Global Governance: From Neoliberalism to a Planetary Civilisation

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Global crises currently pose threats to human survival on earth but there is no legitimate form of global governance to deal with them. The United Nations represents states not people and is dominated by a small group of powerful nations. It is not democratic and does not represent global diversity. This article argues that we need alternative forms of global governance that are more representative and accountable and provide better ways for world planetary civilisation to handle its common affairs. It then examines some alternative proposals for global governance and some existing examples of global cooperation that could provide models for the future.

The human family faces common challenges that threaten the way of life, even survival, of many people on planet Earth. Seemingly intractable problems such as climate change, water and energy shortages, ecological devastation, war, and terrorism suggest the need for cohesive worldwide resolutions. However at this juncture there is no universally agreed means by which these issues can be debated and decided at the planetary level.

The United Nations (UN), whose General Assembly now comprises 193 of the world’s 194 nations, might be regarded as the first global governance organisation. It might also be considered to be the legitimate forum within which global resolutions to such intractable problems should be developed. However there are weaknesses in the structure and operation of the United Nations that limit its ability act. The balance of power within the UN is skewed by the power of veto held by a small number of politically and economically dominant countries. The views on globalisation and global governance held by these countries are dominated by a commitment to neoliberalism reminiscent of the 1980s. Representatives of less influential nations attending UN and World Trade Organisation (WTO) forums are rarely able to stand up to the powerful nations who can wield the veto to attain their own ends. Weaker nations have been coerced or induced by more powerful actors to sign agreements and to vote on issues contrary to their people’s best interests. In such a highly contested arena dominated by politics and economics it is difficult for marginalised peoples’ views to be heard. Individual citizens have no legitimate means of contributing to global decisions as only nations are represented at the United Nations.

In this context there is an increasing need for the study of alternative forms of global governance to determine a means by which the people of the world might contribute their collective intelligence and wisdom to the debates and decisions on planetary issues. This article seeks to provide the rationale for a formal social platform to counterbalance the current politically and economically weighted processes by which planetary issues are decided.

Globalisation and Alter-Mondialisme

Globalisation is one of the most contested concepts of our time, yet it is not a new phenomenon as one might believe from popular media coverage. It has in fact been eroding the borders of nation states for centuries as social, cultural, political and economic relations have developed between nations. What has changed during the past three decades is the rate of globalisation. This appears to have increased due to advances in travel and communications’ technologies during the twentieth century and the nature of globalisation, which donned the mantle of neoliberalism during the ‘Thatcher-Reagan’ years in the 1980s (OECD 2001; Mayoux 2004; Wallerstein 2008). An analysis of British and US politics of this period reveals the specific historical dynamics formed by the interplay of a concentration of economic power and interests-driven politics that led to the creation of the neoliberal form of globalisation.

Placing this form of globalisation within the context of a specific time and space enables us to view neoliberal globalisation as a unique product of that era. It also enables us to more fully appreciate that this seemingly dominant form of globalisation might not resemble the international relations discourses that preceded it nor does it determine the shape of globalisation for the future. This opens up the space for alternative views of globalisation and new thinking around global governance.
The French term ‘alter mondialisme’ (alternative globalisation) has been the mantra of social activist movements in Europe for the past decade, accompanied by the slogan ‘une autre monde est possible’ (another world is possible). Whilst these activist movements were initially focused on building co-operation on social issues across borders, with the advent of climate change a number of groups have included environmental issues in their programs (World Social Forum 2009). If these groups were to become better organised we might speculate that globalisation in the future could be more socially and culturally driven. In the interim, the neoliberal hegemony of the past three decades of globalisation discourse is still very much in evidence, although there are signs that this domination might be coming to an end.

**Neoliberal Globalisation**

In the 1980s, former President of the United States of America, Ronald Reagan, and former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher implemented policies based on neoliberal theories. Sociologist and world-systems analyst Immanuel Wallerstein describes neoliberal globalisation as an old idea that resurfaced again in the 1980s as a counter to Keynesian economics and socialism. These were being held responsible for what Wallerstein refers to as ‘the stagnation of profit’, including balance of payment problems for many governments (Wallerstein 2008).

