

FEDERALISM: A WAY TO GOVERN GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: Globalization is a social and economic integration process, which has a significant political meaning, i.e. the erosion of state sovereignty. The nature of globalization is not a mere quantitative increase of social relations and exchanges at world level, but it is a qualitative change rooted in the scientific revolution of material production, and it creates, alongside national societies and markets, a global market and a global civil society. It is a process that is changing the form and size of economic and social life and imposes on all sectors of social life a much wider dimension than that of sovereign states, even the biggest ones. The changes that have occurred in the sovereign state and the international system of states are by now recognized as the central political fact of our times. The construction of a general theory of politics that unifies political science and international relations is a long term task that may be performed by an entire generation of scholars. Multitudes of scholars are working to reconstruct a theory of politics that adheres more to the evolution of contemporary history. Federalism is one of these theories: it is an unfinished project, not a static political vision nor a timeless political theory. It is an unaccomplished project, which is constantly evolving in response to the new problems which history is raising relentlessly. Flexibility – which is the specific character of federal institutions – is particularly adapted to answering the need of combining unity with diversity that is required by the globalization era. Therefore, federalism is a political tool suitable for governing the social transformations under way in the contemporary world. It appears to be a very efficient institutional device for political integration, for ensuring the functioning of pluralistic societies, for protecting minorities, for solving ethnic, religious and national conflicts, and for answering the need for peace and international solidarity.

Keywords: federalism, globalization, nation-state, sovereignty, international relations.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE EROSION OF STATE SOVEREIGNTY

Globalization is a social and economic integration process, which has a significant political meaning, i.e. the erosion of state sovereignty. The nature of globalization is not a mere quantitative increase of social relations and exchanges at world level, but it is a qualitative change rooted in the scientific revolution of material production, and it creates, alongside national societies and markets, a global market and a global civil society. It is a process that is changing the

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form and size of economic and social life and imposes on all sectors of social life a much wider dimension than that of sovereign states, even the biggest ones.

It escapes states' control, limits the ability of governments to act and dents the essential character of their structure and functions. It produces an ever deeper contradiction between the development of the forces of production that are going to unify the world, and the state, the organized power that should govern it and ensure that general interests prevail over the private ones. In other words, globalization is unifying the world structurally while politics, still dominated by the idea of nation, keeps it divided at a super-structural level, which is the sphere where political decisions are taken. The state structures are subjected to a strong strain, which shows the need to adapt their dimensions to the requirements of the new mode of production.

If we accept the idea that the mode of production is the factor which exerts a decisive impact on the structure and the dimension of the state and international relations, a relationship can be established between the mode of production and the state dimension, in particular between the agricultural mode of production and the city-state, between the first phase of the industrial mode of production (utilization of coal and the steam-engine) and the nation-state, between the second phase of the industrial mode of production (utilization of electricity, oil and the internal combustion engine) and the state of dimensions as big as entire regions of the world. With the scientific revolution of material production (and the digital revolution that has changed the communication and information technologies) a world government becomes not only possible but also necessary. There is, therefore, a specific relationship between the globalization process and the scientific mode of production. This process, as slow as its evolution may be, creates the economic and social basis for the formation of a global market, a global civil society and global forms of statehood.

It is important to specify that the processes of regional unification and globalization belong to two different historical epochs and to two different phases in the evolution of the mode of production: the second phase of the industrial



mode of production and the scientific mode of production respectively. The very changes that made great political unions possible make states that maintain the old dimensions insignificant and outdated. Just as national states after the Second World War were condemned to decline and be reduced to the status of satellites of the two superpowers, states like the United States and Russia, whose dimensions were once considered gigantic, are now declining under the thrust of globalization that is eroding their sovereignty.

