



Book Review

Globalization, EU Democracy Assistance and the World Social Forum. Micha Fiedlschuster. 2018. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 307 pages, ISBN 978-3-319-70738-9 Hardcover (\$119.00)

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What is the nature of the relationship between globalization and democracy? In an era of intensified, if also increasingly contested globalization processes, this question understandably preoccupies political theorists and scientists as well as other scholars and concerned citizens. Taking a perspective supportive of democratization, views on the subject can be ordered from optimistic to pessimistic. Optimistic contributions argue that globalizing processes, including democracy promotion programs and foreign military interventions by “benevolent” powers, contribute to an unprecedented expansion and consolidation of democracy around the world. International surveys based on formal classifications of regimes and various composite indices of democratization are commonly invoked as evidence. In contrast, pessimistic contributions dispute the effectiveness of democracy promotion and military interventions as tools of democratization and allege that the dominant neoliberal model of globalization results in an exact opposite of democratization: a “hollowing out” of democracy as crucial decisions are increasingly removed from the domain of democratic deliberation. Such contributions tend to take a more critical view



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of the concept of democracy itself and generally privilege qualitative analysis of social relations and processes over numerical indicators.

Micha Fiedlschuster, whose work is located at the intersection of political sociology, political science and global studies, intervenes in this debate with an analysis of the models of democracy developed by two entities deeply implicated in globalization processes: the European Union (EU) and the World Social Forum (WSF). His contribution is original in several respects. First, he is concerned not only with how these entities articulate and disseminate particular models of democracy but also with how, and to what extent, they apply such models in their own activities. In other words, he is concerned with their contributions to a democratization of transnational politics in addition to the more conventional concern with democratization at the national level. Second, Fiedlschuster adds another critical concept to the equation globalization/democracy – the one of civil society. An additional thread in the book is thus a focus on how the EU and the WSF envisage the relationship between democracy and civil society and how they themselves understand and relate to civil society.

The first cluster of chapters after the introduction focus on the EU's external democratization and civil society policies. Apart from a somewhat formal overview of EU such policies, Chapter 2 considers some of their possible motivations: a "democratic peace" hypothesis, a belief in a link between democracy and economic development, or the EU's value-based "identity-building". Compared to Fiedlschuster's neo-Gramscian analysis of the WSF (see below), this discussion seems to mainly draw on mainstream political science and as a result remains too close to official narratives. What its focus on formal frameworks and legitimating ideas largely leaves out is a consideration of how particular historical conjunctures and political and social settlements shaped the EU's external policies. From the perspective of the Worlds-System theory, an opportunity is missed to reflect on these policies as part of an effort of the EU as one of the global capitalist cores to manage its peripheries. Chapter 3 chapter offers an in-depth analysis of two EU models of democracy and civil society - "deep democracy" and participatory democracy (or participatory governance) - and their implications for the EU's strategies of democratization abroad. While the EU denies that it promotes any particular model of democracy, Fiedlschuster shows that its deep democracy is little more than a relabeled Western European liberal democracy, which is thereby still being exported to other societies without much consideration of their actual needs, possibilities and preferences. As for participatory democracy/governance, Fiedlschuster analyzes it as essentially ambivalent. On the one hand, moving beyond the earlier near-exclusive focus on state building and reform, the EU increasingly talks about and creates mechanisms for a participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in decision-making, which introduces some bottom-up elements into the EU's overwhelmingly top-down strategies of democratization abroad. On the other hand, inasmuch as the EU's concept of participatory democracy/governance was influenced

by the idea of good governance, it envisaged the role of CSOs in technocratic, managerial and depoliticized terms – as monitors of government reforms and providers of expert knowledge who collaborate with rather than challenge governments. I was struck by glaring similarities with my own analysis of the ways in which the EU involved Serbian CSOs in its various policies and programs in Serbia in the early 2010s. Fiedlschuster argues that this mode of CSO inclusion resulted in little to no democratization of either EU’s transnational policies or the countries that they target. Again, however, the analysis would have benefitted from being extended beyond formal policies and their ideational sources to historical processes and social settlements that shaped them – a point to which I briefly return below.

The core of the book is made up of the four chapters on the WSF – a global platform for CSOs and social movements sharing a broadly anti-neoliberal agenda, with regular meetings moving between countries and continents as its flagship activity. Chapter 4 provides some crucial background information on the WSF, in particular on the regional and political composition of meeting participants. It also considers the merits of the cosmopolitan approach to global civil society, associated mainly with the work of Mary Kaldor, for analyzing the WSF. Fiedlschuster concludes that as an elitist paradigm of global democratization that sees CSOs largely as a “transmission belt” between global institutions and individuals, the cosmopolitan approach is bound to overlook the WSF’s defining features – its constitution as a bottom-up, self-organized platform for formulating civil society’s own agendas instead of inserting it into pre-existing global governance mechanisms and agendas. Accordingly, Chapter 5 proceeds to articulate a neo-Gramscian reading of the WSF as a space of contestation in a double sense: first, in the sense of serving as a site of contestation of transnational institutions and neoliberal globalization, and second, in the sense of being itself contested by market and statist logics that infiltrate it. Building on the Gramscian concern with the coalescing of a multiplicity of interests, actors and worldviews into a common counter-hegemonic project, Fiedlschuster documents various experiments with alliance-building in the WSF and interprets its model of “convergence” as a bottom-up and non-hierarchical form of internationalism.

The remaining two chapters focus even more closely on the organizational aspects of the WSF. Chapter 6 employs concepts of loosely coupled system and partial organization to characterize the WSF as a blend of an organization and a network that serves as a platform for “meeting democracy” - another hybrid, this time of procedural and experiential forms of democracy. Chapter 7 delves deeper into the issue of democracy within such an organizational context by unpacking how the International Council (IC), the steering body of the WSF, dealt with expectations of its own democratic functioning based in the two models of procedural and experiential forms of democracy: on the one hand, expectations of transparency, accountability

and codified procedures for participation and decision-making, and on the other, those of equality in diversity and non-codified, inclusive participation. In Conclusions, Fiedlschuster argues that the WSF has contributed not so much to a democratization of global governance than a democratization of global civil society – by establishing democracy as its fundamental principle and providing space for experimentation with ways of putting such a democratic, civil society-driven internationalism into practice.

The book is well argued, well organized and written in a clear and accessible style. It makes a particularly valuable contribution with its close analysis of the organizational processes and dilemmas of the WSF and how these reflect the challenges that it faces in establishing a coherent counter-hegemonic project while at the same time putting it on a firmly democratic foundation. The main weakness of the book, in my view, is a certain unevenness. The two chapters on the EU focus mainly on discourse and formal institutions. The analysis, close in spirit to mainstream political science, would have benefitted from a more historical, materialist and social-relational interpretation of the EU's external democratization and civil society policies. As mentioned, one promising line of analysis would be to situate them within core-periphery relations and processes of uneven development, thereby also supporting a more critical reading of the EU's role in globalization processes. In addition, the neo-Gramscian framework employed later in the book would have been particularly well-suited for making sense of these ambivalent policies as efforts to co-opt civil society for what an extensive neo-Gramscian literature analyzes as the EU's neoliberal hegemonic project since the 1990s. In contrast, the chapters on the WSF are more engaging and illuminating (at least for an anthropologist) because they draw on participant observation in addition to interviews and secondary sources and closely analyze specific processes and events, including their informal elements. This, together with the inspiration by critical theories of globalization and civil society, enabled Fiedlschuster to offer a comprehensive and convincing account of the WSF's transnational democratization politics.