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Global Democracy, Western Hegemony, and the Russian Challenge

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The central normative concern of this paper is the prospects of global democracy, examined from the point of view of poststructuralist theory. A particular empirical focus is on the recent Russian debate about democracy, sovereignty and relations with the West. In the first section I outline a poststructuralist approach to this notion, based mostly on the neo-Gramscian theory of discourse developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The second section addresses the problem of democracy as a hegemonic discourse which is, in particular, promoted by the West in as much as the latter is constructed as a global political subject. The third section examines a particular challenge to western hegemony presented by the Russian president Vladimir Putin and his team, who insist on the importance of sovereignty for the idea of democracy. The implications of this challenge potentially go far beyond the current opposition between Russia and the West and can both broaden the democratic horizon and lead to an even greater closure of the Russian political space.

1

The question of global democracy is an obviously normative one; however, my key theoretically inspired contention is that it is impossible to address this question in a purely normative, deductive fashion. Many authors these days complain that the term ‘democracy’ has lost any concrete meaning, and some (e.g. Martyanov 2007) even argue that this is one of the many sad consequences of the onset of the postmodern

epoch. This paper, on the contrary, proceeds from the assumption that being empty is a necessary condition of all universalia. Universal values, such as democracy, good governance or, for that matter, the right to life, can perhaps be defined at the abstract level, but those definitions are extremely difficult to operationalise in political practice. Political definition of public good can only be a concrete definition applied to a particular case, because politics, in the end, is about taking a decision in a situation of utter uncertainty, when the decision itself has to serve as its own foundation. It is very easy to be in favour of the right to life in general, but there is a world of difference between this abstract righteousness and having to form and defend an opinion about a proper penalty for someone who cool-bloodedly raped, tortured and killed people, or to work out a law on abortion, sorting out all the minute details differentiating a human being from a foetus which has not yet reached that legal status. It is clear that these concrete definitions of right and wrong are time and space specific: they are bound to vary from one historical conjuncture to another, and, as made clear by the postcolonial turn in social sciences, a definition accepted in one society in a particular historical moment is in itself, 'objectively' speaking, no better or worse than any other, belonging to another epoch or a different region of the world.

In the luxury of the academic world, one can try to assume this neutral posture, maintaining that 'all cultures are equal' and condemning 'Eurocentrism' as being, in essence, imperialist. However, one is normally dragged out of this refuge – both by one's own position as a political being and by the practitioners eager to listen to the 'experts' – towards the need to take a moral stance on current political issues. These issues, once again, are concrete ones, and often – especially when IR people are involved – imply that one has to make judgements on the relative merits of particular social and political practices belonging to different cultural and historical contexts. Is the obligatory veil for women an acceptable cultural practice expressing some essential features of Islamic worldview or a terrible violation of women's rights? Is the Second Amendment a rudiment of the past or a bulwark of American freedom? To answer questions like these, and a myriad others, one has to correlate the substance of the matter with something which, in *our* world, represents universal reason but which, after all, is only the result of a particular political decision that is ultimately valid only within the boundaries of *our* community. This need for constant critical self-grounding, for

walking the tightrope between moral relativism and religious (or quasi-religious) fundamentalism, is a distinctive feature of modernity (Kapustin 1996), and it is this feature that sparkles the feeling of insecurity among those who fail to recognize it as inevitable, and produces invectives about the ever-deepening moral decline.

Moreover, even if one recognizes the fact that universal values are based on nothing more than a self-grounded political decision, this still leaves open a question of representation. As Ernesto Laclau (2000: 80–81) argues, 'society consists only of particularities, and… all universality will have to be incarnated in something utterly incommensurable with it'. A political position speaking in the name of common good is always a particular position which constantly has to reaffirm its right to speak in the name of the universal whole. The problem of representation is equally valid in case of any community, however small or big – from a family or a group of scholars to humanity as a whole – but, at the same time, it should be noted that it is only through practices of representation that a community comes into being in the first place (Seitz 2005: 287). Modern political thought has concentrated on (in the most common wording) the problem of legitimacy in the framework of the nation state, which has to some extent eclipsed the broader agenda. Yet in the light of the preceding observations it should be evident that the problem of representation exists in relation to such communities as Europe, the West or humanity as a whole, and, especially in the latter case, it is acquiring unprecedented urgency.

