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Abstract

Scepticism about the possibility of a democratically governed global polity is often rooted in beliefs about 'necessary conditions'. Some democracy scholars consider a transition to global democracy to be incompatible with necessary conditions for democratic governance, while some international relations scholars consider it to be incompatible with necessary conditions for international structural change. This article assesses hypotheses and evidence about democratic transitions within states and transformations in the interaction among states, and concludes that arguments based on necessary conditions are not compelling. This suggests that global democracy may be unlikely but it is not impossible.

1. Introduction

The variety of forms of political organization created in human history is bewildering, but there has never been a polity that displayed two features at the same time: a territorial extension sufficient to encompass the perceived boundaries of economic, social and military interdependence on the one hand, and a governance structure that would satisfy contemporary standards of 'democracy' on the other. Hedley Bull remarked that 'there has never been a government of the world, but there has often been a government supreme over much of what for those subjected to it was the known world' (Bull, 1977: 244). 'Subjected' is a key word in this sentence, since none of those

'global' governments were based on anything resembling modern principles of democratic citizenship, representation and accountability.

Despite the lack of empirical instances, or perhaps because of it, the idea of a democratic world polity has attracted thinkers and political activists since the eighteenth century. It is during the Enlightenment that the old idea of a 'universal monarchy', which had been advocated in medieval Europe by the likes of Dante Alighieri, was combined with radical ideas about republicanism and democracy to produce projects for world governance based on democratic structures and procedures. In the twentieth century there has been no shortage of plans and blueprints for democratically organized leagues of nations, world federations, cosmopolitan democracies, and other combinations of representative and international governance.[1] Nor has there been a shortage of stern criticisms of such ideas. Some of those criticisms concern the desirability of global democracy, such as the suggestion that any global polity might easily degenerate into global tyranny, or that it would simply be a tool in the hand of the most powerful governments, or that it would destroy national democracy and cultural diversity. But even more frequently the idea of global democracy has been dismissed as a daydream with no prospect of realization in the real world. Bull, for instance, was prepared to take seriously the idea of a world government in his wide-ranging mapping of *conceivable* alternatives to the states system, but he dismissed it as an *actual* possibility, as he observed that 'There is not the slightest evidence that sovereign states in this century will agree to subordinate themselves to a world government founded upon consent' (Bull, 1977: 252). He also chastised 'Western radicals' such as Richard Falk for the 'fundamental pessimism that underlies the superficial optimisms of their pronouncements that disaster will immediately befall us unless drastic transformations are effected, which they themselves must know to have no prospect of being carried out' (Bull, 1977: 294).

The end of the Cold War brought about a resurgence of thinking about global democracy, as well as a new barrage of criticisms. Critics can be found among specialists in international relations (IR) as well as experts of democracy and democratization. For instance, a prominent representative of contemporary Realist thinking in IR, Randall Schweller, wrote a harsh commentary on Andrew Linklater's *The Transformation of Political Community* (1998), a book that had grounded

normative support for transnational democracy in critical theory and discourse ethics and had highlighted opportunities for its realization under post-Westphalian conditions. Schweller branded those views as 'fantasy theory' and trusted that practitioners of international politics 'understand that foreign policy is too serious a business to entertain utopian ideas about dramatically reconstructed social relations; confronted by weighty foreign policy decisions, they do not enjoy the luxury of retreating into a fantasy world of their own creation but instead must act under real-world constraints, knowing that bad judgment can lead to the subjugation or extinction of the state and its citizens.' (Schweller, 1999: 150). Robert Keohane is a prominent critic of the Realist view of the world and in recent years has devoted considerable attention to the range of accountability mechanisms that can prevent and control abuses of power in world politics. But he is very careful in distinguishing the sum of those mechanisms from global democracy, which he considers 'infeasible' (Grant and Keohane, 2005: 40). 'Unfortunately', the vision of a system of democratic accountability in world politics 'would be utopian in the sense of illusory – impossible of realization under realistically foreseeable conditions' (Keohane, 2006: 77). One of the foremost scholars of democracy, Robert Dahl, not only pointed to the lacking democratic quality of existing international organizations, but posed a more fundamental question: 'Can international organizations, institutions, or processes be democratic? I argue that they cannot be.' He acknowledged that international organizations or even a world government may perform useful functions but, because of a fundamental trade-off between citizen participation and scale of government, 'the opportunities available to the ordinary citizen to participate effectively in the decisions of a world government would diminish to the vanishing point.' As international political systems are bound to remain below any reasonable threshold of democracy, 'we should openly recognize that international decision-making will not be democratic' (Dahl, 1999: 19, 22, 23; see also Dahl, 2001).

It is not always clear when sceptics consider global democracy to be impossible rather than just very unlikely. Many Realist authors probably would make a claim for empirical impossibility, as they believe in the fundamental continuity of international relations throughout human history. A prominent Realist, Robert Gilpin, stated that 'Realism is based on practices of states, and it seeks to understand how states have always behaved and presumably will always behave.' Its key insight is said to be that

'the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia. International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy' (Gilpin, 1981: 226, 7).[2] 'Liberal' sceptics may be less inflexible. Keohane's remark quoted earlier could be read as implying that global democracy may become possible under different conditions that are unforeseeable *for the time being*. Michael Doyle maintains that 'no strong version of global democracy is viable *at the present time*' (Doyle, 2000: 90, emphasis added). Debates about the feasibility of global democracy are hampered by ambiguities about what 'possibility' means, when the term is applied to large-scale political and social transformations.

This article develops an operational understanding of possibility, which may help clarify and perhaps reduce differences of opinion among scholars, and assesses the possibility of global democracy in the light of different strands of the political science literature. The steps of the argument are as follows. I first present a working definition of global democracy and discuss what it means to say that it may be possible or impossible (section 2). I argue that empirical possibility is best conceived as compatibility with a range of necessary condition hypotheses that are presently supported by empirical studies. Then the article examines two particularly relevant sets of necessary conditions. First, the literature on democratization is assessed in order to establish which (if any) conditions can be considered necessary for democratic transitions on the basis of historical and comparative evidence (section 3). As this search yields one plausible necessary condition – a degree of political centralization – I then focus on that condition and assess the international relations literature to determine whether the emergence of a democratic global polity would violate inescapable constraints on international systemic change (section 4). I conclude by offering some thoughts on the implications of the argument and directions of further research (section 5).

