

Outline and assess Dryzek's critique of cosmopolitan democracy/multilateralism.

I will assess John Dryzek's critique of cosmopolitan democracy/multilateralism with close textual reference to the seventh and eighth chapters of his book *Deliberative Global Politics*. He makes a few valid points, such as arguing that promoting a sense of global citizenship is very difficult faced with a world of divided identities. However, I will outline three weaknesses with his argument. Firstly, he makes unsubstantiated assumptions that he does not back up with evidence or clear examples, which leaves gaps in the form of his argument. Secondly, some of his criticisms, such as administrative excess and bureaucratic unaccountability, can be turned against his own deliberative democracy. Thirdly, I will challenge whether the processes he promotes as an alternative to multilateral democracy have real world impact or are normatively desirable.

Overview

Multilateralism is a school of thought that seeks to establish order in an anarchic realm of international relations through legal agreements between multiple states. This includes treaties and formal bodies like the United Nations and European Union. For example, agencies of the United Nations are responsible for creating norms and laws regarding international travel by sea and air. The basic premise is that anarchy can be fought off by mutual agreement, but today, with no international rule of law to enforce compliance, the multilateral ideal is hardly complete.

Cosmopolitan democracy extends multilateralism by proposing constitutionalism as a method of creating international order. In the first case, cosmopolitan thinkers like David Held argue for the strengthening of international organisations, and secondly, for their democratisation. Held and Crawford write that the legitimacy of state sovereignty has been eroded by globalisation, and should be gradually supplemented by international democratic institutions at a regional level. Descriptively, he points to the increased importance of human rights, especially in the

European Union where they are legally protected¹. Held does not use this example himself, but one might look at the development of peace-keeping operations around the world, in Kosovo for instance, when democratic principles and the protection of human rights were deemed more important than the sovereignty of state.

For Cosmopolitan thinkers, the boundaries of nation states do not adequately represent the 'communities of fate' for complex global issues such as the use of fossil fuels, exploitation of environmental treasures and the global market². Held speaks of a "double sided process" of democratisation, not concentrating democratic power at a higher global level, but extending democracy at local, national and regional levels. The European Union is perhaps an early example of this (except that it is often criticised for having a democratic deficit). To summarise, cosmopolitan democracy envisages international rule of law and constitutional separation of powers at different levels of government becoming new norms of international relations.

There is an important difference between Dryzek's and Held's understanding of transnational democracy. For Dryzek, democracy is not to be found in the ballot box, but is a deliberative process of changing a group's preferences and opinions³. Deliberative democracy, therefore, does not propose a final model of international democracy to be sought, but encourages a process of democratisation at an informal level across and within state boundaries. This deliberation happens in civil society, and is manifest in the media and grassroots pressure groups, whereas states and international corporations are less amenable to discursive deliberation.

Dryzek's main criticisms of multilateralism are the alleged problems of 'constitutional excess' and 'excessive administration'. By 'constitutional excess', he means that the more numerous or complicated laws become, the more interpretation of law (by the judiciary) becomes increasingly necessary and important in its application. Dryzek argues that the clarity of the

1 Held, D. The Changing Contours of Political Community. In: M. Greven (ed) Democracy - a Western Political Culture? Leske und Budrich, 1999, pp. 24

2 McGrew, A. Transnational Democracy. In: G Stokes and A Carter (eds), Democratic Theory Today: Challenges for the 21st Century. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, pp. 270-271

3 Dryzek, J. S. Transnational Democracy, The Journal of Political Philosophy Vol. 7, No. 1, 1999, pp. 44

law is inversely proportional to the number of laws⁴ and that more complex matters cannot be dealt with in all their aspects by legislation. He claims that “there are many structures and processes that offer alternatives to constitutionalization”⁵ but does not mention any. By 'excessive administration' he means to imply that bureaucracies cannot effectively administrate very complicated subjects.

