

## The Time for a World Political Party is Now: A Response to Critics

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In the future, we will see many world political parties (WPPs). The idea of WPP is generic. While our capacity to envisage our common existence from a planetary perspective and to organise politics accordingly is a value in itself, I am advocating a particular vision such a party could take. This ambiguity has triggered a number of critical comments, so let me be clear: what I propose is that we establish a democratic socialist world party. At the same time, however, I believe that in a pluralistic and non-Eurocentric world there will be other simultaneous and substantial ideals around which future politics revolve.

What could a democratic socialist world party do under the current institutional and political economy circumstances? We know that actors “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”. Certainly, there have been better world-historical moments for global democratic ideas than the early 2020s, such as the end of the two world wars and the 1990s. If anything, the world is now disintegrating, in part as a result of the rise of nationalist populism. This rise has been strongly fuelled by the 2008-9 crisis and its consequences, but its deeper causes are related to neoliberalisation that started back in 1971-1981. Moreover, in spite of many campaigns, it remains the case that there is still no world parliament (or government). Even if the idea of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) was realised immediately, it would probably give greater participation and voice for members of national parliaments, rather than creating space for anything resembling global political parties proper. No global elections are yet in sight.

It is reasonable, at least tentatively, to see the current situation in terms of Karl Polanyi’s double movement, although clearly, history does not simply repeat itself. There is no pendulum of history. Also, we cannot go back to what Axel Honneth calls the intellectual fictions of the age of the Industrial Revolution, namely that historical progress is necessary and that it will be carried forward by a particular class with fixed interests. While the working class movement in England and elsewhere emerged from a variety of real socio-economic conditions, it was actively made by socialists who believed in its world-historical role. The socio-economic conditions are different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance, industrial workers form a declining share of labour force in most countries.

Changing realities require new ideas. The idea of transformative global agency is purported to make a wide rational appeal across different social classes: “this is what is reasonable for us to do!”. As Richard Falk puts it, “the very adversity of circumstances and the severity of global risks is giving rise to a radical populist consciousness”. In addition to these risks, and the acute sense of injustices and asymmetries of power, there must also be a positive direction. David Christian expresses the positive part of the idea eloquently: the challenge is to construct “a new and inspiring vision of where we humans are today, a vision that can inspire optimism and ambition about the planetary task of building a sustainable future”. Indeed, this is the main aim of my call for a WPP.

The making of a collective agency is a process of active and reflexive engagement within the world. The 19<sup>th</sup> century socialists, who believed in their world-historical role, established trade unions, various associations and societies, and founded labour and socialist parties. The making of a working class not only shaped the development of industrial capitalism but also, together with the

20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes, led to the establishment of dictatorial and often violent single party socialist regimes across the world. We need to learn from these historical experiences, both negatively and positively. The negative lesson is to avoid the intellectual fictions of the age of the Industrial Revolution. The positive lesson is to acknowledge the diversity of elements that fed into the process of forming the 19<sup>th</sup> century working class. The majority of these associations, unions and parties were struggling to democratise society, often successfully so.

Similarly, we can see the emergence of global civil society and the possible rise of world political party as part of a wide process of global transformation. Citizens across the world are disillusioned by national politics. The latest rounds of globalisation have turned most national parties post-democratic. Consider the fate of Syriza in Greece, for instance. What happened was not simply an example of how Michels’s law of oligarchy works. More importantly, the debacle of summer 2015 is an illustration of the power of creditors over debtors in the world economy and the lack of equitable rule of law in worldwide financial relations. During past decades a large number of countries in the global south went through similar experiences. These experiences instigated the emergence of global debt campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s.

Civil society is about associational life and public space. Since Hegel, there have been several conceptions of civil society, each of which accord with different ethical and political aims of public associations. Table 1 summarises four conceptions of civil society. These are not universal categories but results of particular historical discussions and conceptual developments. Variations 2-4 all contain ideas that important for emancipation and increasing social freedom. It is of course true that many contemporary civil society organisations are financially and otherwise dependent on powers that be, and even those that are not, tend to focus on one or two limited issues. This does not annul the idea that civil society organisations can do good things or foster ideas of global justice and democracy (it is true that although the abstract concept of justice is universal, its substance and direction are not; however, there is no space to pursue the implications here). Moreover, in a good society the freedom of association must prevail. As Roy Bhaskar puts it, even when civil society is conceived in economic and socialist terms, the social virtues of civil society involves “a domain of innovation, initiative and enterprise necessary to a dynamic, pluralistic socialist society”.

