

Rethinking Sovereignty In the Age of Globalization

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As we approach the dawn of a new century, the changes and reorganization the world is experiencing are dramatically affecting politics, the economy, the structure of society and cultural life in a considerable number of nations. Today, it is undeniable that over the last two decades the growing interdependence among countries has become the distinguishing feature and central point of reference for the structural modernization processes of all nations.

More than ever before, we are faced with complex, close links among many social and political actors, each with different histories, interests and ideological perspectives.

In the twilight of the twentieth century, the perception of the world as a unified entity has taken on unprecedented dimensions. This involves the vision of a unified, integrating world as well as the awareness of a system of international relations which, in contrast to other moments in history, can only be analyzed, understood and evaluated from a global perspective.

For example, then, in the area of the economy, globalization in our time is distinguished by the world's nations' productive, trade and financial systems going through an intensive process whereby

they become more harmonized, internationalized and complementary. Together with this, the technological revolution is radically transforming production, the conditions in which communities are organized and even patterns of daily life.

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We are dealing with a dynamic which is developing in a framework of economic multipolarity marked by the forging of regional alliances in which the expansion of markets acquires different characteristics initially linked to the scientific, technological and industrial development of the international economy.

From this perspective, currently at least 100 regionalization processes are underway worldwide, the most outstanding of which are the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the one in Southeast Asia headed up by Japan.

It is important to note how this worldwide integration of the economy has been accompanied by a political globalization expressed over the last 20 years in the demand for democratic governments in every region of the planet. More than at any other moment in the history of systems of government, the principles and values underpinning democracy as a form of collective organization are present and have become the reference points that orient political activity in a growing number of countries. This explains why the association between the market, the symbol of economic globalization, and democracy, the symbol of political globalization, goes practically unquestioned today. After the collapse of the socialist countries, the central question of debate is not whether the market and democracy should exist, but which forms they should take in the historical development and political balance of forces in each nation.

Thus, in the context of globalization, pluralism has come to the fore as the distinctive trait of modern societies. These are increasingly demanding and differentiated societies which require better spaces for participation, whether in forming governments or in any other facet of social life. This explains why today in a great many countries, state institutions are being reformed to allow for social diversity and to create better conditions for living together and political competition.

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In the code of globalization, the democratic processing of social plurality has become a fundamental principle of legitimacy in modern political systems. Development, social differentiation, competition and negotiation are indicative of a kind of collective interaction which only through democracy can sidestep conflicts and paralyzing confrontations.

Undoubtedly, this relative harmonization of political procedures has found significant support in the type of culture which has been promoted parallel to the economic globalization. The value structures and evaluative aspects of national identities have changed with regard to their sense of history and prospects for the future. The ever greater scope of the mass media has displaced traditional local means of forging identities.

On this basis, so-called Western culture has become the philosophical, scientific and ideological paradigm with the greatest impact on the new, globalized world. In the last analysis, it is a particular pattern of perceiving reality in which the values of rationality, effectiveness and productivity in the economy coexist with the notions of freedom, tolerance, the rule of law and unrestricted respect for the individual socially and politically. This culture has become the main source of ideological socialization and generation of behavior patterns worldwide. It is not by chance that, as Huntington points out, the main ideological and political conflict in the world is no longer the opposition between socialism and capitalism, but has now been replaced with the clash between Western with non-Western. Of course, this confrontation should not be read with simplistic geographical or even religious cri-

teria: it can be found within many nations typically considered Western.

From this point of view, the thrust of globalization brings with it an intrinsic danger of upsetting or traumatizing particular cultural identities. If just the right harmonization between specific cultures and the global culture is not achieved—as has happened in many cases—there is a rejection of what is then seen as cultural imperialism. This is particularly important in societies like Mexico whose cultural traditions are very deeply rooted both regionally and nationally. To a great

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degree, Mexican nationalism grows out of the defense of these traditions and experiences which historically have forged an identity that is both indivisible and irreplaceable.

