections, the existence of competing political parties, and so on, which might be used to make up a definition. But, he says, “a definition based on [these three principles] would seem...to be the most general, to grasp the spirit of what we commonly term *democracy*, and to be useful in identifying [*and evaluating, Ed.*] different models.” Further, these principles can be elaborated in a satisfying way to express democratic values, and establish requirements and institutional means for realizing such values.

For example, the value of “transparency” flows from principle of **popular control**—the requirement for transparency being government action open to scrutiny by the legislative power and the general public, and the institutional means for achieving transparency to include such items as legislative protection of the freedom of information and independent means of communication (i.e., other than state-controlled media).

An important point for Archibugi's master theme, cosmopolitan democracy, is that this kind of definition makes it possible to identify which norms and values can be extended from the national sphere to the international/global sphere; he would argue that such norms and values are in shorter supply than are generally thought.

The assessment of democratic states according to these principles and their associated norms and values, then, becomes a critical mirror which not only can improve democratic practice within nation-states, but raise questions about their behavior in their external relations. We can reasonably think of the normal operations of a democracy—elections, constitutional courts, the deliberations of a legislature—as a set of internal assessment systems that typically contain self-correcting measures and antidotes to excesses of power...referenda, recall, executive veto and override, and the like. Democracies can become very self-satisfied, with such credible mechanisms in place, and they often work well. But Archibugi cautions

...the internal assessment channels are not always enough. The members of the government, parliament, and constitutional courts are, for example, part of the establishment and could prove reluctant to identify any distortions in the system or to accept any radical modifications demanded by the general public. Voters might have only limited information on highly complex issues and when called upon to express their

opinion, in elections or referendum, might express themselves too synthetically¹: neither the vote for a candidate or a political party nor the vote in a referendum communicates sufficient information regarding the public's perception of the political system...

In other words, internal mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient, and so external assessment is advocated as a fact-finding tool that can guide political development and remove illusions from political perception. External assessment of human rights has a long history, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its regime implemented by the United Nations and its agencies, the Council of Europe, and other international bodies; however, the external assessment of democracy is still in its early stages.

Two different approaches to external assessments carried out by civil society have been followed thus far—the first is made by independent experts who, using given parameters, assess the level of democracy prevailing in various countries (Freedom House and Polity IV are examples of this); the second is survey based, in which groups of citizens from a state are asked to weigh existing problems in their own political system and to point out modifications that they believe would increase the democratic level of the community (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance carries out such projects and provides analytical comparisons).

Such assessments are not merely exercises in determining political virtue. The results are used in regional political decision-making, such as the expansion of the European Union eastward after the end of the Cold War, in the business community in making investment decisions, and even, in the spirit of Ulrich Beck's consumer sovereignty, for individuals to decide where to spend their vacation dollars or from which countries to purchase tropical fruit. And as Archibugi suggests, "External assessment is also an essential part of cosmopolitan democracy since both embrace the notion that it is not sufficient for the institutions of a political system to declare themselves democratic to them to be such, nor can these institutions be validated by suffrage only." He regards democracy, both within nations and among nations, as an evolving project that must remain open to independent critical thinking...otherwise, for example, an internal audit of democracy in Switzerland in the 1960's might not have captured the fundamental fact that women did not have the right to vote.

Democracies: A Problem Sharing

The second key point that Archibugi makes is that democratic countries, while they have "...succeeded in distributing substantial [political/social] benefits within their own borders...have shared only a small fraction of the benefits obtained from self-government with the other parts of the world." Further, he suggests that they have "...often exploited their own privileged position to give free reign to their desire for dominion and have spread toward the exterior the poisons held in check on the interior."

This sounds harsh, and the easy objection is, what about all the horrible dictatorships around the world and their behavior? Surely had they the power, their capacity to do evil in

¹ Here he employs the less common meaning of "not genuine, not rooted in facts, that is, superficial"

concert (as in the 1930's) would be much greater than the democracies. The point is that in evolving toward cosmopolitan democracy we must start to hold ourselves to a much higher standard. The foreign policy of the democratic countries should not be compared with the foreign policy of the despotic countries but with the democratic countries' own internal policy.

Until 2003, the trend was for more and more countries to seek and achieve democratic rule; that year, the trend flattened and reversed. Many peoples have stopped seeking alliances with western countries against the dictatorships that dominate them and have adopted an attitude of indifference and often of open opposition. Archibugi raises the question of how it was possible for such a radical change to occur in such a short historical period (the last decade or so), and his answer is that the West had promised to treat all peoples with the same dignity and to promote the same rights for all individuals irrespective of the color of their skin and the passport they held, but these promises were not kept and the asymmetric interventions (Kosovo but not Rwanda) and wars of choice (Gulf War II) and the indulgence of oil-rich autocracies (Saudi Arabia) tell a story of geopolitical calculation that has nothing to do with democratic ideals. Further, the failure of structural reform in the UN Security Council effectively disenfranchises billions of people from the highest level of global decision-making, keeping it an anachronistic Northern Hemisphere club.

