Which world order: cosmopolitan or multipolar?

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ABSTRACT. It is often taken for granted that the Western interpretation of democracy and human rights is universally valid and ought to be implemented worldwide. Against this view, Chantal Mouffe argues that there is a plurality of "good" regimes. Basing herself on the work of Raimundo Panikkar, among others, she shows that there are ways of respecting the dignity of the person other than through human rights. Similarly, other cultures can have political regimes that are different from, yet equivalent to Western democratic institutions. When inquiring about the possibility of global democracy, this plurality needs to be taken seriously. Accordingly, Chantal Mouffe argues for a multipolar world order, which recognizes multiple understandings of democracy and human rights and allows for the agonistic coexistence of different regional poles.

KEYWORDS. Democracy, human rights, dignity, relativism, universalism, globalization, pluralism, multipolar order.

In the present article, I will address the theme of global democracy by discussing the widespread conviction that one single, privileged model of democracy exists that should be universalized. I will begin by examining this issue from a particular angle, scrutinizing the universal relevance of the notion of human rights, which is at the core of the Western conception of democracy. In the present author's view, envisaging the question in these terms has the advantage of making it more precise, because the term *democracy* is too polysemic to function as an unequivocal guide in our enquiry. When one refers to democracy, of course, it is normally envisaged in the way it is defined in Western liberal democratic societies. There is no reason to believe, however, that this is the only possible way to understand democracy, nor the only legitimate one for that matter. Many people naturally assert that the liberal

democratic meaning of democracy is the only true, rational one, but this is precisely the kind of assertion that needs to be put to the test if we want to seriously examine the question of global democracy with an open mind. It will be evident that similar problems are likely to be encountered when we pose the question in terms of *human rights*. This, however, will allow me to bring to the fore the difficulties surrounding the universalist approach.

I. THE PROBLEM WITH HUMAN RIGHTS

The point of departure of my reflection is that there is something very problematic about the idea of *human rights* as it is usually envisaged, i.e., as a cultural invariant that should be accepted by all cultures. As has often been pointed out, this is because human rights are presented as being both universally valid and uniquely European in their origins. An important consequence of this formulation is that the universalization of human rights is generally seen as depending on the adoption by other societies of Western types of institutions. Indeed, most contemporary political theory – not to speak of Western politics – asserts that Western liberal democracy is the necessary framework for the implementation of human rights. Liberal democracy is presented as the *good regime*, the *just regime*, the only legitimate one. In fact, a great deal of liberal democratic theory aims at proving it to be the kind of regime that would be chosen by rational individuals in idealized conditions like the *veil of ignorance* (Rawls) or the *ideal speech situation* (Habermas).

The dominant view, found in many different currents of political theory, asserts that moral progress requires the acceptance of the Western model of liberal democracy, because it is the only possible shell for the implementation of human rights. It should be noted that such a view is found not only among the theorists who belong to the universalist-rationalist camp, but also among the many others who argue for a *contextualist*

approach. This is the case with Richard Rorty, for example, who closely approaches Habermas when it comes to the point of asserting this superiority, despite being an eloquent critic of Habermas' brand of universalism, with its search for *context-independent* arguments to justify the superiority of liberal democracy.

Nevertheless, there are important differences between Rorty and Habermas. Habermas believes that the process of universalization of liberal democracy will take place through rational argumentation and that it requires arguments from trans-culturally valid premises, while Rorty insists on making a distinction between *universal validity* and *universal reach*. In his view, the universality of liberal democracy needs to be envisaged in this second mode, since it is not a matter of rationality but of persuasion and economic progress. According to Rorty, it is a question of people having more secure conditions of existence and sharing more beliefs and desires with others. He is adamant that it is possible to build a universal consensus around liberal democratic institutions through economic growth and the right kind of *sentimental education*. His disagreement with Habermas concerns the way one should arrive at such a universal consensus and not its very possibility, and he never calls the superiority of the liberal way of life into question.[1]

Taking issue with both Habermas and Rorty, I want to challenge the idea that moral progress consists in the universalization of Western liberal democracy with its specific understanding of human rights. I will argue in favour of a pluralist conception, allowing us to make room not only for pluralism of cultures and ways of life, but also of *good* political regimes. In my view, liberal democratic institutions and the Western language of human rights represent only one possible *political language game* among others, and it cannot claim to have a privileged relation to rationality. We should therefore accept the possibility of a plurality of legitimate answers to the question of the *good regime*. To counter the objections of many rationalists, however, it is important to make clear that such a pluralist approach does not entail any form of relativism. This is not an

everything goes approach, which is unable to make distinctions between existing regimes. According to a pluralist perspective, some ethico-political conditions need to be fulfilled in order for a regime to be qualified as just. The requirements that would need to be specified for a given political form of society to be accepted as a *good regime* give rise to important questions that cannot be resolved in the present contribution. I will limit myself, therefore, to giving some indications on how this issue might be tackled.

