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Democratic Global Governance, Political Inequality, and the Nationalist Retrenchment Hypothesis

Abstract: Is global governance inevitable? Is democratic global governance likely? I point out two obstacles that lie in the path toward democratic global governance: political inequality and nationalist retrenchment. While global governance is already here, democratic global governance is held back by political inequality within and between countries. In this context, nationalist retrenchment, a stop and backslide toward unilateralism where nations eschew global governance strategies, also poses a challenge to the democratic development of global governance institutions. This article serves to continue the conversation among sociologists and other social scientists on the optimistic hopes for democratic global governance.

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Is global governance inevitable? Is *democratic* global governance likely? In this article, I point out two obstacles that lie in the path toward democratic global governance: political inequality and nationalist retrenchment.

This article, and this issue of the *International Journal of Sociology*, was initially inspired by two events at the International Sociological Association (ISA) World Congress in Göteborg, Sweden, 2010. The first inspirational event was a talk by the First Presidential Session's keynote speaker, Yuan-Tseh Lee from Taiwan, winner of the Nobel Prize in chemistry.¹ In a three-quarters-filled assembly hall and for forty-five minutes, Lee argued that humanity is on a troublesome path. We are all interconnected through the natural environment and globalization processes, he said. Our interconnected humanity combines unsustainable living with rapid industrialization and the results are pandemics and global climate change, food and water shortages in some places, and overindulgence in others. Lee called for science to lead the way out. A key problem with this solution is that scientific advance and competitiveness are built to satisfy national or limited international needs. To paraphrase Lee: Scientists go to meetings, promise international collaboration, and then go home. At home, the government asks, "Will this international collaboration improve national competitiveness in the global market," or the European Union asks, "Will this improve the EU?" If the scientist answers, "no," then the governments are not enthusiastic.

In order for science and technology to solve the problems man faces in the 21st century, it is not enough to advance science and technology at a faster pace. . . . The serious problems related to sustainable development will not be solved unless we . . . learn to work together beyond national boundaries, and pay more attention to our collective "global competitiveness" for solving the problems of the entire world, rather than continuing to worry about the "national competitiveness" of our own countries. (Lee 2010: 33)

To lift science from its subservience to national self-interest, Lee calls for some sort of global government: "As the world has become more and more globalized, it has become obvious that there

is a need for some sort of ‘global government’ that can resolve the conflict between the interests of nation-states and the interests of the entire world” (ibid.).

The second inspirational event was an ad hoc session² on “Democratizing Global Governance” organized by Christopher Chase-Dunn and Alberto Martinelli, a former president of the ISA. Chase-Dunn and Martinelli described the session as addressing “conceptual and empirical issues in the study of global governance and historical and contemporary efforts to democratize the global system.”³ In keeping with its grand subject, the session was hosted in a main congress venue, in a large room with a large stage, a professional sound system, and a massive computer projection screen. This session was well attended (perhaps fifty to seventy-five attendees), an indicator of great interest in a session listed in the back of the ISA program book.⁴ The session was international, though skewed toward American scholars: including the distributed papers, four of eight were from academic institutions in the United States. The session consisted of five presentations and, at the end, a question-and-answer session. Among the presenters were John Markoff (“National and Global Democracy”) and Peter Evans (“Democratizing Global Governance”). Markoff argued that what we think of democracy is historically situated and inherently discriminatory (in his words, “Democracy for us, not for them.” See also Markoff [1999] and this issue of the *International Journal of Sociology*). Markoff’s main thesis is that, due to globalization and other processes of interconnectivity, national problems—ranging from nuclear proliferation and international terrorism to global climate change—inevitably give way to trans- or international governance. The presenters speculated on the future, where all paths lead to global governance.

During this session I directed a question to John Markoff, but it was applicable to the entire session. My comment was phrased as follows:

You say that transnational governance is inevitable . . . why is nationalist retrenchment not the inevitable outcome? For example, while problems become increasingly transnational—and here I agree with you—in the

United States, the “US out of the UN!” voices grow louder. Is your thesis on the future based on optimism?

