

Is global democracy possible?

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Abstract - Skepticism 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 paper reviews 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.

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1. Introduction¹

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”, 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.² 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

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²Useful overviews are provided by Suganami (1989) and McGrew (2002).

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, commenting 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 optimism 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 as well as experts of democracy and democratization. On the IR side, Robert Keohane remarked that, “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). Randall Schweller branded the new wave of cosmopolitan thought 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). On the side of democracy studies, one of its foremost scholars, Robert Dahl, argued that international organization may perform useful functions, but because of a fundamental trade-off between citizen participation and scale of government “we should openly recognize that international decision-making will not be democratic” (Dahl 1999: 23). In sum, leading international relations and comparative politics scholars seem to agree that global democracy is impossible.

One possible response to this skepticism is to adopt a “voluntarist” stance, whose spirit is well expressed by what Edvard Hambro said when he was president of the United Nations General Assembly: “We ought not to be satisfied when people tell us that politics is the art of the possible. Politics should be the art to make possible tomorrow what seems impossible today” (cited by Kuper 2004, 45). It may be argued that if the Founders of the United States had simply accepted what Dahl calls the “standard view” until the eighteenth century, namely that “representative democracy was a contradiction in terms” (Dahl 1998: 94), they would have refrained from designing novel

types of political institutions intended to combine mechanisms of political representation and (substantially qualified) political/electoral equality. But instead they envisaged a *novus ordo seclorum* and thus decisively shaped political development in America and in the world.

While this is a legitimate response to skepticism, this paper takes a different route: it critically assesses the theoretical and empirical foundations of the impossibility arguments. The observation that something (such as representative democracy or global democracy) has never happened is not sufficient to prove that it could not happen. Additional arguments are required to support such a claim. This paper spells out these arguments in relation to global democracy and reviews relevant findings from two sub-disciplines of political studies: international relations and comparative politics. It proceeds in two steps. First, it reviews the literature on democratization in order to establish which (if any) conditions can be considered necessary for democratic transitions on the basis of historical and comparative evidence.³ Second, it singles out one of those conditions – a degree of political centralization – and reviews the international relations literature to determine whether the emergence of a democratic global polity would violate inescapable constraints on international systemic change.

Defining democracy is very contentious even in relation to existing states, but a working definition of “global democracy” is necessary to proceed. Most generally, democracy can be understood procedurally, as “a method of determining the content of laws (and other legally binding decisions) such that the preferences of the citizens have some formal connection with the outcome in which each counts equally” (Barry 1979: 156-157). This paper focuses on the

³ The argument builds on themes presented by Zürn (2000), McGrew (2002) and Archibugi (2008). Michael Zürn critically examines the argument that transnational democracy is impossible because there is no transnational demos. He disaggregates the idea of the demos into five components and suggests that three of those components – the mutual acceptance of rights, mutual trust, and public spirit, i.e. a form of collective identity able to sustain public deliberation – are already present in the OECD world, at least to some extent. Zürn notes that the other two components – broader public discourse and solidarity – are less developed at the transnational level, even in the OECD. However, he suggests that the weakness of public discourse is due to infrastructural problems (lack of a shared language, media and parties) rather than to the lack of cultural homogeneity per se, and that “[e]ven if there is no strong sense of collective identity in terms of solidarity and willingness to make sacrifices, this does not mean that the social prerequisites for democracy are completely lacking.” (Zürn 2000: 200). This paper considers existing democratic states to ascertain whether any facilitative background condition should be regarded as an essential “prerequisite”.

institutional/procedural dimensions of democracy because, while advocates of democracy tend to support it for a variety of different reasons, there is reasonably broad agreement on a set of institutional requirements for political governance to be considered democratic. The agreement is closer to a “constitutional consensus” than an “overlapping consensus”, as these terms have been defined by Rawls (1996). The existence of democratic political institutions is often seen as a necessary, although not always sufficient, condition for the promotion of political equality and a range of substantive values.⁴ Moreover, even “minimalist” or “electoral” democracy may be defensible in itself if the alternative is the violent resolution of conflicts (Przeworski 1999).

In this paper, “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 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 (5) allow the supranational bodies to take decisions in accordance with a variety of decision rules, but exclude veto rights for small minorities unless 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.

⁴ “Promotion” rather than “realization” since, as Dahl (1998) and many others have argued, no existing democratic polity fulfills the stringent requirements of ideal democracy.

⁵ A balance between those competing principles would presumably be achieved through the solution commonly adopted in federal states and the European Union: changes to the status quo require majorities in separate decision-making bodies, which favour the equal representation of citizens and of territorial units respectively (for instance, for the purpose of electing United States Senators, one voter in Wyoming has the same weight as 55 voters in California).

