

Whither global democracy?

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Abstract

The political optimism of the immediate aftermath of the Cold War was accompanied by an upsurge in scholarly attention to the question of democratic global governance. However, the past decade and a half has seen a ‘globalization backlash’ that has eroded faith in both the feasibility and desirability of strong global institutions. These developments raise important questions for the future of research into the application of democratic principles to international governance arrangements. This article reviews three recent attempts, from Luis Cabrera, Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, and Hans Agné, to theorise democracy beyond the state. The three authors converge in seeking insights into democratic global governance in the interaction of empirical and normative themes, though they also identify potentially divergent paths of inquiry for the future of the global democracy research programme.

Keywords

global democracy, global justice, global governance, democratic theory, international relations

Luis Cabrera, *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-state Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, *The Universal Republic: A Realistic Utopia?* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Hans Agné, *Democratism: Explaining International Politics with Democracy Beyond the State* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

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The political optimism of the immediate aftermath of the Cold War was accompanied by an upsurge in scholarly attention to the question of democratic global governance. David Held's *Democracy and the Global Order* was published in 1995, for example, while the early 2000s saw continued research in this area (Archibugi, 2008; Bohman, 2007; Held, 1995; Wendt, 2003). Yet against the optimism of many who proposed, (and in some cases, assumed) that the principles of liberal democracy should suffice the global political order, the past decade and a half has seen a 'globalization backlash' that has eroded faith in both the feasibility and desirability of strong global institutions (Walter, 2021). Alongside these political developments, and building on the postcolonial tradition, this period has also seen growing scholarly interest in the subaltern, often with the goal of unmasking the 'false universalism' of dominant liberal thought.

These developments raise profound questions for the viability of the global democracy project. Where should the literature on supranational democracy go from here? Three significant recent attempts to theorise democracy beyond the state all reckon with this question. What unites them is attention to bridging normative and empirical themes, though they each do so in slightly different ways, and offer distinctive answers. Each draws on disciplines adjacent to analytical political theory for help in constructing normative arguments for how democracy at the supranational level can and should be realised. Luis Cabrera turns to 'grounded normative theory', and the political thought of India's Dalit champion Ramji Ambedkar. Mathias Koenig-Archibugi draws on empirical political science, and Hans Agné synthesises ideas from political theory and international relations. Below I provide brief exegesis and analysis of each work in turn, focusing primarily on the normative claims they advance. I then examine a number of key issues for the global democracy research agenda that, taken together, the authors address, sometimes converging in their perspectives, and sometimes diverging significantly.

The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-State Democracy

Luis Cabrera is concerned to show that cosmopolitan democracy is compatible with cultural and national diversity (Cabrera, 2020). According to Cabrera, one key objection to cosmopolitanism has been claims of 'arrogance'. Cabrera divides these arrogance objections into two types, noting that they have been addressed to both cosmopolitan moral theory, and proposals to institutionalise cosmopolitanism through the design of empowered global institutions. The first objection is that cosmopolitanism is dismissive of particularistic, non-universal attachments. The second is that it treats individuals who hold non-Western moral views as 'not qualified' to make moral claims regarding the operation of the global order, and in doing so imposes parochial, Western moral views in the guise of neutral, universal values (p. 8). Much of the book is addressed to diffusing the force of these objections.

Cabrera begins by introducing the concept of 'political humility', using Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's work challenging the 'arrogance' of the caste system in India.

Drawing on Ambedkar, Cabrera defines political humility in terms of three core conditions and notes these differ from the equation of humility with deference: 1. Recognising the equal standing of others 2. Openness to input or challenge from differing viewpoints 3. Intellectual modesty about the validity of one's judgments (pp. 34–36). Cabrera then asserts that political humility is best promoted by democracy. The political arrogance of the nation-state system, for Cabrera, derives from the assumption that a state's sovereignty gives it the right to ignore the claims of those beyond its borders. Political humility, by contrast, requires openness to input from all perspectives and voices affected by a particular exercise of political power. Trans-state democracy institutionalises this principle of political humility.