Table 1: Approaches to civil society

	Focus on property rights and market economy	Focus on moral or political civil society
Procedural democracy (liberalism)	1. Lockean-Schumpeterian approach: primacy of stability in capitalist market economy	2. Fair participation in political processes and similar ideas (often associated with Mill and Rawls)
Participatory democracy (republicanism)	3. The idea of participatory democratised, economic organisations and systems	4. Dissident ideas and “Green” political theory; the New Left; “postmaterial values”

Although national laws vary, a political party is best seen as an instance of public association. A typical national political party is an association that has achieved the right to nominate candidates in elections and thereby contest and claim the political power of the state. A party has to have a wide programme covering multiple complex issues, for its point is to take part in making laws and

budgetary decisions. A world political party could not claim the power of world state, simply because there is no world state. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the party itself would constitute a public sphere; and the existing international regimes, or systems of regional and global governance, would provide sites for a public sphere and political actions, as do elements of global media. However, the *raison d'être* of the world party must lie in furthering transformations and various new institutional forms in which the planetary public realm can be organised. For this purpose, the largely shared opinions will be forged into a programme of change, which can also involve direct or indirect participation in elections in different countries and organisations. We can distinguish between three moments of transformative global democratic action:

MOMENT 1: Activities within the confines of established institutions.

MOMENT 2: Advocacy to transform global institutions and create new ones.

MOMENT 3: Participation in the newly formed global institutions.

These three moments form a logical order: activities within existing institutions can include advocacy of, and legislation for, global-democratic institutions. A grouping of like-minded countries, supported by global civil society and WPPs, can suffice for establishing a new global system of governance. These systems can be functional and yet democratic. Successful attempts at creating institutions of planetary democracy make participation in them possible. Over time, new institutions will become established, and the cycle can continue from (MOMENT 1) to (MOMENT 2) to (MOMENT 3). Each cycle changes the constellation of forces in global politics. There is no end to history; and not all new institutions will have to be planetary in scope. Global institutions can, and in many cases should, increase the contextually overlapping, multi-layered autonomy and social freedom of actors, learning from experiences in the spirit of experimentalism.

At this point, I must again stress the distinction between the generic idea of a world political party and a particular version of it. But before exploring that distinction further, I must clarify that the published version of the call for a WPP was cut down and edited by the GTI team. I did not write the sentence “a detailed blueprint for a WPP is neither advisable nor possible”, though I accepted it as a summary of my approach, partly because applying the metaphor of a blueprint to a political programme risks reducing what should be a dynamic, over time evolving and democratic process to a static and mechanical model. Nonetheless, I also argued that:

[... the] actors aiming at transformation must thus adopt programs specifying aims and outlining concrete utopias. Theory and practice have to be consistent. This implies that the transformative practice itself has to be capable of learning, democratic will-formation and decision-making. The organizational forms of transformative agency must be compatible with all these requirements.

Since the 1990s, I have been involved in developing and advocating several global concrete utopias (or *eutopias* as I prefer to call them), from a debt arbitration mechanism and global taxes (including global greenhouse gas tax) to a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Keynes's clearing union. One of my favourite ideas is support for workers' rights and trade unionization on a planetary scale, both out of solidarity and to increase global aggregate demand. Another key idea is to regulate and maintain aggregate efficient demand on a global scale, which presupposes the coordinated institutionalization of economic policies between nation-states and functional international organizations, coordinated for example through a world parliament. These reforms would be critically important also for global peace and security, as the main formative causes of conflicts and securitisation tend to lie in the sphere of political economy. We need to build a more cooperative and equitable world.

The rational tendential direction of world history is toward green global Keynesianism, also in order to achieve democratic control over the mechanisms and processes of capitalist world economy. It is contingent how well any of the proposed institutional arrangements will work. There are also deeper and more generic aims. The ultimate aim lies in increasing human emancipation and furthering the development of all on this thin sphere of life of our fragile planet, in the wide context of cosmic evolution. This generic aim should, in my view, constitute the key idea of a democratic socialist world party, which should encourage a diversity of emancipatory projects on scales varying from local to cosmic, focussing for instance on the idea of commons. It would be premature to write a detailed programme for a WPP before the process leading to its creation has begun; at this point we can only outline a broad direction. And, to reiterate, there will be many WPPs.

Let me conclude this short response by outlining three scenarios about the future role of WPPs in global politics. The three scenarios are:

- A) A world political party – or a number of them – will be formed in the near future, proving decisively important in future transformations.
- B) Transformations emerge mainly from within the existing structures of power (global “gorbachevs” rise in response to crises, resonating with wider societal developments and new ideas); in this scenario, new democratic systems of global governance will precipitate the formation of WPPs, with important functions.
- C) Current developments will lead to a global military or ecological catastrophe; a world party will assume leadership and establish a democratic world state (this is the well-known scenario of W. Warren Wagar in his *A Short History of Future*); soon the world party will be challenged by other world political parties, carrying the project of emancipation further, perhaps into new and hitherto unimagined directions.

My general anticipation is that WPPs will be in the centre stage of future world politics, no matter which of these scenarios will come true. The current system is not sustainable economically, politically, militarily or ecologically. I am all in favour of scenario 1. To avoid a catastrophe, or an elite-led development, the time to establish a democratic world political party is indeed now!

Reflexively, the democratic-socialist world party would recognise a widespread tendency towards post-democratic forms of governance – towards oligarchy – and face it as a permanent challenge for its own legitimacy as well. Hence, oligarchic tendencies would have to be countered also in terms of cultivating the republican virtues and courageous participation of its constantly shifting groups of activist members. This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for ensuring democratic responsiveness and learning. A WPP is a historical experiment in itself.

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