
Preface

Many have a sense that governments are increasingly out of control, that elections have less and less influence on the social, environmental, and economic conditions we face every day. It seems that just as formal democracy is spreading into new corners of the world following the collapse of communism, the effectiveness of many longer-lived democracies is subtly, or perhaps not so subtly, declining. Civic involvement and even voting are less entrenched than they were as recently as the 1970s, and political cynicism is all too normal. Political life seems to most people to be dominated by media and money. Why?

The answer for some is expressed in the single word *globalization*. Single explanations are of course always too simple, but a widespread desire to be globally competitive can lead to abrupt changes in productive capacity (and to political acquiescence in such initiatives). In turn, the innovative expansion of social programs and quality public schools is frequently deemed unachievable, and environmental protection is frequently seen as impossibly expensive, even in the richest nations in the world.

At the same time, decisions made in nonelected and essentially closed global trade organizations have been known to override hard-won environmental initiatives in democratic nations or communities. It is little wonder that trade integration, like government as a whole, is often met with a kind of resigned suspicion, if not open hostility.

Global economic integration, however, is part of a centuries-long trend that almost two centuries ago saw economic markets grow beyond regions and principalities and thereby foster the growth of nation-states. It was in those jurisdictions that democracy ultimately flourished. Moreover, today's *global* economic integration has been fostered and accelerated by computers, media, and communications technologies that have in turn

aided the spread of democracy to the former communist nations and elsewhere. The combination of these factors has also likely promoted overall economic expansion that in turn could help to sustain both democracy and social progress.

Thus the realities of global economic integration are far more complex and multifaceted than simply involving a rise of global corporate actors to political dominance, as some believe. Democracy, formal if not necessarily effective, *is* spreading to more nations as global economic integration proceeds. Trade offers positive benefits of many kinds, from product diversity to economic growth. The frequent and rapid movement of people and information within globalization exposes more people to a wide array of cultures.

At the same time, however, the process of expanding global interaction is overwhelmingly dominated by economic considerations. This is indeed the core problem. The expansion of markets beyond local borders in the nineteenth century was followed by the expansion and intensification of political life—geographically to the scale of the nation-state and structurally to encompass all classes, males and females alike, and all manner of burgeoning social and political organizations. Basic political rights were universalized in many nations. Democracy established itself at a scale comparable to the newly expanded economic marketplace.

Now, through global-scale communications, computerization, and travel capabilities, we are moving toward worldwide economic integration in forms and styles that never existed previously. But politics cannot easily follow economics to this new scale of operation. The notion of global government is almost universally distrusted. Faced with it, we yearn more than ever for local government, for the decentralization of authority. But absent politics, global governance proceeds as if all that mattered were economic considerations. In a word, at the global scale there is no semblance of democracy and no semblance of balance.

Economic considerations overwhelm all else. What might be called “economism” is triumphant. We pretend that at the global scale we can build a structure of economic rules and leave all else to the sovereign nation-states and other levels of government. This is nonsense. The reason communism failed was that it was fundamentally undemocratic and fundamentally economic. It let economic considerations overwhelm environmental considerations and denied citizens the opportunity to defend their own social rights through rights-based laws or through independent

social and economic organizations, including trade unions and religious and community organizations. There was no effective balancing of economic, social, and environmental factors and interests.

That same reality is close to existing at the global level. Private corporate actors and their many and varied associations are there in force, but almost no other voices are heard. No other considerations enter the arena of trade-treaty creation and trade-dispute resolution. Environmental and social considerations are addressed elsewhere perhaps, but not comprehensively and not effectively. Environmental problems are systematically exported from rich nations to poor and to the margins of all nations. Social problems are not adequately addressed (and cannot be within any nation at risk of being economically uncompetitive). Social equity is in retreat worldwide. In the absence of deliberate balancing at the highest level where economic decisions are made, this result is almost inevitable.

To compound the problem, this pervasive economism is everywhere reinforced by commercially oriented, increasingly global electronic media. Today's media convey a dream world in which all problems are solvable through the purchase of goods and services. Economism is again ascendant as these media become increasingly the central means by which information moves within societies. Balance is thus lost not only in the processes of political life but in everyday communications as well.

In this new world of global, electronic capitalism we must develop new ways to restore the balance we once had in the domestic politics of many nations, a balance among at least three aspects of societal life—economy, social equity, and environment. The task at hand is to resolve democracy's dilemma at the global scale, not withdraw within autonomous national, ethnic, religious, or even local bastions. Too much potential would be lost in doing so. It is also not clear that we could do so even if we wanted to. Through a myriad of inventions and activities, humankind has been moving toward global integration for centuries. Global economic integration calls for more effective democracy—democracy that attends to human economic, social, *and* environmental needs on all levels from the global to the local.

President George W. Bush, commenting in May 2002 on the possibility of normalizing relations between the United States and Cuba, spoke of a need for “the substance of democracy, not its hollow empty forms.” This is a challenging standard to which *all* nations might now be held.