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ON THE ORGANIZING OF GLOBAL POLITICAL PARTIES

Abstract

There is tremendous tension between on the one hand, the processes where ideas, communication patterns, struggles and challenges are increasingly global in nature when at the same time, and on the other hand, the focus, action and spatial organization of political parties remain national. Global threats, such as global climate change, or regional issues, such as the euro crisis, are of cross-border concern and must be addressed together by way of shared mechanisms and according to shared visions. What is more, these issues can only be successfully dealt by way of universal rule and according to democratic principles where everyone concerned will have a say. In short, today, globalization affects everything but the organization of political parties.

The various globalization processes influence most aspects of our lives. An increasing number of matters are regulated by a complex system of international institutions, networks, and groups, or what we call “global governance.” Global governance operates in multiple and diffused ways and sites and it is within this system, consisting of a dense web of contracts, agreements, and understandings, that political parties define their operating space. This affects political organization in many ways, at least two of which must be singled out. First, networks and organizations lobby and gain influence over the decision-making in issue-specific matters. At times, these decisions take place in forums that lie outside democratic control. Second, globalization has provided people with new skills, and people are increasingly able not only technologically, but also legally, linguistically, culturally, and psychologically to have direct interaction regardless of their physical location (Scholte 2007: 14). And while these new developments have brought along risks for democratic decision-making, they simultaneously provide new possibilities for interaction, and for formulating political agendas in new ways. The new skills also cater for a new kind of interest in global issues.

These developments bring with them that the concepts of time and space regarding political decision-making are changing. One factor regarding time is that the big problems of the world, such as world poverty and global warming, require vision and political action over a time frame longer than the electoral cycle. Another factor is that as the electoral cycles in various nations differ, and this does not facilitate the forming of a space for creating concerted action even if such a vision existed. A third factor is that, in contrast to what a longer term vision would require, the political horizon for action seems to be drawing closer over time, expecting immediate results with a close eye on

the stock markets, thus copying the horizon of the business world. At times, politicians cultivate their own career and may therefore have less interest in furthering issues for the long-term. In addition, if their country is, say, benefitting from oil production, then they also have little interest in regulating this business. The focus on the short-term is also a result of polls and instant reactions via social media. A fourth factor worth listing is that the political space of national parties is framed by contracts agreed upon in multiple transnational forums, and importantly, these contracts tie the hands of future governments and thus limit the current as well as the future political space.

On the issue of space, the fact that many systems in the world become increasingly integrated challenges the basic democratic principle that those affected by decisions should have a say in such decisions. This includes the observation that production and manufacturing take place not necessarily close to the planning and decision-making site of the corporation. This means that regulatory decisions, for instance, may not carry any effect in sites far away from the company's headquarters. For instance, environmental effects of production in areas with cheap labour are not necessarily bound by the law in the jurisdiction of the corporate headquarters. Such systems raise questions not only with respect to labour laws and responsive action as they concern the environment, but also with respect to taxation and international capital flows. The spatial change in political decision-making also applies to the rule-making that takes place in the web of transnational organizations. Arguably, treaty-based organizations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Union (EU), are more than merely cooperative arrangements among members. They are also permanent institutions whose on-going authority does not require continuing consent from member states (Dunoff and Trachman 2009). The decision-makers in these organizations are not democratically elected, and this means that they are not accountable to electorates.

The geography and dynamics of formulating the required political responses to current problems are thus changing. Increasingly, politics takes place elsewhere. Yet, this "elsewhere" cannot be pinpointed to any particular electorate. At the same time though, the political decision powers remain with governments. This confusion may help to explain why, over the last 40 years, voter turnout has been steadily declining in most established democracies. Given this, it is therefore not surprising that one of the failures of the modern political party is precisely in educating publics (Scholte 2007: 23). To take it from here, one way is to ask: What are the questions that political parties seek to answer? The argument of this article is that pressing global issues, such as world poverty and climate change, cannot be successfully addressed on national scales alone. The blind focus on national economic competitiveness is blurring the global vision. The argument is constructed by way of four subquestions: What are the main challenges of political parties today? What is their connection to global civil society? What are the new movements? And finally, do we need global political parties?

1. *On Today's Challenges for Political Parties*

Political parties find themselves in a crisis because of sinking and aging membership figures, diminishing voter turnout, and lack of interest among the youth. There are several reasons for why trust in the party as an organization of political will is diminishing, and a few merit particular attention (see also Sehm-Patomäki and Ulvila 2007: 4).