II. PANIKKAR: HUMAN RIGHTS AS HUMAN DIGNITY

When we begin to inquire about the requirements to be met by a good regime, the idea of human rights could play an important role, but on condition that it is reformulated in a way that permits a pluralism of interpretations. What I mean is the following: it could be argued that to pass the test of a good regime, a political form of society would need to be informed by a set of values whose role in that regime corresponds to that played in liberal democracy by the notion of human rights. An important source of inspiration in formulating such an approach can be found in the work of Raimundo Panikkar, whose interesting insights I want to bring into our discussion.

In an important article entitled *Is the notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?*[2] Panikkar argues that, to understand the meaning of human rights, it is necessary to scrutinize the function played by this notion in our culture. This then allows us to determine whether this function has or has not been fulfilled in different ways in other cultures. In other words, Panikkar urges us to enquire about the possibility of what he calls homeomorphic, i.e., functional equivalents of the notion of human rights. Looking at Western culture, we ascertain that human rights are presented as providing the basic criteria for the recognition of human dignity and as being the necessary condition for a just social and political order.

The question we need to ask, therefore, is whether other cultures do not give different answers to the same question.

Once it is acknowledged, says Panikkar, that what is at stake in human rights is the dignity of the person, the possibility of different manners of envisaging this question becomes evident, as well as the different ways in which it can be answered. Indeed, what Western culture calls *human rights* is a culturally specific form of asserting the dignity of the person. It would therefore be very presumptuous to declare that it is the only legitimate form.

To make his case, he convincingly demonstrates that the concept of human rights relies on a well known set of presuppositions, all of which are distinctively Western, namely: there is a universal human nature that can be known by rational means; human nature is essentially different from and higher than the rest of reality; the individual has an absolute and irreducible dignity that must be defended against society and the state; the autonomy of the individual requires that society be organized in a non-hierarchical way, as a sum of free individuals. All these presuppositions, he claims, are definitively Western and liberal and are distinguishable from other conceptions of human dignity in other cultures. There is no necessary overlap, for example, between the idea of the *person* and the idea of the *individual*. The *individual* is the specific way in which Western liberal discourse formulates the concept of the self. Other cultures, however, envisage the self in different ways.

Thinking along similar lines, Bikhu Parekh has shown how non-liberal societies rest on a theory of overlapping selves. Those bound together by familial, kinship, religious or other ties do not see themselves as independent and self-contained ontological units involved in specific kinds of relationships with *others*, but rather as bearers of overlapping selves whose identities are constituted by and incapable of being defined in isolation from these relationships. For them, individual and self are distinct and their boundaries do not coincide, so that naturally distinct individuals may or may not share their selves in common. Each individual is deeply implicated in

— 457 —

the lives of those related to him or her and their interests, lives and life plans are inextricably interlinked and incapable of individuation.[3]

A number of consequences can be determined on the basis of these considerations. One of the most important is the need to recognize that the idea of *autonomy*, which is so central in Western liberal discourse and which is at the centre of our understanding of human rights, cannot be granted such priority in other cultures, where decision-making is less individualistic and more cooperative than in Western societies. This in no way signifies that those cultures are not concerned with the dignity of the person and the conditions for a just social order. What it means is that they deal with these questions in a different way. This is why the search for homeomorphic equivalents is an important one. We need to establish a cross-cultural dialogue based on the acceptance that the notion of human rights as formulated in Western culture is one formulation among many of the idea of the dignity of the person. It is a very individualistic interpretation, specific to liberal culture, and cannot claim to be the only legitimate interpretation.

III. De Sousa Santos' mestiza conception

It goes without saying that the acknowledgement of the cultural specificity of the notion of human rights and calling their universal validity into question need not imply that we should automatically negate their universal *reach*, to use Rorty's distinction. In other words, this does not force us to reject the idea that human rights could become universally accepted. In such an instance, however, we would need to be aware of the conditions that would have to be fulfilled for this process to take place. Indeed, it would ultimately require Western culture to become the universal culture. This is not impossible, of course, and there are many liberals – Rorty among them – who would rejoice in such an evolution, since they believe in the superiority of the Western culture. Nevertheless, such an evolution is not

likely to be the cause of universal celebration, since many have been calling our attention to the dangers that a process of homogenization would imply.