Constituting a vital empirical and political issue, representation of humanity as a single community of values amounts to a theoretical problem of no less importance. This problem is most explicitly addressed in poststructuralist theory of discourse developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who, relying mostly on Slavoj Žižek, link it to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Poststructuralism insists on the co-dimensionality between the linguistic and the social (Torfing 1999: 300): there undoubtedly is a social (as well as physical) world beyond language, but, as David Campbell (1998: 6) put it, 'we can never *know* about it (apart from the statement of the fact itself), because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our tradition of interpretation'. Since Saussure, language is understood as a relational system of differences: the meaning of any element is defined exclusively by its relations with other elements, while the language as a whole 'constitutes a system in which no element

can be defined independently of the others' (Laclau 1991: 432). This, in turn, means that the entirety of the system of meaning cannot be represented in the normal process of signification:

> Each signifier constitutes a sign by attaching itself to a particular signified, inscribing itself as a difference within the signifying process. But if what we are trying to signify is not a difference but, on the contrary, a radical exclusion which is the ground and condition of all differences, in that case, no production of *one more* difference can do the trick. As, however, all the means of representation are differential in nature, it is only if the differential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being – that such a signification is possible (Laclau 1996: 39).

This is how empty signifiers – signifiers with no signified – are generated in the process establishing a relation of equivalence between a particular signifier and the rest of identities inside the system, which leads to this signifier being almost completely deprived of its own differential dimension and of its signifying relationship with any specific signified.

The radical exclusion that constitutes the very possibility of meaning is a by necessity a political (and not just linguistic) act which establishes a community by drawing a boundary between inside and outside – the domestic space of the system where meanings are shared and therefore common values can exist, and the external chaos where no comprehensible meaning exists at all. The fullness of communal existence is expressed through certain words which cannot have any other meaning, thus being empty signifiers, and which assume the role of nodal points (Lacan's (1966) 'points de caption') – 'the words which, exactly as words, at the level of the signifier, unify a particular field, define its identity. It is a word to which the 'things' themselves turn to comprehend themselves in their entirety' (Žižek 1989). This is valid for political communities of any 'level' – in as much as one can talk about any hierarchies using such an approach, – but obviously the 'emptiest' of the nodal points would be those whose role is to signify the community of humanity as such, to refer to the universal human values. This can only be done by drawing the most radical of all political

boundaries – the one between humans and non-humans, and thus through constituting the foundational antagonism, which defines the setting for the global political struggle at a particular historical conjuncture. 'Democracy' certainly comes closest to this role of a nodal point organizing global political space, so it is little wonder that the term is being emptied of any positive meaning.

Viewed in this light, there is no contradiction in the fact that while nearly everyone in today's world pays lip service to democracy, the notion itself becomes ever more contentious, and moreover, has become the focal point of the most acute global conflicts. At the level of declaratory politics, there are very few undemocratic states left in this world: nearly each end every political force is compelled to declare loyalty to the democratic ideal. Yet in the meantime, international politics is increasingly focused on mutual accusations of falling short of the democratic standards. To overcome this apparent contradiction, one can go on accusing his or her opponents of hypocritically using the notion of democracy as a political tool while caring little of the substance[1], or insisting that there exists a transcendental idea of democracy which must be recovered (Martyanov 2007) or, finally, recognizing, in the spirit of poststructuralist theory, that universal notions are empty by necessity.

2

The emptiness of democracy as a signifier by no means implies futility of democratic endeavour. On the contrary, it emphasizes the crucial importance of critical reflection about the foundational principles of any political order which arguably lies at the core of the liberal democratic project. Assuming that emancipation is the central value of liberalism and that democracy is a key tool of achieving emancipation in the political domain, one does not have to irreversibly link democracy with any particular institution or form of government. The differentiation between democratic and non-democratic institutions and practices is to be based not on some uncritically accepted eternal truth, but on the political dynamics of the everyday struggle for hegemony. This notion, introduced by Antonio Gramsci (1971), is developed by Laclau and Mouffe in

[1] This is a typical argument developed, inter alia, by Russian conservative thinkers, see Morozov 2002.

the spirit of post-structuralism: they do away with the essentialist notion of class struggle and arrive at the understanding of hegemony as always contingent and discursively based. It incorporates Foucauldian concept of power as constitutive of the social, retaining at the same time the characteristically Marxist view of politics as antagonism. Hegemony is only possible when there exist antagonism and domination, but when at the same time domination is contingent and the boundaries which separate the antagonistic forces are unstable (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 136). Hegemony is power which is at the same time accepted and challenged, a system of social institutions and practices (and the underlying discursive articulation) based on a decision whose political nature is still very much alive and can be reactivated. Hegemony exists in a war of position (another Gramscian term) for the redefinition of discursive space around nodal points, while revolutions result in the old nodal points being swept away and replaced with new ones.

