

CHRISTOPHER CHASE-DUNN, BRUCE LERRO,
HIROKO INOUE, AND ALEXIS ÁLVAREZ

Democratic Global Governance

Moving From Ideal to Reality

Abstract: The political ideal of democracy has become increasingly adopted, yet the existing institutions of global governance can scarcely be considered democratic. The simple addition of national democracies does not necessarily add up to global democracy because national states have unequal power. Despite existing problems, democratic global governance remains a possibility. In this article, we use a world historical perspective to discuss difficulties in and viable solutions to establishing democratic global governance. We begin by laying out the difficulties in democracy taking hold nation-

Christopher Chase-Dunn is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and director of the Institute for Research on World-Systems at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author (with Terry Boswell) of *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism* (Lynne Rienner, 2000). He is the founder and former editor of the *Journal of World-Systems Research*. Address correspondence to Christopher Chase-Dunn, e-mail: chriscd@ucr.edu. Bruce Lerro is research associate at the Institute for Research on World-Systems; e-mail: goethe48@pacbell.net. Hiroko Inoue is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of California, Riverside, and is currently working on the dynamic formation of social complexity in long-run world-systems evolution; e-mail: inoueh02@ucr.edu. Alexis Álvarez is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of California, Riverside. He also teaches courses in sociology, psychology, and statistics, and participates in various nonprofit efforts locally and globally; e-mail: alexisalvarez@earthlink.net.

ally and globally as well as critical problems of the United Nations. Then, we discuss innovations in the semiperiphery, reforming global governance institutions, and the possibilities for transnational social movements to be the impetus for creating a democratic and inclusive global polity and global civil society.

The political ideal of democracy has become increasingly adopted, yet the existing institutions of global governance can scarcely be considered democratic. Most people have little knowledge about or say over the existing institutions of global governance. Core national polities located in the global North dominate global governance institutions that affect the peripheral and semiperipheral countries of the global South. Transnational activism to change the system is often undercut by the system of global institutions that is usefully characterized as polyarchy.

Despite existing problems, democratic global governance remains a possibility. In this article, we use a world historical perspective to discuss difficulties in, and viable solutions to, establishing democratic global governance.

National Democracy and Global Democracy

The idea of global democracy, like democracy itself, is a contested concept in both theory and practice (Robinson 1996). For many, global democracy is simply the addition of more and more national democracies characterized by parliamentary governments in which fair elections decide the political leadership of the national state. Democracy within nation-states, though a laudable goal and in many cases a valuable achievement, does not add up to global democracy, because it says little about the nature of relations among nation-states or about governance at the global level. Political inequality within the world-system is a major culprit. The simple addition of national democracies does not necessarily add up to global democracy because nation-states have unequal power, and the question of global democracy turns importantly on the nature of relations among the nation-states. This has been referred to as

the problem of *global vs. single-state democracy* (see Chase-Dunn and Lerro 2012).

Even when more democratic global governance institutions arise, it is difficult for democracy to take a strong hold. Outside the core (the Global North), the rest of the world has had a very difficult time institutionalizing parliamentary democracy, though there have been recurrent waves of democratization in the parliamentary sense (Markoff 1996). Charles Tilly's (2007) recent summary and conclusions, based on decades of studying the political history of national societies, provides a useful roadmap to the conditions under which a nation-state responds to the will of its average citizens. Like John Markoff, Tilly contends that democracy at the national level is tenuous and difficult to sustain, even in states where it has become institutionalized. A state must have capacity and must be able to contain the autonomy of internal elite challengers to popular power (e.g., the military). Although Tilly does not do so, his analysis is usefully applied to the issues of global state formation and global democracy.

Global governance has long meant “international relations”—the economic, political, military, and cultural interactions among a large number of sovereign states. The interstate system and the rise and fall of hegemonic core powers has been somewhat modified over the past 200 years by the emergence of international organizations that operate in between and over the tops of the nation-states (Boli and Thomas 1999; Murphy 1994). This emergence of multilateral institutions has been called “political globalization” and is seen as a possible precursor to eventual global state formation (Chase-Dunn and Inoue 2012). Global governance is structured as a system of allying and competing nation-states, the rise and fall of hegemons, and an increasingly dense system of public and private institutions that are international and transnational in scope.