Among those signalling danger is the Portuguese theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, whose ideas I find particularly fruitful for the elaboration of the pluralist approach that I am advocating. While critical of the dominant form of universalization of the language of human rights, de Sousa Santos does not deny that such a notion could be used in positive ways. His main concern is to envisage how human rights can be put at the service of a progressive emancipatory politics. His central argument is that human rights can become the vehicle for a progressive politics, provided they are re-conceptualized in a *multicultural* way.

 He argues that human rights, as long as they are conceived as *universal*, will always be an instrument of what he calls *globalization from above*, i.e. something imposed by the West on the rest of the world. As a consequence, they will contribute to the clash of civilizations announced by Huntington. He affirms, however, that another possible form of globalization exists, a globalization *from below*, which he suggests we call *cosmopolitan globalization*.[4]

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me point out immediately that de Sousa Santos does not use the term *cosmopolitan* in the conventional modern sense, where it is associated with rootless universalism and individualism, world citizenship and the negation of territorial or cultural borders. For him *cosmopolitanism* refers to cross-border solidarity between groups that are exploited, oppressed or excluded from the hegemonic globalization from above. His main idea is that the form of domination prevalent today does not exclude the possibility for subordinated nation-states, regions, classes or social groups and their allies to organize themselves trans-nationally in defence of perceived common interests and use the potential of trans-national interaction created by the world-system for their own benefit. For de Sousa Santos, examples of cosmopolitan activities include South-South dialogues and organizations, new forms of

labour internationalism, transnational networks of women's groups, indigenous people and human rights organizations, North/South anti-capitalist solidarity, transformative advocacy NGOs, alternative development networks and sustainable environment groups, as well as a multitude of literary, artistic and scientific movements in the periphery of the world. In his view, and despite their heterogeneity, the different anti-globalization movements are a good example of cosmopolitanism and he has been very active in this regards as a founder member of the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre.

In line with Panikkar, de Sousa Santos likewise stresses the importance of looking for functional equivalents of the idea of human rights in other cultures. He argues that to be able to operate as a cosmopolitan counter-hegemonic form of globalization, human rights need to be reconceived as *multicultural*, i.e. as allowing for different formulations according to different cultures. In his view, the very question of the universality of human rights indicates that it is a Western cultural question, particular to a specific culture. Indeed, the focus on universality is a product of Western culture and the idea of universal human rights as such cannot be presented as a cultural invariant. He does not conclude, however, that this is a reason for rejecting this idea and, while acknowledging that human rights policies have often been at the service of the economic and geo-political interests of the hegemonic capitalist states, de Sousa Santos recognizes that the human rights discourse has also been articulated in the defence of the oppressed. He indicates the existence of a counter-hegemonic human rights discourse, which can play an important role in the struggle for globalization from below and the development of the cosmopolitan project that he advocates.

It is indeed crucial to realize that a hegemonic struggle is taking place around the human rights discourse, a struggle that opposes those who want to use it to impose the Western model on the rest of the world to those who are trying to harness it for an emancipatory politics. I agree with de Sousa Santos that it is vital to organize cross-cultural dialogues

for this counter-hegemonic movement to be successful. The aim, as he says, is to develop a *mestiza* conception of human rights, acknowledging cultural specificity and proposing different versions of human dignity, instead of resorting to false universalisms.

IV. DIFFERENT FORMS OF DEMOCRACY?

What I find interesting in the approaches of Panikkar and de Sousa Santos is their emphasis on pluralism and the fact that their critique of universalism is not made in the name of a relativist approach that would foreclose any possibility of criticizing specific regimes. It is therefore a pluralism that does not eliminate the political dimension and that permits making political judgments.

In the second part of this contribution, I would like to focus on some of the consequences of this pluralist approach for envisaging the possibility of a multiplicity of forms of democracy. Let me return to an affirmation I made earlier, when I asserted that the liberal democratic regime had to be envisaged as one possible political language game among others, with no privileged claim on rationality. This led me to the idea that there could be a plurality of answers to the question of the *good regime*. I also proposed that, on condition that they were reformulated in a pluralistic way, respect for *human rights* (if we want to maintain the expression) could be seen as a necessary requirement for classification as a good regime. It was in this context that I brought the ideas of Panikkar and de Sousa Santos into my argument.

