

World trade organization: a public sphere



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It is popular belief that the World Trade Organization (WTO) does not truly represent the interests of all its member states, despite the fact that the WTO was established as a supranational organization, that is, an institution that transcends national spheres of interests or national boundaries to encompass the interests of all in the quest to liberalize trade across borders - for the economic interests of all. But, is it really possible to democratize such institutions?

Gills (2002) states that the concept of democratization of international, regional and/or supranational organizations has arisen alongside the notion of universal or global liberalism. The concept has become increasingly important after the Cold War, and it is most often heard about when it is propounded by Western politicians and political scientists. Nash (2000) writes that democracy may not be truly possible for supranational organizations without the interests of the most powerful entities playing a vital role in running the show. Who are the most powerful entities that run the show?

Undoubtedly, they are the political elites, the powerhouses of the richest nations in the world, called by such names as the G7 or G8. They would like trade to be liberalized as much as possible at the same time as they advocate global democracy. But, problems confronting the WTO clearly reveal that the rich nations would like to keep their position as the richest countries in the world, regardless of the envy of the poor and developing nations that would like to speak up for themselves through WTO and avail more benefits of the presence of the rich.

In short, pure global democracy looks virtually impossible for WTO, if we were to describe the organization as a free trade public sphere, just as there are public spheres within the WTO, for example, a “green public sphere” supported by multinational NGO’s and their likes speaking for the global environment (Eckersley, 2007, pp. 329). Habermas’ model of the public sphere explains the dilemmas facing the WTO in our time. Based on this model, it can be confidently restated that the WTO is positioned to represent the interests of the rich nations alone.

Indeed, the global public sphere must necessarily be dominated by the rich, capitalist nations that speak for democracy but would reject the idea of democratization of supranational organizations if democratization stands in the way of highest economic achievement for the capitalists. Habermas refers to the public sphere as the “bourgeois public sphere,” regardless of whether the public sphere is merely local or truly global (Kellner). In other words, it is almost always the rich people or the capitalists in the position to employ the poor that must dominate the public sphere.

Although Habermas’ thought is centered on the concept of democracy to boot - the reality that the poor must be dominated by the rich stands true in the world of politics as well (Kellner). The word, “bourgeois,” next to “public sphere,” stands out in Habermas’ writing (Kellner). After all, it is the only the richest people that can buy space in major international newspapers to publish their stories. They are the ones with the financial resources to struggle for political power as well.

Kellner explains Habermas’ concept thus: The bourgeois public sphere, which began appearing around 1700 in Habermas' interpretation, was to mediate

between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic, and social life contrasted to the demands and concerns of social and public life. This involved mediation of the contradiction between bourgeois and citizen, to use terms developed by Hegel and the early Marx, overcoming private interests and opinions to discover common interests and to reach societal consensus. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place.

For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interests that were coming to shape bourgeois society. Habermas' concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power.

The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace where private interests prevail and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the "bourgeois public sphere" consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power. The principles of the public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of

general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interests and the public good.

The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making. After the democratic revolutions, Habermas suggested, the bourgeois public sphere was institutionalized in constitutional orders which guaranteed a wide range of political rights, and which established a judicial system that was to mediate between claims between various individuals or groups, or between individuals and groups and the state (Kellner).

The word "citoyen" is considered synonymous with "bourgeois (Wilson, 1833, pp. 100)." Hence, the interaction between the two kinds of groups described through Habermas' model of the public sphere must be an interaction between the political elites and the immediate beneficiaries of their activities, including the media giants that convey the messages of the ruling class to the people in exchange for high amounts of money. The poorest people of the nation or the world at large do not have access to high incomes, so therefore the ruling class is expected to make rational decisions in their favor to boot.

It is the ruling class that hires the poorest people. Regardless of the day to day concerns of the latter, public opinion, according to Habermas' model must be that which the ruling class believes to be the public opinion. Nearly everybody can talk or try to express opinions. Given that it is impossible to take everybody's opinion into account, it is the bourgeois that must consider the general opinion of the majority to come to a democratic conclusion in matters of importance.

According to Held & Koenig-Archibugi (2005) the requirement of a “transnational civil society” mandates the presence of global public spheres (pp. 199). In a civil society, by its very definition, there should not be global problems such as terrorism. Because the ruling class fears protestation on the part of the poor if the latter’s interests are unheeded, it is the job of the ruling class to take the interests of the poor into account, whether they like it or not.

Held & Koenig-Archibugi write that the “notion of public deliberation is not so much that everyone participates but more that there is a warranted presumption that public opinion is formed on the basis of adequate information and relevant reasons, and that those whose interests are involved have an equal and effective opportunity to make their own interests (and their reasons for them) known (pp. 197).” Here, “general interest” is considered of the essence (Held & Koenig-Archibugi, pp. 197).

Nevertheless, decisions rest with the decision-makers – most often than not those that have the financial resources to lobby support for their cause. Held & Koenig-Archibugi refer to “global media of communication” as a necessary accompaniment to the global public sphere (pp. 199). Freedman (2000) reminds us, however, that access to global communication technologies is limited, and only easy for the rich people of the world. It is, of course, true that everybody in the world cannot even dream (as yet) about advancements in communication and Internet technologies that the so-called civilized people of the world enjoy at present.

This is the reason for acts of terrorism, according to Freedman – that, in fact, the have-nots struggle against the haves with the assumption that the latter

are stealing the rights of the have-nots in their quest for greater profits and higher standards of living. Global civil society continues to be but a dream in this scenario, which is why pure democracy continues to be a focus in the establishment or functioning of transnational institutions such as the WTO. Reconsidering Democratization of the WTO According to Fraser (2007):

The concept of the public sphere was developed not simply to understand communication flows but to contribute a normative political theory of democracy. In that theory, a public sphere is conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion. Insofar as the process is inclusive and fair, publicity is supposed to discredit views that cannot withstand critical scrutiny and to assure the legitimacy of those that do. Thus, it matters who participates and on what terms.