2. Defining 'global democracy' and 'possibility'

This section addresses two questions. First, what is 'global democracy'? Second, what does it mean to say that it is 'possible'? The following discussion does not aim to

provide any definitive answer to these complex questions, but only an operational conceptualization aimed at setting the stage for the arguments that will follow.

.   For the purposes of this article, 'global democracy' refers to a range of conceivable institutional systems that share a number of characteristics: to qualify, they must (1) encompass all regions of the world; (2) empower supranational bodies to make binding decisions on a range of (enumerated) issues of global relevance; (3) ensure that the members of those bodies are representative of, and accountable to, groups of citizens, through electoral mechanisms or other formal and transparent relationships of political delegation; (4) promote the equal representation of all world citizens in conjunction with other principles such as a balanced representation of the constitutive territorial units and possibly forms of functional representation; (5) allow the supranational bodies to take decisions in accordance with a variety of decision rules, but exclude veto rights for small minorities, except when they are based on legitimate and impartially determined vital interests; (6) empower independent supranational judicial bodies to resolve conflicts in accordance with constitutional rules; (7) include robust mechanisms for promoting compliance with decisions and rulings, possibly but not necessarily through the centralized control of the means of coercion.

This definition is deliberately vague – essentially democracy as constitutional, representative and inclusive decision-making *institutions* – because the arguments developed in this article are meant to apply to a wide range of world order proposals[3] While such proposals differ according to several dimensions, many of them can be imagined as being somewhere along a continuum from federalist to confederal models of political organization.[4] Federalist models stress the direct and equal representation of citizens in global bodies, centralization of the means of coercion, and supremacy of federal law over state law. Confederal models stress the gate-keeping role of governments between citizens and global institutions, dispersion of military and coercive capabilities, and the ability of individual member states to block any undesired collective decision. The argument of this article is particularly relevant for an intermediate model that is known as 'cosmopolitan democracy' (Held, 1995; Archibugi, 2008).[5]

What does it mean to ask if global democracy is possible? Philosophers distinguish between different kinds of possibility, notably logical possibility (i.e., free

from logical contradictions), metaphysical possibility (i.e., compatibility with the nature and identity conditions of things), nomological possibility (i.e., compatibility with the laws of nature), and deontic possibility (i.e., compatibility with certain norms or rules) (Divers, 2002: 3-9; Gendler and Hawthorne, 2002). This article is not concerned with the *deontic* dimension of global democracy, as this question has been explored in great depth by other authors.[6] In the social sciences, examples of statements about *logical* possibility are the impossibility theorems proved by axiomatic social choice theory (Arrow, 1951; List and Pettit 2002) and the so-called 'impossible trinity' of fixed exchange rate, free capital movement and independent monetary policy that derives from the assumptions of the Mundell-Fleming model in international economics. However, this article does *not* consider the logical possibility of global democracy, because few people, if any, would maintain that global democracy is a logically contradictory notion.

In principle, it is possible to make a case against the *metaphysical* possibility of global democracy. The argument could be that (*a*) a global *demos* would (empirically?) require a shared global identity and (*b*) a global identity is metaphysically impossible because every collective identity needs an external 'Other' and thus can never be global. This line of argument will not be pursued here, because various variants of thesis (*b*) have been thoroughly analysed and, in my opinion, persuasively refuted by Abizadeh (2005).

The possibility considered in this article is thus empirical. However, defining empirical possibility is fraught with difficulties. Possibility theory, which has been developed as an alternative to probability theory in the analysis of uncertainty (Zadeh, 1978), provides a framework for conceptualizing the differences and relationship between two types of possibility judgement. It distinguishes between what is 'not impossible' because it is not ruled out by our beliefs and what is 'guaranteed possible' because it has been observed. Uncertainty about what is possible can be reduced or modelled through 'knowledge', 'data', and their merger. Knowledge is conceived as negative information in the sense that it expresses *constraints* on how the world behaves, such as physical laws or common sense. Data is positive information as it consists of actual observations on the world. The accumulation of negative information restricts the set of possible worlds, whereas the accumulation of positive information

expands it. Possibility theory offers formal tools for analysing the consistency and merger of the two types of information, and conceptualizes learning processes as turning data into knowledge (Benferhat et al., 2008; Dubois and Prade, 2009).

As I noted in the introduction, global democracy has never been observed, at least as it is understood in this article. While scholars have collected 'data' on several processes that could in time lead to its emergence,[7] an assessment of its possibility must rely to a significant extent on background 'knowledge' (in the sense of possibility theory). However, it is not self-evident *what* should count as relevant knowledge. Empirical impossibility is sometimes understood as incompatibility with what we know about the 'laws of nature', i.e. nomological impossibility (Gendler and Hawthorne, 2002). This criterion, however, faces serious problems, especially when applied to the social sciences. For instance, physicists regard the impossibility of travelling faster than light as an objective constraint that operates independently of people's beliefs about the existence of that constraint; the possibility of social events, on the contrary, depends in part on beliefs about their possibility. Specifically, the possibility of global democracy may not be independent from people's beliefs about the possibility of global democracy. The issue of recursivity is just one of the reasons why many social scientists are sceptical about the notion of 'social laws'. The debate on this issue is intense and complex[8], but fortunately it does not have to be resolved here, because the question of empirical possibility can be approached in a way that does not require reliance on the concept of social laws. This is because that question often takes the form of arguments about necessary conditions: social facts or events are deemed to require other facts or events in order to occur. Social scientists routinely advance arguments of this kind: Goertz (2003), for instance, cites 150 examples of necessary condition hypotheses discussed in political science, sociology and economic history.

This article thus adopts the following working definition of empirical possibility: a not-yet-observed phenomenon can be considered possible except when its emergence would violate a necessary condition hypothesis that has been supported, however tentatively and provisionally, by empirical research.