This definition is deliberately vague – essentially democracy as constitutional, representative and inclusive decision-making *institutions*⁶ – because the arguments developed in this paper are meant to apply to a wide range of world order proposals, which may rely on more communitarian or on more cosmopolitan principles (see the analysis of Bienen et al. 1998). 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.⁷ Federalist models stress the direct and equal representation of citizens in global bodies, the centralization of the means of coercion, and the supremacy of federal law over state law. Confederal models stress the gate-keeping role of governments between citizens and global institutions, the dispersion of military and coercive capabilities, and the ability of individual member states to block any undesired collective decision. The argument of this paper is particularly relevant for an intermediate model that is known as “cosmopolitan democracy” (e.g. Archibugi and Held 1995; Held 1995; Archibugi 2008).

Readers who feel that the institutional prescriptions of cosmopolitan democracy are not specific enough can think of the European Union (EU) instead. Despite numerous controversies on its democratic quality (e.g. Moravcsik 2005, Føllesdal and Hix 2006), the EU qualifies as transnational democracy in the limited sense outlined above. In the EU policies are made by decision-makers that represent all European citizens either directly (members of the European Parliament) or indirectly and with some weight attached to relative population sizes (members of the Council of Ministers). The members of the European Commission are selected by the governments and are to some extent accountable to the European Parliament, while an independent Court of Justice solves conflicts fairly effectively. For the sake of simplicity, I assume that a global polity with institutions modeled along the lines of the EU would qualify as sufficiently democratic for the limited purposes of this paper.

It is important to stress what this paper *does not* aim to do. First, it does not consider whether global democracy (or specific forms of it) would be desirable, if considered in light of the interests of specific states and groups or in light of

⁶ The emphasis on formal decision-making institutions excludes “transnational discursive democracy” (Dryzek 2006) as a form of global democracy as defined here. More ambiguously, it would exclude asymmetrical institutional structures in which a set of citizens holds power-holders accountable on behalf of a distinct set of citizens, for instance consumers imposing sanctions on companies on behalf of workers in global supply chains (Macdonald and Macdonald 2006).

⁷ On different, non-territorial possibilities see for instance Saward (2000), Kuper (2004) and Scholte (2008).

impartial principles of justice.⁸ Second, it does not explore the implications of various institutional forms that global democracy might take.⁹ Third, it does not try to estimate the likelihood that global democracy may be established in any particular time frame, for instance by weighing the social and political forces that may promote it against the forces that would oppose it.¹⁰

Addressing these issues is crucial, and fortunately they are for the most part subject to lively and constructive debates. But progress in the understanding of global democracy is hindered by a divide between two groups of scholars and practitioners: on the one hand, those for whom the possibility of democratizing global politics is an established fact, and hence prefer to develop normatively compelling arguments for or against it and/or explore strategies for social change; on the other hand, those who refuse to engage in normative and strategic arguments about global democracy in the belief that they are futile. Clarifying the question of possibility seems a pre-condition for further constructive debate between those groups, which could potentially lead either to a reorientation of normative and strategic priorities (if the skeptical position turns out to be more persuasive), or to a more inclusive debate about the desirability of various forms of global democracy and about possible trajectories for social change (if the skeptical position loses adherents). This paper contributes to this ground-clearing task by reconstructing various reasons for skepticism and by comparing them with the current state of relevant knowledge in relevant areas of political studies.¹¹

⁸ On desirability see amongst others Falk (1975), Bull (1977), Held (1995), Linklater (1998); Miller (2000), Archibugi (2003, 2008), Gould (2004), Kuper (2004), Christiano (2006); Marchetti (2008).

⁹ On models of global democracy see amongst others Suganami (1989), Bienen et al. (1998), Galtung (2000), McGrew (2002), Patomäki and Teivainen (2004), Kuper (2004), Marchetti (2008), Archibugi (2008).

¹⁰ See Held et al. (1999), Zürn (2000), Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2000), McGrew (2002), Devezasa and Modelski (2003), Patomäki and Teivainen (2004), Payne and Samhat (2004), Wendt (2004), Scholte (2005), Furia (2005), Deudney (2007), Norris (2008); Archibugi (2008).

¹¹ Clearly the assessment of impossibility arguments is not purely of academic interest. For example, a representative sample of the participants in the 2005 World Social Forum was asked whether it was a good or bad idea to have a democratic world government. For 32 per cent it was a bad idea, for 39 per cent it was a good idea but not plausible, and 29 per cent responded that it is a good idea and plausible (Chase-Dunn et al. 2008). This suggests that currently a majority of WSF participants would oppose proposals for a campaign for democratic world government, but also that it might gather majority support if the sympathetic but skeptical participants came to change their views on its feasibility. More generally, individuals and organizations

2. Necessary conditions for democracy

This part examines whether any *favorable* condition for democracy can also be considered a *necessary* condition in the light of the historical experience, and considers in more 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.