Valid Points in Dryzek's Critique

Dryzek does recognise some valid criticism of cosmopolitan democracy⁶. For cosmopolitan democracy to succeed, people across the world would need to accept the discourse of globalisation, that is global citizenship and responsibility, as opposed to the current climate of divisions on the basis of identity. This seems a daunting task for the cosmopolitan. Moreover, to be democratic, autonomous individuals should be able to reject the constitutional framework of cosmopolitan democracy⁷. Cosmopolitanism cannot be democratic without potentially allowing its global unity to be compromised. The American Civil War is one historical example of bloodshed over the issue of ceding from a greater democratic institution. Divisions of North or South identity came before the unified identity of citizens of the United States, and a similar fate might befall any global democratic system. One wonders whether cosmopolitan writers would justify coercion to maintain a cosmopolitan world should it ever exist and Dryzek calls on Popper⁸ to argue that coercion is an inevitable consequence of implementing “blueprint” systems like cosmopolitanism.

It might be a more important criticism of cosmopolitanism, not that it would lead to too much coercive power, but that there is not enough power to radically change the current international system to bring about cosmopolitanism. At present it is far from certain that the numerous real-world challenges to cosmopolitanism can be overcome.

4 Ibid. pp. 137

5 Ibid. pp. 140

6 Ibid. pp. 153

7 Ibid. pp. 144

8 Popper, K. *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966

Dryzek does have a point that heavily administrative institutions suffer from a democratic deficit⁹, since the more complicated a system is, the harder it is for a layperson to understand. For example, many people seek professional help when calculating how much tax they are required to pay, and almost everyone seeks professional legal counsel to argue on their behalf in court. While a cosmopolitan thinker might go on to explore methods to bring greater transparency and accountability to public processes, especially in the international sphere, Dryzek favours a movement to networked governance. Later, I will examine this idea of networked governance in comparison to hierarchical organisations.

Unsubstantiated Assumptions and Unconvincing Examples

The first weakness of Dryzek's argument that I will address is the assumptions he makes. Either crucial steps of reasoning are omitted, or the examples he provides are unconvincing. He takes a little time to praise bureaucracy for its success in dealing with complex matters but asks the question "Why then do systems grounded in instrumental-analytical rationality eventually fail when confronted with growing complexity?"¹⁰. Dryzek hides the assumption in this question, hoping that his readers will ignore the non-sequitur. He has failed to demonstrate in any capacity that bureaucracy fails to cope with problems past a certain level of complexity.

The examples he provides of 'failure' of a centralised system, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, continued poverty in the United States and the September 11th terrorist attacks not being prevented¹¹, are not conclusive. We are led to suppose that they are indicative of failures of the system, but each example is clouded in debate as to the individual circumstances. In other words, his evidence of some unrelated and unconnected mistakes or partial failures does not support his conclusion that the system as a whole is flawed.

A favourite example of Dryzek is that the United States' pursuit of the 'War on Terror' is a

9 Ibid. pp. 142

10 Ibid. pp. 141

11 Ibid. pp. 142

severe blow for multilateralism¹². I agree that the invasion of Iraq without the support of United Nations Security Council is strong evidence to support this claim. On the other hand, it is too early to know what the long term effects of the war on terror will be. One of the reasons the war in Iraq has been controversial in the United Kingdom was the lack of international support. If Dryzek is right that protests in London against the war in Iraq “help[ed] reshape the global constellation of discourses”, then it may be that the unpopularity of the Iraq War will lead to a reaction of increased support for multilateralism and a strengthening of international rule of law.

The European Union is often viewed as prime example of cosmopolitan democracy in action, incorporating as it does national democracies and regional government. Dryzek criticises it in a number of ways and tries to downplay its successes, but ultimately I cannot find his criticisms convincing because he fails to show his working. Dryzek tries to deny that the EU's successes are related to its “constitutional framework”. He instead attributes the success of this cosmopolitan prototype to “the multi-level networked governance that may occur in the vicinity of the constitutional framework of the EU, but not because of it”¹³. The phrase is cryptic; Dryzek should show some evidence of how 'multi-level networked governance' can be separated from the 'constitutional framework' and why one is responsible for the EU's successes, but not the other. Or if they are separate, it is not unreasonable to suppose the multi-level networked governance came into being as a result of, or in conjunction with, the formal creation of the European Union. Again, he accuses the EU of being “famously insensitive to variations in local conditions”¹⁴ without citing examples.