Which necessary condition hypotheses are relevant for the assessment of the possibility of global democracy? I argue that two broad sets of hypotheses are especially important. The first set consists of hypotheses on necessary conditions for democracy.

Since the highest governance level in which democracy has emerged so far is the state (with the possible exception of the European Union), the main source of data on necessary conditions for democracy consists of the pool of national experiences with democratization. If it can be shown that countries experiencing successful transitions to democracy did so only in the presence of certain 'prerequisites', and that these prerequisites are lacking at the international level, now and in the foreseeable future, then this would provide strong reasons to believe that global democracy is impossible.

The second important set of necessary condition hypotheses concerns international structural change. For reasons that will be clarified in the next section, global democracy would require a process of concentration of power capabilities and authority in the international system, i.e. a shift from anarchy to polity. If it can be shown that international systems only ever changed as a result of certain conditions (notably self-help imperatives and competitive power politics), and that these conditions cannot generate a global democratic polity, then this would provide strong reasons to believe that global democracy is impossible.

Both sets of necessary condition hypotheses focus on structural dimensions. This is consistent with an interpretation of structural analysis as an inquiry into the conditions of possibility for social events to occur (Wight, 2006: 279-289). The concluding section will discuss the implications of the findings for the development of a more agent-oriented investigation of pathways to global democracy.

The rest of the article aims at assessing these two sets of necessary conditions hypotheses and is organized as follows. The next section investigates whether any condition can be considered necessary for democratic transitions and concludes that only a certain degree of political centralization qualifies as a genuinely necessary condition for democracy. Section 4 focuses on that condition and assesses whether its emergence at the global level would violate any necessary condition for international systemic change.

3. Necessary conditions for democracy

This section assesses the comparative politics literature in order to identify necessary conditions for democratic transitions. As noted above, if any condition is identified as

necessary in the domestic context, it is useful to ask whether it can be found at the international level. If any necessary condition is identified that is not present and cannot be replicated at the international level, this would provide an argument for the impossibility of global democracy. The section starts by examining whether any *favourable* condition for democracy can also be considered a *necessary* condition in the light of historical experiences, and then considers in greater detail whether transitions to democracy require any of the following conditions that are arguably absent at the global level: the existence of a state; high levels of cultural homogeneity; high levels of economic prosperity; low levels of economic inequality; and a polity of small or moderate size.

3.1. Necessary v. favourable conditions

Most literature on democratization is not concerned primarily with necessary conditions, but with conditions that are positively or negatively associated with democracy and could have a causal role in facilitating or hindering its development and durability. This way of framing the question resonates with the probabilistic character of most theorizing in political science. Indeed, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) started his seminal article on the 'social requisites' of democracy by criticizing the tendency to dismiss hypotheses on the basis of deviant cases that can only disprove arguments of causal necessity, not causality as such. For the purposes of this article, however, it is important to distinguish carefully between those conditions that appear to be positively associated with either the likelihood of democracy or the quality of democracy on the one hand, and those conditions that have to be present for democracy to occur. Only the absence of the latter conditions at the global level would support the conclusion that global democracy is impossible rather than merely unlikely.

Even scholars who emphasise the importance of structure rather than agency in democratization processes usually avoid presenting their preferred conditions as 'necessary'. For instance, the 'crucial' explanatory variable in the influential comparative historical study of Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens (1992) is the relative size and density of the industrial working class, but their case studies reveal several exceptions to the general pattern, notably the 'agrarian democracies' of the early United States, Switzerland, and Norway. Similar

findings emerge also from quantitative studies. Vanhanen (2003), for instance, hypothesises that 'resource distribution' is the key explanatory factor for democratization and applies regression analysis to 170 countries to estimate at which level of resource distribution countries are expected to pass the threshold of democracy. He presents his hypotheses as probabilistic, and despite the strong statistical and substantive significance of his explanatory variable (which appears to account for 70 per cent of variance in democracy), there are several countries with large positive or negative residuals, which contradict the hypothesis. Out of 170 countries, 11 are democracies despite the fact that their level of resource distribution is below the posited transition level (Vanhanen, 2003: 138) - a finding that can be interpreted as ruling out resource distribution as a *necessary* condition of democracy.

A particularly systematic search for necessary conditions is performed by Carsten Q. Schneider and Claudius Wagemann (2006), who examined 32 countries from six world regions that underwent a regime transition between 1974 and 2000. Using a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative method, they assess whether any of the following sociocultural, economic and historical features of the countries constitutes a necessary and/or sufficient condition for democratic *consolidation*: level of economic development, level of education, degree of ethno-linguistic homogeneity, distance to the West, degree of previous democratic experiences and extent of communist past. They conclude that 'there are no necessary preconditions for [the consolidation of democracy]. Instead, some democracies consolidate in unfavourable conditions, while others fail to consolidate in favourable contexts.' (Schneider and Wagemann, 2006).

This brief overview suggests that scholars have been able to identify a number of conditions under which democracy is more likely to thrive, but that the quest for necessary conditions has been less successful – even conditions that some analysts regard as highly favourable fail to qualify as genuinely necessary conditions. However, five arguments deserve closer scrutiny as they have been invoked to question the possibility of global democracy.[9] They are: (a) democracy is possible only in a state; (b) cultural heterogeneity in the world is an insurmountable obstacle to democracy; (c) most of the world is too poor to allow the emergence of democratic institutions; (d) democracy at the global level could not work because of the huge differences in the economic conditions of the world's inhabitants, and (e) the world is too large to allow

the establishment of democratic institutions. These arguments will be considered in turn.

3.2. Stateness

Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996: 17) argue that '[d]emocracy is a form of governance of a modern state. Thus, without a state, no modern democracy is possible'. While this argument comes close to being tautological (democracy appears to be *defined* as an attribute of a state), they also suggest some substantive reasons for the link between statehood and democracy: 'Democracy is a form of governance of life in a polis in which citizens have rights that are guaranteed and protected. To protect the rights of its citizens and to deliver the other basic services that citizens demand, a democratic government needs to be able to exercise effectively its claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of force in the territory.' (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 10-11). In other words, the argument is that democracy requires a 'Weberian' effective monopoly of force to secure citizen's rights and the ability to extract resources to perform this function.

