

The Age of Consent

By George Monbiot

Without global democracy, national democracy is impossible. If you don't believe me, take a look at what has happened to Luiz Inacio da Silva. Before he became president of Brazil, Lula promised to transform the way his country was run. The economy would be managed for the sake of society, rather than society for the sake of the economy. Well I think it is fair to say that he has done his best. But Brazil still looks like a neoliberal economy. The reason is obvious: the key economic decisions were not made by him, but by the financial speculators and the International Monetary Fund. Even if our representatives want to change the way our nations are run, they are unable to do so. They become technocrats, managers of the conditions thrust upon them.

The shift of power to the global sphere is the reason why almost every major political party on earth now has the same policies. Their policies are pre-determined by the banks and financial speculators, the corporations and the global institutions. At the national level, there is democracy but no choice. At the global level, there is choice but no democracy. The great question of our age is what the hell we intend to do about it.

Many within our movement have responded to this problem in two related ways. The first is to seek to regain control of politics by dragging it back to the only level at which true democracy could be said to work: the local community. The second is to accept that representative politics has failed, and to ditch it in favour of "participatory" or "direct" democracy. I understand and sympathise with both positions. But I feel they are inadequate responses to the challenges we face.

All the issues we care about most – climate change, international debt, nuclear proliferation, war, the balance of trade between nations – can be resolved only at the global or the international level. Without global measures, it is impossible to see how we might distribute wealth from rich nations to poor ones, tax the mobile rich and their even more mobile money, control the shipment of toxic waste, sustain the ban on landmines, prevent the use of nuclear weapons, broker peace between nations or prevent powerful states from forcing weaker ones to trade on their terms. By working only at the local level, we leave these, the most critical of issues, to the men who have appointed themselves to run the world.

Moreover, everything we attempt to implement at the local level can be destroyed at the global or the continental level. Look at what the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas has done to local environmental protection. Look at what the General Agreement on Trade in Services will do to public education and healthcare. Look at what European subsidies have done to small farmers in the developing world. Ignoring global governance does not make it go away. It is happening now. It will continue to happen, with or without us. And – and this is the most uncomfortable truth with which we must engage – it must happen, if the issues which concern us are not to be resolved simply by the brute force of the powerful.

It seems to me, in other words, that it is not enough to think globally and act locally, important as this is. We must act globally as well. Our task is not to overthrow globalisation, but to capture it, and to use it as a vehicle for humanity's first global democratic revolution.

Now many will respond, "but we are operating at the global level already. Are you not aware of the protests in Seattle, Cancun,

Genoa and one hundred other cities? Are you not aware of the World Social Forum and the meetings which build up to it? Are we not already doing all that we can to seize control of global politics?"

My response is that these are the most exciting political developments in decades, and that we have begun a movement which really does have the potential to change the world.

But we have two basic problems, with which we must engage if we are serious about global justice. The first is that, vast and inspiring as our movements are, they have not yet shaken the seat of power, and do not yet show any sign of being able to do so. We rightly exposed, for example, the outrageous trading demands of the rich nations, and helped some of the weaker nations to find the courage to stand up to them, contributing to the collapse of the reviled World Trade Organisation. But has this prevented injustice? Not a bit of it. The European Union and the US have discovered that they are in fact better off without the WTO. They have now struck bilateral deals with most of the weaker nations, which are even more oppressive than the policies they tried to impose through the trade organisation. What we have found, in other words, is that the WTO was not power, simply the organisation through which power was brokered. We have helped to smash a symbol of power. We have done nothing to prevent the exercise of power.

The second problem is that, though we have a better claim than any other global grouping to speak on its behalf, we are not the world. Most of us who attend the national and global social forums, who travel to our capitals or other people's to protest, who fill cyberspace and the printed page with our opinions and debates, are members of a privileged minority. We have time, money, passports, literacy and access to technology.

At the European Social Forum in November, I was struck by how young and how white the meetings were. It is a wonderful thing that young white people gather in vast numbers to discuss the issues neglected by mainstream politics. But we spoke and argued there as if we were speaking and arguing on behalf of everyone. Participatory politics is valuable and important, but at any level above that of the local community, it becomes representative politics, only with this difference: that we elect ourselves to represent everyone else.

These two problems are, I feel, closely connected. Our power is limited partly because our mandate is limited. In all periods of history, people seeking democracy under conditions of dictatorship have possessed two sources of power. The first is force of arms. Modern military technology ensures that the overthrow of existing powers by means of armed civilian revolt has become all but impossible. If we sought to storm the modern world's Bastille at Guantanamo Bay, we would be blown to bits long before we came anywhere near. Terrorism, of course, remains an effective weapon: Bin Laden's key demand, that US troops be removed from Saudi Arabia, has quietly been met by the superpower. But, like all violent revolutionary means, it is inherently anti-democratic. It requires secrecy, while democracy requires transparency and accountability. It empowers those with the means to violence, and they are likely, once their first aims have been met, to turn it against the citizens with whom they disagree.