In response, Markoff commented that this is a common question posed to him when he presents this thesis and argued that he deliberately did not say that the governance will be effective, or even democratic. Simply put, global problems affect many countries simultaneously, a fact that makes global governance the inevitable, practical solution. He does hope for *democratic* global governance, however. Peter Evans also responded to what he called the “nationalist retrenchment hypothesis.” Evans put a humorous spin on the subject, paraphrased as: “If there is an Intergalactic Council betting on the fate of humanity on Earth, it would bet on extinction; anyone looking at this situation would bet on nationalist retrenchment.” Evans’s comment was clear on the subject: *Democratic* global governance is based on optimism. Considering the content of the presentations by Markoff and Evans, I characterize the session as rooted in an Obamian “optimistic pragmatism,” where the players act as if they are grounded in a worrisome reality, yet profess hope for a better future all the while.

As a scientist at this conference, I promised international collaboration with my colleagues, and then went home. At home, I was in the process of coediting—with Soraya Vargas Cortes of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil—an issue of the *International Journal of Sociology* titled “Political Inequality in Latin America.” That issue draws together in one volume empirically based articles by Latin American scholars on the form, causes, and consequences of political inequality in Latin America (Cortes and Dubrow 2011). In it, we define political inequality as a matter of who influences the decisions of decision-making bodies. We regard political inequality as a multidimensional concept—consisting of voice and response—that occurs in all types of governance structures, from social movement organizations, to local and national governments, on to global governance. Voice refers to how constituencies express their interests to decision makers, either directly or through representatives. Response refers to how decision makers act and react to their constituencies, and take the forms of

symbols and policy. A flexible concept of political inequality, we argued, can be applied across countries and across time and across all types of political decision-making systems.

With these events and projects in mind, it became clear to me that along the path to democratic global governance lie the obstacles of political inequality between countries and the nationalist interests within countries. This article began as a short paper that outlined these obstacles; I e-mailed it to Markoff, Chase-Dunn, and Evans, all of whom were kind enough to reply quickly with thoughtful comments. When Soraya Cortes and I said we wanted to create an issue of the *International Journal of Sociology* devoted to these topics, Markoff and Chase-Dunn agreed to participate.

To continue the conversation with these scholars, I incorporate their articles in this issue into an expanded comment on the inevitability of global governance and the possibilities for democratic global governance.

I first turn to the issue of democracy and base much of my argument on Markoff and his article in this issue of the journal on the past, present, and future of democracy. Markoff notes that what we understand as democracy has changed over time. Our modern notion of direct election for all major political offices was not acceptable in Athenian democracy, for example; in fact, what social scientists now think of as democracy changed radically since the 1780s, especially our desire for inclusiveness. If it is anything, democracy is self-rule within boundaries. Markoff's article reminds us that democracy has always been limited by boundaries, whether demographic (women's suffrage is a twentieth-century invention) or national ("citizens" vote, but not noncitizens) or international (only a small, select group of countries sit on the UN Security Council).⁵ Particular boundaries change, but the use of boundaries has been constant.

Although "it is generally rather hazardous to speculate about major shifts in thinking" (in this issue, p. 24), Markoff anticipates a potential shift in thinking about democracy in a time when our antiquated notions of national boundaries collide with global problems. Like Lee (2010), in making this point Markoff presents a

catalog of concurrent, looming disasters: deadly global pandemics, transnational criminality, nuclear proliferation, global economic crisis, and global climate change prominent among them. These problems do not respect our carefully defended national borders. To defend ourselves against disaster, some transnational agencies will have to be developed. Some already have been: the UN, the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund are prime examples. Global governance is a means for countries to coordinate action on multiple, simultaneous fronts. But there is no guarantee that the governance will be democratic.

Markoff argues that notions of democracy change because democracy allows social movements to challenge inequalities of the status quo, and it is these social movements that Chase-Dunn et al. believe will democratize global governance. Specifically, the transnational character of global problems will increasingly require response by transnational social movement organizations, which will then lead to democratic global governance.