British sociologist Anthony Giddens claimed that ‘a pessimistic view of globalisation would consider it largely an affair of the industrial North, in which the developing societies of the South play little or no active part’ (Giddens 2002, 15). There would appear to be some basis for this pessimistic view. The Washington Consensus was devised in 1989 and according to author John Williamson, many of the neoliberal ideas introduced by Thatcher and Reagan, including ‘monetarism, supply-side economics, and minimal government, had been discarded by then as impractical or undesirable fads’ the exception being privatisation (Williamson 2004). The Washington Consensus was a set of ten prescriptive policy statements intended to create global market freedoms, prosperity and economic growth through deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation. It was viewed by many as a neoliberal blueprint (Williamson 2004; Werlhof 2007). The consensus around what was now perceived as state interference in market forces was coming to an end. Coupled with declarations that capitalism had triumphed over communism, neoliberal globalisation was portrayed as evolutionary and inevitable. The acronym TINA was coined by Thatcher ‘there is no alternative’ (Wallerstein 2008).

A marked contrast could be observed between the intentions of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’, to subtly guide economic development towards the common good, and those of Margaret Thatcher’s ‘iron fist in the velvet glove’ which unequivocally warned governments that they would suffer slow economic growth if they failed to abide by neoliberal policies (Werlhof, 2008). For neoliberals the common good is achieved by allowing market forces to operate without interference so businesses, including transnational corporations, can have the freedom necessary to create wealth. For Mies (2005) this is tantamount to freedom from responsibility and commitment to society.

Whilst neoliberalism was considered to be politically successful in some countries, the economic and social impacts were disastrous for others. Noam Chomsky, leading critic of US foreign and economic policies, cites Mexico as an example of the way a US free trade agreement put thousands of people out of work and sent the economy into a downward spiral (1997). He also describes the 1992 riots in Los Angeles and the 1994 Mayan uprising in Mexico as

- products of the increasing marginalisation of people who do not contribute to profit-making under the prevailing USA dominated institutional arrangements and therefore lack human rights or value (Chomsky 1997, 187).

He sees the international economic system as a catastrophic failure. This view appears to be reinforced by the current Global Financial Crisis. This crisis, which is expected to last at least until 2011, has prompted calls for a complete re-think of the global financial system.

Some in developing countries view neoliberal globalisation as a new and threatening form of colonisation. This leads to a sense of helplessness and concern that corporations are manipulating governments. The UN has at times been perceived as just another powerful institution that can’t be trusted. Some believe that US government interests funded by multi-national corporations currently dominate its agendas (Kelleher 2005). When we consider that 53 of the largest 100 economic entities in the world are multinational corporations we begin to appreciate that society has created global economic entities of a power and size unequalled in the history of the world (Gabel & Bruner 2003).

Korten suggests the ideal world of globalisation for corporations would be characterised as one in which the world’s money, technology and markets are controlled and managed by gigantic global
corporations. In this future, there is perfect global competition among workers and localities to offer their services to investors at the most advantageous terms. A common consumer culture unifies all people in a shared quest for material gratification and as relationships, both individual and corporate, are defined entirely by the market there are no loyalties to any place or community. Corporations are free to act solely on the basis of profitability without regard to national or local consequences (Korten 1996, 131).

Viewed from this perspective it is hardly surprising that corporations hold strong sway over governments and exert influence in international forums. While the original neoliberal agenda may have been developed by governments to support corporations, over time the powerbase shifted to a corporate agenda supported by co-operative governments. The international media itself is controlled by corporate interests and has ensured that neoliberal globalisation became all pervasive in the globalisation discourse. The power of corporate interests needs to be taken seriously when considering ‘alter-mondialisation’ and proposals for new forms of global governance.

Global Governance and the United Nations
If nations are the unit of measurement by which an organisation may justify its claim to be ‘global’, the United Nations may claim to be the first ‘global’ governance organisation. Of the world’s 194 nations, 193 are members of the UN General Assembly. The Vatican City is the only nation recognised by international sovereignty treaties not to participate in the General Assembly. The current system of global governance with the UN at its core is based on an array of treaties and agreements. These include international treaties by which nations and nation states recognise each other formally and accord each other sovereign rights over geographical territories and peoples. Some of these agreements date back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and were accorded to the nations that emerged victorious after 30 years of conflict in Western Europe, along with the lands and peoples conquered. Other agreements can be traced back to the formation of the UN after World War II. Since the 1950s in particular the number of international treaties has grown exponentially. The present structure of wealth and power in Northern nations is underpinned by political and economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the G8. Chomsky argues that they are designed to act as a ‘de facto board of management’ for the world economy (Chomsky 1997). He believes this structure is intended to serve the interests of transnational corporations, banks and investment firms.