So just one legitimate source of power remains: moral authority. It is the force which helped to remove Marcos, Ceaucescu, Suharto, Milosevic, de Lozada and Shevardnadze from government. It is the force we possess in some measure already – why else did James Wolfenson, the head of the World Bank, apply to speak at the World Social Forum last year? It is a force

which we would possess in far, far greater measure if we could show that we represented the people of the world, rather than just ourselves.

Alongside our participatory forums, in other words, we need to build a representative forum. We need a world parliament.

Many people consider this an appalling idea, and I can understand why. Representative democracy at the national and the regional level looks bad enough. Why on earth would we want to replicate that system at the global level? And if true democracy can function only at the level of the community, surely by the time we get to the global level, it's going to be a pretty shoddy version of the Athenian (or Zapatistan) ideal.

The answer to the second question is yes, it will be. But I would ask you this. If not by this means, then what? Not having a world parliament is also a decision. It is a decision to permit the world to continue to be run by a self-appointed group of men from the rich nations. A world parliament is a far-from-perfect solution to the problem of global governance. But not nearly as far-from-perfect as the alternative: permitting the global dictatorship to resolve the problem on our behalf.

The answer to the first question is also yes. The existing model of national parliamentary or congressional democracy in most parts of the world is a dreadful template on which to base a new system. It has been corrupted by monied interests, by unfair voting systems, by executive power and media control. But there are many lessons we can learn from the failures of our systems, and I would like to take a moment to spell some of these out.

I suggest in *The Age of Consent* a number of safeguards which could make a world parliament radically different from national

parliaments. Most importantly, it must belong to the people from the beginning of the process. With our vast international networks, we are in a good position to start building a representative assembly from the bottom up.

In the first instance, I see such a parliament as operating purely by means of its moral authority. Its purpose would be to draw up principles of good global governance, assess the performance of the other international bodies against those principles, and call upon them to answer for themselves when they are found to fall short. This presents those other bodies with an uncomfortable choice. Either they disregard the parliament's request, in which case they abandon any claim to be acting in the public interest, or they turn up and go through the motions, in which case they recognise and therefore enhance the parliament's authority.

What we have here, in other words, is a means of making the instruments of global governance respond to the demands of the people. But this means would be weak if applied to the current instruments, most of which are constitutionally obliged to represent only the interests of the major powers. It would be a powerful means when applied to a system which was constitutionally just. Our next task is to create that system.

My starting point in trying to figure out what such a system might look like is this: that the only thing worse than a world with the wrong global institutions is a world with no global institutions at all. We've seen what that looked like: 500 years of European colonisation, theft, piracy, murder and genocide. Of course, the existing system of global governance, controlled by the major powers, has not prevented most of these things from happening today, but that is not an argument against global governance. It is an argument for a global political system which belongs to the world's people.

Let us assume for the moment that we have the means to design whatever system we please. What would that system be? It seems to me that it must do what the existing global institutions claim to do but fail to do. In other words, we need a body through which nations can negotiate with each other to achieve peace. We need a body which distributes wealth between nations. We need a body which lays down fair trading rules, defending citizens and the environment. To travel from here to there means transforming some of the world's institutions and destroying others.

I should emphasise at this point, as the idea is commonly misunderstood, that I am not talking about any further transfer of powers from the nation states to global or international bodies. I am simply talking about the democratisation of those powers which have already been ceded by nation states to the global level. I am not inventing global governance, but merely trying to make it work in the interests of the people.

Let us start with the United Nations. In principle, it's a good idea. In practice, it helps the strong to bully the weak, for three reasons. The first is that the permanent members of the Security Council have been granted absolute power. The second is that it is riddled with rotten boroughs: the tiny nations have the same vote as the very large ones. This is grossly unfair – every Tuvaluan, for example, is worth 100,000 Indians – and it also means that the strong nations have a powerful incentive to kick the small ones around. The third is that the dictatorships have the same voting rights as the democracies, and none of the attendant governments have any obligation to refer to their people before voting.

It seems to me that the answer here is not to junk the UN, but to democratise it. The first step is surely to scrap the Security

Council and vest its powers in the UN General Assembly. The second is to weight the votes of the member states according to their country's size and their degree of democratisation. Democracy rankings are already being developed by groups such as Democratic Audit. But we should begin to develop our own. Among the criteria we should investigate are the nation's degree of economic democracy (the distribution of wealth) and the extent of public consultation before global voting takes place.

This weighting of votes has the double benefit of democratising global governance and encouraging national democratisation, as the quickest means by which a nation can enhance its power at the global level. It also means that the nations with the biggest votes – the largest and most democratic – are the hardest to bully and blackmail: vote-buying, in other words, becomes much more difficult.