To place parties in a historical perspective, it is important to remember that political parties are a fairly recent form of political organization. Today's western politics are dominated by the parties that grew out of the modern European and North American social movements mainly between 1750 and 1920 (Sehm-Patomäki and Ulvila 2007). The issues that these movements furthered, such as labour conditions, the right to organize labour, and women's voting rights can be dealt with regionally and by way of national legislation.

In contrast to these movements, today's political parties lose their effectiveness as instruments of democracy (Wallgren 2007). This goes in two ways; political parties remain region-focused and thus fail to address understanding of global issues (Scholte 2007). As democracy spreads across the globe through the third wave of democratization, economic and political globalization has once again shifted the locus of political power from the nation-state to the global level (Chase Dunn and Reese 2007). At the same time, economic globalization limits public discussion of democracy as states compete in creating favourable business environments for investors. Political elites see no alternative to the focusing on negotiating terms of surrender to corporate globalization.

On an individual level, ideologies may have slipped into the background as issue-based politics play center-stage. As a part of this development, politics is more personalized. Politicians tweet about their personal life and feelings. This makes politicians connect with voters on an immediate and personal basis, outside of ideology. Yet, this connection takes place through the filter of social media. The weight that media gives certain issues or particular politicians is decided by the media houses, outside of the control of politicians and in isolation from priorities as the people may rank them.

In the past, destruction of your neighbour might have been considered a goal in itself and a victory, but today we are all interdependent. We live in a global interconnected economy where we face problems that affect us all, like climate change or global economic slowdown. But so that the peoples may take a stand on these issues, such matters must be clearly defined and alternatives argued for. Generally though, political parties have underplayed their possibilities of democratizing global affairs (Scholte 2007: 25). Nor have they engaged in super-state or non-state governance mechanisms to the extent that it is expected (Scholte 2007: 27). While it is true that national parties form international networks – the roots to international party formations can be traced to the 19th century – it also holds that voters do not get to vote on these, their composition or agenda (for discussions on international organization of political parties, see Amin 2007; Patomäki and Teivainen 2008*a*; and Scholte 2007). What is more, the World Bank and the IMF are in more frequent and more formalized contact with global civil society than

with national political parties (Scholte 2007: 27). But not only do parties not engage with the IMF and other international organizations as they could: The absence of these links has contributed to a poor understanding from the IMF's part of national political circumstances (Scholte 2007: 27). This has set a new political agenda, where the priorities and their organization do not take shape by means of traditional mechanisms of direct or representative democracy.

The political party as a recent form of political organization may be on the threshold of renewal. It was only in the late 19th century, when political parties became mass membership organizations, that they started to become financially organised by raising membership dues and by receiving donations. This development of course brought along a host of new questions relating to dependency relations including the contrasting of personal gain over ideology. The changes ahead may prove to be as significant.

2. *Political Parties and Civil Society as Global Opinion*

Each political party in every nation must take a position regarding its agenda and how it fits in with global surroundings. In focusing on the future role, form, or principles of political parties we should not limit our attention to the specific forms we know now. The real nature of the political, or civil society, is not confined to the current forms we have attributed them.

To advance, we may use the observations from global civil society, the spontaneous political action that reached its heights in the early 2000s. In the 1990s, global civil society started to shadow meetings of nodes in the global governance network. In retrospect, this political energy may have culminated with Battle for Seattle in 1999. But still in the early 2000s, for instance, the process attracted hundreds of thousands of people into the streets on 15 February 2003, when 11 million people marched in 800 cities across the world against military attacks on Iraq. At that time, *the New York Times* proclaimed world public opinion to be the new global political force (Tyler 2003). This was also the time when international official political gatherings institutionalized civil society hearings as part of their meetings.

But the energy from transnational civil society has not evolve further and it has not channelled into concrete political action. Paradoxically, it may have been the launch of the World Social Forum process in 2001 that led to a fatigue of the spontaneous activities. It seems contradictory to the traditional understanding of political organization that the World Social Forum process was born under the main declaration that it does not seek power, and that it is and will always be a *space*, not an organization. The organization is horizontal, not hierarchical. It was going to be almost a decade until a second wave of global civil society action emerged. First, in 2010, the Arab spring movement emerged expressing regional dissatisfaction with the rulers and second, in 2011, the Occupy movement started protesting specifically against economic greed.

One reason for why the transformation into political action is difficult is that there are no political forms that fit global civil society to further its political aims. Another reason may be that global civil society may have stumbled on its own demands regarding its

political organization. If this holds, then a constructive interpretation is that the World Social Forum movement was ahead of its time. In that case, global civil society may re-emerge, and the future will show whether forms and goals meet.