Having drawn conceptually from non-Western intellectual Ambedkar, Cabrera introduces a further methodological choice, the choice to engage in 'grounded normative theory', which seeks to use empirical research to inform normative theorising (pp. 94–104). This grounded normative theory begins with the analysis of claims made by activists associated with the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). Collectively, this groundwork builds to an account of institutional cosmopolitanism that both advances the key cosmopolitan aim of protecting rights globally, while also satisfying concerns about cosmopolitan arrogance. For Cabrera, overcoming the political arrogance of the sovereign state system requires the cultivation of global citizenship. Individuals, on his view, have a duty to support the creation of global institutions that can challenge state actions when they threaten individual rights. A global order that gives expression to the notion of political humility must thus allow for both 'vertical' challenges (from individuals and non-state actors), as well as 'horizontal' challenges (between states) to the exercise of state power – particular in cases of rights violations. The second half of the book turns to defending this account of institutional cosmopolitanism from specific objections of arrogance, first from political theorists Martha Nussbaum and Simon Caney, and then, returning to the method of grounding normative theory, from two case studies of nationalist political movements, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, and the UK Independence Party.

Cabrera's analysis of the institutional and moral implications of 'humility' and 'arrogance' in the design of the global order is novel and insightful. It is notable, for example, that Cabrera's conceptualisation and operationalisation of the concept of political humility attempts to explore its importance not only as a particular civic virtue or desirable attribute for particular agents, but also considers how political humility can be institutionalised, or reflected in political structures.

Core to Cabrera's argument is the notion that the 'arrogance' of the existing global order is best combated by creating and promoting mechanisms by which decisions and powerful agents in the global order can be challenged. This does leave underspecified, though, what exactly the institutionalisation of political humility amounts to, beyond an endorsement of the importance of permanent contestation in politics. Regardless of the validity of this claim, it is similar in form at least to claims within existing strands of democratic thought such as agonism. The argument might thus benefit from further elaboration of how the notion of political humility shapes the nature, extent or form of mechanisms for challenging the exercise of political power: are some mechanisms or

procedures for challenging powerful agents more expressive of political humility than others, for example?

The philosophical basis of Cabrera's account in *The Humble Cosmopolitan* is drawn from a wider range of traditions of thought than his previous work, notably *Political Theory of Global Justice* (2004). However, the argument is contiguous – both assert that cosmopolitan and democratic principles can only be properly expressed through a strong global institutional architecture capable of enacting and safeguarding them. Mathias Koenig-Archibugi shares this general perspective, though offers a distinctive account of what form this institutional architecture should take.

The Universal Republic: A Realistic Utopia?

The Universal Republic asks whether it is possible and desirable to create a democratic world state (Koenig-Archibugi, 2024). It is a major contribution to a tradition of thought which focuses on how a democratic global order might be constructed, building on, for example, earlier work by Luis Cabrera and Thomas Pogge (Cabrera, 2004; Pogge, 2002). Its key contribution is in bringing both empirical political science and engagement with political philosophy together in a book length treatment of the subject.

Koenig-Archibugi begins by distinguishing between the two key issues of *possibility* and *desirability*. The first half of the book addresses the former, the second the latter. The reason for this structure, Koenig-Archibugi explains, is that allegations of impossibility are generally taken to be a 'normative argument-stopper' (p. 9): if a world state is impossible, then there is no point theorising its desirability, let alone worrying about its design. As a result, the argument first sets out to refute, or at least question, common arguments against the possibility of a democratically governed global republic.

Possibility is defined in terms of feasibility, which itself contains two dimensions: achievability (could a democratic world state emerge?) and viability (could it survive as a democratic state?). Koenig-Archibugi then identifies constraints that are commonly held to make a world state unfeasible, distinguishing between motivational, structural and institutional constraints. He then tests arguments against the feasibility of a universal republic, giving attention to both dimensions of feasibility. Beginning with viability, simulations are presented of the probability that a world state would survive over a number of decades as a democratic polity. For achievability, a range of empirical tests are used to suggest that the motivational and structural arguments generally taken to make a world state unachievable are not, in fact, persuasive.

The second half of the book turns to the question of desirability. The grounding for the argument here is liberal and republican. The normative argument, stated briefly, is as follows: political orders are desirable when they treat individuals with equal respect, and protect individual autonomy. Protecting or promoting autonomy requires that political orders regulate autonomy-affecting behaviours. Autonomy may be affected by relationships of coercion, harm or profound impact, and the state of global interdependence means that each of these three relationships provides motivation for why a supranational political order is necessary. The question, then, is what kind of order should this be – why should this order be democratic? To prevent institutions becoming a threat to autonomy,

they must be placed under the control of those affected by their actions. Further, since people disagree about how the political order should protect and promote autonomy (and achieve other goals), the principle of equal respect demands that each person has an equal opportunity to shape the content of the laws that affect them. Hence, global democracy is derivative of the two postulates of autonomy and equal respect (pp. 101–104).