If we apply the consequences of our preceding reflections on human rights to our understanding of democracy, the *universality* of liberal democracy is once again called into question. As I have argued in *The Democratic Paradox*[5], liberal democracy is the articulation between two different traditions: liberalism, with its emphasis on individual liberty and universal rights, and democracy, which privileges the idea of equality and *rule by*

— 461 —

the people, i.e. popular sovereignty. Such an articulation is not necessary but contingent; it is the product of a given history. Indeed, the liberal democratic model, with its particular conception of human rights, is the expression of a specific cultural and historical context, in which, as has often been noted, the Judeo-Christian tradition has played a central role. Such a model of democracy is constitutive of our form of life and it is certainly worthy of our allegiance, but there is no reason to present it as the only legitimate way of organizing human coexistence and to try to impose it on the rest of the world. The kind of individualism dominant in Western societies is alien to many other cultures, whose traditions are informed by different values, and democracy understood as *rule by the people* can therefore take other forms, in which the value of community, for example, carries a heavier charge than the idea of individual liberty.

In my view, a political theory that wants to take *value pluralism* in its multiple dimensions seriously needs to make room for the pluralism of cultures, forms of life and political regimes. This means that we should add the recognition of a plurality of forms of democracy to the recognition of a plurality of understandings of *human rights*. Societies that envisage human dignity in a way which differs from the Western understanding of human rights are also likely to have a different way of envisaging the nature and role of democratic institutions. When we enquire about the possibility of global democracy, it is necessary therefore to take this plurality into account. By not doing so, and by taking the notion that there is only one possible understanding of democracy for granted, i.e. our Western understanding, one is likely to contribute, albeit unwittingly, to the imposition of the globalization from above denounced by de Sousa Santos.

V. Different types of pluralism

I am aware, of course, that the approach that I am defending would require dealing with a very wide range of new questions, questions that

cannot be addressed satisfactorily in the present context. My aim here is a very limited one. It is an attempt to transform the way the problem is usually posed and to delineate what I believe to be a more adequate framework for a pluralist questioning. Nevertheless, some indication of the way I envisage the connection between this pluralist approach and some of the issues that constitute today's agenda seems appropriate at this juncture.

One of the first questions that come to mind concerns the way in which this plurality of understandings of human rights and democracy might co-exist within a given political community. To put it more precisely, what kind of multiculturalism is compatible with liberal democracy? My position in this regard is that the adoption of a pluralist approach, which questions the privileged position usually granted to liberal democracy, does not entail endorsing the type of multiculturalism that calls for the acceptance of legal pluralism. Conflicting principles of legitimacy cannot, in my view, be made to coexist inside a political association without calling its very existence into question. This is why I do not believe that pluralism requires allowing different communities to organize themselves according to their own laws in a liberal democratic regime, when the said laws contradict the constitutional essentials. To acknowledge the existence of a plurality of legitimate answers to the question of the good regime does not imply asserting that different regimes can coexist inside a single political association. Within the context of a liberal democratic political association, it is perfectly legitimate for the state to require allegiance from its citizens to the ethico-political principles that are constitutive of the liberal democratic form of life; ethico-political principles that are embedded in its constitution and constitute its *political grammar*.

While pluralism may be one of the central values of such a regime, here we are dealing with a different kind of pluralism, the liberal pluralism that celebrates the individual and asserts the priority of the right over the good. In my view, what this liberal pluralism demands is recognizing the legitimacy of a multiplicity of different interpretations of the aforementioned shared ethico-political principles. What is at stake is the multiplicity of ways in which liberal-democratic citizenship can be envisaged.

This kind of pluralism, however, can only be exercised within certain limits and it cannot enter into contradiction with the principles of the constitution. There can be little doubt that the constitutional framework itself can be the location of conflicting interpretations and it would be a mistake to present it as permitting only one single, *true* interpretation. Indeed, many important political struggles among competing conceptions of citizenship have in fact taken place at this level. Nevertheless, we cannot erase the need for a framework, with the limitations of pluralism that this necessarily entails.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between different types of pluralism. The pluralism that has been at the centre of my reflection in this contribution differs from the liberal pluralism that deals with individual liberty. It is a pluralism that concerns the relationship between regimes and requires recognizing alternative forms of political association to liberal democracy as legitimate. Despite significant differences, it has affinities with the kind of pluralism advocated by Carl Schmitt when he insisted that the world is a *pluriverse* not a *universe*.[6] This pluralism has important consequences for envisaging the future of the world order and I will conclude my reflections by addressing this issue, which I consider to be of a particular relevance in the present international circumstances.