As Dabat and Rivera have point out, “Globalization generates apparently contradictory results. On the one hand, it gives rise to supranational relations and entities of different kinds which become a basic part of the lives of peoples; simultaneously, however, it provokes strong reactions of rejection like religious or ethnic fundamentalism or the geopolitical disintegration of nation-states.”¹

Neither is it possible to ignore that the new situation created by globalization has, in many cases, accentuated the dichotomy between backwardness and development, as well as the growing difficulty national governments have in controlling the social impact of the modern economy. In our country, there has been an attempt to accompany the implementation of the internationally dominant economic model with policies to alleviate social inequalities. However, the difficulties that this has met with are expressed in the high poverty and indigence rates we still have, evidence that the so-called modernization of economic relations in and of itself does not bring equality and well being.

In addition, the difference in strength between countries has meant that the supposedly free flow of goods or services has in reality been regulated by protectionist policies designed from the point of view and in the interest of countries with a greater ability to bring pressure and negotiate. In that framework, phenomena like unfair competition for markets and the proliferation of difficult-to-regulate speculative investments have developed.

In an international scenario with such sharp contrasts, we must ask ourselves: What effect is globalization having on the redefinition of sovereignty of nation-states at the end of the twentieth century? What room for manoeuvre do they have given the challenges and demands of living together internationally in a globalized world? What is the policy these states should adopt in this context as they go into the third millennium? And finally, how can they grow and develop without losing their sense of community and national identity in the process?

In relation to this, Joseph A. Camilleri has observed, "Globalization and its corollaries bring forth significant elements of analysis about the underlying premises of the legal and political theory of sovereignty. In the first place, they challenge the notion that political authority is exercised exclusively or even primarily in a particular territory. In the second place, they bring into question the hypothesis that in the state's territory, authority is unlimited and indivisible. And, in the third place, they suggest a growing dilemma between the state and civil society, between political authorities and the organization of the economy, between cultural identity and social cohesion."²

Clearly the common denominator of this situation is the concept of sovereignty and its implications. Certainly, the dominant trends internationally seem to question the traditional definition of sovereignty. It is a good idea to remember that the notion of sovereignty was born with the rise of national states, initially to justify the absolute, unquestionable authority of monarchs exercised between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was only after the liberal democratic revolution at the end of the eighteenth century that the concept of sovereignty changed in emphasis to link it up directly with the notion of the people's will.

What is common, however, to both these ways of understanding sovereignty is the idea of the individual's freedom to decide unimpeded how he or she is going to act. For that reason, according to the political theory of democratic liberalism, sovereignty is to a nation what freedom is to the individual. In that sense, nations must be free to decide both their internal forms of political organization and the

kind of links that they will establish with other nations.

This classical conception of sovereignty has gradually been brought into question, however, by a markedly asymmetrical balance of forces among nations, an imbalance in which the rise and consolidation of great centers of power put less developed nations in a distinctly vulnerable position. In order to survive, particularly after World War II, they pressed for the formal recognition of their sovereignty in terms of self-determination of all peoples, non-intervention and the peace-

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ful solution of controversies as defense mechanisms in the face of the expansionist and interventionist temptations of the strong countries.

We should underline this reading of sovereignty associated with a clear political demand in that it continues to be current despite the enormous changes in the post-war period, which have intensified in the last two decades. While the globalized world has made it impossible to think of sovereignty as synonymous with independence or self-sufficiency, it has not made it impossible to conceive it in terms of political decision-making ability whose legiti-

macy is decided exclusively within each country's national borders.

If this is accepted, it becomes clear that the notion of sovereignty should be perceived, analyzed and evaluated from the perspective of the interdependency among nations, understood as the ability of each nation-state to decide or choose the terms under which it will be part of a globalized world, according to its specific circumstances and in the best possible conditions.