The remainder of the book defends the universal republic against two key alternatives: a confederation of democracies and a polycentric approach to democracy. Regarding the first, the author addresses the objection that a world state could only have a low-quality democracy, whether this is defined in terms of participation, deliberation, liberalism or egalitarianism. The overall finding is that the world state would likely fare no worse than many existing democracies. Included here is a discussion of the risk of persistent or intense minorities in a world polity, a concern typified by Joseph Nye's statement that 'treating the world as one global constituency implies the existence of a political community in which citizens of around 200 states would be willing to be continually out-voted by more than a billion Chinese and a billion Indians' (Nye, 2002: 17). Drawing on analysis of survey data in research conducted with Thomas Hale, Koenig-Archibugi finds that the risk of being in a persistent minority is no higher at the global level than in several existing democratic countries (Hale and Koenig-Archibugi, 2018; Koenig-Archibugi, 2024: 154–160).

The book ends with consideration of a 'polycentric' approach to democracy, a view that is growing in popularity (see for example Bohman, 2007; Scholte, 2014; for a review see Smith, 2018). Polycentric approaches suggest that, rather than focusing on the democratic legitimacy or quality of any single institution or forum, transnational democracy should be understood as a complex practice that can be dispersed across multiple sites of governance and deliberation. Koenig-Archibugi suggests that polycentric democracy is not sufficiently democratic: it carries significant costs in terms of how well it represents its constituents. By contrast, traditional mechanisms of democracy of the kind proposed for the 'universal republic', such as parliaments and aggregative procedures, would mitigate these costs at the supranational level (pp. 178–195).

Koenig-Archibugi's book is thus notable for the depth of engagement with both empirical political science, and contemporary analytical political theory, with much of the analysis offering compelling arguments against prior objections to global democracy. The argument of the book has a positive and negative component. The positive component is that a universal republic would enable self-government in a highly interdependent world. The negative claim is that a universal republic would, across several empirically verifiable dimensions, be *no worse* than (at least some) existing democratic states. Let us grant that this negative claim is correct. This is sufficient to rebut the claims that a global state would inevitably be tyrannical, wracked by civil war etc. But the scope of this argument is still fairly restricted: the argument does not offer much to convince a reader who is sceptical of the quality of existing democracies that the universal republic would be any better. One might point, for example, to ideological polarisation, and oligarchic capture, and ask whether the universal republic would improve in any way on these well-documented tendencies in many nation-states. One might go further and suggest that we have greater reason to be sceptical of a universal republic, even if it is comparable

to some existing nation-states, given the higher stakes involved in creating a universally binding polity. In other words, should we not want the risk of tyranny in a global democracy to be *lower* than in a national democracy?

Democratism: Explaining International Politics with Democracy Beyond the State

Like Koenig-Archibugi, Hans Agné bridges normative and empirical themes, noting that ‘acceptance of research that draws inspiration from both normative and empirical sources has become more widespread’ (Agne, 2022: 294). However, Agné asks slightly different questions. The core claim behind the book is that it is both possible and necessary to assess the level of ‘democracy beyond the state’, a notion that is intended to be distinct from, and broader than, the notions of ‘transnational’ or ‘global’ democracy. As with the previous works, the argument proceeds in two halves; here the first part is dedicated to conceptual analysis, and the second to using this analysis to provide an explanatory framework for key findings in the realm of international relations.

To this end, the first two chapters provide definitional work on the concept of democracy, in order to make transnational politics amenable to analysis through the lens of democracy. Agné defines the essence of democracy as rule by the greatest number (p. 60). According to his account, three indicators can be used to appraise the level of democracy within a given social practice. The first is the level of equality in the distribution of resources and skills, the second is the degree of inclusiveness of social groups whose purpose is to shape political structures, and the third is proximity to the notion of rule by the greatest number in the design of procedures used to settle disagreements (pp. 292–293).

Importantly, Agné proposes that descriptions of democracy should not be limited to appraisals of formal political systems, but can also be applied to the political experience of individuals (p. 41). He proposes ‘democratism’ as a regulative ideal that calls for the continuous expansion of democratic practices in all domains of social life. For Agné, democratism has both normative and explanatory implications. Normatively, international practices and institutions can be judged on how democratic they are, according to the conception of democracy he proposes. Empirically, Agné posits that the level of democracy in a given domain of international politics can explain a number of key findings in international relations theory, including but not limited to international conflict, migration policy, and human rights and environmental protection. Among other phenomena, Agné finds, for example, that increasing levels of democracy beyond the state can help to explain the decline in international wars and war deaths since the Second World War (p. 145), that levels of democracy can explain whether international powers rise peacefully or violently (p. 172), and that more democratic supranational political institutions are generally correlated with stronger preferences for social inclusion on issues of migration, wealth redistribution, and the enlargement of political unions (p. 213).