VI. TOWARDS A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER?

When we enquire about possible scenarios for the future of democracy at the world level, we find two main possibilities. There are those who call for the establishment of a *cosmopolitan democracy* and a *cosmopolitan citizenship* resulting from the universalization of the Western interpretation of democratic values and the implementation of the Western version of human rights at the world level. According to such an approach, this is how a democratic global order would come about. There are different variants of this approach, but all of them share a common premise: that

the Western form of life is the best alternative and that moral progress requires its worldwide implementation. This is the liberal universalism that aims at imposing its institutions on the rest of the world with the argument that they are the only rational and legitimate ones. I have been arguing against such a conception in the present contribution because in my view, it is bound to justify the hegemony of the West and the imposition of its particular values, even if this is very far from the intentions of those who advocate it.

Those who believe in the possibility of a *World Republic* with an homogeneous body of cosmopolitan citizens with the same rights and obligations, a constituency that would coincide with *humanity*, are denying the dimension of the political that is constitutive of human societies. They overlook the fact that power relations are constitutive of the social, and that conflict and antagonism cannot be eradicated. This is why the establishment of a World Republic, if it ever came about, would only signify the world hegemony of a dominant power that was able to erase all differences and impose its own conception of the world on the entire planet. This would have dire consequences, and we are already witnessing how current attempts to homogenize the world are provoking violent adverse reactions from those societies whose specific values and cultures are being rendered illegitimate by the enforced universalization of the Western model.

It is a matter of urgency, therefore, that we oppose a different conception of the world order to the flawed models of *cosmopolitan democracy* and *global civil society*, a conception that would acknowledge value pluralism in its strong, Weberian or Nietzschean sense, with all its implications for politics. Against the delusions of the universalists, we need to listen to those who warn us about the dangers implied in the illusions of the universalist-globalist discourse, which envisages human progress as the establishment of world unity based on the global acceptance of the Western definition of human rights and the dream of a unification of the world achieved by transcending the political, conflict and negativity. At a time when the United States – under the pretence of a *true universalism* –

is trying to impose its system and its values on the rest of the world, the need for a multipolar world order is more pressing than ever. We should aim at the establishment of a pluralist world order, in which a number of large regional units might coexist, with their different cultures and values, and in which a plurality of understandings of *human rights* and forms of democracy might be considered as legitimate.

At this stage in the process of globalization I do not want to deny that we need a set of institutions to regulate international relations, but the institutions in question should allow for a significant degree of pluralism and they should not require the existence of a single unified structure. Such a structure would necessarily entail the presence of a centre, which would be the only locus of sovereignty. It would be pointless to imagine the possibility of a world system ruled by Reason, in which power relations have been neutralized. This supposed reign of Reason would only be a screen concealing the rule of a dominant power, which identifies its own interests with those of humanity and treats any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its *rational* leadership.

This, in my view, would be a recipe for disaster, and the thought that I would like to share with you is that a pluralistic world order is the only way to avoid current international antagonisms and the global civil war feared by Carl Schmitt. It is crucial to realize that the universalist approach exacerbates such antagonisms. By attempting to impose the Western conception of democracy, deemed to be the only legitimate one, on recalcitrant societies, it has been forced to present those who do not accept this conception as *enemies* of civilization, thereby denying their right to maintain their culture and creating the conditions of an antagonistic struggle between different civilizations. It is only by acknowledging the legitimacy of a plurality of just forms of society, and the fact that the liberal democratic model is only one form of democracy among others, that conditions can be created for an *agonistic* coexistence between different regional poles with their specific institutions. It goes without saying that this multipolar world order will not eliminate conflict, but the conflict in question will be

less likely to take antagonistic forms than it would in a world that does not allow for pluralism. Peace has a greater chance of being secure and long lasting when some sort of equilibrium is reached between regional units than by the imposition of order by a single hyper-power. If we are concerned with justice and democracy we cannot avoid facing these issues.

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NOTES

1. These views are to be found, for example, in the following books by Rorty: *Achieving our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) and *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999).

2. Raimundo Panikkar, "Is the notion of Human Rights a Western Concept," *Diogenes* 120 (1982): 81-82.

3. Bikhu Parekh, "Decolonizing Liberalism" in *The End of Isms?*, ed. Aleksandras Shtromas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994): 89.

4. See, for instance, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense, Law, Science and Politics in a Paradigmatic Transition* (London: Routledge, 1995): 337-342.

5. See, for instance, Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

6. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976): 53.