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Book Reviews on geopolitical readings

ESADEgeo, under the supervision of Professor Javier Solana.
Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities


“The paradox of our times refers to the fact that the collective issues we must grapple with are of growing cross-border extensity and intensity, yet the means for addressing them are weak and incomplete.”

“Globalization [...] raises issues concerning [...] democracy, [...] given that the relation between decision-makers and decision-takers is not necessarily symmetrical or congruent with respect to the territory.”

Basic idea and opinion

This book proposes a new system of world governance: “cosmopolitanism”, an alternative to the current system based on the sovereignty of nation-states. Held sets forth the challenges faced by the world today, and the inadequacy of the system of governance in force at present. Cosmopolitanism takes the form of two universal meta-principles: everyone is entitled to autonomy and all arguments should be analysed impartially. According to Held, only a system of global governance based on cosmopolitanism will be capable of solving the contemporary paradox posed by the present system, based on the nation-state, and problems with cross-border causes and effects.

The book provides us with a conceptual model to gain insight into global governance, the nation-state and democracy. Although the typologies and classifications presented sometimes become labyrinthine and the author needs to make his model more concrete, this beautiful work is fundamental for exploring one of the most serious invitations to redesign the international system.

The author

David Held is a British sociologist specialising in political theory and international relations. Educated in the UK, France, Germany and the US, he has become one of the key figures in the development of cosmopolitanism and the study of globalisation. He is now Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science at London School of Economics (LSE), Co-director of the LSE Centre for the Study of Global Governance and visiting lecturer in Global Politics at Central European University.
Two decades ago, Held co-founded Polity Press, whose publications now occupy a prominent place in the field of social sciences and humanities. His more recent major works include: The Cosmopolitanism Reader (2010); Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies (2007); Global Inequality: Patterns and Explanations (2007); Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus (2004).

**Cosmopolitanism: the Foundation for the New Global Governance**

**Cosmopolitanism: what and why?**

In the face of a world scenario of profound transformations, growing interdependence and major challenges, it is essential to rethink democracy and globalisation. David Held proposes “cosmopolitanism” as the foundation for the new global governance.

Cosmopolitanism is an attempt to make the principles of democracy prevail, at a global level, over the principal of state sovereignty. The idea is to seek an alternative to the contradictory situation in which the world now stands: global challenges but governance based on national sovereign states. All kinds of decision-making, from trade to energy policies and security, entail possible cross-border consequences. The global nature of the challenges facing the 21st century erodes the state’s capacity to provide solutions to these problems. As a response intended to solve this contradiction, cosmopolitanism is based on two meta-principles: autonomy and impartial reasoning. The first refers to the fact that all individuals are entitled to be free, autonomous and make their own decisions. The second is the mechanism that enables us to evaluate any decision, institution or action, and in essence forces us to put ourselves in other people’s place when judging.

At this point, Held pauses to reject the criticism that these two meta-principles are culturally biased in favour of the Western model of democracy. These meta-principles stand on their own and are independent of culture; this is why these democratic principles have spread the length and breadth of the planet as the foundation of the nation-state.

Working from these two meta-principles, Held’s cosmopolitanism derives eight basic principles, namely: 1) equality; 2) individual autonomy; 3) personal responsibility; 4) inclusiveness; 5) decision-making through voting; 6) subsidiarity; 7) avoidance of harm to people; and 8) sustainability.

Held draws an important distinction between two different types of cosmopolitanism: thick and thin. Thick cosmopolitanism seeks to completely overtake and replace the nation-state with a system of suprastate governance. Thin cosmopolitanism, the sort advocated by the author, seeks to complement and modify the nation-state, providing
additional forums and limiting some of its powers. Thin cosmopolitanism is complementary to the nation-state, as it stakes out the universal moral principles, while the state interprets and gives concrete form to those principles in each context. With this proposal, Held is capable of coupling universalism to the diversity of each national context.

**Background to cosmopolitanism**

The proposal of cosmopolitanism to overtake the sovereign state is not an entirely novel one. After the Second World War, the system formed by the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Union already established a series of rules designed to limit the sovereignty of the state. The objective was to facilitate peaceful interaction between states and mitigate the threats to humanity derived from the principles of the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state and non-interference.

These initiatives recognised the supremacy of human rights, and considerable efforts were made to create common rules for the functioning of markets. Institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (formerly GATT) laid the foundations on which to now build.