The fact that democracy today comes close to being universally accepted as a point of reference is in itself a result of the hegemonic position of one particular subject of history – the West. There is no denial that the West as a subject has been – and still is being – discursively constructed, and thus it is always dangerous to speak about certain things as being 'western', but however broadly or narrowly we define the West, it is still impossible to dismiss the fact that the democratic ideal itself originates in the western civilization. The current global political struggle around the notion of democracy illustrates the idea of hegemony very well: democracy is simultaneously accepted and challenged, and even while it is accepted as an empty signifier, a growing number of political forces is struggling to fill it in with a content which would empower them and liberate them from the dominance of the West. The western dominance in itself is hegemonic: on the one hand, non-western leaders criticize the West, in particular the United States, for being undemocratic, for usurping power and promoting their national or 'civilizational' interest in the name of democracy. In the meantime, political leaders all over the world often refer to the West as setting the standards for democracy when they need to justify a particular course of political action, such as the Russian government citing environmental reasons for squeezing foreign investors out of the oil and gas sectors.

A crucial point is to be made here about the nature of western hegemony. There is no doubt, once again, that the West as a unified global political subject is discursively constructed, mostly by its opponents. It is clear that the West is very diverse, being a place where the war of position around the notion of democracy is most intense. Moreover, in the country that embodies the West in most cases for the majority of its opponents – the United States – the very notion of the West as a community of values seems no longer valid, with unilateralism being the main principle of foreign policy. However, this diversity is often ignored by those who antagonize the West and thus construct it as a subject: one could provide an almost endless number of quotes belonging to different cultural, religious and linguistic contexts, which would illustrate the fact that western policies are being perceived as coherent and purposeful, as if directed from a single centre.

It is useless to argue which image is 'more real': they are both real in their respective discursive settings, and while the first is more relevant for the future of the European Union and the Transatlantic community, the second lies beneath the most intense global conflicts in the wake of September 11. In the first place, discursive constructions become real if they acquire hegemonic position within a particular community, and it seems that this is exactly the case in many communities which do not belong to the West. Secondly, and even more importantly, the western debates about the nature of democracy hardly translate into political action on the global arena. While the Americans and the Europeans might be in doubt about the meaning of democracy, as well as about the democratic credentials of their own political systems, the policy impact felt by the people in the periphery and semi-periphery of the world system makes an impression that the West is as self-confident as ever in its democratic crusade. Non-western countries are under constant pressure to liberalize politically and economically, and to introduce practices and institutions borrowed from Western Europe and the US. The European Union mostly uses 'soft power', while the US has recently preferred sticks over carrots, but the ambition in any case is to *export* democracy, and the rationale is security.

The net result is that while the liberal democratic idea does indeed have an infinite number of incarnations, the resultant hegemonic force of the war of position inside the West is the insistence that sovereignty be limited for the sake of spreading

democracy and/or protecting human rights. Sovereignty is out of fashion in contemporary world – at least in as much as hegemonic articulation succeeds in promoting liberal universalism in its various incarnations, from neoconservative to cosmopolitan. As David Chandler (2006: 487–488) put it:

> The advocacy of new international norms and of 'cosmopolitan' law has gone hand-in-hand with the creation of a new international legal subject, usurping the primacy of the sovereign state. This new legal subject is proclaimed to be the same subject as that of domestic law – the individual person – but as the bearer of human rights rather than civil or democratic rights.

Chandler (2006: 489) refers to what is perhaps the most explicit elaboration of the topic in a book by Robert Cooper, policy advisor to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and the EU High Representative Javier Solana. Cooper divides the world into pre-modern, modern and post-modern states, and argues that the latter ones (the EU members and to some extent the US) are primarily concerned with democracy and justice, having no traditional foreign policy interests. However, when the post-modern world has to face the modern and pre-modern states, it cannot treat them as equals:

> …When dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of state outside the post-modern limits, Europeans need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era – force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary… In the jungle, one must use the laws of the jungle (Cooper 2003: 62).

Echoing John Rawls (1999), Cooper goes on advocating a neo-Wilsonian interventionist agenda, which does not tolerate modernity and pre-modernity as co-existing worlds, but insists on the need to reshape them by introducing the 'universal' norms and institutions.

