

Why a World State is Democratically Necessary

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Thank you, Tyler, for that very generous introduction, to James for inviting me, and to all of you for coming, and also to Tim Burns for sharing the podium with me. I very much look forward to his own take on this issue, and of course to all of your reactions as well.

My talk builds on this paper that Tyler mentioned, that I published over ten years ago, about why I think a world state is inevitable. My original plan was to turn that paper into a book in short order. Then I got interested in a totally different project, on this idea of quantum social science. And with the years it took to write that book, have two kids, and just life in general, I am only now coming back to the world state idea. So this seminar is actually good timing for me.

However, in retrospect it is a good thing I waited, both because, unlike the situation in 2003, there is now quite a bit of scholarship on the idea of the world state, which I can take advantage of, and because my own thinking on the subject has come some distance from then as well. In particular, in my 2003 paper my approach and ambition was purely explanatory. I wanted to show for good social science reasons a world state was inevitable, whether we liked it or not. I still agree a world state is inevitable but I now think making the case for the desirability of the world state, a moral or a normative question, is essential to the explanatory story.

Today, I want to first briefly define what I mean by a world state, then summarize in 10 minutes the explanatory argument I made in 2003 and highlight why I think a normative argument is now crucial, and then in the second half turn to the normative story about why a world state is desirable or even morally necessary.

Definition: What you think about the world state will depend a lot on what you mean by the term STATE and there are many definitions out there in the literature and they have quite different implications for both the likelihood and desirability of a world state

My own feeling in scholarly work is that arguments are more interesting if you make things hard for yourself rather than taking easy cases. So with that in mind I take what I think is a hard case or hard definition, which combines elements from Max Weber and Carl Schmidt.

From Weber I take the idea that the essence of a state, any state, is a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence. This is a common view of the state, especially in my field of international relations; it also underlies everyday language. The reason we say Somalia is a failed state is because it does not currently have a monopoly of force in its territory

From Schmidt, in turn, I take a particular view of what it means for a state to have sovereignty, namely, quoting Schmidt “he is sovereign who decides the exception.” What Schmidt is getting at here is that everyday politics is governed by rules and institutions like the U.S. Constitution and Congress. The Constitution is not where US sovereignty ultimately lies. Where sovereignty lies is with the actors who decide what must be done when the institutions and rules don’t provide a clear answer. The exception to the rule rather than the norm. This can vary depending on what issue you are talking about, but when it comes to decisions to use force, namely the issue of organized violence, to kill, sovereignty lies in the executive branch. In particular, given my Weberian view of the State, sovereignty lies in the ability to decide who is the enemy of the state, whether internal or external, and therefore may be killed by the armed forces. In today’s world, sovereignty in this sense is distributed to 190 separate states, basically privatized on a global scale. Each of these states has the final authority to make life and death decisions about its own national security. Put more provocatively, each state today has the unilateral right to kill foreigners if it thinks this is necessary for its national security, and there is no higher accountability for those decisions. A world state therefore would on this view mean that sovereignty over organized violence is collectivized to the whole system. All organized killing would ultimately be accountable to the global sovereign. Something like a beefed up U.N. rather than privatized out to 190 separate units.

Now to minimize the alarm that such an idea might raise just off the top of your head, let me add two qualifications. First, I’m only talking about sovereignty over violence, not education policy, taxation, culture, or the vast majority of things governments do on a day-to-day basis. All of those issues might remain privatized to separate countries and as such a world state in my view might be a quite minimalist entity focusing just on the issue of violence, and not a gigantic bureaucracy of territorial states we have today. Second, even in the area of organized violence a world state might be quite decentralized in practice, with each current state retaining its own armed forces, much like in the U.S. each of the 50 states has its own state and local police forces, national guard, and so on. It might help to have a UN army, but I don’t see this as essential to the idea of a world state. All that is essential is that the authority to use violence and the power to back up that authority no longer be private -- a private unilateral right of the today’s 190 states -- but a collective right of the whole. So “no national level of violence without UN authorization” might be a slogan. Even with these qualifications, however, I still think this conceptualization of a world state is a hard case for a theory of world state formation. And the reason is that, of all of the aspects of a state's sovereign control, its decisions to use force for national security is the aspect that states seem to be least willing to give up. Look at the EU; its members have given up sovereignty over many different issue areas to the EU level. But control over their armed forces and national security is the one area where this delegation of sovereignty to the EU has

progressed least far. Certainly, I think this is the area of our own sovereignty, as Americans, that we would be most loathe to give up as well. Giving up sovereignty to the WTO is one thing; giving up sovereignty over of our national security is another.