2.1. Necessary v. favorable conditions

Skepticism about the possibility of global democracy can be based on the belief that countries experiencing successful transitions to democracy did so because of the presence of certain prerequisites, and that these prerequisites are lacking at the international level, now and in the foreseeable future. The comparison between democratic and non-democratic countries is thought to provide insights into the possibility of democratizing global politics. In other words, not only optimists but also skeptics about global democracy may rely, implicitly or explicitly, on a “domestic analogy”, which in its broader definition is “presumptive reasoning [...] about international relations based on the assumption that since domestic and international phenomena are similar in a number of respects, a given proposition which holds true domestically, but whose validity is as yet uncertain internationally, will also hold true internationally” (Suganami 1989: 24). The “necessary conditions for democracy” arguments against global democracy are based on a diagnostic (as opposed to prescriptive) use of the domestic analogy, for they draw on what is known about the successful democratization of states to rule out the possibility of democratization at the global level.¹²

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the validity of this domestic analogy.¹³ It is sufficient that it is plausible enough to warrant an examination

convinced of the desirability of global democracy may decide to dedicate time and resources in promoting it even if the chances of success are limited, as long as they are not close to nil. Similarly, opponents of global democracy may decide to mobilize against it if they perceive it to be a real possibility.

¹² See Suganami (1989: 136) for the distinction between the diagnostic and the prescriptive use of the domestic analogy.

¹³ The domestic analogy could be expressed “*If x is necessary for domestic democracy, then x is necessary for global democracy*” (to which skeptics add “x is absent at the

of its premises. Despite their numerous differences, both international systems and domestic political systems consist of a multitude of collective actors who engage in a variety of modes of interaction – from coercion and competition to negotiation and cooperation – on the basis of complex power relations, conflicting and compatible interests, and norms of appropriate behaviour. A rigid analytical separation is therefore unwarranted (Milner 1991). As those interactions can be considered more or less democratic within the context of individual states, it is legitimate to apply similar criteria to analyze political structures beyond that level (Moravcsik 2005). By extension, the question “under what conditions can a political system be democratized?” can be legitimately asked with regard to international as well as intra-national interactions.

This section accepts that insights garnered from the study of domestic political processes may be relevant to arguments about potential international processes, but it questions the skeptical conclusions that are sometimes said to follow. It reviews the comparative politics literature in order to identify necessary conditions for democratic transitions. 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 a strong argument for the impossibility of global democracy.

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 paper 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 paper, 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

global level”). This paper scrutinizes the “*if*”, not the “*then*”. However, below I consider the relevance of precisely those factors that are most commonly said to set apart international from domestic politics (notably the lack of political centralization, extreme cultural diversity and the gap in living standards) for the prospects of democratization.

support the conclusion that global democracy is impossible rather than merely unlikely.

The distinction between necessary and favorable conditions intersects with a central axis in recent academic debates about democratic transitions and consolidation: the distinction between those accounts that focus on structural “background” conditions and those that focus on political actors and strategies. The forerunner of the “structuralist” approach was Lipset himself, whose conjectures on economic development as requisite of democratization had a decisive impact on subsequent scholarship. The agency-oriented or voluntarist approach was propelled by Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter’s (1986) path-breaking volumes on “transitions from authoritarian rule”. The debate shows little sign of abating. A scholar who emphasizes structural factors has recently lamented that for actor-oriented scholars “democratization is ultimately a matter of political crafting. It seems that democracy can be crafted and promoted in all sorts of places, even in culturally and structurally unfavorable circumstances.” (Doorenspleet 2004: 301). On the other side, Larry Diamond has insisted that, “[c]learly, most states can become democratic, because most states already are. Moreover—and this is perhaps the most stunning and unexpected aspect of the third wave of democratization—the overwhelming bulk of the states that have become democratic during the third wave have remained so, even in countries lacking virtually all of the supposed ‘conditions’ for democracy.” (Diamond 2003: 5). The existence of many democracies among the world’s least developed countries is said to be “profoundly in defiance of established social science theories.” (Diamond 2003: 7).

Even structuralist scholars 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 as the “agrarian democracies” of the early United States, Switzerland, and Norway. These types of findings emerge also from quantitative studies such as those of Tatu Vanhanen. Vanhanen (2003) 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 having a resource distribution 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.

Two prominent democracy theorists who have considered the issue of necessary conditions are Samuel Huntington and Robert Dahl. Huntington maintains that “[n]o single factor is necessary to the development of democracy in all countries.” (Huntington 1991, 38). In contrast, Robert Dahl emphasizes three “essential conditions” for democracy and two “favorable conditions”. The essential conditions are the control of military and police by elected officials, democratic beliefs and political culture, and no foreign control hostile to democracy. The two conditions favorable to democracy are a modern market economy and society and weak subcultural pluralism (Dahl 1998: 147).

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 unfavorable conditions, while others fail to consolidate in favourable contexts.” (Schneider and Wagemann 2006).

If structuralist-minded scholars have not been very successful in identifying necessary conditions for democracy, finding such conditions has been even more difficult for scholars using an agency-oriented approach. Barbara Geddes (1999) notes that the initially proposed generalization that divisions within the authoritarian regime were an essential condition of transitions was disproved by later developments in the Soviet bloc. Conversely, popular mobilization was unimportant as a cause of democratization in early studies focusing on Latin America, but then appeared to be crucial in Eastern Europe. Studies of Latin America and Europe stressed the importance of pacts among elites, but there is little evidence of pacts in African cases of democratization. Geddes (1999: 119) points out that “[v]irtually every suggested generalization to arise from this literature [...] has been challenged.”