Using his own terms, one might speak of European unity as a discourse which has its supporters and countering reflexive traditionalisation movement. In 2004, the European Constitution was signed by member states. Of the four countries to hold referenda on the issue of ratification (fifteen states ratified the treaty through the conventional political process), two rejected and two accepted the treaty. This is a good example of competing discourses in action.

¹² Ibid. pp. 152

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Dryzek's claim that "European... peoples find it very hard to internalize any notion of citizenship beyond the state level" seems to deny the very real struggle between national, European and even global identity. If what he says were true, the European Union would have no support at all, which is not the case. Any kind of globalisation, including discursive democracy, is irrelevant if no one could extend responsibility or identity beyond state boundaries. We know that the idea of regional citizenship must exist, because of the very existence of the European Union, support (even if divided) for it, and the debate on whether to increase European integration.

As with the War on Terror, Dryzek may have pronounced judgement on Europe too soon. Throughout the nineteenth century and twice in the twentieth century, Europe tore itself apart in wars over national identity. Since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 to the widespread adoption of the single currency in 2002 there has not been to date a war between two European Union member states. There is, of course, no guarantee that this process will continue, but cosmopolitans hope that continued integration will succeed in replacing conflict and national divisions with economic prosperity and regional unity.

Arguments That Cut Both Ways

My second criticism is that Dryzek's critical arguments can be employed against his own theory. Dryzek criticises international regimes for being unaccountable: "Discretionary action... is often exercised in practice by unelected and often unaccountable officials"¹⁵. Yet in this regard, the hierarchical system of administration he criticises is far superior to his idea of 'networked governance'. Networks suffer from an even greater lack of accountability than do hierarchical administrative systems: in a hierarchy, either the agent concerned with the particular sub-problem, or the overall head of the organisation, is responsible for its actions. Yet in a network, when everyone is responsible, no one is accountable. Dryzek's response to this is that networks should involve "communicative action engaged by critical and competent

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 136

individuals”, but there is never any guarantee – in any system – that decision makers will be competent, think critically and communicate efficiently. The criticisms of 'constitutional excess' and 'excessive administration' can be inversely applied to his own discursive democracy. If multilateralism and cosmopolitanism suffer from administrative excess, then discursive democracy is under a far more severe threat of administrative deficit.

For Dryzek, networked governance is legitimised if democratic in nature. For him, the deliberative process in a network will produce desirable results and reduces the need for accountability. Yet contestation of discourses does not necessarily result in optimal outcomes. In the context of changing attitudes to American foreign policy within Washington D.C. earlier in Chapter Four¹⁶, Dryzek points out that the difficulty of doing the 'right thing' (in this case improve diplomatic relations with the rest of the world) is the myriad of competing strategic interests involved in the network of government. By implication, Dryzek has shown that the United States government, too, is a network made up of hundreds of elected and thousands of unelected individuals. In this example, competing self-interest can prevent the ideal solution from being adopted, despite deliberation. Dryzek would likely respond to this point that networks outside the apparatus of state are more flexible and open to democratic deliberation, aside from strategic interests. Yet self-interest is not limited to individuals within government, and a certain amount of bargaining and compromise is a common feature of the democratic process. We also see that some networks can be highly undemocratic and even violent in nature.