But giving it up is what I want to now suggest is inevitable. The argument has both an explanatory component and now in my new iteration a moral or normative one. Since I have already addressed the former in my 2003 paper, I want to get to the latter as soon as possible in my talk, but the limits of the explanatory argument are important for setting up the normative argument. Let me briefly summarize my 2003 paper first. The explanatory argument: The basic idea here is that the world state is the only stable equilibrium in global politics and until that equilibrium is reached -- in other words, as long as the international system remains in anarchy as it is today -- the system will be in disequilibrium and gradually evolve toward an equilibrium state. This evolution need not be linear; it could be two steps forward then one step back. But eventually the international system will get there, to a world state. How long? Who knows? I give it 100-200 years. But nothing rides on that particular prediction. So whereas the dominant realist view of anarchy is that it tends to produce a balance of power among rival states, I'm arguing that the logic of anarchy is to produce a world state.

Before unpacking my argument a bit more, lest you think it is a totally utopian idea, let me give you three pieces of evidence that the system is indeed moving in that direction. First is the tremendous decrease historically in the number of independent political units or states that exist in the system. It is estimated that 5,000 years ago there were 600,000 independent political entities in the world or states; most were tribes but let's just call them states. Today there are less than 200. This represents a massive consolidation or concentration of political authority and organized violence potential in the system. To make an anti-world state argument you would have to argue that this process of consolidation will eventually stop, perhaps when there are two states left and they balance each other into eternity. But I don't think that is plausible. Now admittedly the number of states in the system has gone up since World War II, but for reasons that will become apparent I think that this is evidence for my argument, and not against it.

The second piece of evidence is the consolidation of the EU. Tremendous economic integration, among former enemies no less, they now even have the one currency. Granted, political/military integration has gone much less far, but with recent moves toward a common foreign and security policy, the EU defense identity, and so on, the EU now looks set to begin further consolidation, even in the security domain in the near future. That could be a model for other regions as well.

The third evidence is the growing use of UN authorization for uses of force. The idea being that, when great powers want to use force, increasingly since the end of the Cold War they turn to the UN to legitimize that force and to authorize it: The Gulf War, Libya, Bosnia and so on. Not every case of great power uses of force has involved the UN: Kosovo, and the Iraq war, and so on. But I think there is a tendency to use the UN to authorize force and this I think that is an embryo of the kind of collective authority over violence that is required by a world state.

So all three of these trends are suggestive of a direction to history. They do not constitute an argument about inevitability. For that I have a two-part story, one emphasizing material factors and one emphasizing ideas. So the materialist argument is that over time the cost of war between

relatively equal states tends to rise, such that today a major interstate war is almost impossible. This is for two reasons. First, economic interdependence. Call this the liberal argument. The idea here is the familiar one that as capitalism expands on the global scale, national economies become more and more interdependent such that over time it becomes less and less rational for decision makers to contemplate war with each other. Think of China and the US today, much less in 50 years from now. For all of our disagreements, both sides know that it would be ruinously costly to our economies to settle those disputes by war.

The second argument here, called the realist one, is one that has to do with military competition and technological change. The idea here is that anarchy leads to military competition, and that in turn gives states incentives to invest in new military technology in the hopes of winning wars. States that succeed in war with that new technology will find their new weapons being copied by everybody else in the hope of winning future wars, and the effect of this over time is to ratchet up the overall level of military technology in the system. Now crucial advances in military technology usually mean greater destructive power of weapons, and thus as military technology advances, the cost of war will rise too, at least between equals. Such that today, with nuclear weapons, for the first time, war would be national suicide. So geopolitical competition and anarchy in effect make interstate war impossible. That's the materialist side of the explanatory argument.

The idealist argument is less familiar, but I think it goes back to Hegel, and the starting point here is an assumption about human motivation and thus the ultimate causes of war. In IR we usually assume that what states want is either power, security, or wealth. I agree states want these things. But following Hegel, I also think they want something else. They want recognition of their identities by significant others and we want that recognition both as individuals and as groups, and until people get recognition of their identities they will struggle for it, even till the death.