The world after World War II has seen the emergence of still-weak but strengthening global-level political institutions characterized by polyarchy and dominated by U.S. hegemony. William Robinson (1996) characterizes “polyarchy” as a contest managed by contending elites to legitimize regimes based on huge inequalities.

The predominant definition of democracy in the West is one 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 discussion. Thus, the kind of democracy that has become hegemonic in the modern world-system is one that is congruent with capitalism. It protects private owners of the major means of production from most claims on their property and profits by narrowly defining political rights. Robinson also convincingly argues that polyarchy is often used to undercut radical movements of participatory and direct democracy that are seen as threatening the interests of capitalist elites.

In the modern process of political globalization, global governance has become more centralized and more capacious because of the huge relative size of the United States and because of the growing importance of international organizations. The United Nations (UN) was established to provide collective security for countries that participate in the global governance system. Unfortunately, the United Nations suffers from some defects that make it unlikely to be effective during a period of continued U.S. hegemonic decline and increasing multipolarity (Chase-Dunn et al. 2011). The most important issue regarding legitimacy has been called the “democratic deficit.” In short, the decision-making structures of the United Nations do not represent the peoples of the world.

It becomes increasingly apparent that the UN does not have the capacity to help humanity meet the challenges of the twenty-first century effectively. The main weakness relates to the UN’s ability to resolve major conflicts and to enforce decisions. In order to resolve major conflicts among powerful nation-states, UN Peacekeeping Forces would have to be superior to military forces that oppose it. It is usual to consider global governance without discussing Max Weber’s definition (1978) of a state as, most importantly, “a monopoly of legitimate violence.” But ignoring the issue of military power and security will not help us through the coming period of great power rivalry. The United Nations is not a state by Weber’s

definition. A near-monopoly of global violent capability is held by the armed forces of the United States. This is the de facto world state but one that lacks legitimacy according to broadly accepted definitions of democratic control. The president of the United States is the commander in chief of the U.S. armed forces. But the president is not elected by the peoples of the world, and therefore U.S. military power is not a democratically legitimate defender of the global governance system, especially when it is exercised unilaterally.

Solutions to Democratic Deficits

Role of the Semiperiphery

The terminology of “North–South relations” has come to refer to the relationship that wealthy powerful countries have with poor and less developed ones (Reuveny and Thompson 2008). The terms we prefer are *core*, *periphery*, and *semiperiphery*, defined as structural positions in a global hierarchy that is economic, political-military, and cultural. The core/periphery hierarchy at the global level is organized spatially, but it is not simply a matter of latitude as implied by the North–South terminology. It is a complex and multidimensional hierarchy of different kinds of interrelated power and dependence relations.

Semiperipheral development has historically played a large role in innovating economic and political systems and changing the world order. Institutional development in premodern world-systems has most often occurred because innovations and implementations of new techniques and organizational forms have emerged in societies that are in semiperipheral positions within larger core/periphery hierarchies (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997: ch. 5). For example, most of the big upward sweeps of polity size since the Bronze Age have been instances in which a semiperipheral marcher state has conquered a group of older core states to form a corewide empire.

The modern world-system has experienced systemwide 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. Some of the strongest challenges to capitalism (the communist states) have been concentrated mainly in the semiperiphery.

Reforming Global Institutions

To create a global polity, we must first create a global civil society. We conceptualize a global polity that has long been composed of nation-states in which elites have carried out the jobs of international relations, but that is increasingly becoming an arena of direct popular participation. The notion of global civil society imagines a world that is informed about global issues and thinks about, and conducts, action toward the solution of global problems.

The elements are in place to affect the creation of an inclusive global civil society. Cheap and global communications technologies have accelerated a trend toward the formation of transnational social movements that has roots in earlier centuries. Ideas of democracy that are deeply institutionalized in modern societies are being increasingly applied at the global level. Both elite policymakers and transnational social movements have begun to raise issues about the democratic nature of existing institutions of global governance. The challenges were weak during the years in which the neoliberal globalization project could take credit for economic growth in many parts of the world. But since the financial crises of 2008 and the ensuing global recession even many of the elites are casting about for new directions.