But although the organization of political will as political parties may be problematic, it is still irreplaceable (Wallgren 2007: 40). The ideal of direct democracy is hard to live up to already because of the sheer number of decisions that need to be made concerning legislation, distribution of resources. What is more, national and local preferences are of course not easily or appropriately interpreted or defended by those unfamiliar with relevant cultural codes, customs, circumstances, and traditions.

This leads us to conclude so far, that what should be discussed is not the idea of replacing national parties with global ones, but rather, the idea of seeing global political organization as a complement to their national counterparts. Within history, we find inspiration from successful issue-focused movements such as the anti-slavery campaigns in the USA in the mid-1900s and the mentioned movements for labour rights starting in Europe in the 19th century. More recently, the green parties have spread out in many countries into some kind of a green movement, although they have not developed into a global political force. An alternative way to approach the political is thus to focus on the *movement* rather than on the *organization* (Scholte 2007; Gill 2007).

These movements just mentioned have led to a transnational introduction of certain common principles. Today, slavery is not acceptable and labour rights are protected by law. While these form a particular degree of institutional change, we must not shy away from exploring the need for higher degrees of institutional development. We must ask ourselves if we want to create new global institutions. But before doing so, it is of relevance to take a closer look at the newest social movements.

3. *New Movements: Nationalism and Xenophobia*

New movements emerge differently and into different circumstances than traditional political parties have done. In the past decades, social mass movements have formed around two particular issues; one is environmental concerns, as mentioned above, and the other is the rise of a far right (Wallgren 2007: 46). In the past years, a third movement has formed in protest against European austerity concerns. In line with previous successful mass mobilizations, also these new movements have their roots in Europe. But what distinguishes these from the traditional social movements, which spoke for labour rights and women's voting rights, is that the new movements reflect international concerns. Environmental degradation cannot be controlled by political borders, xenophobia is partly fuelled by immigration, and EU austerity policies have divided Europe into North and South.

Yet, while it is easy to see that these three groups are results of protests, it would be wrong to assume that they can be unified into a single form of agency or party (Gill 2007). Beginning with the most recent movement, the street protests in Europe echo the demonstrations in Latin America in the 1980s and in Africa in the 1990s. It is now Europe that suffers from the combined weight of high debt, low growth, high

unemployment, and increasing inequality. As in Latin America and Africa before, the attention of the protesters turns towards the institutions that are in charge of the debt sustainability assessments. But where the main focus used to be the IMF, in Europe it lies with the European Central Bank (ECB). Importantly, the attention is on an institution that is not democratic and where political parties have little influence. The debt crisis of the euro zone exemplifies the limits that the national political party faces in dealing with the situation.

The two pieces of advice to debt-burdened countries tend to be the same. The first is to implement structural reforms, which usually include to reduce labour costs and to cut in social expenditures. The second is to open the borders to trade and in particular, to increase exports. This advice may be problematic in several ways, for one, the term “structural reform” tends to stand for declines in educational and health care sectors, or to put it differently, immediate savings which tend to be costly in the long run. In addition, as trade is constituted of imports and exports, the emphasis on free-trade may have the opposite effects to the one intended, namely, that of increasing exports. Imports may have a slowing effect on the national production and this on exports. But without entering that discussion any further here, for the purposes of this article, the main problem is found in the simultaneous and uniform way in which every nation is reducing their labour costs and social expenditures aiming at increasing their exports. Austerity policies tend to decrease overall demand, and when such policies are implemented in whole regions at once, or even globally, the prospects for economic growth are not favourable. In short, the advice is neither favouring economic growth nor the thriving of the population. In fact, following structural adjustments in the Euro zone, European unemployment reached 12 per cent in 2013, with Greece and Spain approaching 30 per cent (see Eurostat 2013 for figures).

It is often clear to the people that the hands of the politicians are tied, and this provokes radical reactions. Political action aim at softening the effects of the crisis, not at addressing the causes of the crisis. As a consequence, the street protesters do not feel that they are being listened to. This is manifested in rising far-right political movements and nationalistic parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence party in the UK, the True Finns in Finland, and the Golden Dawn in Greece. Even though these parties do not publically speak in favour of racism, they do, however, battle with xenophobic views. Out of these, the Golden Dawn may be the most internationally oriented party; reportedly, it is looking beyond Greece to countries with large Greek populations like Australia, England, and Canada to broaden its political reach (Arvanitakis 2013).

But far-right movements emerged in the EU before the euro crisis; the Alliance of the Future of Austria is perhaps the most debated. Putting aside the questions of the potential causal links between the EU project as such and the strengthening of neo-fascist or other far-right movements, the degrees of fascism within these movements or their links to Nazism, the point of the current argument is that among the international movements that we see, these far-right groupings of pronounced nationalism and xenophobia remain important and on the increase. In addition to what has been mentioned, far-right movements have gained political power in Hungary and Norway.