Renowned macro-historian and peace activist Johan Galtung has also criticised the UN system. In his 2002 public speech in Koln, Germany, Galtung described the UN as a system ‘dominated by middle-aged, white, middle and upper class males, often Christian and Anglo-Saxon, from the USA, UK and other rich countries enforcing their caricature of globalisation’ (Galtung 2002). He believes that in order to achieve a globalisation that supports a life of dignity for all, massive civil society movements are needed that can stand up to the IMF, WTO and World Bank.

The political system at the heart of the UN has also been found wanting with allegations of bribery and corruption in decision-making processes. The process itself currently permits decisions with global implications to be taken by a few powerful nations on the Security Council with little consideration of other perspectives. The right of veto was given to a powerful few allowing them to block unfavourable decisions (Kelleher 2005). In 2003, former UN General Secretary General Kofi Annan released a press statement claiming that the UN needed to be restructured in order to re-establish credibility and legitimacy on the world stage (Weekend Australian 2003). At this time there is little information in the public domain to suggest that the transformational change required for the UN to become credible, legitimate and relevant to meet the needs of the human family in the twenty-first century is underway.

Alternatives to Neoliberal Globalisation and Global Governance
Friedman (2005:11) states that,

[b]ecause it is flattening and shrinking the world, Globalisation 3.0 is going to be more and more driven not only by individuals but also by a much more diverse – non-Western, non-white – group of individuals. Individuals from every corner of the flat world are being empowered.

The focus on globalisation as a political-economic phenomenon produces a narrowly constructed discourse that misses the diversity Friedman envisages in his discussion on Globalisation 3.0. In addition to overlooking ‘non-Western, non-white’ perspectives that add richness to the globalisation debates, the dominant view also fails to notice the alternative forms of globalisation that already exist and promise to become more prominent in the future. These ‘alter-mondialisations’ include ecology, culture, human rights, law, spirituality, consciousness, civil society, technology, and new forms of socially and ecologically responsible economy (Ramos 2004; Inayatullah 1999a; Henderson 2006).
These alternatives to neoliberal globalisation create space for debates about new forms of global governance. During the past decade some of the more prominent proposals have included Johan Galtung's concept of a restructured UN that includes a house of people with direct voting, a house of nations, and a house of corporations (Inayatullah 1999b). Other writers have advocated for a global parliamentary assembly, a concept that has recently won support from the European Parliament and the Senate of the Republic of Argentina (Falk & Strauss 2002; UNPA 2008). Focusing on political forms of governance, internet technologies have been seen as a means to form global republics online (Skrzeszewski, 2002). Another concept, Bioregionalism, has been proposed in response to the need for greater consideration of ecological and cultural affiliations in globalisation discourses. Bioregionalism could be a way to integrate such affiliations within a regional-based governance framework thus highlighting bioregional identity within global politics (Lipschutz 1999; Thomashow 1999).

From Friedman's 'non Western, non-white' scholars, the PROut (progressive utilisation theory) movement based on the philosophies of PR Sarkar is promoting a World Government structure (Inayatullah, 1999a) while some Muslim writers' propose an alternative global governance paradigm based on four key concepts: unity, trusteeship, worship and knowledge (Sardar, 1993, Inayatullah, 2001). These concepts for dealing with the world's common affairs are congruent with the view of the Commission on Global Governance that:

> effective global decision-making needs to employ the skills and resources of a diversity of people and institutions at many levels in a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action may be taken (Commission on Global Governance, 1996:3).

They also respond, to a greater or lesser extent, to the alter-mondialisations discussed above. However, as the human family becomes more aware of the interconnectedness of all things on planet Earth, the globalisation and global governance discourses have increasingly included discussions about the commons and the prospect of a future planetary civilisation. Writers such as Inayatullah (1999a), Chase-Dunn (2005) and Reidy (2006), for example, discuss the possible emergence of a planetary civilisation. Sen (2006) explores the importance of common identities in bridging the gaps often imposed by fealty to one nation or civilisation that can lead to the type of violence envisaged by Samuel Huntington in his 'Clash of Civilizations'. Gaia, ecology, evolution and the 'new' sciences are discussed by Jones (2006), Sahtouris (2006) and Laszlo (2008) whilst Noubel (2008) argues for the consideration of spirituality in a global collective. Policy and strategy analysts James Quilligan and David Bollier are pressing for international debate on the identification of and agreement to the global commons, whilst the means to achieve the transformation deemed necessary for a collective capable of addressing global issues are elucidated by Laszlo (2006) and Sharma (2007).