In effect, power becomes its own raison, even when wielded by democratic countries, and it is not easily set aside, not least because it can be used to defend democracies against the Hitlers and the Stalins of history. And so we have a circular argument that political good is limited within the boundaries of nation-states...virtuous democracies that do not behave virtuously in external relations.

Beyond the Impasse

Archibugi sees two complementary paths forward out of the present condition. One, for global governance to be subject to democratic values, international organizations such as the UN must assume more functions and greater legitimacy by embracing the principles of accountability, participation, and equality. To put that in concrete terms based on the direct observation of the editor, the UN's operations are not sufficiently transparent to the wider public and accountability of executive leadership is not enforced; participation by civil society through the NGO community is paternalistic; and equality of member states is only a reality in the General Assembly, essentially a budgetary body which is itself further compromised by extra-budgetary items earmarked by powerful nations that in sum exceed the normal budget.

Secondly, the emergence of a new political player, the global citizen, is advocated and a role is proposed. Archibugi believes in a new global constitutionalism that incorporates the global citizen, and that empowerment of that citizen can be done by building up at the global level those checks and balances that have nurtured the evolution of democracy. He does not advocate anarchy, or the usurpation of national leadership, but rather the emergence of a number of dialogic, participatory measures. The new global citizen must be prepared to take political action on the basis of cosmopolitan **inclusion** (participation and sharing across cultures and variations of democracy), cosmopolitan **responsibility** (the enlargement of the public sphere to the point that political action can be taken in the interest of all those who are

directly or indirectly involved—think of Zimbabwe or Sudan and the effect of their governments' misbehaviors on neighboring countries), and cosmopolitan **impartiality** (seeking out impartial means of adjudication, on the principle that no one can be his own judge; and concomitantly, being willing to appeal to and accept an external judgment on a difficult question, regulating atmospheric pollution, for example).

Archibugi argues that this approach "...prevents certain values being imposed on others and offsets a danger inherent in cosmopolitanism, the danger of considering one's own views to be universally valid." The principles outlined, if applied, are designed to move us from the politics of the *polis*, founded on borders, to that of the *cosmopolis*, founded on sharing.

The chart following shows the range and kind of initiatives that Archibugi and his colleagues urge for our consideration. They can be a basis for further study and exchange of views within One World United & Virtuous, and should make the ideas raised in Archibugi's short piece at the start of this document much more intelligible.

Main Proposals

| <i>Domain</i> | <i>Institutions</i> | <i>Proposals</i> |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Security | UN Security Council | Procedurally and substantially limit the use of the veto of permanent members |
| | Humanitarian Military Intervention | Generate procedures for timely interventions through a permanent rescue army. |
| Participation | World Parliamentary Assembly | Institute a world legislative assembly representing citizens independently of the state they belong to |
| | UN Security Council | Increase the number of seats to allow more equitable and representative participation of countries. |
| | | Provide access to regional organizations and to selected non-state players. |
| | UN General Assembly | Link national delegations to their citizens by making elective the appointment of at least one of the ambassadors. |
| | UN Thematic areas and specialized agencies. | Increase and formalize the access of non-governmental organizations. |
| Judiciary | International Court of Justice | Strengthen its role by making its jurisdiction mandatory and by extending competencies also to non-state actors such as insurgents and ethnic minorities. |
| | International Criminal Court | Fully implement the court's treaty and increase the number of state parties. |
| | Right to self-determination | Enhance the practice of mediation and arbitration of third and independent parties to minimize the recourse to violence. |
| Human rights | Council of Human Rights | Strengthen the review of human rights, giving a greater role to non-governmental organizations and independent advocacy groups. |
| | World Parliamentary | Periodically evaluate the human rights regimes in countries and activate smart sanctions for those |

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| | Assembly | governments that violate them. |
| Internal democratization | International organizations | Provide greater support to democratic forces in authoritarian and transition states. |
| | | Use membership of international organizations as an incentive to strengthen and consolidate internal democratic institutions. |
| | World Parliamentary Assembly | Perform independent audits of national performance. |
| Global democratization | International organizations | Apply to the various international organizations the core values of nonviolence, popular control, and political equality. |
| | World Parliamentary Assembly | Assess and steer political actions in the direction of democratic values and norms. |