Five arguments deserve closer scrutiny as they have been invoked to deny the possibility of global democracy.¹⁴ 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.

2.2. 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.¹⁵

Guillermo O’Donnell (1993: 1361) presents a somewhat milder version of the same argument, noting that a state without the capacity to enforce its laws can at most support a “democracy of low-intensity citizenship”, which denies the rights of poor and otherwise deprived citizens. The monopoly of violence and an administrative infrastructure is necessary to restrict the capacity of subgroups (local power-holders or secessionist groups) to ignore and challenge the decisions taken by democratic institutions.

If the “no state, no democracy” principle is interpreted probabilistically as holding that “processes of regime change that lead to state decay or state collapse reduce the prospects of democracy” (Munck 2001: 3426), it is certainly plausible in the light of the historical experience. But four issues should be considered. First, governments do not necessarily lose their overall democratic character when their control of part of the state territory is challenged by armed

¹⁴ For instance Doyle 2000: 93, Nye 2002, Keohane 2003: 137. See also Offe 2002.

¹⁵ For similar arguments see Rueschemeyer et al. (1992: 67), Bunce (2000), Plattner (2004), and Rose and Shin (2001).

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 clearly possible only when the conflict is territorially localized and its intensity is limited.

Second, “too much” state can hinder democratization, as it strengthens the coercive apparatus of the military, the police and centralized bureaucracies at the expense of civil society and societal pluralism. The question is therefore whether, in addition to a maximum threshold of stateness beyond which democracy becomes impossible, there is also a minimum threshold of stateness below which democracy cannot emerge, for instance because individuals are left with no protection against private power-wielders. 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 restricted democracy from its colonial origins to the 1820s and as 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). Moreover, policing and criminal law enforcement were almost completely in the hands of the states until the twentieth century.

The early United States may thus be an example of “stateless democracy”. It could be argued that this country was a comparatively early starter in the process of democratization precisely because of its very low level of stateness. But on the other hand the low level of stateness can 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.

The impact of various degrees of stateness on democracy seems to depend on a number of circumstances. In any case, it would be going too far to maintain 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. The most notable example of this disjunction is the European Union. For instance, J. H. H. Weiler (2003: 10) interprets the EU as a combination of a 'confederal' institutional arrangement and a 'federal' legal arrangement. On the one hand, EU law is accepted as having direct effect in the jurisdictions of member states and supremacy over national law, without significant problems of compliance. On the other hand, EU institutions lack both the means of coercion and the bureaucratic apparatus to enforce EU law. "There is a hierarchy of norms: Community norms trump conflicting Member State norms. But this hierarchy is not rooted in a hierarchy of normative authority or in a hierarchy of real power. Indeed, European federalism is constructed with a top-to-bottom hierarchy of norms, but with a bottom-to-top hierarchy of authority and real power." (Weiler 2003: 9). 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.

A variant of the argument discussed in this section goes beyond the claim that stateness is necessary for democracy. It claims that state-building and democratization cannot proceed simultaneously, but the former must precede the latter with a significant temporal lag (Brown 2002: 246). However, the historical evidence does not show this to be necessarily the case. Charles Tilly (2000: 7) identifies two (ideal-typical) paths towards democratization. In the strong-state path there is an early expansion of governmental capacity and an authoritarian phase, and then emergence of democratic regime. Most European countries followed this path. In the weak-state path, there is an early expansion of democracy and later an increase of governmental capacity. Switzerland exemplifies this path, but also the United States can be seen as a case where state-building and democratization proceeded simultaneously. In Israel the simultaneity and speed of the two processes was considerable – it is a state born as a democracy.

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. But the required level falls short of a complete monopoly of the legitimate use of coercion – that is, *stateness*. The question of the conditions under which a global polity can emerge becomes therefore crucial to the problem of whether democracy is possible beyond the state. That question is examined in part 3, after other conditions for democracy are considered in the remainder of part 2.

2.3. 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 idea that cultural (ethnic, linguistic or religious) diversity is an obstacle to democracy is frequently repeated in the literature on democratization, on the grounds that it may hinder the development of communication, trust and solidarity among citizens, and increase the likelihood of divergent value orientations.¹⁶

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 compiled 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.¹⁷

This paper focuses on the emergence of democratic institutions rather than other aspects of democracy, but it is worth noting here that the historical experience does not support the idea that cultural diversity must have a negative impact on the “quality” of democratic politics and culture. Linz and Stepan note that a significant number of contemporary states are not “nation states”, but what they call “state nations”, i.e. “multicultural, or even multinational states, which nonetheless still manage to engender strong identification and loyalty from their citizens” (Linz and Stepan 1996: 34). In the ideal-typical nation state, citizens share one cultural identity that corresponds to the existing boundaries of the state; cultural homogeneity is actively fostered by the public institutions; and a unitary structure of the state is more common, but federal arrangements

¹⁶ Whether there is any link between democratic beliefs among citizens and the transition to or even the survival of democracy is disputed (see for instance Dahl 1998 versus Przeworski 2006).