The third new movement is that of environmental concerns. Somehow surprisingly, the threatening global warming has not necessarily strengthened the positions of the green parties. This is interesting, given that one of the major current security concerns is global warming (see IPCC 2013). An explanation for this inaction may be that “green principles” are adopted on paper by most, if not all, political parties, but yet, the common global frame is not defined. In any case, this observation points towards new questions: Would the green movement require some form of global institutionalization for it to gain stronger support, or does the movement itself need some kind of transformation?

4. *What about Global Political Parties?*

The institutional framework that we have in place today is a result of the efforts of preventing a third world war following the first two. Since then, the framework has been complemented and to the extent that we have been saved from a third world war, the framework has been successful. Importantly, though, the very shortcomings of this framework that were left unaddressed in the 1940s have now turned into two central stumble blocks for humanity. The first issue is the lack of global mechanisms of control for human activities that worsen global warming. This is partly a result of the fact that the UN Charter does not mention the world “environment,” and global warming was not foreseen in the 1940s. The second issue relates to the global economy and world poverty. As John Maynard Keynes predicted in the 1940s, the adopted system would lead to deep divisions among nations. Instead of creating a system where the balance of the trade of nations equals zero, as Keynes (1943) suggested, the adopted system favors nations with export surpluses. This is problematic already because not all nations can have export surpluses at the same time, but also because the export composition differs among nations and regions. The framework also left out stabilization mechanisms for commodity prices, the main export of developing nations. This framework sets limits for the national political space, and these limits differ among nations.

The question then becomes whether we need new institutions, and if so, what should the kind of organizations, and their underlying principles, be? Are we thinking of regional or global institutions? And how do we approach the principles of direct and/or representative democracy?

Another approach while trying to answer the challenges of a globalized world is to note that if political parties are among the only things that have not been globalized, an intuitive question is to ask whether we should, then, look into the idea of global political parties (Sehm-Patomäki and Ulvila 2007). This issue is perhaps best approached by way of searching for answers to the subquestions that emerge, both theoretically and practically. For one, for the subsequent questions to be meaningful, it is essential to stress the plurality of several global political parties, and the importance of creating similar organizations simultaneously. Second, if such processes were in place, how would global elections be organized? And for a party to be truly global it would have to show actual interests beyond the West. This, on the other hand, would mean that any form of

political organization that covers large heterogeneous geographical territories would necessarily face challenges of hierarchy and subsidiarity. The simple definition of a political party is a formal organization that supports candidates for public office; but then, is it possible to have global parties without a world government into which persons would be elected (for discussions, see Patomäki and Teivainen 2007*a* and *b*)? Perhaps *governance*, as mentioned in the beginning, is more relevant than *government* (see also Scholte 2007:15)?

Yet, the thought of global political parties is almost intuitively associated with the idea of a world parliament. So far, the experiences of the regional European Parliament are not always positive and do not point to an unhindered path towards a global parliament or government. Not only has the European experiment of the EU given rise to criticism for lack of democratic control in its various entities, but further, or maybe consequently, the voter turnout in elections of the European Parliament has been on a steady decline. The Eurobarometer (2013: 11) reports that in 2013, 67 per cent of Europeans feel that their voice does not count in the EU. This is not only a rise from 42 per cent in 2004, but also illustrates an unbroken trend. The reasons behind this result may be complex and EU-specific and therefore, the result should not necessarily be assumed to other regional, or global, arrangements. The importance here is the continued trend and the apparent inability to correct it. In the absence of a global entity, and putting aside the normative discussions regarding its desirability and the experiences from the EU, early thoughts on another possibility emerge: perhaps parties could co-operate and collectively take positions in international matters that they would then further in their respective governments and legislations. The key would be for the populations to learn of and vote for these positions, principles, and arguments.

Transnational civil society has not organized into seeds towards global political parties. In fact, the role of political parties in the democratization of globalization has received surprisingly modest attention. Rather, for many, the term “global political party” seems to bring back images of the communist party, with a less than flattering track record. However, another way of approaching this idea is to present neoliberalism as a global political program that has been implemented by most nations – without the support of a global political party. A third approach comes with a warning. It may be that developments towards global political parties are even dangerous. The emergence of the far-right was mentioned, but there is also another dimension that must be taken seriously, namely, that the idea in itself may be a Eurocentric or North-centric initiative that leaves little space for other visions, values, or priorities (Pratap 2007; Patomäki and Teivainen 2007*b*: 154; see also Wallgren 2007).

Our traditional understanding of the organization of the political is thus under transformation. Our globalized and globalizing world surely requires new thinking involving geography, space, and common political priorities.

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