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Contemporary Research and Directions

*Edited by Richard E. Lee and Gerhard Preyer*

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GLOBAL DEMOCRACY:  
A WORLD-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

*Christopher Chase-Dunn and Terry Boswell*

*Abstract*

*This essay is on the concept of global democracy. We discuss the historical development of the concept of democracy and the material bases for the possible emergence of a democratic and collectively rational global commonwealth in the future. We confront the problem of contested meanings of democracy, the roots of the modern concept in the European Enlightenment, the problem of Eurocentrism in the formulation of a global philosophy of democracy, the relationship between capitalist globalization and antisystemic movements and the need for globalization from below.*

A useful conceptualization of global democracy requires both an astute political philosophy and a deep understanding of the historical and structural processes of institutional development. This paper addresses emerging debates among counter-hegemonic critics of capitalist globalization and presents an approach that is intended to be helpful to those who wish to construct a more democratic and egalitarian world society. The approach we develop employs the comparative world-systems perspective.<sup>1</sup>

For many modern citizens global democracy simply means the addition of more and more national democracies – parliamentary governments in which fair elections decide the political leadership of the state. This is the subject of most of the democratization literature. But we will argue that global democracy needs to mean much more than this if real progress is to be made. We contend that the peoples of the world live in a single social system, and that decisions about what will happen in that system are the relevant foci for understanding the meaning of global democracy. Democracy means that the majority of the people have a say over the decisions that affect their lives. When the problems are global,

1 For an introduction see Shannon (1996) and Hall (2000). This essay draws heavily from Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2000).

the democracy should be global, meaning that the majority of the people of the Earth should have a say.

Our approach questions the idea that parliamentary democracy in single states, even when most of the states in the world-system have this kind of political system, adds up to global democracy. Some states are much more powerful than others, and their policies affect people all over the Earth. We call this the problem of *global vs. single-state democracy*.

The second focus of our essay is on the issue of the contested nature of the idea of democracy. Here we will note that the definitions of democracy have themselves been issues of political struggle both within the discourse of the European Enlightenment and in the discourse about Eurocentrism. Our goal is to move toward the formulation of a global consensus about the meaning of the idea of popular democracy. This requires drawing on knowledge of this history of political struggles all over the Earth, and an understanding of the historical development of human societies over the last twelve thousand years.

The democratization literature has mainly studied how and why some societies have been able to institutionalize parliamentary systems for the peaceful transition of power by means of popular elections. This is a very important literature and much has been learned about the conditions that are favorable for stable parliamentary regimes. The world-systems perspective points out that it has been successful core capitalism that has been the main support for institutionalizing parliamentary systems. The core countries of Europe, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, and India are the most successful cases. The rest of the world has had a difficult time institutionalizing parliamentary democracy, though there have been recurrent waves of democratization in the parliamentary sense (Markoff 1996). The main reason for this is that the hierarchical division of labor between the core and the periphery concentrates greater resources in the core, making alliances between potentially competing elites and cross class alliances more stable because there is a bigger pie to share. In peripheral countries the struggle to control the state apparatus is more often violent because it is the only game in town. To be sure there are exceptions, and trends. Many semiperipheral and peripheral national societies have been able to achieve at least the trappings of parliamentary democracy, especially in the latest wave.

We do not wish to minimize the important differences between formally democratic regimes that operate according to the law versus lawless

and arbitrary authoritarian regimes. Achieving formal parliamentary democracy and the rule of law are huge gains for people who have not had them in the past. But we do wish to point out that formal parliamentary democracy, even in those societies in which it is most heavily institutionalized, is not necessarily the best of all possible worlds.

Within the European Enlightenment discourse there has long been a contest between representative formal democracy and popular social democracy. Bill Robinson (1996) characterizes “polyarchy” as a contest managed by contending elites to legitimize regimes based on huge inequalities. The now-dominant definition of democracy in the West is a definition that separates political rights from economic rights and that legitimizes and sustains private property in the major means of production. More populist and direct versions of the idea of democracy challenge the radical separation between political and economic rights, and the exclusion of economic democracy from the realm of legitimate contentions. Thus the kind of democracy that has become hegemonic in the modern world-system is the kind that is most congruent with capitalism. It protects private owners of the major means of production from claims on their property and profits by narrowly defining the proper terrain of rights.