There is a further possible outcome of this process: over time, we could envisage the reformed General Assembly and the world parliament beginning to draw together. The parliament enhances the assembly's legitimacy by holding it to account; the members of the assembly enhance their voting powers by encouraging elections to the world parliament. We have the makings, in other words, of a bicameral parliament for the planet. We could then envisage a transfer of real powers from the indirectly- elected chamber to the directly-elected chamber.

While the UN is, in theory, reformable, the IMF and the World Bank are not. It's not just that they are controlled by the rich world but operate in the poor world. They are also constitutionally obliged to place the entire burden of dealing with trade deficits and international debt on the deficit and debtor nations, which are least able to do anything about them. When they were

established in 1944, a much better idea had already been proposed.

John Maynard Keynes had been working on his proposal for an International Clearing Union for 12 years. When he unveiled it in 1943, it was almost universally recognised as a work of genius. Not only had he solved the problem of debt and the balance of trade; he had also discovered a formula for global economic stability. The Clearing Union was a bank operating at the international level, in which nations held their trade accounts. They would be charged interest not only on their trade deficits, but also on their trade surpluses. Before the end of every year, therefore, when the interest payments fell due, they would have a powerful incentive to “clear” their accounts – in other words, to end up with neither a deficit nor a surplus. The only way in which surplus nations can clear their accounts is to change their terms of trade, so that they import more and export less. By getting rid of their surpluses, in other words, they also get rid of other nations’ deficits. As accumulated trade deficits are the major component of international debt, by preventing the accumulation of deficits you also prevent the accumulation of debt.

Keynes’s idea was blocked by the US government. Many economists warned at the time that the result would be a massive accumulation of unpayable debt on the part of the poor nations, and a corresponding increase in the powers of the rich nations. They have been vindicated. It is time to bring the Clearing Union back to life.

We also need some kind of a global trading body, if the weaker nations are to have any possibility of collective bargaining. A fair trade regime might look something like this:

The nations which are poor today would be permitted to follow the routes to development taken by the nations which are rich today. This means protecting their new industries from foreign competition until they are big enough to fight their own corner, and making free use of other countries' intellectual property, for trade within their own borders and with other poor nations. What I am suggesting, in other words, is a sliding scale of trade privileges: the poorest nations are permitted full protection of their infant industries and the free use of intellectual property; slightly richer nations lesser privileges, the richest nations none at all.

But this is only one component of fair trade. A Fair Trade Organisation would also become an international licensing authority for corporations. Only those companies which can demonstrate that they are not employing slaves, banning trades unions or dumping their pollutants in the rivers would be permitted to trade internationally. All global trade is therefore run on the principles of the fair trade movement today. A corporation wishing to trade internationally must employ monitoring companies to examine its performance and report back to the FTO. Among the criteria they apply should be the requirement that companies pay the full costs of production themselves, rather than dumping their costs on other people or the environment.

So how does any of this happen? All international treaties have the threat of force behind them, and if we are to design new ones, those who are weak today must find the means of becoming strong. I believe that these means exist. The poor nations have a weapon they have never recognised as such. That weapon is their debt.

It is often said that if you owe the bank \$1000, you're in trouble; while if you owe the bank \$1 million, the bank is in trouble. So what if you owe the bank \$2.2 trillion? What if, between them, the poor nations own the global financial system? If they were to threaten a sudden collective default on their debt unless they got what they wanted, they would transform their greatest enemies – the financial markets – into their allies. The banks would be forced to go to their governments and say: if you don't give them what they want, we, and therefore you, are ruined. This is by no means the only weapon the poor world possesses, but this is the scale on which we have to think if we are serious about a global transformation.

And the citizens of the rich world are not without their weapons either. Our greatest ally is currently the president of the United States. For the past three years, he has been attacking the very institutions which were designed to sustain his power: the UN, the World Trade Organisation, even the IMF and World Bank. In doing so, he has been presenting the other powerful nations with a stark choice: either they accept that from now on the world will be run directly from Washington, without their involvement, or they seek to build new multilateral systems. Already they are choosing the latter option, constructing an International Criminal Court and seeking to ratify the Kyoto protocol on climate change. But they cannot take on one superpower without the support of the other, namely global public opinion. This provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to press our own demands.

What I have attempted in *The Age of Consent* is not a final or definitive description of a new world order, but an analysis of existing patterns of power and their weaknesses, and of the means we might possess of exploiting those weaknesses to try to turn an unjust world order into a just one. To some people it will seem under-ambitious, to others wildly optimistic. But I hope it

helps to stimulate debate and concentrate minds on the question which looms behind all the issues with which we engage: what do we do about global power? None of the means I have proposed are easy or certain of success. But it seems to me that unless we seek to devise a political programme with global reach, we are certain only of failure.