Like Markoff, Chase-Dunn et al. find democracy—as it is practiced—rife with political inequality. Chase-Dunn et al. are concerned that most people have little to no input into the decisions made within existing global governance structures. As they point out, we cannot simply add up national democracies and declare that global governance is democratic.⁶ A truly global democracy is one in which the majority of peoples have meaningful influence over the decisions that affect them. As of now, this does not exist.

According to Chase-Dunn et al., global political equality comes when decision-making power is separated from location in the world system. Hegemons from the core tend to hand down decisions to the semiperiphery and the periphery. Hierarchical relations of the modern world-system are rooted in global capitalism; this system underwrites and controls current global governance structures.

Democratic global governance also requires direct popular democracy, characterized by a substantial diffusion of political influence coupled with low verticality in the political stratification structure (see Sorokin 1927/1957). Historically, social movement

organizations that advocate for direct popular democracy arose among small groups in limited territories that have focused their energies on their home countries. As humanity's connections spread and deepen, movements and their organizations look beyond their borders. Chase-Dunn et al. argue that transnational social movement organizations that advocate for global justice and political equality must arise to institute democracy into global governance.⁷ Democratizing global governance institutions requires that we overcome "democratic deficits," and Chase-Dunn et al. are not alone in thinking that transnational actors hold great potential in this regard (e.g., Bexell, Tallberg, and Uhlin 2010; Weiss, Carayannis, and Jolly 2009).

Obstacles on the Path to Democratic Global Governance

I now turn to the obstacles on the path to democratic global governance by asking the first and most obvious question: Is global governance inevitable?

It would be helpful to begin by defining "global governance." Elke Krahmman analyzed twenty years of academic literature on governance on the national, regional, and global levels to reveal how the term "governance" has been defined. From this she culled a general definition of governance, and it is worth repeating: "[It is] the structures and processes that enable governmental and non-governmental actors to coordinate their interdependent needs and interests through the making and implementation of policies in the absence of a unifying political authority" (Krahmann 2003: 331).

The absence of a central authority is a key difference between "governance" and government, the latter of which is characterized by state-centralized political authority. *Global* governance is regulation of international relations without centralized authority, meaning that collaborative efforts to address interdependent needs are voluntary. Because global governance challenges national sovereignty, nation-states resist centralizing too much power in a single global body. Despite that global governance challenges

national sovereignty, its institutionalization has accelerated; nations are aware that no one nation can solve global problems, and globalization has forced even the most nationalistic countries to collaborate across state lines (Krahmann 2003: 329–30).

In addressing the question of governance inevitability, there are two major hypotheses: the global governance hypothesis, and the nationalist retrenchment hypothesis.

Global Governance Hypothesis: The more problems are global in scope, the greater the chance that global governance will emerge and be enhanced.

According to Lee, Chase-Dunn and Lerro (2012) and Markoff (in this issue), global governance of some type is a pragmatic result of natural and human-made problems on a global scope. The fact that we already have global governance structures in place provides empirical support for a positive answer. Academia has already declared global governance a reality: The journal *Global Governance* has been around since the early 1990s.⁸

An alternative hypothesis posits a world in which the opposite occurs: Despite growing global problems, countries will shrink from international commitments that they think will limit their ability to act in their parochial self-interest. This is the nationalist retrenchment hypothesis.

Nationalist Retrenchment Hypothesis: The more problems are global in scope, the greater the nationalist retrenchment.

I use the terms “nationalist” and “retrenchment” deliberately. By nationalist, I mean a nation-centric view of world events, akin to unilateralism (Howard 2010). By retrenchment, I mean a stop and backslide toward unilateralism in which countries eschew global governance strategies.

Nationalist retrenchment may be a mere theoretical counterfactual, something that at its fullest extent is not now possible. What evidence do we have in the modern era of nationalist retrenchment? The relationship between the United States and the UN is a useful case study. The “U.S. out of the UN!” movement has its

roots in the ultraright-wing John Birch Society, and despite some occasional resurgence, it has never truly threatened to pull the United States from the UN or eject the UN from its New York City headquarters. Nevertheless, the United States has had a contentious history with the UN, vacillating between unilateralism and multilateralism (Howard 2010). Although the U.S. Congress has historically been skeptical of the UN (Howard 2010: 485), diehard members of the nationalist retrenchment club—anachronistic throwbacks to the pre-Wilsonian era (or the 1930s)—are a rare breed.