To claim that politics is conditioned by the mode of production does not however mean that political institutions lack a relative autonomy and that they have an insignificant role in determining the course of history. What else but political autonomy can explain the formation of the Roman Empire in a phase of history in which the agricultural mode of production did not allow the construction of well-organized states larger than a city and the surrounding territory? After having defeated all of its enemies, Rome became an empire that covered nearly the entire known world of the time. It is thus a political-military factor – the power acquired by Rome –, which met no appreciable resistance by the other political communities, that explains the dimensions assumed by the Roman Empire. It must be emphasized however that the latter managed to govern, from a single center, a territory so vast that the internal divisions and the pressure of other populations at its borders did not cause it to break up. But it is also the autonomy of politics that explains the survival of city-states like San Marino, Monaco and Andorra, which are UN member states in an epoch in which the state tends to assume macro-regional dimensions. These examples illustrate the resistance that political institutions offer to change. Nevertheless, we should not forget that keeping alive old forms of political organization has a price: decline and subordination to states having another dimension.



GLOBALIZATION OF POLITICS AND CRISIS OF THE STATE-CENTRIC PARADIGM

Since politics is the field of human activity whose goal is to rule the historical process, in parallel to globalization of markets the trend to globalization of politics has also developed. The world system of states is the political context, which, depending on how power is distributed among states, can assure (under the leadership of one state or by the convergence of *raisons d'état* among several states) the minimum international order necessary to the functioning of the world market, but it can also fail in pursuing this objective (international disorder). This is why the formation of the world market does not proceed along a straight line, but in waves. This progression is the reflection of the political conditions that make it possible and can help or hamper it.

The changes that have occurred in the sovereign state and the international system of states are by now recognized as the central political facts of our times. The consequence of this awareness is that the state-centric paradigm must not only be viewed as the theory of politics of a given historical epoch – that of the sovereign states –, but that it has also ceased being a guide for political research in our time. The construction of a general theory of politics that unifies political science and international relations is a long term task that can be performed by an entire generation of scholars. Multitudes of scholars are working to reconstruct a theory of politics that adheres more to the evolution of contemporary history. They are grouped together according to the nature of the research project they promote (global governance, glocalization, new medievalism, world order models, world-system studies, cosmopolitan democracy, peace research, theories of dependence, theories of global civil society etc.), but a universally shared model does not exist for the moment.

Federalism is one of these theories. Born with the Constitution of the United States of America, it is currently undergoing a deep renewal process and is developing in the direction of globality. The starting point is the retrieval of Kant's idea of a World Federation, understood as the culmi-



nation of world history and a tool to achieve perpetual peace through the gradual replacement of violence with law in international relations. Today among scholars (Held 1995; Habermas 1998; Höffe 1999) is gaining consent the hypothesis that world unification is an event in progress, driven by the scientific revolution of material production and by globalization whose historical meaning is the construction of peace through constitutionalization of international relations. The guiding idea on which federalism is building its theoretical autonomy is reorganizing political power in the world through a transfer of power from the sovereign states upwards (towards international organizations) and downwards (towards the smaller territorial communities) according to the project of multilevel government.

Federalism is an unfinished project. It is not a static political vision nor a timeless political theory. It is an unaccomplished project, which is constantly evolving in response to the new problems which history is raising relentlessly. Flexibility, that is the specific character of federal institutions, is particularly adapted to answer the need of combining unity with diversity that is required by the globalization era. Therefore, federalism is a political tool suitable for governing the social transformations under way in the contemporary world. It appears to be a very efficient institutional device for political integration, for ensuring the functioning of pluralistic societies, for protecting minorities, for solving ethnic, religious and national conflicts, and for answering the need for peace and international solidarity.

I would like to mention one of the vanguard scholars in the field of global studies, George Modelski, who indicated world politics as the subject of study in his important book *The Principles of World Politics*. It concerns an approach that criticizes the separation between political science and international relations and in particular the supposed autonomy of political science compared with international relations. Modelski denounces the “ethnocentric” nature of the typical approach of political science (Modelski 1972: 2), which studies “the state and (more recently) the political system [...] as though they were isolated, self-contained and self-sufficient entities. They see political change as self-generated – that is,



endogenous to the national community – while influences from ‘outside’ the community are alien, illegitimate, if not positively subversive” (Modelski 1972: 1-2). On the other hand, continues Modelski, “international relations may be said to have functioned as an ‘ideology’ of the nation-state system, rather than as a ‘social-science-type’ explanatory theory” (Modelski 1972: 9).