According to the author, now — in the wake of a profound financial crisis that has manifested market failures on a global scale — is the right time to rethink the nature of global governance and the global economic policies aimed at excessively liberalising and deregulating world finance and trade (what we know as the Washington Consensus).

**A system of global governance**

Today the world needs to create a system of world governance that will make it possible to tackle the three important challenges that face it. First, to learn to share our planet. Environmental limitations and climate change are a transcendental issue. The present trend of the planet will cause temperatures to rise by more than 2°C on average in the coming decades (after which the planet will suffer irreparable harm, according to the scientific community). Second, to sustain humanity, i.e., to reduce poverty in the world. Some 45% of the world population live below the poverty threshold of $2 a day. The third challenge is to be capable of developing a system of worldwide rules that can serve as a basis for peaceful and constructive interaction among countries. Common rules are needed in a host of spheres such as nuclear proliferation, trade, and intellectual property rights, among others.

According to Held, from a cosmopolitan viewpoint based on the guiding principles mentioned above, humanity has the obligation to take these important challenges seriously. They have clear implications, for example, for inclusiveness and subsidiarity in decision-making that affects individuals, harm avoidance and the sustainability of
the planet. The three challenges that are identified – climate change, poverty and common rules – are exacerbated even further by certain characteristics of our present: the information technology revolution, the rise of global markets, population growth and migrations, the expansion of democracy to many countries, and an increasingly global and interconnected public opinion.

Held rules out the institutions and mechanisms of governance in force in the world today, as being incapable of facing contemporary challenges. The existing institutions show several problems. First, the powers of international organisations are neither exclusive nor clear. As a result, we find overlapping and lack of coordination among them, and at the same time they leave certain spheres uncovered. Second, international organisations have become unwieldy machines, with a great deal of inertia and excessive bureaucracy. Third, international organisations focus exclusively on the international dimension, in most cases applying the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. This is a source of ineffectiveness of these international institutions, as the distinction between international and domestic affairs is becoming increasingly blurred. The latter two shortcomings of today’s global institutions are related to accountability and representativeness. Practically all global players — public and private alike — have insufficient systems of accountability. How much do the various international organisations, multinationals and global civil movements spend? With what results? How and why were certain decisions made? Such questions are almost impossible to answer today. This point is related to what is perhaps the most serious shortcoming of world governance today: the lack of correspondence between those who make the decisions and those who are most affected by those decisions.

Furthermore, the ineffective global governance shown in the world at present is not due solely to unsatisfactory institutions, but also to inappropriate and counter-productive policies derived from the Washington Consensus. Held proposes alternative policies with the following aims: to foster economic growth, reduce world poverty, place sustainability at the centre of the debate, provide security at an international level, and create avenues of “voice” in decision-making processes for all the actors involved in an issue. This last point ties in very particularly with the issue of democracy in global governance; that is, how to create a system of global governance in which those affected by a decision participate in it and are informed about its execution.

The new global governance demands specific institutional requirements that will allow its successful implementation. These institutional requirements are as follows: to maintain multilevel governance (local, national, international); to interconnect in a single network the various forums for public debate that already exist, such as the UN General Assembly, the European Parliament, national parliaments and local assemblies; to strengthen human rights conventions; to increase the accountability of international organisations and improve the participation of non-governmental players in them; and finally to create a global force to endow the system with coercive power as a last resort.
The closing chapter applies this proposal (too incompletely) to the sphere of climate change, a paradigmatic case of insufficient global governance. It proposes institutional changes at two levels: nation-state and global. At the nation-state level, strong
leaderships arguing on the basis of economic and scientific knowledge; broadening of deliberative processes and permanent inclusion of civil society; and alignment of citizens’ preferences with the common good through knowledge dissemination processes and informative dialogues. Regarding the global level, it is proposed to open up decision-making channels to participation; transfer resources and technology to developing countries; and strengthen the multilateral agencies with powers in this area.

Where we are heading

In the mid 20th century important steps were made towards cosmopolitanism, but now the rapid and complex transformation of the international scenario is forcing us to rethink current governance schemes. David Held concludes his book with an account of the main obstacles before us in the road ahead: the principle of national sovereignty, the great diversity among countries, cross-border externalities, and the incapacity of many organisations today. Whether the contemporary global order becomes stronger and more democratic or heads towards fragmentation and geopolitical rivalry between regional blocs will depend on how these obstacles and challenges are handled.