The modern consensus is that some type of global governance is inevitable. According to Robert Keohane, “globalization makes some degree of global-level regulation essential” (2002: 2). It is not necessary to be a “vulgar geopolitical realist” (as Chase-Dunn [2005] says he has been called) to argue that the intensity of economic cooperation presupposes a kind of global governance that continues to intensify and interconnect a deeper, denser web of nations, societies, and cultures.⁹ According to Evans (2005, 2008), global capital ensures that a kind of global governance emerges, insofar as the governance structures allow for global capitalism to survive and thrive. Is retrenchment possible, given the scope of the modern capitalist world-system? There is debate on the path, or trajectory, toward global governance. Most argue that there will be periods and episodes of nationalist retrenchment, but even the slouching, lurching trajectory goes toward global governance.

It is worthwhile to emphasize that the emergence of global governance as a transnational means of problem solving does not necessarily herald the coming of a global government. Regardless of which disciplinary or theoretical frame—international relations and world-systems analysis, as examples—there is no evidence that such a unifying political body threatens to become a reality. Some may argue that even without a formal unifying political body, the governance system as it is today acts very much like a global state, in which a handful of countries act in coordination to dominate the rest. While a full discussion of this is not within the scope of this short article (for fuller discussions of this, see Chase-Dunn and

Lerro 2012 and Chase-Dunn et al. in this issue), I touch on it in the next section on democratic global governance.

If global governance is inevitable, we can now turn to the next question: Is democratic global governance likely? Here is where the notion of political inequality is important.

Political inequality can be considered as both a dimension of democracy and a dimension of social stratification. Most contemporary discussions of political inequality are philosophical debates about whether and how equality in democratic governance can be achieved (Dahl 2006; Verba 2006). That democracy lives alongside political inequality leads many to question whether political equality—where all interested participants enjoy equal influence on the governance decision—is realistic; they often conclude that political equality is a fantasy, and that we should seriously consider acceptable limits in regard to who should be unequal and by how much (Bohman 1999: 502; Dahl 2006; Dryzek 1996; Mueller 1992: 987–90; Verba 2006: 505). As Sidney Verba puts it, “democracies are evaluated by the extent to which they provide freedoms to all citizens” (*ibid.*). The underlying assumption is that political inequality is an unfortunate and possibly unavoidable dimension of democracy.

Political inequality is also a dimension of social stratification. Stratification is a social structure, defined as an enduring pattern of behavior that sets limits on thought and action, and one in which meaningful differences are institutionalized and long-lasting. The idea that political power stratifies societies has a long, uninterrupted history. Max Weber (1946) suggested a uniquely political dimension of stratification with the political organization concept called “party”; he argued that party is distinct from the class and status orders and it directly affects life chances. It was Pitirim Sorokin (1927/1957) who coined the term “political stratification.” Sorokin thought that along with economic and occupational forms, political stratification directly affects social and cultural mobility. Borrowing from Weber, Gerhard Lenski (1966: 44) argued that the distribution of power is central to understanding inequality. Lenski contends that in modern market societies political power is very closely connected

to wealth inequality, an idea that foreshadowed legions of quantitative analyses exploring how economic resources influence the political process. In 2004 the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy connected stratification to democracy when it concluded that inequality in government influence is a function of economic and social inequality.

There is plenty of evidence to support the view that global governance organizations are characterized by political inequality. Kofi Annan, former secretary general of the UN, said that “we cannot claim that there is perfect equality between member states” (2002: 140). Political inequality, according to Annan, can differ in extent: he says that the “small and powerless feel less *unequal*” (ibid.) at the UN than in other major international organizations. Nevertheless, political inequality in terms of unequal voice and response continues to challenge the legitimacy of existing global governance institutions (see Bexel, Tallberg, and Uhlin 2010: 81).