¹⁷ For similar results in the Asian context see Croissant (2004). On a separate but related issue, a systematic quantitative assessment of the causes of civil war leads James Fearon and David Laitin (2003: 75) to conclude that “It appears not to be true that a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity—or indeed any particular cultural demography—by itself makes a country more prone to civil war.”

are possible. On the other hand, in the ideal-typical state nation citizens are attached to more than one cultural tradition but are loyal to, and identify with, the institutions of the state; the state recognizes and supports more than one cultural identity and ethno-cultural cleavages are managed democratically rather than suppressed; and the state is usually organized along federal lines.¹⁸ Exemplary state nations are Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, Spain and India.¹⁹ Linz, Stepan and Yadav compare the level of citizen trust in six major institutions, as expressed in opinion polls taken in the world's eleven longstanding federal democracies, and find that the mean trust score is significantly higher in the set of states nations than in the set of nation states: "prima facie, thus, it does not appear that the 'state nation' model produces any deficit in political trust" (Linz, Stepan and Yadav 2007: 95). Multiple identities can be the foundation for democracy as long as they are complementary. Linz and Stepan stress that the careful crafting of institutions is particularly important, since "multiple and complementary identities can be nurtured by political leadership. So can polar and conflictual political identities" (Linz and Stepan 1996: 35).

In particular, language policies can be crafted in such a way as to promote political communication across the boundaries of cultural communities while at the same time protecting the diversity of languages in a country. David Laitin (1997) notes that English is already the de facto lingua franca in Europe and the prospects of formalizing this situation in the EU institutional structure are good in the light of recent history. His conclusion is that "there is a process of state building going on in Europe today, except that it looks more like India's experience since 1947 than France's since 1516" (Laitin 1997: 298). Similar developments cannot be ruled out in the context of global institutions.

¹⁸ Democratic multilingual states are not a recent phenomenon. Of the nine countries that are classified as democracies at the beginning of the twentieth century (1908) in both the Polity IV dataset and Vanhanen's dataset, three were multilingual (Canada, Belgium and Switzerland) (Vanhanen 2003: 72).

¹⁹ In 1996 Linz and Stepan listed the United States among the state nations (1996: 34), but more recently they classified it as nation state (2007: 96). Spain has moved steadily towards the state nation model since its transition to democracy. "Around one-fourth of Spaniards use a language different from Castilian as the main language in their family and private relations and about 40 per cent live in the six territorial autonomous communities in which there are two official languages. The multilingualism of Spanish state citizens includes not only Castilian, Catalan, Galician and Basque, but also Asturian, Aragonese, Arabic, Occitan and Portuguese." (Colomer 2007: 84).

2.3. 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.²⁰ 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 lower limit 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). The results of Przeworski and Limongi and Vanhanen confirm Rustow's older contention that "no minimal level of economic development or social differentiation is necessary as a prerequisite of democracy" (Rustow 1970: 352). On the other hand, 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).²¹ Applying the domestic analogy suggests that global poverty does not in

²⁰ Their conclusions are criticized by Boix and Stokes (2003) and qualified by Hadenius and Teorell (2005). The irrelevance of economic development is confirmed by Doorenspleet (2004) for the "fourth wave" of democratic transitions, i.e. those since 1989.

²¹ Diamond is even more optimistic. Writing in 2003, he noted that several low-income democracies, such as Benin, Mali, Malawi, Mozambique, and Nepal, outlived the life span expected by Przeworski and notes that there have been few breakdowns of democracy even among the poorest countries (Diamond 2003: 12). His optimism regarding the resilience of democracy in poor countries is rooted in the expectation that

itself forestall the transition to a democratic global polity, but the perpetuation of poverty would endanger its consolidation.

2.4. Economic inequality

Several scholars have explored the link between economic inequality and political democracy. For instance, Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2004) provides an insightful discussion of 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 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) These data indicate 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.

2.5 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,

the post-Cold War period is more favorable to democracy than the decades between 1950 and 1990.

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). With regard to decisions about “inescapable” global interdependence, such as climate change, a “reasonable democrat” may well consider the level of popular control to be higher if individual citizens have a weak influence on a fairly effective global polity than when they have a stronger influence on a relatively powerless national polity.

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 further citizen effectiveness for any additional degree of system effectiveness. Several authors have examined the relationship between size and the emergence and survival of democratic institutions, finding that the sign, the statistical and the substantive significance of the relationship vary depending on how the explanatory and outcome variables are conceptualized and measured, which control variables are included, and which countries and years are considered.²² 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

²² For instance Dahl and Tufte 1973; Diamond 1999: 117-121; Ott 2000; Clague et al. 2001; Nieswiadomy and Strazicich 2004; Siaroff 2005: 127-137, Rose 2006)

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.

2.6. 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 has already been mentioned several times in the paper, but the deeper significance of the Indian experience lies in the fact that it lacks most of the conditions considered thus far, and yet it represents a remarkable example of democratic transition and consolidation. India held 16 national parliamentary elections since 1951 and incumbent central and state governments are frequently voted out of office. States are often governed by different parties and coalitions than those in the centre, and the judiciary and the media enjoy strong levels of autonomy from political power. Amartya Sen described India's political system as "a democracy that has, taking the rough with the smooth, worked remarkably well." (Sen 1999: 6).²³

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. Its 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).