In the last analysis, we should remember that the globalized world exists because national states propitiated and regulated it in specific ways. The coordination of trade, financial or industrial policies, the dropping of tariff and non-tariff trade barriers, the promotion of investment, the forging of regional alliances, the establishment of a common currency and even the creation of regional political bodies such as the Parlantino or the European Parliament are all the result of the sovereign will of the states involved to give ongoing globalization a particular profile.

In this same sense, the possibility of influencing and changing the evils of globalization rests in the very actions of local societies and the nation-state. On this basis, clearly nations are not bereft of opportunities for changing their international surroundings; for this reason, developing nations' so-called "state of defenselessness" in a globalized world does, in fact, not exist. Of course, this should not lead us to ignore either the asymmetries or the political and legal inequality among states. For that reason, as David Held argues, "What is needed is an intensification of the levels of interaction and interconnection within and among states and societies that make up international society since all political, economic and social

activity is increasingly played out in a global frame of reference."³

Without a doubt, the nation-state will continue to be the central actor in international relations in the next century since no organizational forms capable of effectively and legitimately replacing it are on the horizon. The increasingly globalized world that is approaching will require, rather, strong national communities, with governments based on consensus, capable of instrumenting their participation in the international scene with a favorable impact on the quality of life of their constituents. What will be required, then, is a nation-state that democratically integrates the interests of a plural, open society, linking them to the opportunities for growth and development that the international situation offers.

The importance of the domestic strength of nations like Mexico is expressed not only with regard to its political institutions, but also the solidity of its economic-financial system. In fact, the different impact country by country of the Russian, Southeast Asian and Brazilian crises show the importance of keeping public finances healthy and inflation rates manageable.

In other words, the favorable insertion of nations in the so-called new world order depends to a great extent on the domestic construction and consolidation of democratic governability and a relatively solid economic-financial system. Globalization demands domestic policies of each country be strengthened by consolidating democratic structures with an aim to guaranteeing social cohesion, legitimacy in the access to public power, the effective exercise of public office and a balance between its different bodies, all of which will serve

to validate government actions abroad. In the Mexican case, the consensus around the 1996 constitutional amendments to effect an electoral reform is particularly significant since it has allowed for political competition to take place in a procedural framework accepted by all the political players.

In this sense, it seems increasingly clear that broadening out democracy, economic growth and the social well-being that should come of it require the solid backing of society and a medium- and long-term perspective. Only in this way will

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In a globalized world, the viability and strength of states is related, then, to economic development, the effectiveness and legitimacy of their institutions, a strict adherence to the rule of law and, particularly, the forging of consensual decisions on all levels of national life including, of course, decisions about foreign policy. On the basis of these suppositions rests the possibility of moving forward with a national project which will safeguard its own interests and be enriched through contact with other nations. Mexico is beginning

to advance on a road of consensus even in economic matters. The president himself has made the proposal of discussing and coming to an agreement on a state development policy to create certainty both among domestic and foreign actors with influence in the economy, regardless of which party is in office.

Only on the basis of a strong, democratic, efficient nation-state will it be possible to face the other challenges of globalization like the zigzags of the world economy, the deterioration of the environment, today's pandemics, famine, terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering and international organized crime.

At the end of the twentieth century, the profound reforms to state structures to guarantee democratic governability and the generation of consensuses around a desirable—and at the same time possible—development model are the central features of any national strategy to meet the challenges of globalization. Only in this way can we be equal to the challenges of our time, retaining our historical memory, vindicating the cultural wealth of different communities and valuing the profound significance of each national identity. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Alejandro Dabat and Miguel Angel Rivera, "Las transformaciones de la economía mundial," comp. Alejandro Dabat, *México y la globalización* (Mexico City: UNAM-CRIM, 1994), p. 30.

² Joseph Camilleri, "Rethinking Sovereignty in a Shrinking, Fragmented World," R.B.J. Walker, *Contending Sovereignities: Redefining Political Community* (U.S.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), pp. 23-24.

³ David Held, "Democracia y globalización" in *Etcétera* 7 (Mexico City) (1993), pp. 12-13.