Dryzek accuses constitutionalism of failing the test of reflexivity because it “relies on a mechanistic view of the world”¹⁷ to succeed. Yet the 'failure' of constitutionalism to find exact mechanisms to govern human society in every circumstance is exactly what makes it open to change and adjustment over time. Having a constitution, therefore, is not necessarily an impediment to being a versatile reflexive society. In the same passage, he argues that a constitution was not enough to ensure the rule of law in the aftermath of French Revolution or

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 81

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 138

the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, it may be worth remembering that both those revolutions were brought about by citizens oppressed by absolute autocratic rule without safeguards or checks, seeking constitutionalism to redress these injustices and hoping to achieve democratic self-rule. Constitutions, then, including the United States constitution, have long been a potent tool in the struggle for democracy and Dryzek is too quick to eschew them..

Undesirable and of Ambiguous Impact

The processes that Dryzek promotes are not concerned with authority, but influence¹⁸. Dryzek does not deny the existing centres of authority. By omission, he argues against any radical change and reform of formal international institutions. So on one level, discursive democracy declines to reform the international decision-making process directly. Though Dryzek labels cosmopolitanism as an utopian model-based theory that cannot be realised, he misses the point that the implementation of cosmopolitanism is also a process. Dryzek prefers to focus on the process of democratising informal power, whereas cosmopolitanism seeks the democratisation of formal power. Dryzek's theory is only relevant on non-normative grounds, therefore, if Dryzek convincingly shows that deliberation of discourses does, in fact, have influence on 'real' power.

Dryzek's theory relies on the assertion that discursive deliberation can affect the terms of the decision making process. He cites the example of the rise of environmentalism, a term which came into existence only a few decades ago. At the same time, however, he criticises states and the international community for its "glacial progress" on tackling climate change¹⁹. Dryzek cannot have it both ways, firstly that discourses affect the decision process, and that secondly the existing institutions are resistant to discursive deliberation. Elsewhere in this essay, I have argued that Dryzek pronounces judgement on recent events too soon. Now it may be that we have yet to see the full effect of the environmental discourse, or that human contributions to climate change will never be curtailed by the international community, or even that current

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 154

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 134

environmental thinking is quite incorrect. My point is that there is still doubt that the process of democratising civil society will have a lasting effect on the realm of international relations and decision making.

One incident that Dryzek produces as an example of a civil society group affecting a corporation's and state's decision is Brent Spar²⁰. The example is an interesting one. The publicity campaign and actions of Greenpeace prompted a consumer backlash against Shell over its decision to dump an unused redundant sea platform in deep ocean waters. Faced with a fall in profits, Shell capitulated and dismantled the platform on land. Yet in normative terms, there are several aspects of this episode which make it a very unattractive model for civil society. Greenpeace violated the private property of Shell Corporation and they were less than fastidious in their assessment of the environmental impact of dumping the platform. It is still ambiguous whether the environmental impact of dismantling the facility onshore is preferable than dumping it in an unused area of resource-less ocean, especially considering the disparity in cost. So without clear evidence that Shell's actions would have a worse environmental impact than the alternative, Greenpeace put their publicity campaign and political agenda before Shell's right to private property and the United Kingdom's sovereignty over its territorial waters.

Dryzek says that in this case, Greenpeace had the most freedom to act, but this lack of constraints also enabled them to act in direct opposition to current models of power and decision-making on rational grounds. Greenpeace were successful in mobilising public opinion over this issue, but (eco-)terrorist groups act in the same 'unconstrained reflexivity'. Of course Dryzek does not support terrorism, but an increase in the number or activities of this particular type of pressure group would not be a victory for democracy, but anarchy.

20 Ibid. pp. 99-100, 122

Conclusion

In conclusion, I picked out some unsubstantiated assumptions from Dryzek's critique, and provided alternative explanations for his examples. I looked at the successes of the European Union in some detail, and concluded that Dryzek was too quick to dismiss them out of hand. I tried to apply some of his criticisms of multilateralism to his alternative of deliberative democracy, especially arguing that networked governance is unaccountable in the same way that hierarchical systems are (or could be). Finally, I focused on deliberative democracy, and challenged Dryzek's claim that it has a real impact on the world, and whether that impact is desirable. I trust that with hindsight, it will become clearer what effect, if any, discursive deliberation has had on the world.

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