Also the 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

²³For a recent survey of achievements and deficits in various areas see Ganguly et al. 2007.

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). David Laitin (1997) notes that in order to benefit from a broad range of mobility opportunities Indians must be able to communicate in 3 ± 1 languages: in addition to the official language of the state in which they reside, they need to know English and Hindi to communicate with the central state and work in large companies. Citizens of states where English or Hindi are the official languages need to learn only two languages, while members of language minorities in some states need to know four languages in order to communicate with authorities at all levels – Hindi, English, the official state language and the language of their own minority. The 3 ± 1 language constellation is the outcome of intense political conflict and bargaining during the decades after Independence, but India’s multilingualism represents a workable compromise among the country’s elites and it is now probably a stable feature of its political life (King 1998, Brass 2004, Chandoke 2007).

The sources of India’s democratic transition and consolidation are manifold and this paper cannot address them (see for instance Mitra 1999, Kohli 2001 and Stepan 2007). What is particularly relevant for this discussion is that India’s exceptional level of diversity may be more beneficial than harmful to its democratic stability. Linz, Stepan and Yadav calculate that the members of what might seem India’s dominant “ethnos” – Hindus who speak a variant of Hindi and reside in Hindi heartland states, not considering further divisions such as caste – amount to little more than a third of the total population, a size which does not put them in a position to dominate Indian politics (Linz et al. 2007: 73). Ashutosh Varshney (1998) notes that India has a dispersed rather than centrally focused ethnic configuration: all ethnic cleavages except the Hindu-Muslim divide are regionally or locally specific, which has ensured that conflicts rarely spill over from one region to another. Religious, linguistic, tribal and caste conflicts often generate serious political violence, but grievances remain localized and can be addressed by the central authorities without disrupting the democratic political process in other parts of the country. Varshney remarks that in the early 1990s the ascent of the Hindu-nationalist

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) threatened to inflame the only cleavage with national significance, the Hindu-Muslim divide, but “India’s ineradicable pluralism has induced the BJP to scale back its anti-Muslim rhetoric; to build coalitions across caste, tribal, linguistic, and religious lines; and to seek electoral alliances with regional parties in states where an ideology based on Hindu-Muslim differences makes no sense.” (Varshney 1998: 45).²⁴ James Manor (1998: 22) agrees that, “[a]mid India’s welter of variably salient identities, tensions have a hard time building up along any single fault line.” He also notes that federalism helps the political system to cope with conflicts by “quarantining” most of them within individual regions.²⁵

3. Necessary conditions for polity formation

The literature examined in the previous section suggests that a polity does not need to be culturally homogeneous, wealthy, and economically egalitarian in order to develop democratic institutions. However, there has to be a polity to be democratized in the first place. While this polity would not need to hold a monopoly of the means of legitimate coercion, it would require a degree of centralization 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 (what could be considered a strong form of “credentials verification”), and (2) local compliance with the decisions taken democratically at the global level. In other words, the polity must fulfill certain requirements relating to the “input” side as well as the “output” side of the political process.

The rest of this paper addresses the objection that such a polity 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 argue 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. Together, the two arguments cast doubt on the proposition that systemic changes necessarily preserve

²⁴For a similar argument see Dahl 1998: 162-3 and Kohli 2001: 7.

²⁵ For a generalization of this argument see Hale (2004).

interstate anarchy as self-help. They contradict the assumption, held mainly by IR scholars working within the realist tradition, 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: 7).²⁶

3.1. The anarchy-polity continuum

When Waltz discussed political ordering principles in his exceptionally influential theory of international politics, he maintained that “two, and only two, types of structure are needed to cover societies of all sorts” (Waltz 1979: 116). These types are anarchy and hierarchy, and for Waltz they correspond to international and domestic politics respectively. Waltz did not fail to acknowledge that many societies fall between the extremes of anarchy and hierarchy and that in reality “[a]ll societies are mixed”, but he considered this fact theoretically irrelevant as long as societies moved along this spectrum rather than incorporating elements of a third type. While the dichotomic approach may be useful to build the specific kind of theory that Waltz aims for, it hinders the task of assessing whether global democracy is possible or not. Assuming that the international system can only be either purely anarchical or purely hierarchical raises the bar considerably: one may posit that democracy under anarchy is a logical impossibility and a fully hierarchical world state an empirical impossibility, and the conclusion would be that global democracy is impossible.

Waltz’s approach to international anarchy has been highly influential, but it has also been the target of sustained criticism.²⁷ On the one hand, hierarchy cannot describe adequately the nature of the relationship between actors in domestic systems: for instance, the U.S. Congress and U.S. President do not stand in a relationship of super- and subordination. On the other hand, not only are hierarchical relationships within an anarchical context possible and common, but the degree of systemic anarchy itself varies according to the issue area and the historical moment. For this reason, Helen Milner (1991) suggests that actual domestic and international political systems are all located on various points along a continuum of centralization of authority. Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim (1995) argue that the anarchy-hierarchy

²⁶ Or, as Kenneth Waltz asks rhetorically: “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?” (Waltz 1993: 64).