The questions Agné asks align in some respects with Michael Zürn’s work analysing whether, how, and to what extent democratic norms manifest themselves in existing

global governance structures (Zürn, 2018). Agné sees diminishing theoretical returns in conventional ways of thinking about supranational democracy so is consciously attempting to create a new research paradigm within the field of international politics and relations.

The argument of the book is innovative and engages with core ideas within contemporary political theory. However, we might question the relationship between Agné's conception of democracy, and the indicators he identifies to appraise the level of democracy in a given social practice. Of the three Agné uses to operationalise the framework of democratism (equality in resource distribution, inclusiveness of social groups who seek to shape social structures, and proximity to rule by the greatest number in decision procedures), only the latter of these is straightforwardly related to the core conception of democracy as rule by the greatest number outlined above. Further, his analysis of how the concept of 'democratism' might be used to explain new phenomena in international politics strays into highly speculative terrain towards the end of the book, including how it might apply to intra-personal conflict, or human/post-human relations.

New directions for global democracy research?

All three works engage with the extension of democratic principles to the global level, as part of a broader tradition of scholarship challenging the traditional confines of state sovereignty. Each author is motivated by a recognition that the continuation of a productive research agenda on global democracy requires new direction and sources of insight, both to determine the kind of global order we should be aiming at, and in response to the question of transition, or 'how we get there'. As a result, they share several notable characteristics.

Bridging the empirical and normative

Most notably, each analysis is motivated by the assumption that engagement with adjacent disciplines, and particularly attention to the interaction of the empirical and the normative, is necessary to illumine the path ahead. This 'turn' within the literature has been underway for sometime, as exemplified by research on global civil society, transnational mini-publics and other empirical phenomena (Dryzek et al., 2011; Smith, 2013; Tallberg et al., 2013). One core objection to the global democracy project, as noted most explicitly by Koenig-Archibugi, has always been the question of pragmatism or feasibility; global democracy, on this view, may be (at best) a virtuous ideal, but not one with implications for 'here and now'. Regardless of how fair this objection is to earlier proposals for globalising democracy, each author attempts to diffuse the force of this charge by engaging closely with empirical reality.

As Koenig-Archibugi highlights throughout the book, empirical research addresses – and in some cases refutes – several claims regarding the viability and achievability of global democracy that are widely taken to be intuitive or obvious, but are in fact unsupported by empirical evidence. The book as a whole brings together two literatures that often operate in isolation of one another: political theorists talk about world government,

but without giving attention to the empirical assumptions or conditions under which it could be realised, while international relations scholars can subject these assumptions to critical scrutiny, but generally do not speak about world government.

Like Koenig-Archibugi, Agné engages with both empirical claims, and normative political theory. However, where Koenig-Archibugi uses empirical analysis to reject commonly held assumptions in order to clear the ground for a normative argument, the structure of Agné's argument is reversed. *Democratism* begins with conceptual analysis of the concept of democracy in order to create a framework which is then applied not only for the purposes of making normative evaluations of global or transnational political structures, but crucially also for the explanation of empirical phenomena. That said, while the three works are not directly responding to one another, one can identify within them potentially divergent paths of inquiry for the future of the global democracy research programme.

Democracy as aggregation?

One question is whether democracy should be understood in purely aggregative terms. Koenig-Archibugi and Agné's arguments are underpinned by a procedural understanding of (democratic) legitimacy. As Koenig-Archibugi puts it: 'Popular control over the making of laws and popular accountability of the actors that monitor and enforce compliance with those laws confers democratic legitimacy to the political order.' (p. 103). Similarly Agné's argument relies on an explicitly (and purely) aggregative conception of democracy, endorsing the line that the essence of democracy is rule by the largest number (Waldron, 2002). This understanding of legitimacy is not uncontroversial, and there are other prominent perspectives that push back against this. Alongside the proceduralist tradition the authors work within, there are a number of schools of thought which begin from the premise that legitimacy requires not only procedures which promote participation as equals, but also that the content of rules and laws respects certain constraints. Ronald Dworkin, for example, suggests that democracy is incompatible with the exercise of political power in ways that treat some as morally inferior to others, even if they are enacted by majority rule (Dworkin, 2011). Theories of public reason are a further prominent version of this perspective, holding that democratic legitimacy is conditional on both aggregative procedures and public justification (Rawls, 2005). The majoritarian perspective, on which the two books structurally rely, is clearly an influential one, but it is not the only game in town, and there is little in either work to convince a reader who is not already in the majoritarian camp.