Polyarchy undercuts social democracy and defines certain claims as outside the bounds of rational discourse based on a narrow political philosophy that has evolved from the conservative branch of the European Enlightenment discourse. The leftist versions – anarchism, socialism, and communism – have been vanquished and proclaimed dead in the celebration of the “end of history” and the victory of capitalistic democracy.

The critique of Eurocentrism has also challenged the hegemony of the polyarchic definition of democracy. Many of the peoples of the colonial empires had indigenous forms of small-scale political regulation that allowed people in local communities to have input in decisions that were made in matters that affected their lives. In the contemporary popular resistance to globalizing corporate capitalism many voices are reasserting the authenticity and value of these traditional political institutions (e.g., Shiva 2002). However “backward” and inegalitarian these traditional political institutions may seem to the Western democracies, that they are resisting global corporate capitalism is making them newly popular with their dispossessed constituencies.

During the nineteenth century, movements that mobilized people around ideas of community self-reliance were often responses to the calamities of the integration of rural regions into the global market. In combination with droughts and famines, market integration produced huge and disastrous “late Victorian holocausts” during the great wave of capitalist globalization of the late nineteenth century (Davis 2001). These indigenous movements often employed millenarian ideologies in which the “good king” was to return or the powers of the universe were expected to intervene to destroy the invading railroads and the white devils that were held to be throwing the natural balances of the universe awry. Self-reliance movements in the Brazilian Northeast, the Philippines and the American West rediscovered local autarky as a protective mechanism from disruptive global market forces and threatening technologies far beyond their control.

Much of the post-colonial critique of Eurocentrism has assumed that it was the ideology of the European Enlightenment that was a main tool in the colonial subjugation of the Third World by European states. And so the assertions of rights, the separation of church and state, and other elements of European thought have sometimes been rejected as so many relics of domination. But it was not liberal ideology that caused so much exploitation and domination. The Europeans were able to dominate and exploit because they had better gunships and other technologies of power that capitalism had enabled them to develop. The values of liberty and equality were fine values, but they were conveniently put aside as European imperialism expanded. Indeed, these very values have often proven to be useful tools for legitimating resistance in the hands of the subjects of European colonialism and neocolonialism.

The first point to make is that democracy is not a European invention and neither has it been a European monopoly. The European civilizational claim that democracy was an invention of the classical Greek city-states is full of contradictions. The economies of most of the Greek city-states were based on slavery (Bollen and Paxton 1997), while the polities of nomadic foragers, which are everywhere on Earth the ancestors of all peoples, were egalitarian systems in which all adults participated in making the important collective decisions. Greek ideas and institutions are only part of the story of the struggle for autonomy and popular control.

## Capitalist Globalization

We understand the historical development of the modern world-system in terms of the evolution of institutions. These key institutions: commodity production, technology and techniques of power, have been shaped by tremendous struggles. These include conflict among contending powers and between the core and the periphery over the past six centuries as Europe rose to hegemony and capitalist globalization expanded in waves of commodification and integration.

The story of how global orders have been restructured in order to facilitate capitalist accumulation must be told in deep temporal perspective in order for us to understand how the most recent wave of corporate globalization is similar or different from earlier waves of globalization. Of particular interest here is the phenomenon of world revolutions and increasingly transnational antisystemic movements. In order to comprehend the possibilities for the emergence of global democracy we need to understand the history of popular movements that have tried to democratize the world-system in the past.