²⁷ See for instance Ruggie 1983; Milner 1991; Buzan et al. 1993; Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Paul 1999; Lake 2003; Donnelly 2006.

continuum should be further broken down into a two-dimensional space, one dimension being the centralization of control and the other dimension the degree of authority (see also Wendt 1999: 308). Since the concept of democratization is related to the degree of authority in the system, the remainder of this section will refer to the anarchy-polity continuum as defined by the extent to which control is centralized.

Scholars have identified several types of political orders between the polar opposites of anarchy and unitary statehood. Even realists allow for relationships of subordination and domination to exist: for instance, Robert Gilpin distinguishes three types of structures: imperial/hegemonic, bipolar and a balance of power among three or more states (Gilpin 1981: 29). Other typologies of the relationship between a dominant polity and subordinate polities display a wider range of possibilities: for instance, Watson identifies relationships of independence, hegemony, suzerainty, dominion and empire (Watson 1992: 13-18). Lake (2003: 312) describes a continuum of security relationships spanning alliances, spheres of influence, protectorates, informal empires and empires. Other typologies envisage more egalitarian relationships among the constituent units. To cite one example among many, Daniel Elazar (1998: 8) identifies a spectrum encompassing inter-jurisdictional functional authorities, leagues, confederations, condominiums, federacies, federations, consociations and unions. More unusual typologies are offered by Philippe Schmitter (1996), who distinguishes between *stato/federatio*, *confederatio*, *consortio*, and *condominio*; and Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe (2003), who distinguish between two types of multi-level governance, one based on general-purpose, nonintersecting, and durable jurisdictions and another based on task-specific, intersecting, and flexible jurisdictions. Finally, some authors develop more comprehensive typologies that include polities based on “associative/federal” principles as well as polities based on “ruling/monarchical principles” (Forsyth 1981: 209). Building on Cronin (1999) and others, 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.

Typologies proliferate, but there are actual examples of nearly all posited types of polity between anarchy and stateness. For instance, the history of European colonial expansion generated a variety of institutional forms linking metropolises and peripheries, which range from formal incorporation to various forms of protectorates, trusteeships supervised by the League of Nations and the United Nations, to the substantial degree of self-governance enjoyed by Britain’s dominions. Throughout the modern era there have been also a number

of polities based on associative/federative principles, notably the Holy Roman Empire, the Swiss Confederation before 1848, the United Provinces of the Netherlands before 1795, the American Confederation from 1781 to 1789, the United States of America until the Civil War, and the German Bund from 1815 to 1866 (Forsyth 1981). In the contemporary world, the most impressive example of associative polity is the European Union, whose nature is the topic of intense debate among scholars (Risse-Kappen 1996, Moravcsik 2001, Marks *et al.* 1996). In sum, a variety of political forms are possible not only conceptually but also empirically.

3.2. Shifts along the anarchy-polity continuum

Skeptics 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 to think 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).²⁸ 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).

²⁸ The selection-by-competition logic of realism and its relationship to Darwinian evolutionary theory are analysed by Sterling-Folker (2001). This logic does not apply only to modern states, but to all kinds of political units interacting under anarchy, such as independent villages, clans and tribes: “Groups that do not seize opportunities to improve their strategic position through warfare will, in [the realist view], tend to be selected out by the unforgiving process of competition with more warlike groups.” (Snyder 2002: 19).

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.²⁹ 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 1993 and 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.³⁰ For Wendt (1999: 249), “anarchy *as such* is an empty vessel and has no intrinsic logic; anarchies only acquire logics as a function of the structure of what we put inside them.”

²⁹ Realism “does not believe that the condition of anarchy can be transcended except through a universal imperium” (Gilpin 1981: 226).

³⁰ See Buzan (2004: 159-160, 190-5) for a more differentiated six-fold classification of interstate societies.

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). Some of these fundamental changes in interstate practices stem from transformations of the domestic political settings, as Rodney Bruce Hall (1999) and Mlada Bukovanski (2002) have shown with regard to the transition from dynastic polities to states based on nationalist and/or democratic principles of legitimacy. Wendt stresses that social structures may be more difficult to change than material structures, but the key point is that 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 (Copeland 2000, Schweller 1999, Krasner 2000), but the crucial point for the purposes of this paper is that the realist account of structural change faces powerful theoretical competitors.

Third, social processes may not alter 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 (Howes 2003, Paul 1999; Koenig-Archibugi 2004a). Theoretically, it is plausible to assume that for political leaders sovereignty is just one goal among others, and “[t]o the extent that leaders face a trade-off between preserving state sovereignty and assuaging a particular constituency, shifting the electoral balance in their party’s favour, or institutionalizing deep-seated preferences, they may sacrifice state sovereignty” (Marks *et al.* 1996: 350).

