



## Referendum

A new world is struggling to be born. Or rather a world of separate and disparate people and nations is struggling to evolve into a diversified but unified human community. Throughout history two opposing tendencies have spurred the evolution of society – the urge of the collective to ensure its security, sustenance and power through exercise of authority, organization and imposition of uniformity, and the urge of the individual for free and creative expression of his ideas, feelings and initiatives for self-affirmation, accomplishment and enjoyment. This has given rise to the two most powerful ideals of the modern era – freedom and equality – the right of the individual to pursue his own life and the right of the collective to govern in the name of equal rights for the benefit of all its members. They are embodied in two powerful forces – individual initiative and social organization – creative self-expression and cooperative endeavor.

In the name of freedom, individuals have claimed the right to do anything they liked, irrespective of its impact on other individuals and rejecting the right of society to claim compensation through taxation for its contribution in their achievements. In the name of society, social organizations strive to preserve and perpetuate their ideas and power, demanding conformity, submission and even sacrifice of life from their members for the welfare or glory of the group.

Through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these ideals vied with one another for supremacy, each proclaiming its sacred heritage and claim to superior virtue. One gave birth to political democracy and competitive capitalism. The other became the seed for democratic socialism and autocratic communism. Feudalism, monarchy, oligarchy, state socialism, fascism, and plutocracy have been various past incarnations of the collectivist urge. An endless succession of revolutionary and sometimes anarchic movements – England in 1688, America in 1776, France in 1789, India in 1947, Hungary in 1956, university campuses from 1964-68, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria in 2011 – are expressive of the assertion of individuality striving for freedom or a more just and equitable collective. In the name of these high ideals, hereditary ruling families have been supplanted by elected leaders, fragmentary kingdoms have been molded into unified nation states, and mighty empires have been toppled. Always the process was imperfect and the outcome far less idealistic than the principles in whose name it was carried out. Founding fathers proclaimed that all men are created equal yet retained the right to own slaves. Revolutionaries fought tyranny on behalf of the common people, only to erect new elites and authoritarian mechanisms more tyrannical than those they deposed. The disenfranchised have risen decrying despotic power, only to succumb to the lure of the power they opposed.

These two apparently contradictory forces are in fact complementary to one another, both indispensable for the evolution and fulfillment of humanity. As Sri Aurobindo observed, the individual cannot thrive as an isolated being or grow in isolated freedom. “He grows by his relations with others and his freedom must exercise itself in a progressive self-harmonizing with the freedom of his fellow-beings.”<sup>1</sup> Through the interaction between these opposing tendencies and even by their contention, humanity as a whole has evolved a freer, more tolerant, enlightened, peaceful, cooperative, prosperous and unified individual and collective existence. History has been a playground, a classroom and a workshop in which humanity has fashioned new tools and instruments for peaceful co-existence, constructive interaction and effective governance. The result has been a progressive discovery and unfolding of the unlimited potential of cooperative, productive and creative interactions and interrelationships between people. The development of social organization as a means for governance is the most marvelous invention, the most miraculous technology so far envisioned, yet still so very incomplete and imperfect. After fighting for land, kingdoms, gold, trade routes and oil, it turns out that human beings are the world’s most precious resource, that human capital and social capital the true source of lasting peace and prosperity.

With the end of the Cold War, this struggle has entered a new phase of unprecedented challenges and opportunities. No longer is the world polarized by the struggle between competing ideologies. No longer are special interests, power elites, ruling parties and nation states the ultimate protagonists. Humanity as a whole and the individuals of which it consists play with and struggle against its myriad constituent elements to effect a more free, transparent, just and equitable global life of society.

Guided by reason, we look for a way to reconcile disparate viewpoints, yet continuously encounter immovable obstacles that refuse their allegiance in the name of one ideal or the other. Reason that affirms the rights of the individual also affirms the necessity of order and organization for governance of the collective. When reason seeks to govern life, it necessarily relies on fixed principles and organizational mechanism. This generates a fundamental dilemma, for unlike the mechanical order of the universe, life is a mobile, progressive and evolving force. It develops by the interaction of an immense number of different and often conflicting or even contradictory elements. “A thorough-going scientific regulation of life can only be brought about by a thorough-going mechanism of life.”<sup>2</sup> Sooner or later humanity finds efforts to impose a purely rational and scientific organization of social life intolerable and it rebels against the suppression of its freedom. Thus, the challenge of global governance exposes a deeper challenge imposed by *limits to rationality*, the title of a WAAS project and topic to be explored in the next issue of Cadmus.