With a global civil society comes the capacity to have a world parliament that is truly representative of the world's populations. George Monbiot (2003) and others have proposed the establishment of a global people's parliament to represent the people of the world in

global governance. Such a parliament should be based on delegation and representation of the peoples of the earth and should operate on the principal of majority decision making. Demographically large countries would have great influence in such an institution. But purely demographic weight could be counterbalanced by the UN General Assembly in which each member state has one vote. The General Assembly is democratic in form, representing national societies by the formula of "one nation, one vote." But the existing General Assembly has little authority over most of the important decisions that are made by the UN. The most important powers are held by the Security Council. The permanent members of the Security Council are the powers that won World War II. The Security Council can veto proposals to reform the structure of the UN, which it has done repeatedly since the formation of the UN in 1945. In order to be a legitimate global authority, the United Nations would have to become more democratic by adding a parliament, broadening control of the Security Council and increasing the powers of the General Assembly and a new people's parliament. Such a global authority would be widely viewed as representing the interests of the people of world.

In order to have sufficient capability to resolve conflicts among the great powers the UN would also need the legal ability to collect taxes, such as the proposed Tobin tax on international financial transactions. With this capability, and with additional legitimacy produced by meaningful democratization, the UN would be in a much better position to effectively mediate the conflicts that are likely to emerge in the coming multipolar structure of interstate power.

The existing global military apparatus was erected by the United States, composed of 865 facilities in 40 countries and overseas U.S. territories (Johnson 2010: 183). Chalmers Johnson, an intrepid critic of imperial U.S. foreign policy, decries the effects that hegemony, and especially the shift toward unilateral militarism, has had on the quality of democracy in the United States. In order to prevent the permanent transition from a republic to an empire Johnson proposes that the U.S. global military apparatus

be sold back to the countries in which the bases and other facilities are located. This would also provide revenues that could be used to revitalize the physical infrastructure of the United States. We agree that hegemony has not been good for democracy in the United States. But the United States operates in a larger capitalist system. Thus, we add to Johnson's arguments the neoliberal globalization project, including (a) the rapid expansion of income inequality since the 1970s, which has devalued Western democracy and (b) neoliberal economic policies that have combined with neoconservative use of military power to undermine the political process.

We also agree with Johnson that dismantling the empire would be a good thing for both the world and the United States. But we doubt that the culture and the dependencies that have been created can be rapidly changed. We therefore propose a slightly different version of Johnson's radical proposal that can help with the issue of the instability of a multipolar world while also helping the United States move in a more healthy direction.

Unlike Johnson, we propose that one-third of those 865 facilities be kept under the control of the U.S. federal government in order to provide some continuity both domestically and in the larger world that has come to expect the United States to play the role of providing stability. Another third should be sold to the countries in which they are located. These facilities should be those that are located in countries where the U.S. military involvement has generated a high level of popular resentment. And the other third should be sold to the UN. Command over these should be transferred to a global multilateral agency similar in form to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but under the control of the democratized UN. The United States would continue to play an important supporting role in this globalized and democratized structure of military power, which could provide useful continuity for a substantial part of the large military labor force and industrial complex that is the domestic legacy of U.S. hegemony.

Transnational Social Movements

A revitalized, capacious, and legitimate UN could also help humanity deal with the North–South inequality challenges that are going to be major problems in the next few decades (Chase-Dunn and Niemeyer 2009; Smith 2008). But for further global state formation and democratization to occur, they will have to be supported by forces that are strong enough to overcome great resistance. The international system of states is so institutionalized that most people, and many social scientists, have a very hard time even imagining the possibility of a world state. The justifications of governance have evolved to legitimate centralized authority by limiting it to certain functions, providing countervailing powers, mechanisms for replacing elites that do not perform well, and by institutionalizing rationality and science as justifications for government functions.

One means of making global governance institutions more democratic stems from the rise of transnational social movements. While transnational social movements in the West date back at least to the Protestant Reformation, the scope and scale of international ties among social activists have risen dramatically over the past few decades, as they have increasingly shared information, conceptual frameworks and other resources, and coordinated actions across borders and continents (Moghadam 2005; Reitan 2007).