In addition, a public sphere is conceived as a vehicle for marshaling public opinion as a political force. Mobilizing the considered sense of civil society, publicity is supposed to hold officials accountable and to assure that the actions of the state express the will of the citizenry. Together, these two ideas - the normative legitimacy and political efficacy of public opinion - are essential to the concept of the public sphere in democratic theory. Without them, the concept loses its critical force and its political point. Yet these two features are not easily associated with the discursive arenas that we today call 'transnational public spheres'.

It is difficult to associate the notion of legitimate public opinion with communicative arenas in which the interlocutors are not fellow members of a political community, with equal rights to participate in political life. And it is hard to associate the notion of efficacious communicative power with

discursive spaces that do not correlate with sovereign states. Thus, it is by no means clear what it means today to speak of 'transnational public spheres'. From the perspective of democratic theory, at least, the phrase sounds a bit like an oxymoron (Fraser, pp. 7-8).

With an emphasis on word usage - the term 'public sphere' appears as a misnomer for organizations such as the WTO, if the rich, Western nations consider WTO a kind of public sphere and the poor nations consider it a platform for only the rich to express their interests and get everything done their way regardless of the interests of the developing world. According to Gills, global liberalism is only a project that the Western world had decided to reassess after the Cold War.

As an example of problems of democratizing supranational institutions, the experience of the World Trade Organization has revealed that there are major differences between the interests of nations at different levels of economic development. The United States, European Union and rich countries such as Japan form a league of their own. The interests of other countries seem to be dictated by them. Of course, the debate over agricultural trade has been one of the most important issues that the WTO has had to confront.

Seemingly pitting rich nations against the poor, the debate focused on the fact that the world's poorest nations have few exports to offer besides agricultural products. These nations find it difficult, if not impossible, to compete against the giant nations, such as the United States and Japan. Rich nations support farmers with subsidies to keep their own people from going out of business, with utter disregard for the fact that some of the world's

poorest nations are primarily agricultural and therefore necessarily reliant on agricultural business with the rich.

The assistance that the rich nations provide their own farmers – amounting to as much as 300 billion U. S. dollars each year – increases supply of agricultural products on the world market. As the price of agricultural produce is lowered, it is the poor nations that are hurt. A humorous example of this policy of the rich nations to support their own citizens first is illustrated by the average cow of the European Union receiving a daily subsidy of more than 2 U. S. dollars, a figure greater than the daily wage of twenty percent of the people of the world (Kaplan & Calzonetti, 2005).

Although the above example sounds humorous, it is not so when in fact problems related to inequality include acts of global terrorism. Freedman writes that globalization is accompanied by a widening gap between the haves and have-nots of the world. If the latter are disregarded, and only the rich keep on getting richer, acts of global terrorism would continue to remind the haves about their responsibility to take real public opinion into account.

To put it another way, institutions such as WTO – claiming to act on behalf of both developed and developing nations – must work to get closer to the spirit of pure democracy if they hope for free trade or whatever else there is on their respective agendas to create a global civil society after all. It is easier for mighty nations such as the United States to have their say when it comes to the creation of a global public sphere. The U. S. , for example, has global media support like no other nation today.

Countless American channels, television shows, and films are distributed worldwide to sell Americanization – the American way of considering

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globalization - to the people of the world with access to global media (Freedman). Sparks (2004) writes that satellites and the Internet, that is, the mass media as we know it today, acts as a contributor to the public sphere. Undoubtedly, the nation(s) that have the greatest say in the media are the dominant force in the public sphere, regardless of whether those nations are said to be actually interested in the welfare of the dominated ones or not.

The rich nations have the power to subdue the poor nations with the use of their military power to boot, and this makes it even more important to consider the possibility that the haves could behave as bullies toward the rest. If democratization is made possible through a process of bullying to boot - we must once again doubt the possibility of pure democratization existing in the global public sphere in the twenty first century - a century begun with acts of terrorism and wars. Let us consider a hypothetical example concerning the U. S.

A news report published in the UK in 2003 stated that the United States had broken rules of the WTO through its steel tariffs (" US Steel Tariffs ' Break WTO Rules,'" 2003). On that note, consider the hypothetical example of the United States openly discussing the virtues of free trade, even as the World Trade Organization is unable to influence the country to reduce its tariffs on imported agricultural products. The U. S. desires to protect domestic farming by keeping tariffs on imported agricultural products at a high level.

The poor countries complain that this is unfair for them, seeing that many of these countries rely on exports of agricultural goods for their national income. Since the World Trade Organization is unable to convince the U. S. to reduce tariffs on imports of agricultural goods from the developing world -

the supranational organization is blamed for favoring the richer countries over the poorer ones. The blame is substantiated by the fact that the World Trade Organization has been established on the principles of democracy.

All nations that are members of the organization are allowed to voice their interests. If conflicts exist, the organization is meant to resolve them. All the same, if all members of the World Trade Organization are not satisfied with the global trade decisions and conflicts are not being resolved by the organization, the World Trade Organization cannot be termed a truly democratic association or a global public sphere that has managed to help create a global civil society.

After all, the most significant feature of democratization of supranational institutions is to make member entities (or nations, as in the case of WTO) self-determining (Nash). But, if all member nations are not satisfied with the terms of global trade, it is clear that all of them do not have the power to influence global decisions that would serve their interests, thereby allowing them to enjoy the kind of present and future that they desire.