The renewal of politological disciplines demands that we overcome the state-centric point of view, which vitiates the studies of political science and international relations, and adopt a perspective that Modelski has called “geocentric” (Modelski 1972: 14-16). It is an approach for studying politics as a phenomenon of international dimensions in accordance with the changes that have taken place in world politics in the age of globalization. The adoption of this point of view allowed Modelski to perceive the advent of the era of globalization before others. As appears in the third chapter of *Principles*, he is the first political scientist to have used this word.

The state-centric approach was justified when the states were independent entities and with their power governed the fundamental aspects of economic and social relations that used to be carried out within state borders. But today this situation has faded away forever.

A comprehensive study of politics, according to the recommendations of Modelski, represents an important proposal of method and an ambitious research project, which is only developed in small part in *Principles*. It will be the task of a new generation of scholars to expand on these suggestions for renewing the studies of political science. In the face of the crisis of social sciences, and the obvious inadequacy of analytical tools at our disposal, we must not abandon hope that the sciences can help us understand the world we live in and identify ways to improve it. In order to continue on this course, however, we first need to clear the path of the residues of outdated and useless theories.



GOVERNMENTS' ANSWER: INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Governments' answer to regional integration and globalization processes has been to pursue international cooperation, not by choice, but due to the absence of alternatives. There is no national answer, in fact, to problems that have regional and global dimensions. If free access to global markets is to be pursued, intergovernmental cooperation is a necessity. The ever more frequent creation of international organizations represents the road taken by governments for finding a solution to problems that they cannot solve alone. The most significant are the EU, for its tendency to evolve toward a federal shape of government, and the UN for its vocation to universality.

A quantitative datum is sufficient to appreciate the importance of the phenomenon of international organizations: the incredible speed at which their number grew since the beginning of the twentieth century. The systematic exploration of this field is provided by the *Yearbook of International Organisations*, where the evolution of the phenomenon is constantly monitored and updated. In order to perceive its dimension, the following data are sufficient. According to a comprehensive criterion utilized by the *Yearbook*, that includes not only the international organizations instituted by states, but also those promoted by international organizations, the intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) were 37 in 1909 and their number grew to 7,608 in 2011, while the number of active non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that was 176 in 1909, has grown in 2011 to 56,834 (*Yearbook of International Organisations* 2011: 32-35).

International organizations are the legal and political structures on which the existing world order lies. They justify a world order whose cornerstone remains state sovereignty. There ensues that the regulation of global market and international civil society is entrusted to the strong powers that exercise their predominance over world politics (the big powers) and over the world market (multinational banks and companies), and also to illegal powers like organized crime and terrorism. At the same time, they exclude the peoples from participation in the making of fun-



damental decisions on which their destiny depends. In other words, they helped to dispel what governments fear most of all: the specter of supranationality.

Of course, it is to be recognized that the existence of international organizations represents a first preliminary step on the way of international democracy. A necessary, even though not sufficient, step. In fact, they are the arena where states exercise co-operation, that is the alternative to violence as a tool to solve international disputes.

However, the price to be paid in terms of effectiveness and democracy for the adoption of the intergovernmental approach – i.e. the belief that international cooperation and international organizations can solve every international issue – is very high. On the one hand, executive powers able to give binding force to common decisions are lacking at international level. On the other hand, the decision-making procedures are mostly submitted to the veto power of member states and exclude, with few exceptions, the democratic principle of majority decisions. This principle is generally rejected for the reason that it is incompatible with the defence of national interests and state sovereignty.

REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AS BUILDING BLOCKS OF A NEW WORLD FEDERAL ORDER

It is difficult to imagine that the construction of world peace could be the result of negotiations among some 200 member states. In fact, the constant increase in the number of the UN member states (today they are approximately four times as many as in 1945) shows an alarming trend toward fragmentation and anarchy. The huge disparity in size and power of member states represents the most serious flaw of the current structure of the UN.