This is, of course, a very simplified version of the Rawlsean democratic peace theory, which lacks a more subtle distinction Rawls makes for the 'decent non-liberal peoples', which are allowed 'to reform themselves in their own way' (1999: 61). For authors like Cooper, the attempts by the modern states to protect their sovereignty are interpreted as security threats to the postmodern world, which are to be countered by 'prevention' reinforced with 'enduring strategic superiority' in the sprit of the US National Security Strategy (Cooper 2003: 65). It is against this background that I

suggest to consider the ongoing debate in Russia about the nature of sovereignty and democracy.

3

The risk of potential confrontation with the global sovereign insisting on the 'old-fashionness', futility and even threatening nature of all other sovereignties was fully recognized in Russia at the beginning of Nato's military operation in Kosovo (Arbatova 2001) and has remained on the lists of threats to Russia's national security ever since (Kontseptsiya 2000, Solovyev 2007). This anxiety has been fully spelled out by Vladimir Putin at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007. He described the 'unipolar world' promoted by the West as 'a world of one master, one sovereign', where 'nearly the entire legal system of one state, first of all, of course, of the United States, has transgressed its national boundaries and… is being imposed on other states'. 'Unilateral, illegitimate actions' of the US and its allies are detrimental to global security because they produce new conflicts and wars, intensify nuclear arms race and lead to a situation where 'no-one feels secure. Because no-one can find refuge behind the stronghold of international law' (Putin 2007). The latter phrase, of course, smacks of sympathies to the internationally prosecuted former dictators like Augusto Pinochet of Chile, but the overall argument of the speech is rather framed from the point of view of global, rather than personal or even national, concerns.

Unlike the hawks in the military establishment and the Duma, the top people in the Kremlin are not comfortable with the prospect of open confrontation with the West, not only because of the costs involved, but primarily, perhaps, for identity reasons – up until now, they have not given up on the idea of establishing Russia as a full member of the 'community of civilized nations' (see also O'Loughlin et al. 2004). Thus, President Putin and his team, including his possible successor Dmitry Medvedev, are busy arguing that 'real democracy exists in Russia', even if 'there is still room for progress' (RIA Novosti 2007). Speaking in Munich, President Putin emphasized that the system with one global sovereign is 'pernicious' for everyone including the sovereign itself, and 'has nothing in common with democracy', and that those who teach Russia to be democratic should first learn themselves (Putin 2007c). In his speech at the Davos

Economic Forum in January 2007, Medvedev maintained that democracy, 'as a social phenomenon, as a legal construction… is a totally universal term… Humankind knows what it is and is able to see when one speaks about real political democracy, and when this word is used in vain' (RIA Novosti 2007). This last quote demonstrates particularly well that the case Putin, Medvedev, Surkov and others are trying to make can be described as an attempt to overcome the 'logic of proper names' (Koposov 2001: 102–121). The argument is that democracy exists, above all, as an abstract principle (something that people, as Medvedev argues, know almost intuitively, because 'freedom is better than the lack of freedom' (Arsiukhin 2007)), and this principle can be put into political practice in many different ways. As argued by the influential Deputy Head of Presidential Administration Vladislav Surkov and maintained in the official propaganda of the party of power, United Russia. Russia is a sovereign democracy – a nation which is going to build democracy according to its own preferences, without references to the western models (see, in particular, Surkov 2006a, 2006b; Dobrynina 2006).

The problem is, however, that in the practice of liberal universalist hegemony the standards of democracy are set by comparison with the United Sates and the European Union as democracies *par excellence*. As Chandler argues, the western interventionism 'delegitimates the political process of the state intervened in' (2006: 485), and thus deprives any non-western standards for democracy of any credibility: being imposed from outside, '[d]emocracy is often presented as a solution to the problems of the political sphere rather than as a process of determining and giving content to the "good life"' (2006: 483). This is true both in the case of the US 'democratic crusade' and its 'with us or against us' logic, and in the case of the EU policy of conditionality, which strives to remodel the neighbours, from Montenegro to Russia to Libya, in its own image and likeness. In Richard Cheney's statement in Vilnius (2006), 'a return to democratic reform in Russia' is synonymous to Russia's 'aligning with the West', and in this respect the speech by the US vice-president in no less indicative than in many others.

Both Surkov's sovereign democracy and Medvedev's real democracy, in essence, are trying to create one more proper name for democracy, 'Russia'. Speaking more broadly, however, this constitutes an exercise in the politics of representation: facing what it perceived as a single and unified West trying to impose its values and

practices on all other civilizations, Russia claims to represent the 'true' universality, attempts to fill in the universal which is always empty. In the Russian discourse, sovereignty becomes the universal value which Russia strives to protect, acting in the name of entire humanity, and its criticism against the West as being ideological in its policies is pointed against the failure to recognize the fundamental nature of sovereignty for the global political order. Thus, both liberal universalism and sovereign democracy represent 'false consciousness' in each other's terms.