Indeed, Cabrera's view can be understood as moving in the opposite direction to the majoritarian position, particularly in his analysis of how political humility can be institutionalised. In the book, Cabrera grapples with the question of how to make the norms of 'political humility' binding, suggesting that Simon Caney's earlier use of the concept of humility as a desideratum for deliberative democracy has insufficient guardrails against a majority ignoring these participative norms and simply riding roughshod over minorities (Caney, 2009). Cabrera's favoured alternative specifies a much thicker set of rights and values to constrain international decision-making, which are to be set outside of global

democratic processes. Thus, in Cabrera's case, we might question what gives these extra-democratically determined values legitimacy. The problem is especially acute for Cabrera's account which goes beyond specifying a minimal set of fundamental rights to food, bodily integrity, and so on, incorporating a thick set of rights and just outcomes that the global order must secure to be legitimate. The reader is left with the question of how much can actually be decided by democratic procedures on Cabrera's account.

What is an inclusive global order?

A further question concerns inclusion. Each author agrees that a legitimate global order will be, in some sense, *inclusive*. But what conception of inclusivity is to be chosen? For Agné and Koenig-Archibugi, whose arguments are underpinned by a proceduralist understanding of democracy, and a combination of liberalism and republicanism respectively, the answer is simple: a political order is inclusive to the extent that it includes *individuals*, and where inclusion is understood primarily in terms of a vote.

Cabrera provides a different perspective on what an appropriately inclusive global order requires. *The Humble Cosmopolitan* addresses itself to two significant challenges for the cosmopolitan tradition. The first is whether cosmopolitanism is compatible with cultural and national diversity. The second is the accusation that the project is Western-centric and thus parochial. Regarding the former, Cabrera's engagement with grounded normative theory, coupled with engagement with the normative arguments of Simon Caney and Martha Nussbaum, is used in service of the claim that the retreat from cosmopolitan principles prevalent in recent literature is a mistake that must be arrested. Regarding the latter objection, the book is situated in a broader trend within the cosmopolitan literature to draw on theoretical resources that support cosmopolitan ambitions from a variety of systems of thought, to defuse the objection that cosmopolitanism is a 'Western' project. Growing attention to the southern African concept of *ubuntu*, the literature within the Chinese academy on *tianxia*, and scholarship on 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' all exemplify this interest (Graness, 2018; Pollock, 2000; Xu, 2018). This engagement is key to the distinctiveness of the argument of the book. Cabrera, then, also endorses the principle of individual inclusion, but in his engagement with Ambedkar strikes a somewhat different note, suggesting that inclusion requires not only the inclusion of individual voices or preferences, but also the involvement of conceptual and normative perspectives from a range of traditions of thought in the design of the global order.

Polycentric vs centralised democracy

Perhaps the most consequential fork in the road that the three accounts draw attention to, however, is over the question of whether a reimagined global order should be polycentric or unitary in character. Agné, for example, begins from the premise that democracy can exist in multi-level form, and express itself at different, overlapping scales, from the sub-national to the global. The argument can thus be situated within a broader turn towards

polycentric approaches to international governance, which favour multiple overlapping centres of democratic authority rather than a single global state (Smith, 2018).

Cabrera's view also identifies the potential for democratisation at different levels, and by advocating for global citizenship practices suggests that a diversity of actors may be agents of democratisation within the global order. In doing so, Agné and Cabrera echo an increasing trend within the literature to highlight the potential for polycentric governance as a path between the Scylla of a tyrannical world sovereign, and the Charbydis of an anarchic world order. Notably, though, Koenig-Archibugi challenges this trend, not only advocating for a centralised global federative state, but also explicitly addressing the polycentric alternative and finding it wanting. In this respect, *The Universal Republic* provides arguably the boldest contribution of the three, suggesting that this recent tendency towards polycentrism may need to be corrected. Where all three converge, of course, is in the conviction that it remains not only possible to theorise democracy beyond the state, but increasingly imperative.

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