Two issues should be considered in the assessment of this 'no state, no democracy' thesis. First, governments do not necessarily lose their overall democratic character when their control of part of the state territory is challenged by armed groups. The British, Spanish, Turkish, and Indian governments fought against secessionist armed groups during the past thirty years while preserving their broadly democratic institutions. However, democratic processes are usually suspended in the regions where armed conflict is most intense, ands this suggests that either governments succeed in circumscribing the spread of armed resistance or democracy is likely to be brought to an end.

Second, it is not clear that, historically, a monopoly of the legitimate use of force has been a necessary condition for democracy to emerge. The historical experience of the United States is revealing in several ways. Most accounts of democracy in the United States classify the North and West of the country as a restricted democracy from its colonial origins to the 1820s and as a full democracy thereafter, while the South is considered a constitutional oligarchy or restricted democracy until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992: 122). At the same time, some analysts deny

that the United States can be considered a 'state' before the war of 1861-1865. Daniel Deudney argues instead that it constituted a 'Philadelphian System', that is, a distinctive states-union consisting of semi-autonomous republics in which power was more concentrated than it would be in a confederation but less than in a Westphalian state. 'With the armed citizenry institutionalized, the central government of the Union explicitly lacked a monopoly of violence capability and of legitimate violence authority' (Deudney, 2007: 178).

The early United States may thus be an example of 'stateless democracy'. But its low level of stateness may also be considered a reason why democracy remained restricted in parts of the country, before and after the civil war. Francisco E. Gonzalez and Desmond King (2004), for instance, argue that the limited presence of the federal government in the Southern states before the New Deal permitted local violations of the rights of citizenship and undermined democracy.

This example suggests that the impact of various degrees of stateness on democracy seems to depend on a number of circumstances. In any case, we should not conclude that the legal rules produced by a political unit can be enforced *only* when the unit possesses the key attributes of statehood, notably a monopoly of the legitimate use of force and bureaucratic control over a territorial jurisdiction. Michael Zürn and his colleagues (2005) show systematically that the experience of the EU disconfirms the thesis that a central monopoly of force is *necessary* to ensure high levels of compliance with the law.

In conclusion, a certain level of political centralization – a *polity* – can be seen as necessary for the democratization of political life, because democratic rights of participation (input) as well as compliance with democratic decisions (output) need to be secured. The required level falls short of a complete monopoly of the legitimate use of coercion – that is, full *stateness*. But it is higher than the degree of political centralization that exists at the global level today. The question of the conditions under which a global polity can emerge therefore becomes crucial to the problem of whether democracy is possible beyond the state. That question is examined in part 4, after other conditions for democracy are considered in the remainder of part 3.

3.3. Cultural homogeneity

John Stuart Mill famously declared that 'Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist' (Mill, 1991: 428). The most systematic analysis of the relationship between diversity and democracy, however, finds no evidence of a negative impact of the former on the latter. M. Steven Fish and Robin S. Brooks (2004) use a recently complied database to assess the impact of three dimensions of fractionalization (ethnic, linguistic and religious) on democracy in 166 countries. Controlling for other factors such as GDP, neither ethnic nor linguistic nor religious fractionalization has a statistically or substantively significant impact on democracy. They conclude that 'the degree of diversity is not shown to influence democracy's prospects.' (Fish and Brooks, 2004: 160). Nor do they find evidence that fractionalization is statistically related to the presence of democracy in low-income countries.

3.4. Economic prosperity

Lipset's argument that 'the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy' (Lipset, 1959: 75) proved extremely influential in the following decades as part of a broader set of hypotheses known as 'modernization theory'. The link between economic development and democracy is usually conceived as probabilistic rather than in terms of a minimum threshold of wealth being necessary for democratization. Indeed, a 'surprising number of poor and underdeveloped countries exhibit democratic institutions' (Clague et al., 2001: 17). But even the probabilistic conjecture that economic development increases the chances of democratization has been dealt a strong blow by recent research. In their landmark statistical study on data from 1950 to 1990, Przeworski and Limongi (1997) showed that the level of economic development has no effect on democratization.[10] Democracies can emerge at almost any level of per capita income.

In a similar vein and using an index of resource distribution that includes per capita GDP, Vanhanen finds that there is no value of that index below which democratization never occurs, and indeed many countries crossed the threshold of democracy despite extremely low per capita incomes. His conclusion is that '[p]overty as such does not seem to constitute an insurmountable obstacle for democratization' (Vanhanen, 2003: 136). However, it appears that economic development makes democracies endure, once they have been established for other reasons. Przeworski and Limongi's data show that the richer a democracy, the lower the likelihood that it will be replaced by a non-democratic regime. But even current wealth is not decisive: 'If they succeed in generating development, democracies can survive even in the poorest nations.' (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997: 176). These findings suggest that global poverty does not in itself forestall the transition to a democratic global polity, but the perpetuation of poverty would endanger its consolidation.

3.5. Economic inequality

Several scholars have explored the link between economic inequality and political democracy. For instance, Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2004) provides an insightful discussion of the negative impact of inequality on the quality of democracy, while Edward N. Muller (1995) examined the statistical evidence and concluded that income inequality hinders democratization.

For Vanhanen income inequality is one of the components of a more fundamental variable: resource distribution. He maintains that 'democratization takes place under conditions in which power resources have become so widely distributed that no group is any longer able to suppress its competitors or to maintain its hegemony' (Vanhanen, 2003: 29). As noted above, he finds that his 'resource distribution' variable explains 70 per cent of the variation in his index of democracy. However, Vanhanen finds eleven countries that are democracies despite having a resource distribution below what he identifies as the transition level (Vanhanen, 2003: 138), and this finding can be interpreted as ruling out resource distribution as a *necessary* condition of democracy in a country.