Of particular relevance here is the story of the nineteenth century and its *tsunami* of capitalist globalization under the auspices of British hegemony. Transnational antisystemic movements, especially the trade union movement and the feminist movement, emerged to contend with global capitalism. Workers and women consciously took the role of world citizens, organizing international movements to contend with the increasingly global organization of an emergent global capitalist class. Political and economic elites, especially finance capitalists, had already been consciously operating on a global stage for centuries, but the degree of international integration of these reached a very high level in the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The British created the Concert of Europe after defeating Napoleon, an alliance of conservative dynasties and politicians who were dedicated to the prevention of any future French revolutions. The Royal Navy suppressed the slave trade and encouraged decolonization of the Spanish colonies. The English *Anti-Corn Law League's* advocacy of international

2 The Institute for Research on World-Systems (IROWS) at the University of California, Riverside is carrying out a research project to compare the degree and contours of international integration of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century global elites (Chase-Dunn, Giem, Jorgenson, Lio, and Reifer 2002).

free trade (carried abroad by British diplomats and businessmen) was adopted by most European and American states in the middle of the century. The gold standard was an important support of a huge increase in international trade and investment (Chase-Dunn, Kawano, and Brewer 2000; O'Rourke and Williamson 1999). The expanding Atlantic economy, already firmly attached to the Indian Ocean, was accompanied by an expanding Pacific economy as Japan and China were more completely and directly brought into the trade and investment networks of Europe and North America. American Ginseng was harvested in the Middle Atlantic states as an important commodity that could be traded for Chinese manufactures rather than having to resort to payment in silver.

The nineteenth-century wave of capitalist globalization was massively contested in a great globalization backlash. The decolonization of Latin America extended the formal aspects of state sovereignty to a large chunk of the periphery. Slave revolts, abolitionism and the further incorporation of Africa into the capitalist world-system eventually led to the abolition of slavery almost everywhere. Within Europe, socialist and democratic demands for political and economic rights of the non-propertied classes strongly emerged in the world revolution of 1848.

An important aspect of our model of world-systems evolution is the idea of semiperipheral development (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997: Chapter 5). We note that institutional development in premodern world-systems occurred because innovations and implementations of new techniques and organizational forms have tended to occur in societies that have semiperipheral positions within larger core/periphery hierarchies. Semiperipheral marcher chiefdoms conquered adjacent core polities to create larger paramount chiefdoms. And semiperipheral marcher states conquered adjacent core states to create larger and larger core-wide empires (e.g., Chin, Akkad, Assyrian, Achaeminid Persians, Alexander, Rome, Abbasid Caliphate, etc.) And semiperipheral capitalist city-states (Dilmun, Phoenician Tyre, Sidon, and Carthage; Venice, Genoa, Malacca, etc.) expanded commercialized trade networks and encouraged commodity production within and between the tributary empires and peripheral regions, linking larger and larger regions together to eventually become the single global economy of today.

The modern hegemons (the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, the United Kingdom of Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and the United States of America in the twentieth century) were all formerly

semiperipheral nation-states that rose to the position of hegemony by transforming the institutional bases of economic and political/military power in response to challenges from contenders for hegemony and challenges from popular movements contesting the injustices of capitalism and modern colonial imperialism. The modern world-system has experienced system-wide waves of democracy rather than separate and disconnected sequences of democratization within individual countries (Markoff 1996). These waves have tended to start in semiperipheral countries and the institutional inventions that have diffused from country to country have disproportionately been invented and implemented in semiperipheral countries first (Markoff 1999). Both the Russian and Chinese Communist challenges to capitalism emerged from the semiperiphery.

The worker's movement became increasingly organized on an international basis during the nineteenth century. Mass production made working conditions increasingly similar for industrial workers around the world. Labor organizers were able to make good use of cheap and rapid transportation as well as new modes of communication (the telegraph) in order to link struggles in distant locations. And the huge migration of workers from Europe to the New World spread the ideas and the strategies of the labor movement. Socialists, anarchists and communists challenged the rule of capital while they competed with each other for leadership of an increasingly global antisystemic movement that sought to democratize the world-system.

The decline of British hegemony and the failure of efforts after World War I to erect an effective structure of global governance led to the collapse of capitalist globalization during the depression of the 1930's, culminating in World War II. In our perspective, capitalist globalization is a cycle as well as a trend. The great wave of the nineteenth century was followed by a collapse in the early twentieth century and then a reemergence in the period after World War II. The global institutions of the post World War II order, now under the sponsorship of the hegemonic United States, were intended to resolve the problems that were perceived to have caused the military conflagrations and economic disasters of the early twentieth century. The United Nations was a stronger version of a global proto-state than the League of Nations had been, though still a long way from the "monopoly of legitimate violence" that is the effective center of a real state.

The Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – were originally intended to promote Keynesian national development rather than a globalized market of investment flows. Free trade was encouraged, but important efforts were made to track international investments and to encourage the efforts of national states to use fiscal policy as a tool of national development. The architects of the Bretton Woods institutions were chary about the effects of volatile waves of international capital flows on economic development and political stability because of what they perceived to have been the lessons of the 1920s. The restarting of the world economy after World War II under the aegis of the Bretton Woods institutions and U.S. support for relatively autonomous capitalism in Europe and Japan succeeded tremendously. But the growing power of unions within the core, and the perceived constraints on U.S. fiscal and financial interests imposed by the Bretton Woods currency regime, along with the oil crisis of the early 1970s, led the U.S. to abandon Bretton Woods in favor of a free world market of capital mobility. The “Washington Consensus” was basically Reaganism-Thatcherism on a global scale – deregulation, privatization, and renegeing on the “social contract” with core labor unions and the welfare state. The IMF was turned into a tool for imposing these policies on countries all over the world.

This U.S./British-led neo-liberal regime of global capitalism (Reaganism-Thatcherism) was a reaction to the successes of the Third World and the core labor movements, not in achieving true global democracy, but in getting a somewhat larger share of the profits of global capitalism. The attack on the institutions of Keynesian national development (labor unions and the welfare state), was also a delayed response to the world revolution of 1968 in which students, women, environmentalists, Third Worldists, indigenous peoples, democracy movements, and radical parts of the labor movement had critiqued and resisted the inadequacies of the welfare capitalism and business unionism from the Left. The New Right appropriated some of the ideology and many of the tactics of the 68ers – such as demonstrations, civil disobedience, guerilla armies, drug financing, and mobilization of subnations. These tactics have come back to haunt the powers that be. In the recent wave of “blowback,” organizations and ideologies formerly supported by the U.S. CIA as instruments against the Soviet Union (e.g., *Al Qaeda*) have turned against their former sponsors, employing dirty tricks to besmirch symbols of global po-

wer and to murder innocent bystanders in the heart of the core.

We contend that the current historical moment is similar to the end of the nineteenth century. Like British hegemony, U.S. hegemony is declining. Contenders for global economic power have been emerging in German-led Europe and in Japan-led Asia. Popular movements and institutions have been under attack, especially since the rise to ideological hegemony of the neo-liberal “globalization project.” Anti-systemic movements are struggling to find new paths for dealing with capitalist globalization. New communications technologies such as the Internet provide possibilities for creating coordinated and integrated movements in favor of global democracy. The liberating potential of decentered and democratized communications is great. But cheap interactive and mass communications also facilitate increasing differentiation and specialization of political mobilization, which can undercut efforts to promote inter-movement coordination. We hold that the Internet will be, on balance, a liberating force, but the big gains in movement integration will probably come as a response to the economic, political, and ecological disasters that globalized capitalism is likely to produce in the not too distant future (Chase-Dunn 2001).

We expect that the current resistance to global capitalism will in large part take the form of local self-reliance, the revitalization of diverse cultural forms and the rejection of the cultural and technological totems of corporate capitalism. Thus the characterization of the recently emergent protest movements (Seattle, Genoa, etc.) as “anti-globalization” movements is partially correct, but it is misleading. Self-reliance may take forms that are progressive or forms that promote divisions among the people based on ethnicity, nation, or race. We want to point out that self-reliance by itself is not an adequate strategy for transforming capitalism into a more humane and sustainable social system. Rather the building of self-reliant communities needs also to organize with a coordinated movement of “globalization from below” that will seek to reform, or create *de novo*, world institutions that will promote social justice and environmental sustainability.