This rise in transnational organizing contributed to and helped to produce the global justice movement. The *global justice movement* is a “movement of movements” that includes all those who are engaged in sustained and contentious challenges to neoliberal global capitalism, propose alternative political and economic structures, and mobilize poor and relatively powerless peoples. While this movement resorts to noninstitutional forms of collective action, it often collaborates with institutional “insiders,” such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that lobby and provide services to people, as well as policymakers (Tarrow 2001: 10–14; see also Keck and Sikkink 1998). The global justice movement and its allies includes a variety of social actors and groups: unions, NGOs, social movement organizations (SMOs), transnational advocacy

networks, as well as policymakers, scholars, artists, journalists, entertainers, and other individuals.

The World Social Forum (WSF) was established in 2001 to serve as a global movement of grassroots progressive movements that could counter the politics of the World Economic Forum. The WSF has become the main arena in which transnational social movements try to coordinate their activities.

A survey conducted at a meeting of the World Social Forum in Nairobi in 2007 shows that most of these New Global Left members of global civil society hold critical attitudes toward the existing institutions of global governance (Reese et al. 2008: table 2). The proportions of respondents who want to abolish the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank vary from 18 percent at the WSF in Nairobi in 2007 to 27 percent at the WSF in Porto Alegre in 2005 to 53 percent at the U.S. Social Forum meeting in Atlanta in 2007. But only from 5 percent (Nairobi) to 11 percent (Atlanta) want to abolish the United Nations. Between 67 percent (Atlanta) and 78 percent (Nairobi) want to reform the United Nations.

Social Forum attendees were also asked about support for the idea of a democratic global government. Attendees were given three choices in answering the question:

“Do you think it is a good or bad idea to have a democratic world government?” Check one:

- Good idea, and it’s possible
- Good idea, but not possible
- Bad idea

At the Nairobi WSF, 15 percent thought that a global democratic government is a bad idea, but at Porto Alegre it was 36 percent and at Atlanta it was 28 percent. In Porto Alegre the proportion indicating that a global democratic government is both a good idea and is possible was only 25 percent, but in Nairobi it was 47 percent and in Atlanta it was 45 percent. The others thought it was a good idea but not possible (Reese et al. 2008: table 2).

Given the antistatist politics and commitment to horizontal leaderless movements that seem to be favored by the WSF attendees

Table 1

Attitudes Toward the Idea of a Global Democratic Government by World-System Position

	Good idea, and possible, % (no. of attendees)	Good idea, but not possible, % (no. of attendees)	Bad idea, % (no. of attendees)
Core	39 (40)	45 (47)	16 (17)
Semiperiphery	26 (106)	37 (148)	37 (148)
Periphery	30 (12)	48 (19)	23 (9)
All respondents	29 (158)	39 (214)	32 (174)

Source: World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2005.

(Santos 2006), it is somewhat amazing how much support there is for the idea of a democratic global government. A major stumbling block, however, is that a large proportion of those in favor think that this goal is unrealizable.

Chase-Dunn et al. (2008) further analyzed the 2005 Porto Alegre survey to examine global North–South differences. Among those from the core, only 16 percent say that democratic world government is a bad idea, while in the periphery it is 23 percent and in the semiperiphery it is 37 percent (see Table 1). It was suspected that this apparent higher skepticism about democratic world government in the semiperiphery may have been due to the large presence of locally oriented activists from Brazil. However, when Brazilian attendees were excluded from the analyses, the proportion of semiperipheral respondents opposing the idea of a world government rose to 39 percent. Of the Porto Alegre attendees, 39 percent from the core thought that democratic world government is a good idea and it is possible, while 45 percent say that it is a good idea but not possible. This may be related to the fact that existing global institutions have been core-controlled and that the forms of democracy that have been institutionalized in global political structures are mainly based on cultural assumptions that emerged from the European Enlightenment. These facts of world history are likely to make noncore peoples skeptical about the possibility and desirability of “democratic global governance.” But even in the core there is con-

siderable skepticism over the real possibility of a democratic world government. The interstate system is still strongly institutionalized despite the rise of globalization in popular consciousness.