The three countries with the world's highest Gini coefficients of inequality are classified as 'free' by Freedom House (Namibia, Lesotho and Botswana). Other

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democratic countries with very high levels of income or consumption inequality are Brazil (Gini of 59.1 in 1998), South Africa (Gini of 59.3 in 1995), and Chile (Gini of 57.1 in 2000) (UNDP 2004: 188-191) This data indicates that the world's most unequal democracies have almost the same level of economic inequality as the world as a whole, which is estimated to have had a Gini coefficient of 64 in 1998 (Milanovic, 2005). In other words, economic inequality may affect negatively the quality of democracy, but having the same degree of inequality that one finds at the global level has not prevented a number of countries from developing and maintaining democratic political institutions.

3.6. Size

Montesquieu famously maintained that 'It is natural for a republic to have only a small territory; otherwise it cannot long subsist.' In the Federalist Papers, James Madison famously retorted that, on the contrary, large republics were more stable because of their superior ability to control the perils of factions. Could size as such represent a barrier to the expansion of democracy at a global scale? The question has two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the problem of the shrinking political influence of each individual citizen as the overall number of citizens in a polity increases. As Dahl and Tufte (1973) argued, democracy requires not only 'citizen effectiveness' but also 'system capacity', i.e. the polity's ability to respond to the collective preferences of its citizens. Hence, a 'rational or reasonable democrat who wished to maximize the chances of attaining certain of his goals might well trade some loss of personal effectiveness for some gain in the capacity of the system to attain them' (Dahl and Tufte, 1973: 23). In some cases, it may be impossible or very costly to prevent decisions made in one independent jurisdiction from affecting the welfare of people in other jurisdictions – the emission of greenhouse gases is a clear example of 'unavoidable' globalization. In such cases, a 'reasonable democrat' may well judge that the overall level of popular control would be higher under a political arrangement where individual citizens have a weak influence on a fairly effective global polity than under a political arrangement where individual citizens have a stronger influence on a relatively powerless national polity. It seems that the gains and losses of democratic control need to be assessed case by case.

The second dimension of the question concerns the ability of democratic institutions, and specifically electoral institutions, to function when the size of the polity becomes very large. If democratic institutions become impossible beyond a certain size, it would make no democratic sense to trade citizen effectiveness for any additional degree of system effectiveness. Several authors have examined the statistical relationship between size and the emergence or survival of democratic institutions. No uniform picture emerges from these studies: the sign, the statistical significance and the magnitude of the relationship all vary depending on how the explanatory and outcome variables are conceptualized and measured, on which control variables are included, and on which countries and years are considered.[11] The most comprehensive statistical analysis to date has been published by Andrew Rose (2006), who used a panel dataset of over 200 countries between 1960 and 2000. In regression models that include 27 control variables that may affect democracy, Rose finds that larger size has a positive and statistically significant effect on democracy as measured by the Polity IV project, a positive and statistically significant effect on political rights as measured by Freedom House, and a positive and (in the instrumental variable model) statistically significant effect on civil liberties as measured by Freedom House. On the other hand, the relationship between size and the Voice and Accountability score from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators is negative, but not statistically significant. These findings cast doubt on the idea that the size of a polity is inversely related to its ability to generate and sustain democratic institutions. *A fortiori*, the evidence does not suggest that a small or moderate polity size is a *necessary* condition for democracy.

3.7. The Indian experience

It could be argued that none of the factors just considered is a necessary condition for democratization, but that the simultaneous lack of *several* of them is an insurmountable obstacle to democratization. India challenges this argument, as it lacks most of the conditions considered thus far, and yet it represents a remarkable example of democratic transition and consolidation.

Atul Kohli (2001: 1) points out that '[t]he success of India's democracy defies many prevailing theories that stipulate preconditions for democracy.' Despite significant advances in recent years, India still has high levels of poverty and low levels of human

development. The Human Development Index for 2006 gives India a rank of 126th out of 177 countries with data. In 2004, nearly forty per cent of all adults (and over half of all women) were illiterate. Twenty per cent of the population is undernourished, i.e. their food intake is chronically insufficient to meet their minimum energy requirements, and nearly half of all children under 5 are underweight. Between 1990 and 2003, one third of the population lived with less than $1 a day and eighty percent with less than $2. Nearly thirty per cent lived below the official poverty line determined by the Indian authorities (HDR 2006). While the level of economic inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) is not significantly higher than in most rich democracies, social equality is severely constrained by the caste system, which has a strong impact on life chances, especially in rural areas (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998) .

Not only India's size (nearly 1.2 billion citizens, over 700 million eligible voters with almost 60 per cent turnout in the general elections of 2009), but also its degree of cultural heterogeneity is considerable. For Arend Lijphart '[t]here can be little doubt that among the world's democracies, India is the most extreme plural society' (Lijphart, 2007: 24). Linz and his colleagues also describe India as 'the world's most diverse democracy' (Linz et al., 2007: 71). One prominent dimension of this diversity is language pluralism. According to the 1991 Census, the main language of about 40 per cent of India's population is Hindi, while eleven more languages have between 13 and 70 million speakers each. Ten more languages are spoken by more than one million people, while the total number of separate languages captured by the Census is 114, a figure obtained by rationalizing and classifying over 10,000 'mother tongues' declared by Census respondents. Nearly twenty per cent of Indians were bilingual in 1991 (up from 9.7 per cent in 1961) and around seven per cent were trilingual (Office of the Registrar General, 2002).

The Indian experience is particularly significant because it helps assess arguments about the interaction of potential necessary conditions. For instance, it could be argued that, despite the findings reported in section 3.3, cultural homogeneity may be a necessary condition for democracy when the average citizen is poor; or that, despite the findings reported in section 3.4 economic prosperity may be a necessary condition for democracy when the polity is large. Indian democracy contradicts all these hypotheses, as it emerged and survived in the context of high levels of cultural

heterogeneity, low per capita incomes, high levels of inequality, and huge population sizes.