If international organizations, individual nations and social movements have thus far been relatively ineffective democratizers of global governance structures, it may be because political inequality at home translates into political inequality on the global stage. It is here where the first person to ask a question of the panelists of the aforementioned Democratic Global Governance session at ISA makes a good point. To paraphrase, she asked: If social movements and national governments tend to underemphasize women’s equality, what would a democratic global governance structure look like? The questioner implied that political inequality of women at home would reproduce itself on the global stage. Even if a global government (i.e., global state) emerged, the problem of the reproduction of political inequality as a barrier to successful democratization would remain. Given the inequalities within national and international civil society organizations, there is simply no evidence to suggest that a global state would be more democratic than the current global system.

While political inequality within and between nations remains a barrier to democratic development of global governance structures, does nationalist retrenchment also make democratic global gover-

nance less likely? Nationalists and internationalists—or, unilateralists and multilateralists—battle for supremacy over foreign policy within their own nations and in global governance organizations. We can imagine a situation in which nationalists win policy battles more often than internationalists, and where the scope of the policies made by nationalists precludes or minimizes actions to internationalize. In a world where few countries have a lot and most have little, nationalist retrenchment can also weaken democratic development of these structures by defunding these organizations and neglecting the needs of the disadvantaged. In Kofi Annan’s words, “We would live in a better, fairer world—indeed, a more democratic world—if in all those places, greater weight were given to the views and interests of the poor” (2002: 140).

Conclusion

This article serves to continue the conversation among sociologists and other social scientists on the hopes for democratic global governance. Given the global scope of the world’s problems, global governance of various types is already here. Given that political inequality has the tendency to reproduce itself on every governance level, and given the uncanny ability of nationalists to persist, political inequality and nationalist retrenchment make democratic global governance less likely to emerge anytime soon. And if the Intergalactic Council is watching, we can only hope that humanity will beat the odds.

Notes

1. It took place on Monday, July 12, 8:45 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. Much of the substance of Lee’s talk appeared in Lee 2010, and I also quote from that work.

2. According to the ISA, ad hoc sessions are those that do “not properly fit” within the normal structure of the ISA. The ISA imposes much stricter rules for ad hoc session inclusion; at least, the rules are much more strict than for other sessions that do “properly fit” within the ISA. According to the ISA, “In order to qualify for a place in the Congress programme, the potential [ad hoc] session must involve [a] substantial number of sociologists from several countries who

have already engaged in some collaboration and whose special interest does not properly fit within the field of an established ISA Research Committee, Working Group or Thematic Group.” One can imagine “Democratic Global Governance” easily fitting within RC18: Political Sociology. Thus, the designation “ad hoc” is more organizational than thematic.

3. See www.isa-sociology.org/congress2010/adh/index.htm (accessed July 20, 2010).

4. On page 323 of a 359-page book, with three of the end pages designated for jotting down notes.

5. For the legal institution of political inequality of migrants in Mercosur (Southern Cone Common Market) countries, see Modolo (2011).

6. Note that while adding up capitalist countries and regions involved in economic production leads to a capitalist world-system and its hierarchical relations, the same process does not apply to democratic global governance.

7. Chase-Dunn et al. (this issue) argue that this innovative challenge to the status quo will come not from the core, but from the semiperiphery, which they argue has historically been the primary global innovators.

8. According to the journal’s Web site, “*Global Governance* showcases the expertise of leading scholars and practitioners concerned with the processes of international cooperation and multilateralism. The result is a provocative exploration of the most pressing transnational challenges of our time—issues of peace and security, development, human rights, the environment, and health among them . . . *Global Governance* is published in association with the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS).” A statement of support reads, “Those of us who work in the UN system admire *Global Governance* for the high quality of its pieces on UN institutions” (Edmond Mulet, assistant secretary general for Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations; available at www.rienner.com/title/Global_Governance_A_Review_of_Multilateralism_and_International_Organizations/, accessed July 4, 2012).

9. And, possibly, a deeper, denser “fog of globalization” (Chase-Dunn 2005: 172).

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