Looking back historically, I think much conflict in world politics is explained by identity/recognition struggles. Think back to the Thirty Years War. It is in part about kings fighting for recognition of their right to define the religion of their subjects, and the Peace of Westphalia at the end of the Thirty Years War gave us the fundamental institution of modern international society, which is the mutual recognition of state sovereignty and its corresponding doctrine of non-intervention and non-interference. Another example is the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, and then continuing today into the 21st. These are in part about individuals' efforts to get their governments to recognize their right to have democratic control over the power that rules them or to make political power accountable. Or a less benign example, take Al-Qaida's struggle today. It is not about power, security, or wealth; it's about protecting Islamic civilization against the threat of western encroachment, which is a kind of struggle for recognition.

An important consequence of these struggles is that once they are successful and once people feel recognized in their individual and group identities, violence and war are no longer necessary. Thus over time the institution of mutual recognition of state sovereignty for example has helped pacify interstate politics such that today it is considered completely illegitimate to try to conquer other states. Whereas two centuries ago it was what you did in world politics. Likewise the

spread of democracy and recognition of individual's rights have brought us democratic peace; namely the fact that democratic states never go to war with each other because their citizens don't want to die fighting other democrats.

In my 2003 paper I put these material and ideational logics together and tried to show in a very schematic way how they would move international politics in various stages from a world of 600,000 states way back when living in a Hobbesian world of all against all, to today's world of less than 200 states living in relative peace, what might be called a cosmopolitan peace. To be sure, this peace is not yet universal. There are still authoritarian states out there. Ethnic and civil wars in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere clearly indicate this cosmopolitan peace is not a complete one. But in the global north, the process of liberal democratization and pacification is basically complete, and as struggles for recognition play out further in the global south, I would argue that the latter too would eventually be pacified as well.

For many scholars, from Francis Fukuyama today, to Kant and Hegel two centuries ago, such pacification would represent the end of history, completing the evolution of the world political system. In their view the world will have become America. Now importantly this end state, this cosmopolitan peace, is not a world state by my definition, but a system of states that still retain ultimate sovereignty over the use of violence. They just happen not to want to use that sovereignty to kill anyone, but they retain the right. So to get to my claim that a world state is inevitable I need a further argument that takes us from the cosmopolitan peace to a world state, and this where I think the normative issue comes into play, that a world state is morally necessary. Let me turn to that argument now.

The crux of my argument here is that there is a basic normative contradiction between the principles of liberal democracy, which I assumed in the cosmopolitan peace would be universalized on the one hand, and the principles of territorial state sovereignty, as I defined it above. As such, even a system of cosmopolitan peace will still be in disequilibrium or unstable and thus will eventually move world politics toward a world state.

To set that up, let me briefly summarize what I will call the ethics of territorial state sovereignty. These ethics are essentially communitarian or nationalist. Which is to say that communities, territorial communities, have the right to exclude foreigners through citizenship laws and immigration control, and can basically define membership in their own communities; that is one aspect. And second, those communities, in particular states, have final authority to decide who is an enemy, and may therefore be killed. In effect, when it comes national security, at least every state is the judge of its own case. That is the standard view of what we live with today. So if the US decides that an Iraqi regime is a threat to our national security, and we have to invade it, then that's our call in the end and it is not accountable or answerable to anyone else. Thousands of Iraqi's may die as a result, but they have no redress, because that is just how it is in a world of territorial states.

Now, as an alternative, consider the ethics of liberal democracy when applied to the global scale. I'll take up liberalism first and then democracy second. Liberalism is a universalistic ideology, the fundamental principle of which is that all human beings have the same basic rights and the implementation of those rights should not be affected by a script of characteristics or accidents of

birth. Let me take two examples. The first is the freedom of movement, perhaps the most basic of these rights. Immigration controls are fundamentally illiberal in character, and we would never tolerate restrictions on the freedom of movement within liberal societies today, so why would such restrictions be justified on a global scale in a world of liberal democracies? Moreover, immigration controls and the citizenship laws they protect have two important illiberal effects. On the level of individuals they create tremendous inequality of opportunity, or different life chances for people born in the US for example vs Bangladesh on the other hand, and they do so purely as a result of an accident of birth, and liberalism is incompatible with such a fundamental inequality of opportunity; it is a morally arbitrary result.