4. Necessary conditions for polity formation

The previous section examined a range of necessary conditions hypotheses on the emergence of democracy. In most cases, it found that either the conditions were not genuinely necessary to democracy, or that they were already present at the global level. Specifically, it found that a polity does not need to be culturally homogeneous, wealthy, and economically egalitarian in order to develop democratic institutions. In comparison with the other potentially necessary conditions considered in section 3, the discussion of *stateness* was less conclusive. A certain degree of concentration of political power is logically implied by the notion of democracy: democracy is not only about *demos* but also about *kratos*. As argued in section 3.2., an additional amount of power concentration may be empirically necessary to democracy: without it, citizens may be left at the mercy of private power-holders and unable to exercise in practice their formal rights of equal citizenship. What is less clear is whether the necessary level of power concentration amounts to a full monopoly of the legitimate use of force - in other words, full stateness. The examples of the early United States and the European Union mentioned in section 3.2 suggest that this monopoly is not necessary for ensuring compliance with political decisions and protecting citizen rights. For this reason, I refer to the institutional infrastructure of global democracy by using the more general term 'polity' rather than the more specific term 'state'. This global polity must have a degree of power concentration that is sufficient to ensure the monitoring and active promotion of (1) effective chains of representation, delegation and accountability that link the polity with the citizens in all regions of the world, and (2) local compliance with the decisions taken democratically at the global level. In other words, the polity must fulfil certain requirements relating to the 'input' side as well as the 'output' side of the political process.

The level of political centralization required to perform those functions effectively is significantly higher than what we find today in the global system taken as

a whole. The remainder of this article addresses the argument that such a level of political centralization cannot emerge in the international system. More specifically, it considers whether world politics can be transformed in ways that do not conform to the alleged imperatives of self-help under anarchy.

The argument proceeds in two steps. First, I point out that world politics is characterized by a variety of structural and institutional forms rather than a constant and immutable state of anarchy. Second, I argue that changes from one form to another are not propelled exclusively by the logics of aggression and self-help in a threatening security environment. This argument casts doubt on the proposition that systemic changes *necessarily* preserve interstate anarchy as self-help, which is one of the crucial points made by IR scholars working within the Realist tradition (see for instance the statements quoted in the introduction).

Within the broad constraints indicated above, a global democratic polity could be located at various points on a continuum from anarchy to stateness. Even Kenneth Waltz, whose theory is based on the distinction between anarchy and hierarchy as types of structure, acknowledged that in reality '[a]ll societies are mixed' (Waltz, 1979: 116). Other authors have identified a large number of theoretically conceivable and empirically existing political orders between the polar opposites of anarchy and unitary statehood. For instance, Jack Donnelly (2006: 154) presents ten systems of 'hierarchy in anarchy': balance of power, protection, concert, collective security, hegemony, dominion, empire, pluralistic security community, common security community and amalgamated security community.

Sceptics may concede that a variety of polities between the extremes of anarchy and stateness are empirically possible, but still rule out that any polity encompassing the globe could have democratic attributes. The Realist interpretation of world politics provides reasons why any emerging global polity would not be democratic. In the words of one of its foremost theorists, according to the Realist school of thought 'a state is compelled within the anarchic and competitive conditions of international relations to expand its power and attempt to extend its control over the international system. If the state fails to make this attempt, it risks the possibility that other states will increase their relative power positions and will thereby place its existence or vital interests in jeopardy.' (Gilpin, 1981: 86-87).

Waltz has stressed the constraining role of anarchic structures, which promote balance-of-power behaviour through socialization (emulation of the most successful practices) and competition (elimination of units that do not respond to structural incentives) (Waltz, 1979: 74). For Neorealist theory, the reproduction of balance-of-power behaviour is not driven primarily by the rationality of decision-makers, but principally by 'the process of selection that takes place in competitive systems' (Waltz, 1986: 330). States that fail to conform to structural imperatives will eventually 'fall by the wayside' and the behaviour of all units will converge towards *Realpolitik* methods (Waltz, 1979: 117-8).

If this interpretation is correct, we should expect that any shift from anarchy to polity can occur *only* as a result of either (1) the conquest or subjugation of one polity by another or (2) the voluntary unification of two or more polities to forestall conquest or subjugation by a powerful third party. The first path could in principle lead to a global polity, but its form of governance would be imperial rather than democratic.[12] The second path could produce a democratic polity, but this polity could never encompass the whole world because there would be no threatening third party left to trigger unification. Moreover, this new polity would find itself in a state of anarchy vis-à-vis other states and be compelled to 'play the game of power politics' in order to survive. In short, for Realism there is no path leading to a global democratic polity.

However, in reality shifts along the anarchy-polity continuum do not occur *exclusively* as a result of self-help imperatives and competitive power politics, although these are certainly important factors in many circumstances. Shifts can also result from political agency propelled by interests that are defined in economic or normative ways. Theoretical as well as empirical considerations point at the inadequacy of a strictly Realist-structural interpretation of international change.

Examining theoretical issues first, three of them are particularly relevant. First, various scholars have criticized the idea of a necessary relationship between anarchical structure and competitive behaviour. They have argued that the absence of a supra-ordinate authority is compatible with a variety of patterns of interaction among independent states. This theme has been developed extensively by the English school (e.g. Bull, 1977; Buzan, 2004). Wendt (1999) developed a particularly influential version of the argument that 'anarchy is what states make of it', which maintains that

the character of interstate relations is determined by the beliefs and expectations that states have about each other. In this interpretation, the effect of material power structures is crucially mediated by the social structure of the system, which can take three forms – Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian – depending on what kind of roles are predominant in the system: enemy, rival or friend.

Second, Constructivists maintain that '[a]ny given international system does not exist because of immutable structures, but rather the very structures are dependent for their reproduction on the practices of the actors. Fundamental change of the international system occurs when actors, through their practices, change the rules and norms constitutive of international interaction' (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994: 216). Wendt stresses that social structures may be more difficult to change than material structures but, crucially, transformations of the character of international life can occur through processes that are not derivative from shifting balances of material power. 'Although there is no 1:1 correspondence between positions in the idealism-materialism debate and beliefs about the ease of social change, showing that seemingly material conditions are actually a function of how actors think about them opens up possibilities for intervention that would otherwise be obscured.' (Wendt, 1999: 371). In his discussion of mechanisms of change, Wendt argues that natural selection and competition for scarce resources have lost most of their explanatory power since the advent of the Westphalian system in the seventeenth century, and that imitation and especially social learning have become the main drivers of structural change in modern international relations. Realists disagree on the obsolescence of competitive selection, but the crucial point for the purposes of this article is that the Realist account of structural change faces powerful theoretical competitors.