The achievement of peace at the regional level is a condition to promote peace at the world level. A regional level of government is an indispensable vehicle to make the working of the UN more efficient, just and democratic. Regional groupings of states are an alternative to the current UN structure based on power hierarchies determined by the



differences between states of varying dimensions and the fragmentation of the UN into an unmanageable number of states. In other words, the reduction of the number of actors within the international system of states makes it easier negotiations and co-operation. Regional organizations, as far as they bring together groupings of states, can be conceived as building blocks of a world community, an intermediate level between nation-states and global institutions. They should not replace states nor eliminate their autonomy. They are the framework where rudimentary legislative, executive and jurisdictional bodies can take shape in order to enable these institutions to address issues of regional dimension. The subsidiarity principle suggests that nations should be represented at the regional level and the great regions of the world should be represented at the world level.

The contribution of federalism to understanding, and therefore to identifying the limitations of national experience, lies in the denunciation of the exclusive character assumed by the ties of national solidarity. These do not tolerate any loyalty towards communities that are smaller or larger than the nation itself. However, national solidarity does not have to be cancelled in the globalization era, but it must be considered as a necessary step towards wider forms of solidarity between nations headed by federations as large as great regions of the world and between great regions bound in a worldwide federation. At the same time, national solidarity does not exclude other forms of solidarity within regional and local communities, but can coexist with them. The federal model is an institutional formula that allows for the coexistence of solidarity towards territorial communities of different size, which may range from small local communities to the entire world.

GLOCALIZATION, NEW MEDIEVALISM AND MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNMENT

The globalization process is characterized by a tension between unification and fragmentation. The global and local do not exclude each other. On the contrary, they are two as-



pects of a single process. The trend toward globalization and world unification coexists with decentralization and localization. At the same time, the nation-state is not destined to disappear. For this reason, Ronald Robertson coined the word “glocalization” (Robertson 1992). Whereas globalization is a process of unification of markets, civil society, cultural models, life styles and political institutions, it fosters, at the same time, the need to preserve differences, local cultures and institutions. Since it is the expression of a tendency to equalize and level social behaviors, it generates the requirement to defend and develop local traditions and identities.

The trend toward fragmentation takes two different ways. The first is ethnic nationalism, which combats globalization, disintegrates old nation-states and tends to transform the world into a sum of closed communities divided by tribal hatred. The second is local and regional self-government, which is compatible with supranational powers and institutions. It is an aspect of a power distribution on different levels – sub-national and supra-national – of government.

The erosion of state sovereignty, which is the main political aspect of globalization, stimulates the need for new forms of governance, including the national level but overcoming it through the transfer of power toward higher and lower levels of government. The articulation of the architecture of the authority structures occurred in the globalization era has much in common with the medieval political organization. Hedley Bull’s theory of “new medievalism” underlines the analogy between the reorganization of the international political space, in progress during the last phase of the Cold War (in 1977, when Bull wrote *The Anarchical Society*, the word “globalization” was just beginning its circulation), and the overlapping of different levels of government from the local to the universal community, typical of medieval times.

Whereas the formation of the modern state was characterized by the assertion of the concept of sovereignty, i.e. the progressive power centralization on the military, fiscal, administrative, legislative and judiciary plane, globalization



brings about a process, which is developing in the opposite direction, of scattering of political power and legal systems. A growing number of power centers is escaping state control, and undermines state sovereignty. However, the observation of the effects of the globalization process shows the loss of authority of the old sovereign states and the scattering of political power. The lack of certainty of law, the clash between ill-defined rights pave the way to the abuse and encroachment of the strongest powers and groups against the weakest, the assertion of new privileges, the limitation of individual liberties, the spread of violence. All these phenomena, which are real aspects of the globalization process, represent a serious danger for the values and institutions on which our civilization rests. The state represents an invaluable heritage and a building bloc of the civilization process. The supremacy of the common good over the private interests depends on it. Therefore, the problem is to rethink and reorganize the state, not abolish it.

This reorganization of political power at different territorial levels has been called in the contemporary political science literature "multi-level governance". This expression echoes the federalist vision of political institutions, which enables to rethink the traditional model of the unitary state. It is worth recalling that Kenneth C. Wheare defines the federal government "that system of power sharing that allows the central government and the regional governments to be, each in its own sphere, coordinated and independent" (Wheare 1964: 11). It is appropriate to call this institutional arrangement "multi-level government".