And second, on a collective level, these laws institutionalize inequality between states and thereby help to preserve the wealth of rich societies. As an illustration, consider what would happen if we opened the border with Mexico. Lots of unskilled workers would immigrate to the US creating downward pressure on wages in this country. Conversely, in Mexico and elsewhere, with the reduction in supply of cheap labor, because it is all moving here, we would see the price of labor, namely wage rates, rise in those countries. So we would begin to get a gradual convergence of wage rates by opening the border. It wouldn't mean you would get total equalization. There are many other reasons for total inequality between the US and Mexico, namely education and productivity and so on. But it does mean one reason why the US is so rich is because we artificially protect our wealth through the political instrument of citizenship laws and immigration controls that keep people out who would drag our wealth down, and that seems to me a fundamentally illiberal idea, something we would never tolerate at home. That is one example.

The other example that I want to talk about here is the freedom from arbitrary killing. If human beings have any universal right it is a right to live in peace as long as they are not hurting anybody else. A right to life. In a liberal society, if someone threatens that right, be it an individual or an agent of the state, that is wrong and not tolerated. Consider again the Iraq war example: by what liberal principle did we have the right to go in there and kill thousands of Iraqis, many of them innocent. Granted, we went in there because we thought we were threatened by Saddam Hussein, I'm not taking a position on that, and we certainly didn't intend to kill thousands of Iraqis, but that is cold comfort to those Iraqis and their families. By way of analogy, consider what our attitude would be if there was a zone of heavy gang activity in Cleveland or Columbus, where the government lost control and decided to send in the military to reestablish its authority, and in doing so the military devastated the neighborhood and killed hundreds of innocent civilians in collateral damage. It seems to me such an activity would have significant repercussions for those in charge of such an operation and for individual soldiers if they could be identified. In short, collateral damage like that would not be tolerated within a liberal society. In sum, with respect to both freedom of movement and freedom from arbitrary killing, liberalism is inconsistent with the sovereignty to the territorial state.

Now let me turn to what I'll call the ethics of democracy. The fundamental principle of democracy is that power should be accountable to those it affects. This is called the principle of affected interest by democratic theorists. Now usually in democratic theory and practice we think of this principle as applying only to citizens of territorial states, within states, to the demos within a state. And historically that probably made sense. With the big exception of interstate

wars, and I'll get to that in a minute, historically the people that were affected by power structures were primarily the state's own citizens, so it made sense to think of the demos in territorial terms.

Today, however, in a globalizing world, it is increasingly difficult to justify such a limited application of the democratic principle. Canadian citizens are deeply and routinely affected by decisions of the American government, so why shouldn't they have a say in how this form of power over them is exercised? Then of course there is still the problem with interstate war. Iraqis were deeply affected by the decision of the US to invade their country, and now have no recourse. Why should that exercise of our power not be accountable in some way to the Iraqis? In other words, why should the US be allowed to be judge in its own case?

Now one response to this line of argument is to claim that societies are free associations. If a people come together and constitute themselves as a people, as a demos, then that is their right and democratic principles would then only apply within that society or free association, not outside. This response is vulnerable to a basic objection, which is known as the boundary problem in democratic theory. Namely, the idea of a society or demos as a free association already assumes a distinction or a boundary between those that have a vote in constituting that association and those who don't. The problem is how is that boundary, between us and them, friend and enemy, in Schmidtian terms, to be justified in democratic terms?

Perhaps if a group of people lives on a desert island cut off from all outsiders, then yes you can argue that those people can constitute themselves as a demos. But in the real world there are always outsiders out there who will be affected by the power of a democratic free association and as such might want to be included in the discussion from the start. So how to justify their exclusion from the process right up front? In practice we do so on grounds of ethnicity, language, or just historical accident. But none of these criteria provide a democratic justification for the boundary. Indeed, quite the contrary, these are anti or nondemocratic bases for the constitution of our demos.

In short, I would argue that the only way to constitute a demos that is consistent with democratic theory, at least in today's world, is to do so globally, where everyone on the planet has a say in how the world will be carved up and organized, and then if people want to go their separate ways, that's fine, but everybody has a say in that process at the start.

