David Held’s Cosmopolitan Democracy

David Held’s consideration of sovereignty in the global system questions whether “the idea of sovereignty can be sustained in the face of current economic and political circumstances.”¹ For him, sovereignty consists of the right to determine rules and regulations within a territory. Therein lies both the dual purpose and limits of sovereignty. Sovereignty is internal, for the political body, determined as sovereign, exercises “complete command’ over a particular society.”² Sovereignty is also external in that it is the ultimate authority. It gives way to the freedom of a political territory to govern itself without the interference of others.

In an increasingly global environment, however, neither the governors nor the governed are clearly delineated. The sovereignty of a political territory does not depend strictly on its ability to display the internal cohesiveness of its constituency either by active participation in the classical Athenian sense of democracy or by the delegation of responsibility to representatives.³ Held believes that many developments in the history of government and in the international arena reinforce the idea that there is a disjuncture between the political theory of the sovereign state and the contemporary global system.⁴ There are spheres of power independent of the nation-state that impinge on the latter’s autonomous activities. The range of decision open to a particular majority where representative democracy is exercised is limited by activities and decisions of other states and organizations, and inversely, the activities of a state do not strictly concern its citizens but other citizens as well. Held asserts,

Politicians may often have aspired to a world marked by total freedom of action, but they have always been forced to recognize, in the end, that states do not exist in isolation and that the international system

of states is a power system sui generis. The critical question, therefore, is: do states face a loss of sovereignty because new types of “superior authority” have in fact crystallized in the international world and/or because their freedom of action (autonomy) has declined to a point at which it is no longer meaningful to say that supreme authority rests in their hands?5

The unsettling prospect of competing interest groups in the international environment coupled with the realization of a need to restore a sense of order in the international arena encourage Held to propose allegiance to sovereign states. The latter continues to wield differing degrees of coercive power over individuals. But as Held acknowledges, states operate within an international system that limits their autonomy and infringes on their sovereignty. He thus supports devising formal restraining structures that would maintain a peaceful order in the international environment as they also allocate responsibility. These responsibilities would mimic, in my view, those assigned within nation-states.

The unrestrained globalization that is currently taking hold of the global environment goes, according to Held, counter to some of the fundamental tenets of democracy, for not all actors/agents of the globalized environment are made or deemed equally accountable. As a result, the idea of complete autonomy/sovereignty is suspect while it is at once fundamental to democratic polity. Democratic policies and decision making that meant to be representative of a sovereign and autonomous citizenry are now, according to Held, influenced by globalization. The process of globalization uncovers a world in which states are competing and interacting with NGOs, corporations, and diverse other interest groups. International politics and activities impact the decisions that would be relevant to distinct, particular communities. The interests of sovereign communities are thus in fact mitigated by international issues (e.g., the harvesting of rainforests, exploration for oil, construction of nuclear plants, maintenance of cultural integrity).

Held’s proposal of a global democracy is a solution that seeks to institute a moral order that would establish the accountability of transnational actors. It is a moral order whose core is the belief that democracy involves civil, political, and social rights pursued and enacted in intergovernmental and transnational power structures. His position guarantees the survival of democracy beyond the territorial borders of nation-states by developing new organizational and binding mechanisms. But with his prescription of (1) a territory of states with enough fluidity to accommodate individual grievances and (2)