## Imagining Global Democracy

This means imagining global democracy. What might global democracy look like? And how could we get from here to there? A consideration of global democracy must confront two main issues: huge and growing inequalities within and between countries; and the grave problems of environmental sustainability that capitalist (and Communist) industrialization has produced.

Rather than drawing the blueprint of a global utopia and then arguing the fine points it makes more sense to learn from the heritages of earlier efforts to do what we are here proposing. Utopias may be useful for those who are unable to imagine any possible improvement over existing institutions. But they also function to delegitimize efforts to make social change because they usually appear to be unattainable. A more useful approach is to imagine an historically apt next step, one that the relevant constituencies can agree is a significant improvement and that is plausibly attainable.

Global democracy means real economic, political and cultural rights and influence for the majority of the world's people over the local and global institutions that affect their lives. Local and national democracy is part of the problem, but not the whole problem. Global democracy requires that local institutions and national states be democratic *and* democratic institutions of global governance.

We basically support the proposals for radically reforming the United Nations and for establishing an institutional framework for global finance proposed by Camilleri, Malhotra and Tehranian (2000).<sup>3</sup> Their principles and thoughtful step-by-step proposals for democratizing global governance address most of the issues quite well. We agree with the *principle of subsidiarity*, which decentralizes control to the local level over all issues that can be effectively resolved at that level (2000: 46). This principle is similarly applied to the national and international regional levels, so that global-level institutions deal with problems that can only find effective solutions at the global level.

Camilleri, Malhotra and Tehranian also abjure the term “global government” and prefer terms such as “interlocking institutions” and “in-

3 Patomaki, Teivainen, and Ronkko (2002) provide a valuable review of proposals for globalizing global governance that includes the U.N., the Bretton Woods institutions, and the system of international courts.

ternational regimes” for describing global governance (2000: 25). We see the political sensitivities involved in this choice of terms, and we agree that it is important to use language wisely. There is a lot of resistance to the idea of an emerging world state because people understandably fear that such an institution might become an instrument of repression or exploitation. But we are concerned that careful rhetoric might obscure or paper over issues that need to be confronted explicitly. It is arguably true that the main reason that the United Nations has been largely ineffective at stopping interstate warfare is that it is not a state in the Weberian sense – a *monopoly of legitimate violence*. International law is not truly law according to Weber because it is not backed up by institutionalized sanctions.

Our position is that the human species needs to establish a global government that is legitimate, effective and democratic. This does not require the centralization of everything. As stated above, we agree with the principle of subsidiarity in which everything that can effectively be left to local, national, and regional bodies should be. But inequality, environmental problems, population pressure, and peace are all global problems that can only be effectively solved by a democratic global government with the power to enforce the law. Thus, reforming the United Nations must move in the direction of the establishment of a democratic global government. This is in the interest of all the people of the Earth, but especially the dispossessed. The Westphalian interstate system has allowed powerful capitalists to repeatedly escape the institutional controls that have emerged from antisystemic movements that have sought to protect workers and communities from exploitation. Only a democratic world state can produce institutions that can guarantee social justice.

We also support the establishment of new institutions to provide a framework for global financial relations that can support local and national development, and increased oversight of these by the United Nations (Patomaki, Teivainen, and Ronkko 2002). And we see a need to go beyond polyarchy at both the national and the global levels.

As pointed out above, we are not satisfied with polyarchy (parliamentary democracy) at the national level. We contend that real democracy must address the issue of wealth and property, rather than defining these as beyond the bounds of political discourse. This said, we can also learn much from those failed experiments with collective property that were

carried out in the socialist and Communist states in the twentieth century. State ownership works well for infrastructure, such as health and education, but for the production of goods and services, even when the state is itself truly democratic, this creates grave economic problems because of the problem of “soft budget constraints.” This is because firms are usually bailed out by the state for their budget mistakes, and they respond to state rather than consumer demands. In order to achieve a modicum of efficiency large firms need to compete with one another in markets, but even more importantly they should compete for financing by showing that they can make a profit. We support John Roemer’s (1994) advocacy of a kind of market socialism in which ownership shares of large firms are distributed to all adult citizens, who then invest their shares in a stock market that is the main source of capital for large firms. All citizens receive a set number of shares at the age of majority and when they die their shares revert to the public weal. So there is no inheritance of corporate property, though personal property can be inherited. Firms, large and small, produce for markets and labor is rewarded in competitive labor markets. Small firms can be privately owned. This kind of market socialism equalizes income, though some inequalities due to skill differences will exist. The economy will still be a market economy, but the democratic state will provide security, due process, and oversee the redistribution of corporate shares across generations.