Third, social processes may alter not only the culture of anarchy but the fact of anarchy itself. Both Waltz (1979: 126) and Wendt (1999: 235) regard 'survival' as an intrinsic interest of states. However, this interest cannot be taken for granted, especially if forms of suprastate political organization are conceptualized as a continuum rather than a dichotomy between undiluted sovereignty and subjugation to an external authority (Paul, 1999; Koenig-Archibugi, 2004a). Corporate identities can and should be endogenized (Cederman and Daase, 2003).

The extensive debate generated by the English School and Constructivist challenges to the Realist interpretation of international change and stability cannot be assessed here. What is of central importance for the question addressed in this article is that English school theory and Constructivism have provided solid ground for the *theoretical possibility* of fundamental transformations driven by processes that are different from competition for material supremacy and survival. The rest of this section aims to show that shifts along the anarchy-polity continuum pushed by economic and normative factors are also an *empirical possibility* by mentioning two examples. The first one is the dissolution of colonial empires after World War II, which can be described as a shift *towards* anarchy. The second one is European integration, which is a shift *away* from anarchy. Neither can be considered as the outcome of self-help behaviour under anarchy.

Approximately a third of the world's population lived under colonial rule in 1939. Barely forty years later, colonial rule extended only over a few small and scattered territories. For K. J. Holsti (2004: 274) the obsolescence of colonialism as an institution 'ranks as one of the most important processes in international politics during the twentieth century, with consequences that are in many ways more significant than those of globalization or the declining significance of territoriality'.

Post-WWII decolonization was a massive process of polity disaggregation that cannot be explained merely with reference to the logic of power competition in a self-help system. Many colonies gained independence consensually, on the basis of negotiated settlements, rather than as a result of military defeat. Diehl and Goertz (1991) examined 121 cases of national independence between 1816 and 1980 and found that only 23 cases (about 20 per cent) were preceded or accompanied by fighting between indigenous and imperial military forces, and moreover that such fighting was comparatively rare after 1950. Goldsmith and He (2008) examined every state that achieved independence between 1900 and 1994 and its relationship with its (former) colonial power during the seven years before and seven years after independence, and found that war between imperial and indigenous military forces occurred in less than four per cent of those years. This suggests that, despite the importance of armed conflicts in a number of colonial dependencies, overall they cannot be considered a *necessary* condition for the end of colonial rule. It could be argued that the mere

expectation of war and defeat at the hand of national liberation armies may have triggered peaceful decolonization. But in fact many historians of decolonization reject explanations that attribute a decisive role to shifting balances of *military* and *material* power between imperial centres and peripheries with regard to most areas.[13]. Nor do they regard the military decline of the imperial powers in comparison to the United States and the Soviet Union as a necessary or sufficient condition for decolonization.[14] The end of the European overseas empires was the result of the conjunction of several causes, whose relative importance and interplay in each case depended on a variety of circumstances (Holsti, 2004: 263-274; Darwin, 1991). But in general an important role was played by shifting balances of *ideational* power, and specifically by the decline of the legitimacy of colonialism as an institution, which in turn was related to the transnational diffusion and influence of ideas about national self-determination and racial equality.[15]

If decolonization – 'the greatest explosion of state creation in world history' (Holsti, 2004: 273) – can be considered a shift away from polity and towards anarchy, European integration is a movement in the opposite direction. The scholarly debate on the driving forces of European integration is intense and far from resolved. What is relevant here is whether the Realist understanding of the necessary conditions for polity formation can account for this process. The desire to pool resources to face the Soviet threat may have played a role in promoting the early steps of integration, and geo-economic competition against the USA and Japan may have played a similar role in later stages. But many initiatives that resulted in further political integration cannot be understood simply as means to strengthen EU member states in their competition for power and survival within an anarchical global system. Instead of trying to summarize the many decisions on institutions and policies that produced the European Union in its present form, I will consider only one set of decisions that increased substantially the 'polity' nature of the EU: the delegation of significant legislative, budgetary and supervision powers from the member states to a supranational body directly elected by European citizens.

Since its birth as Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, the European Parliament has evolved from a 'talking-shop' to a key participant in the political process of the world's most integrated supranational

organization. As a result of formal agreements among member states and parliamentary practices, 'it is not unreasonable to say that the European Parliament is one of the most powerful legislative chambers in the world' (Hix et al., 2007: 21). The increase of the EP's role was not a result of global anarchy. While in some cases the parliamentarization of the European Union has increased the efficiency of the decision-making process in the EU (and thus may have indirectly contributed to the EU's global competitiveness), in other cases efficiency has been reduced (Rittberger, 2005: 21).

The willingness of governments to delegate substantial powers to a body whose preferences and decisions they cannot control is best explained by concerns about the democratic legitimacy of the EU. Political elites were aware that pooling decision-making power at the European level involved a reduction in the control exercised by national parliaments. While this may have been welcome in some cases (Koenig-Archibugi, 2004b), the trend towards de-parliamentarization raised concerns that the gains produced by European integration would come at the expense of the procedural requirements of parliamentary democracy. Berthold Rittberger shows that the decision to create and empower a parliamentary institution in the European Community resulted from the perception that there was a democratic legitimacy deficit that could and should be alleviated (Rittberger, 2005: 204).

Twentieth-century decolonization and the parliamentarization of the European Union are undoubtedly two very different processes, but both lend support to two key propositions. First, shifts along the anarchy-polity continuum are conceptually and empirically possible. Second, such shifts are not necessarily propelled by the imperatives of competitive self-help within wider anarchical structures and are not necessarily functional to reproducing those anarchical structures. They can be produced by normative commitments as well as a variety of economic and security interests that are not necessarily competitive. The theory and practice of international politics offers no compelling reason to rule out changes in the direction of a global democratic polity.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that what we know about the democratization of states and the conditions of polity formation at the international level does not lend support to the

claim that global democracy is impossible. While the emergence of democracy within countries is a difficult and in many ways a historically unlikely process, attempts at identifying universally valid necessary conditions for democratic transitions have been less than successful. Multiple paths to democracy exist, and recognizing that some circumstances are much more favourable to democratization than others is different from positing strict preconditions. While a certain level of political centralization – the existence of a polity – seems logically and empirically necessary for democracy, a complete centralization of the means of coercion is not. Furthermore, the findings of international relations scholarship disconfirm the Realist view that shifts along the continuum from anarchy to polity are possible only as a result of the threat or exercise of violence. Anarchy does not invariably punish with subjugation those states that aim at voluntary integration with other states. These results put into question the claim that polities can be either global or democratic, but not both.