If Galtung's proposed 'house of the people' were to be accepted as the preferred form of governance for a future planetary civilisation, one might anticipate a number of challenges arising from the differing value sets and world views ingrained within the political, economic and social domains. A house for civil society, individuals and NGOs, could provide the forum in which the views of the people might counter political and economic extremism. Professor Bob Deacon identifies another challenge for the reform of planetary decision-making. That is the sheer number of organisations, summits, ad hoc reports, think-tank meetings and outputs of scholarly gatherings that make their way to the various UN agencies. These pose a serious challenge to the furthering of a social agenda of planetary decision-making (Deacon 2003).

On a more optimistic note for the peoples' agenda, renowned futurist Hazel Henderson believes citizen movements ‘...constitute an evolving form of democratic governance, sometimes rivalling the influence of heads of state, generals, scientists, inventors, and multinational corporate executives' (Henderson, 2006). These social movements are highly egalitarian networks and appear to be emerging in a number of domains (Bauwens, 2005). In technology, for example, people anywhere in the world with access to a computer can share files, contribute opinions to blogs, mobilise large groups using social networks like Facebook and My Space, and collectively produce reports, books and media articles by collaborating and building on information provided freely on the internet. Some of this content simply requires the author to be acknowledged in a particular way and a popular means of achieving this is through the Creative Commons licence which tells the reader how the author wishes their work to be used and recognised (Bauwens 2005; Henderson 1996; Henderson 2006).

It is apparent that there are significant numbers of people in many countries who are prepared to engage in global affairs either in person or via the internet. The challenge now, according to participants in the WSF 2009, is how to sustain the momentum when the stated anti-neoliberal aims appear to have been
achieved (World Social Forum, 2009). From this writer’s perspective, a further challenge is that of organising the social movements for effective participation in global decision-making.

Conclusion
In their 1996 publication ‘Our Global Neighbourhood’ the Commission on Global Governance pronounced that the people of the world have more power to shape the future than ever before and never has there been a greater need to exercise that power. In the past decade the people of the world have rallied to exercise their power in demonstrations against neoliberal globalisation, wars, environmental issues and social injustices. They have used this power by mobilising grass roots resistance to form transnational social movements that challenge governments and corporations. These movements may act as a counter to political and economic decisions in order to influence social change. They are emerging as a powerful force in international politics and are transforming global norms and practices (Khagram et al. 2002).

The seeds of a new form of globalisation are being sown by these transnational social movements from which a planetary civilisation might emerge in the future. For Werlhof (2007, 385) we will need to establish a new economy and a new technology; a new relationship with nature; a new relationship between men and women that will finally be defined by mutual respect; a new relationship between the generations that reaches even further than the seventh; and a new political understanding based on egalitarianism and the acknowledgment of the dignity of each individual. But even once we have achieved all this, we will still need to establish an appropriate spirituality with regard to the earth.

The means by which an emerging planetary civilisation might handle its common affairs in the future, whilst the topic of ongoing debate, are yet to be agreed. For this writer, improved future planetary governance arrangements would provide the means for the collective intelligence and wisdom of all peoples to contribute to decisions affecting our common future. A wisdom council would be the ultimate planetary decision-maker whilst nation-states, governments and local communities would make national and local decisions respectively, adapting and implementing planetary decisions to local environments and cultures. Information technologies would be used to collect and manage contributions, however, social technologies at local, national and global forums would be used by humans to create their vision for the planet’s future. If the row of nation-states’ flags conjures an image of United Nations, the writer’s image for a future planetary governance system is that of planet Earth with different coloured hands linked around it – ‘One World’ that we all take care of.

Many luminary authors share the writer’s optimism for the potential of the human family in the twenty-first century and believe that a peaceful world with healthy eco-systems and a life in dignity for all is achievable. For this potential to be realised, however, a strong social platform for participation by the peoples of the world in global decision-making is vital.

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**Beethoven, Townsville Cathedral**

In the cathedral’s high-steepled windows the condemned hanging above our heads trembles a little on his cross, moved perhaps by the churning of air as players test strings turn pages, people seek and change seats. At last all settle, prepared for possibilities Of nobility in the midst of holiday indulgence.

Not until afterwards, strolling through agreeable warm air, past poster colours of bougainvillea and tropic blue sea do we begin to think of how strange it is to hang machines of cruel punishment in holy houses where love and forgiveness are preached and where, sometimes we can believe in the duality of goodness and beauty.

**Somewhere, I read, it was usual at public executions, for buskers to entertain with music or mummery so excellent that the last throes of the condemned were ignored.**

Nicola Knox, Neutral Bay NSW