It is a simple delusion to think that the destruction of the nation-state alone could be the vehicle towards more elevated forms of solidarity. It is true that the nation-state has been the expression of the deepest political division and the strongest concentration of power that the world has known. However, the examples of Yugoslavia, Somalia, Lybia and Siria are well known and show how the collapse of the state is equivalent to a return to primitive barbarism, to ferocious, selfish tribalism and to the return to obsolete forms of solidarity based on ethnic or religious ties.



Faced with these phenomena, one can do no less than appreciate the positive aspects of national solidarity in overcoming local, regional and class self-interests and the great role that nation-states have played in our history. France, Spain, Italy and Germany have unified populations with a variety of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. To be sure, this unity has been achieved through centralization, i.e. by sacrificing pluralism. It is what the federalists of nineteenth century, from Proudhon to Frantz and Cattaneo, untiringly denounced even if the federalist political proposal had no chance of influencing states such as France, Germany and Italy. In fact, the strong political and military pressure that these states underwent on their borders and the radical nature assumed by the class struggle created a drive towards power centralization that no force could oppose. The fact is that democratic centralism has been a stage in the construction of democracy, of its extension to mixed populations with the same rights of citizenship; and a means of overcoming old political and economic institutions in which the privileges of the feudal guilds were concealed.

The contribution of federalism to understanding, and therefore to identifying the limitations of national experience, lies in the denunciation of the exclusive character assumed by the ties of national solidarity. These do not tolerate any loyalty towards communities that are smaller or larger than the nation itself. However, national solidarity does not have to be cancelled in the globalization era, but it must be considered as a necessary step towards wider forms of solidarity between nations headed by federations as large as great regions of the world and between great regions bound in a worldwide federation. At the same time, national solidarity does not exclude other forms of solidarity within regional and local communities, but can coexist with them.

The federal model is an institutional formula that allows for the coexistence of solidarity towards territorial communities of different size, which may range from small local communities to the entire world. The federalizing process has become increasingly widespread until it embraces en-



tire continents and potentially the whole of the planet (UN reform). At the same time, unitary states have been affected by federalism, which has determined a transfer of power towards smaller territorial communities. As a result of this process that is developing in two directions, one towards the top of the federal hierarchy and the other towards the bottom, it has become necessary to organize the federations with more than two levels of government, and so to supersede the traditional model that shared power only between federal government and federated states.

To these two levels of government must be added (with equal dignity within the state) the levels of the region, the county (or the province, i.e. the intermediate community between the region and town) and the local community, i.e. the borough of a large city or the town. Then, above the macro-regional union of states, there is the worldwide level.

In each of these territorial areas, institutions already exist that are a clear expression of governmental and organizational requirements. However, these institutions are not usually autonomous centers of power but are subordinate to the nation-state. Their reorganization according to the federal pattern allows every level of government to be given an independent power. This implies full freedom for each level of government to have, within the framework of its own authority, relationships with all the other corresponding levels or with different levels, without being subjected to control (except for those of a constitutional nature) of the higher levels of government (for example, Region-European Union relationships, or links between bordering regions, and so on).

The federal model has to be seen as the overcoming not as the destruction of the national model. It is a change in two directions: towards the top and towards the bottom. In fact, the federalist design improves on the limitations of national democracy, which is in decline owing to its excessive concentration of power in the hands of national governments. This improvement is achieved by adding new levels of government, popular participation and citizenship, both above and within the nations.



On the other hand, the decline of power politics and the ever closer interdependence between peoples have erased not only the incentives towards centralization, but they have also changed the traditional concept of border, which used to give states the unchangeable shape of a closed society with homogeneous characteristics. The new forms of federal organization join the coexistence of different levels of government with the openness and the overlapping of the individual territorial communities.

As an example, the removal of the military and economic divisions within the European Union has brought to light the artificial character of nation-states. From this comes the possibility for border populations to develop new forms of association within the European regions. For example, there are the Basque Countries, Tyrol, Catalonia and Roussillon, Alsace and Baden, the French and the English region bordering the Channel and so on. It is possible to forecast that in the future there will be an institutionalization of these regions that goes beyond mere cross-frontier cooperation. This would be a new aspect of contemporary federalism and a way to overcome the obsolete formula of the nation-state, born during the French revolution and now at sunset.

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