These conclusions concern historical possibility and nothing in this article should be interpreted as suggesting that the emergence of global democracy is likely in the near or distant future, if compared with other scenarios for future world order. Some authors have argued that a world state is likely or even 'inevitable', albeit in a long-term perspective (Wendt, 2003; Carneiro, 2004). The argument made here differs fundamentally from such forecasts, since it is compatible with the view that the transition to global democracy is a very unlikely event.

On the other hand, some of the findings discussed in this article could also suggest that the likelihood of global democracy may be substantially higher than zero even under present conditions – for instance, the finding that there is no significant correlation between a state's chance to democratize and its level of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, or its per capita income; or the finding that larger countries appear more likely to have democratic institutions than smaller ones; or the fact that a concern about the democratic deficit of EU governance explains at least in part why European states shared decision-making powers not only among themselves but also with a supranational parliamentary institution over which they retained no control. Statistical 'out-of-sample' estimation techniques may even allow us to perform a daring thought-experiment: *if* the world were a country, how likely would it be to experience a transition to democracy, given its level of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, its

level of economic prosperity and economic inequality, the size of its population, and other variables of interest?

The results of such an exercise may be intriguing, but perhaps the best lesson to be drawn from the difficulty of finding any strictly necessary non-trivial preconditions for democratic development may be that, in assessing the prospects for global democracy, the analysis of structures can only go so far. As noted in section 2, this article has focused on (domestic and international) structures because they provide insights on the conditions of possibility for social events to occur (Wight, 2006: 279-289). However, any account of how global democracy *might* come about would need to explore potential combinations of structures and *agency*. In the study of democratic transitions within countries, approaches that emphasise the role of agency have allowed researchers to understand dynamics and outcomes that were puzzling from a structure-oriented perspective (e.g., Mahoney and Snyder, 1999); and agency-oriented analyses of strategic and communicative action by political entrepreneurs revealed that they can modify important features of global politics (e.g., Evangelista, 1999; Crawford 2002; Legro, 2005). Combining creatively the insights of these areas of scholarship, and thinking systematically about different *pathways* to global democracy, may be the best way in which empirical political science can contribute to intellectual and political debates on a more inclusive and just world order.

In response to assertions about the presumed inevitability of globalization, Robert Dahl (1999: 34) commented that 'The last three centuries are a graveyard packed with the corpses of "inevitable" developments'. Claims that all paths to global democracy are blocked by the lack of inevitable 'prerequisites' should be approached with the same sceptical outlook, since world politics is clearly capable of surprising even the most disenchanted observers. [16]

[1] Useful overviews are provided by Suganami (1989) and McGrew (2002).

[2] As Kenneth Waltz (1993: 64) put it: 'Countries have always competed for wealth and security, and the competition has often led to conflict. Why should the future be different from the past?'

[3] For a more thorough examination of the implications of various models of global democracy see for instance Suganami (1989), Bienen et al. (1998), McGrew (2002), Patomaki and Teivainen (2004), Marchetti (2008b), Archibugi (2008), Macdonald (2008).

[4] On different, non-territorial possibilities see for instance Saward (2000), Patomäki (2003), Macdonald and Macdonald (2006), Scholte (2008), and Macdonald (2008).

[5] Several themes discussed in this article loosely correspond to different strands of criticisms of cosmopolitan democracy, which have been reviewed by Archibugi (2004). Specifically, section 3.3 on cultural homogeneity addresses some of the points raised by those whom Archibugi calls 'Communitarian' critics, section 4 on international structural change addresses some of the points raised by those he describes as 'Realist' critics, and section 3.4 on economic inequality addresses an important aspect of the position of those he calls 'Marxist' critics. See also McGrew (2002).

[6] See, amongst others, Falk (1975), Bull (1977), Held (1995), Linklater (1998); Miller (2000), Franceschet (2000), Archibugi (2004, 2008), Brown (2005), Christiano (2006), Marchetti (2008a,b).

[7] See for instance Held et al. (1999), Zürn (2000), Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2000), McGrew (2002), Patomäki (2003), Patomäki and Teivainen (2004), Nanz and Steffek (2004), Macdonald and Macdonald (2006), Deudney (2007), Scholte (2008), Archibugi (2008).

[8] Arguments for and against social laws are discussed by Kincaid (1996: 58-100).

[9] For instance Doyle (2000: 93), Nye (2002), Keohane (2003: 137).

[10] Their conclusions are criticized by Boix and Stokes (2003) but supported by Acemoglu et al. (2008), who use data from the past 100 years and the past 500 years.

[11] For instance Dahl and Tufte (1973), Clague et al. (2001), Siaroff (2005: 127-137), Rose (2006).

[12] Realism 'does not believe that the condition of anarchy can be transcended except through a universal imperium' (Gilpin, 1981: 226). However, such a universal imperium could develop democratic institutions over time.

[13] See for instance Holland (1985: 1, 191, 293, 300), Darwin (1988: 331; 1991: 104), Heinlein (2002: 303), Shipway (2008: 14, 146-147, 161, 167-168, 194).

[14] See for instance Darwin (1988: 21, 331; 1991: 58-61), Betts (2004: 36-37).

[15] Among the social scientists who have elaborated on this theme are Strang (1990), Diehl and Goertz (1991), Jackson (1993), Philpott (2001), Crawford (2002). For historians' views see for instance Holland (1985: 191), Darwin (1988: 16, 332-333; 1991: 20-21, 73, 79, 108-110), Heinlein (2002: 307-308).

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