In sum, taking these liberal and democratic principles together, it seems to me that there is a fundamental contradiction between the principles that we hold dear at the domestic level and the principles of the territorial sovereign state. Put another way, if we were designing the organization of the world today from scratch, and assuming that a cosmopolitan peace had already been achieved, we would never, as liberal democrats, proceed to delegate sovereignty and especially the right to kill to 190 separate units. It just doesn't make any sense. So the only reason we have such a system today, is because of history, which is not from a liberal democratic standpoint a sufficient justification.

To wrap up my talk, I want to make two objections, one normative and one more practical. The normative objection is a fairly common one to a world state and one of the oldest objections

going back to Kant himself. That is that a world state would be despotism, an undemocratic authoritarian structure that would force its members to do things they don't want to do. This is the world state of black helicopter fame that frightens many Americans and many people around the world. Yet while this is a common and politically salient objection, I have had trouble finding serious scholarly arguments in trying to defend it. It is more often asserted and feared than argued for. And in fact it is a relatively easy objection to deflect, for three reasons. First, if a world state does come about, it won't be by force, by some state trying to conquer the world. For all of our military superiority as the American state, consider the limits of American power today globally, and if we couldn't take over the world today, it is doubtful anybody else could do so either. It is much more likely, in my view, that a world state today will evolve gradually and voluntarily, much like the European Union is today, and in that process, making sure it is a democratic process with lots of checks and balances, will be a very high priority for today's territorial states. They are not going to sign on to anything voluntarily that gives away democracy at the global level.

The second response to this objection is the issue of scale. In large democracies today the center of power is very far removed from individual voters. In a world state of 10 billion people, down the road, that distance will only be increased. So if a world state is not a despotism, it is clear it won't be the direct democracy that the ancient Athenians enjoyed. On the other hand, India today has a population of over one billion people, and those people speak hundreds of languages, and yet it has been a democracy of long standing. It is not a perfect democracy, but no one would say India is a despotism. So if India can be a democracy, then why could not a world state be one?

Finally, consider the alternative to a world state: an anarchic system like today, where territorial states retain the sovereign right to decide the exception and are able to kill foreigners if they so choose. It seems to me, as I suggested above, that that is actually despotism, and of the worst kind, so whatever the imperfections of a world state, its accountability to its people would surely be greater than today's states are accountable to foreigners. That is the response to the normative objection.

Now there is a practical objection that also has a normative side to it. That is that great powers, and the US in particular, would probably be very resistant to the idea of a world state because they have the most to lose. If you are Chad or Burundi, having territorial sovereignty doesn't buy you a whole lot. If you are the US, having territorial sovereignty give us tremendous freedom of action on the global stage. So why would we want to give that up? And more to the point, who has the power to make us? Now I have no doubt that great powers will resist joining a world state, but in the end I don't see how they can avoid it. For if the rest of the world has become America, so to speak, become a cosmopolitan peace, then on what normative principle can we argue that our sovereignty should remain separate and unaccountable to everyone else. In other words, by what right should we retain final authority to kill Canadians if we unilaterally decide that it is in our national interest? It seems deeply hypocritical and inconsistent with our own values.

Now one might respond that the issue here is not by what right, but about the power to resist world state formation, and I concede that no one can force the US to join. But here I guess is where I return to Hegel's struggle for recognition. For it is not only the slave who seeks

recognition from the master, but it is also the master who seeks recognition from the slave. And while in the short run the master can compel the slave to recognize him with the threat of violence or even death, in the long run this is not very satisfying. Coerced recognition is not really recognition at all, but only a pale, psychologically unsatisfying substitute. So if Americans really want to be recognized by others, that recognition has to be freely given, not compelled, and that only is going to happen if we choose to make ourselves vulnerable by joining a world state. Ultimately, in other words, the question is if we could live with ourselves by not joining with the rest of "America," namely the globalized one in a world state. So as I see it, in the end, Americans will have a choice, between their nationalist communitarian identity as an independent sovereign state, and their liberal democratic identity as a potential member of a world state. Trying to have it both ways works for now, but in the long run I think it is an unstable equilibrium, and I think Americans will eventually choose their better half.