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 paper is that English school theory and constructivism have provided solid ground for the *conceptual 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 discussing briefly two important macrohistorical processes. 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.

In the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1776/1993: 361) remarked that “To propose that Great Britain should voluntarily give up all authority over her colonies, and leave them to elect their own magistrates, to enact their own laws, and to make peace and war as they might think proper, would be to propose such a measure as never was, and never will be adopted, by any nation in the world”. During the first half of the twentieth century colonialism was a more prominent feature of world politics than in Smith’s lifetime: 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”. One of the most striking features of this process is that few people had predicted its speed and extent in 1945, certainly not leaders such as Winston Churchill and Charles De Gaulle, to whom the idea of relinquishing a key source of their state’s power and prestige in world politics was most distasteful.

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 (see also Ravlo et al. 2003). This suggests that, despite the presence and importance of armed conflicts in various 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 centers and peripheries with regard to most areas.³¹ Nor do they regard the military decline of the imperial powers relatively to the United States and the Soviet Union as a necessary or sufficient condition for decolonization.³² 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; Springhall 2001). 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.³³ The process that Neta Crawford describes as the “denormalization” of colonialism culminated in the landmark “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People” approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1960.³⁴ Major developments in decolonization were not determined by strategic considerations in a competitive international system, but from “a fundamental shift of normative ideas and a corresponding change of mind on the part of most sovereign governments and the public opinion influencing them concerning the right to sovereign statehood” (Jackson 1993: 129)..

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

³¹ See for instance Holland 1985: 1, 191, 293, 300; Darwin 1988: 331; Darwin 1991: 104; Heinlein 2002: 303; Shipway 2008: 14, 146-147, 161, 167-168, 194.

³² See for instance Darwin 1988: 21, 331; Darwin 1991: 58-61; Betts 2004: 36-37.

³³ Among the social scientists who have elaborated on this theme are Strang 1990, 1991, 1992, Diehl and Goertz 1991, Jackson 1993, Philpott 2001, Crawford 2002; Ravlo et al. 2003. For historians’ views see for instance Holland 1985: 191; Darwin 1988: 16, 332-333; Darwin 1991: 20-21, 73, 79, 108-110; Heinlein 2002: 307-308.

³⁴ According to the event history analysis performed by Strang (1990: 854) the estimated transition rate from dependent to sovereign status was almost six times larger after the UN Declaration than before, net of other factors.

scholarly debate on the driving forces of European integration is intense and far from resolved (Wiener and Dietz 2003). 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. What is uncontested is that not all initiatives leading to further political integration can be understood simply as ways to strengthen EU member states in their competition for power and survival within an anarchical global system. Instead of trying to summarize the myriad 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), it can plausibly be argued that 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 control³⁵ 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

³⁵ It should be considered that, “since members of the EP are directly elected in second-order elections that tend to take the form of protests against governments in power, the political complexion of the EP often runs counter to those of the governments in the Council of Ministers!” (Pollack 2006: 191).

parliamentary democracy. Berthold Rittberger shows that the decision to create and empower a parliamentary institution in the European Community derived from the perception that there was a democratic legitimacy deficit that could and should be alleviated (Rittberger 2005: 204). Mark Pollack interprets the introduction of aspects of parliamentary democracy at the EU level as a clear case of “normative institutional isomorphism”, whereby an institutional form judged to be legitimate in one context is replicated in another context (Pollack 2006: 191).

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.

4. Conclusions

This paper 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 favorable 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 paper 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 (Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2004). Some authors have argued that a world state is likely or even “inevitable”, albeit in a long-term perspective³⁶. 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. But, crucially, it leaves room for political agency. The criticism of “necessitarian” objections to global democracy should be welcome to those who are convinced that it would be desirable. But it should be useful also to those who would object to the establishment of a global democratic polity, since the arguments of this paper suggest that they cannot rely on structural forces to thwart any attempt to bring it about.

In reflecting on the legacy of the late Ernst Haas, John Gerard Ruggie, Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane and Philippe Schmitter pointed out that “none of the major realists of his day believed that the project of European unification could succeed, so if political leaders and policy makers had acted on the basis of those realist analyses, they would not have undertaken what turned out to be one of the most significant initiatives in the history of the modern system of states. Indeed, roads theoretically proscribed by realists are many, and others, too, have led to profound change in the actual practice of international politics.” (Ruggie et al. 2005: 274). One of those roads led to the emergence of a “security community” among the world’s leading states – those of North America, Western Europe and Japan – and the implausibility of war among them, which for Robert Jervis is perhaps the most striking discontinuity in the whole history of international politics, comparable to a repeal of the law of gravity: “a great many things will become unstuck” (Jervis 2001: 295).

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 global democracy is impossible should be approached with the same skeptical outlook, since world politics is clearly capable of surprising even the most disenchanting observers.

³⁶ For instance, on the basis of the extrapolation of an exponential equation modelling the size of polities since prehistory, Taagepeera (1997) estimates that the number of polities would be reduced to one around the year 3800. See also Wendt (2004), Deveza and Modelski (2003) and Carneiro (2004).

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