The ever-present threats to human security posed by nuclear weapons, the international financial crisis, climate change, rising levels of unemployment, persistent poverty and terrorism compel us to evolve more progressive institutions that reconcile freedom with equality, creative individuality with consistent organization, institutions that are truly global and yet at the same time representative and protective of the varied needs, interests, aspirations and rights of seven billion individuals. For the first time in modern history, the legitimate claims of both freedom and equality can be affirmed without awakening accusations of ideological heresy.

Yet this new phase will be as challenging as those that have come before. No simple

formula or doctrinaire principle can provide us with a clear path for reconciling freedom and equality, the interests of individuals and communities with that of nations and humanity as a whole. The world today has inherited a motley assortment of hybrid institutions, reflective of the power equations of earlier generations – hereditary rule and military strongmen still preside over unwilling citizenry in many countries, corrupt political parties control the media and dominate elections in many others, the victors of a war ended 65 years ago still enjoy undemocratic privileges and veto power in the UN Security Council, military power still claims that might is right, wealth and corporate interests exert inordinate influence on laws and public policy, idealistic non-governmental organizations are ruled autocratically by a few in the name of the many.

At the same time individuals and minorities have been empowered as never before to make their voices heard, assert their rights, seek protection and redress under law. Google, Facebook and Twitter have broken forever the monopolistic control on communications which earlier enabled governments to conceal, censor and distort information flows since time immemorial. China tries to control the World Wide Web the same way two centuries earlier Britain prohibited its newspapers from any reference to the French Revolution unfolding across the English Channel for fear the conflagration would spread to its own populace. Today Wikileaks exposes the underside of national self-interest in international diplomacy. Andreas Bummel refers to this phenomenon in his article “Global Democratic Revolution” as a movement toward planetary consciousness and global democracy.

Solutions have not been wanting. Calls for the formation of truly democratic and representative institutions for global governance date back more than a century. Nature and necessity now compel us to accept what idealism inspired earlier generations to conceive. The task is complex and daunting, but no longer inconceivable or impossible. Silent and unnoticed, the threads of global governance have been evolving over the past six decades into a thick fabric of interconnectedness and interdependence. Knowledge and communications have become global. Economic integration has reached the point where no nation can thrive in isolation and every nation has a stake in maintenance of world peace and global cooperation. Still we live in a fragmentary world of national governments asserting imaginary sovereignty and refusing accountability to humanity-at-large, private interests asserting the right to exploit the global commons, groups in authority at all levels insisting on retention of their past privileges.

Yet beneath the conflicting ideologies and struggling powers, a foundation is being laid for the future. The corner stone of that foundation is recognition of the value and rights of each and every individual human being, while acknowledging the collective rights of humanity as a whole to an equitable sharing of the global commons. This requires a reconceptualization of the idea of sovereignty. The sovereign rights of nations must ultimately derive from a consensus of the individuals and groups of which they are composed and the representative nature of national government, not merely from the power of an elite to dominate or suppress its own citizenry. The individual also has a legitimate claim to sovereignty over beliefs, speech, personal property and actions. So too, humanity as a whole has an undeniable sovereign claim for security in all its forms, just governance, economic opportunity and an equitable sharing of the global commons. None of these sovereign rights are absolute in themselves. None can be truly and fully ensured unless they all are. The

rights of the individual will always be subject to usurpation by the tyranny of the state, unless the international community as a whole assumes responsibility for protecting those rights. The rights of the nation will always be subject to the tyranny of larger, stronger states, unless guaranteed by a system of global cooperative security and representative governance. The rights of individuals and of humanity as a whole will continue to be neglected in favor of commercial interests, social organizations, privileged classes, dominant communities and national power, unless and until humanity evolves a truly effective system of global governance.

Calls for the democratization of the UN, abolition of the veto power, outlawing the use and possession of nuclear weapons, formation of a global cooperative security system, establishment of a world central bank and a global parliament may still seem utopian to many, but they are as inevitable and irresistible as the progressive evolution of democratic freedom and individual human rights over the past few centuries. What is needed are practical steps to generate awareness, build consensus and release a revolutionary or evolutionary movement akin to those of the past, but on a global scale. In her article “Biopolicy”, Agni Vlavianos Arvanitis proposes a world referendum. A referendum of the world’s people on the fundamental principles that should govern the evolution of the human community is a practical step that can be taken now. Conducted electronically, it can reach out and involve one billion people, possibly many more. It is a seed-idea, an idea whose time has come.

A new world is struggling to be born, and as T. Natarajan writes in his article “Governance”, we have a unique opportunity to make it happen now.

## Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, Pondicherry 1997, 214
2. *ibid*, 212-3.