At a more general level, however, both discourses are ideological in as much as they constitute 'a critique of the lack of structuration accompanying the dominant order' and refuse to accept 'the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture' (Laclau 1990: 62, 92). Russia is unhappy with the fact that the world today is 'no longer' neatly divided into sovereign territorial states, and the ideological moment in this position consists in the failure to recognize that the world has never been like that, nor could have been. For the US and the European Union, in turn, Russia's and others' insistence on their sovereignty challenges their view of global democracy understood, firstly, as a universal value, but secondly, as modelled on their own historically contingent social institutions and practices.

This predicament, as any structural dislocation, has a strong emancipatory potential, since Russia could, theoretically, try to embark on what Ernesto Laclau (1996: 34) calls 'a systematic decentring of the West' by exposing the Eurocentric nature of western discourse 'which did not differentiate between the universal values the West was advocating and the concrete social agents that were incarnating them'. This could expand the horizon of universal democracy by undermining the link between universal values and their particular cultural context, which could be useful for both the West and the non-West (in a way, this would also inevitably deconstruct this opposition). Unfortunately, Russia compromises its own position of the protector of global diversity by the attempts to install uniformity within the limits of the nation – as a member of Putin's audience in Munich aptly noted, criticizing the western-dominated unipolarity, the Kremlin at the same time creates a unipolar political space within Russia (Putin 2007c).

Even though the Kremlin's desire to protect and enhance Russia's sovereignty is framed in opposition to the West, Moscow's policies actually mirror those of the West

in one important respect: it claims for itself the role of the ultimate political centre which simultaneously figures as the only locus of politics and as a depoliticized, disinterested subject catering exclusively for common good. David Chandler argues that the emphasis on 'good governance' in various projects aimed at exporting democracy is based on '[t]he rejection of the domestic political sphere as a vital constitutive sphere, in which social and political bonds are constituted and strengthened, and the re-representation of this sphere as essentially one of division and conflict' (2006: 486). The external intervening powers, on their part, is also portrayed as being 'above politics' (2006: 485) and aimed essentially at administering and policing, rather than on taking decisions in a situation of indeterminacy. This has a striking parallel in the Russian domestic discourse, where the ruling party presents itself as a party of 'the real deeds' taking care of the de-problematized national interest, while the opposition is scorned as trying to split society and capitalize on social problems instead of solving them. Both strategies originate in the inherent mistrust of all 'local' politics and thus of democracy on the ground, and both consist in monopolizing the power to take decisions while at the same time presenting these decisions as essentially non-political in nature.

Moreover, it can be argued that by mistreating the NGO activists, the Georgians, the Chechens, the liberal politicians etc., the Russian authorities engage in a practice which, rephrasing Ernesto Laclau, may be called representational inversion of the relations of oppression. Facing what it perceives as the unjust western dominance in global affairs, on the one hand, and the disturbing uncertainty at home, on the other hand, Russia is tempted to define its identity in radical opposition to the West. Even if it could win this battle and inverse the oppressive relationship (i.e. started a new cold war and won it), oppression as a form would still be there, the only result being that the oppressor and the oppressed would have changed their roles (Laclau 1996: 31). This is why Russia's criticism against the West from the vantage point of universal and abstract democracy is a very encouraging sign: it is a move in the direction of opposing the form of oppression as such and thus towards the expansion of the horizon of global democracy. The opposite trend, however, is also present, and might be taking the upper hand: being unable to win the confrontation with the West, the Russian state turns against what is sees as western agents, clients and proxies – everything which *represents* the West in the domestic political space. The result of this representational

inversion is that the oppression is not only preserved, but doubled: the western hegemony is still there and is still perceived as oppressive, but internal hegemony within Russian society is also built on oppressive treatment of various 'pro-western' identities.

On the one hand, sovereign democracy as ideology certainly contributes to the new antagonism between Russia and the West, which reinforces existing political boundaries and marginalizes oppositional discourses as being 'pro-western' and thus belonging to the threatening world located beyond the limits of the domestic political space. On the other hand, Putin's insistence on the universal nature of democracy as opposed to its particularist representations by the West opens up the possibility to argue that democracy *within* Russia can be defined in numerous ways, and thus to revitalize the irreducible diversity of local politics. This leaves open the question about the possible subject of such discursive transformation, but at least one can see that there is a *possibility* for this subject to emerge.

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