This model of public market socialism incentivizes technological change and efficiency without producing increasing inequalities. It would probably work well, especially in the core countries for which Roemer has intended it. But when we think about the global economy there are certain problems that are not addressed in Roemer’s model. One of the main problems in the global economy is the huge difference in productivity between core and peripheral labor. This is why labor standards in international economic agreements are anathema to workers and unions in peripheral countries. A single worldwide minimum wage standard sounds good, but it would tend to function as a protectionist agreement for core workers, and undercut the ability of peripheral firms and workers to sell their products in core markets. Wage and other standards have to take into account local conditions, but their enforcement is the key to preventing the race to the bottom pursued by many transnational corporations. The real solution to this is to raise the level of productivity of peripheral labor. So global democracy needs to structure

institutions that can do this. Banning child labor worldwide while supporting the children’s families to speed the demographic transition would be a giant first step in this direction.

This is why we need effective institutions of global governance. Anti-globalization cannot simply dismantle such institutions as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. They must either be reformed (democratized and empowered) or they must be replaced. Market socialism in the core will not be enough. A movement for economic democracy in the core needs also to mobilize for economic democracy at the global level.

Support for both more democratic national regimes and global socialist institutions is likely to come from the semiperiphery. We expect that some of the most potent efforts to democratize global capitalism will come out of movements and democratic socialist regimes that emerge in semiperipheral countries. As in earlier epochs, semiperipheral countries have the “advantages of backwardness” – they are not already heavily invested in the existing organizational and political institutions and technologies – and so they have the maneuverability and the resources to invest in new institutions.

Peripheral countries could also do this, but they are more completely dependent on the core and they are not able to mobilize sufficient resources to overcome this dependency. The semiperiphery, especially the large semiperipheral countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, India, Indonesia, and China, has opportunities that neither core nor peripheral countries have. If a democratic socialist regime is able to come to state power by legal means, and if this regime has the political will to mobilize the popular sectors in favor of democratic socialism, an experiment in one or another version of market socialism could be carried out. We expect that regimes of this type will in fact emerge in the near future as the options of kowtowing to the megacorps or demagoging the popular sectors (Chavez in Venezuela) become more obviously bankrupt.

The smaller semiperipheral countries (South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa, Israel) may also opt for democratic socialism, but we expect that these will only be able to do so after earlier efforts have been made in the large semiperipheral countries. Much also depends on what happens in the contest for hegemony. Continued U.S. primacy will likely strengthen the resistance to democratizing global governance, while the rise of the European Union, which has stronger social democratic traditions, will

likely provide greater core support for democratizing global institutions and for emerging democratic socialist movements in the semiperiphery.

The semiperipheral democratic socialist regimes will be the strongest organizational entities that can forge the links among the global antisystemic movements and produce a network for bringing forth the institutions of global socialism. Globalization from below and the formation of global socialist institutions will need to be facilitated by an organized network of world citizens. We have adopted the name given to such a confederation by Warren Wagar (1996) – the World Party. But this is not a party in the old sense of the Third International – a vanguard party of the world proletariat. Rather the World Party we propose would be a network of individuals and representatives of popular organizations from all over the world who agree to help create a democratic and collectively rational global commonwealth. The World Party<sup>4</sup> will actively recruit people of all nations and religions and will seek to create the institutional bases for a culturally pluralistic and socially just and ecologically sustainable world society. This is what we mean by global democracy.

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**Double Vol. 18-19, 2003**

**Understanding the Social II – Philosophy of Sociality**

*Edited by Raimo Tuomela, Gerhard Preyer, and Georg Peter*

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