Conclusion

Global democracy needs to address the huge and growing inequalities within and between countries. Global democracy means the existence of legitimate and enforceable economic, political and cultural rights and voice for the majority of the world's people over the local and global institutions that affect their lives. Democracy of the nation-state is part of the solution but not the whole solution. Global democracy requires that the nation-states be democratic and that the global institutions be democratic. Thus it requires democratic institutions of global governance.

There are real differences among modern states in the extent to which political and economic rights are extended to all the citizens and the majority participates in consequential political decision making. Robinson (1996) is right in that the current democratic system is partly a sham as it legitimates the rule of capitalist elites. However, truly authoritarian government is much, much worse. The problem is to help those who do not yet enjoy national polyarchy to get it and to move beyond polyarchy in those states where that is possible. At the global level, polyarchy would be preferable to the current situation in which the institutions of global governance rely on the institutionalized structure of the interstate system to veil the realities of global power and authority.

If a legitimate and effective road to improving global governance is not found, humanity risks repeating the chaos that characterized the first half of the twentieth century, except that it might be worse because of the global environmental problems that are likely to exacerbate rivalries and North–South issues. As described by Mike Davis (2006), populist social movements in the teeming cities of the global South are demonstrating how humanity can live happily with a smaller environmental footprint. Thus might the *Planet of Slums* help to build a collectively rational and democratic global commonwealth.

References

- Boli, John, and George M. Thomas, ed. 1999. *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher, and Thomas D. Hall. 1997. *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems*. Boulder: Westview.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher, and Hiroko Inoue 2012 "Accelerating Democratic Global State Formation." *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 2 157–75. Available at <http://cac.sagepub.com/content/47/2/157/>.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher, and Bruce Lerro. 2012. "Democratizing Global Governance: Strategy and Tactics." In *Global Crises and the Challenges of the 21st Century*, ed. Tom Reifer, 39–64. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher, and Richard E. Niemeyer. 2009. "The World Revolution of 20xx." In *Transnational Political Spaces*, ed. Mathias Albert, Gesa Bluhm, Han Helmig, Andreas Leutzsch, Jochen Walter, 35–57. Frankfurt/New York: Campus. Available at <http://irows.ucr.edu/papers/irows35/irows35.htm>.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher; Roy Kwon; Kirk Lawrence; and Hiroko Inoue. 2011. "Last of the Hegemons: U.S. Decline and Global Governance." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 37, no. 1 (Spring): 1–29.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher; Ellen Reese; Mark Herkenrath; Rebecca Giem; Erika Gutierrez; Linda Kim; and Christine Petit. 2008. "North–South Contradictions and Bridges at the World Social Forum." In *North and South in the World Political Economy*, ed. Rafael Reuveny and William R. Thompson, 341–66. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Davis, Mike. 2006. *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso
- Johnson, Chalmers A. 2010. *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Markoff, John. 1996. *Waves of Democracy: Social Movements and Political Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Moghadam, Valentine. 2005. *Globalizing Women*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Monbiot, George. 2003. *Manifesto for a New World Order*. New York: New Press.
- Murphy, Craig. 1994. *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance Since 1850*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reese, Ellen; Christopher Chase-Dunn; Kadambari Anantram; Gary Coyne; Matheu Kaneshiro; Ashley N. Koda; Roy Kwon; and Preeta Saxena. 2008. "Research Note: Surveys of World Social Forum Participants Show Influence of Place and Base in the Global Public Sphere." *Mobilization: An International Journal* 13, no. 4: 431–45.
- Reitan, Ruth. 2007. *Global Activism*. London: Routledge.

- Reuveny, Rafael, and William R. Thompson, ed. 2008. *The North–South Divide in the World Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Robinson, William I. 1996. *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2006. *The Rise of the New Global Left*. London: Zed Press.
- Smith, Jackie. 2008. *Social Movements for Global Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 2005. *The New Transnational Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 2007. *Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1978. "Types of Legitimate Order: Convention and Law." In *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, 33–36. Berkeley: University of California Press.