

UNIVERSALISM AND AMBIGUOSNESS: COMMENTS ON WAGAR'S PRAXIS OF WORLD
INTEGRATION

Teivo Teivainen
Researcher
Ibero-American Center
PO Box 4, 00014 University of Helsinki
Helsinki, Finland
tel: 358-0-1917867
fax: 358-0-1917940
e-mail: teivo.teivainen@helsinki.fi

at present
Visiting Researcher
Desco Research Center, Lima
e-mail: teivo@desco.org.pe

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Theoretical discourses that emphasize difference, fragmentation and contingency have presented various challenges to the social sciences of today. The political implications of these discourses have generally been expressed in rather vague terms and often simply left unspecified. In this context, W. Warren Wagar's bold and

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provocative defence of the universalist values of the European Enlightenment is a most welcome contribution.

Wagar's attempt, as I understand it, is to show that one cannot have the cake of a project to transform the modern world-system into a more egalitarian and democratic system and eat it too by a wholesale rejection of the modern values that would be a necessary element in the transformation. As he states, choices must be made, and his choice is clear: opt unambiguously for universalism and globalism, reject particularism and multiculturalism.

Wagar's statements are often harsh. The argumentative style of the paper is somewhat different from the more balanced perspective of his wonderful book, *A Short History of the Future*, in which one can find many insightful criticisms of the neo-Enlightenment globalism defended without much hesitation in the paper (see Wagar 1992). While I agree with many, if not most, of his provocative arguments, and in many ways share his basic objective of a socialist world-system that is both relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian, I would like to provide some constructively critical comments on the paper. I shall focus on his declared unambiguosness and universalism and argue that some of his formulations and conceptual choices may imply a rather depoliticized vision of our possible futures.

UNIVERSALISM AND UNAMBIGUOUSNESS

Wagar's declared political objective is to work towards a single planetary civilization which - apart from being democratic and egalitarian - would be consensual. He shows little tolerance towards any elements that may deviate from the consensus based on the

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universal moral authority of the Enlightenment. As a polemical criticism directed at pure relativism and nihilist celebrations of difference, his attitude is certainly refreshing. As a serious attempt to explore and construct the ideological and moral foundations of emancipatory politics in the 21st Century, I do, however, find some problems in it.

One problem in Wagar's paper is that it constructs a simplified picture of the criticized position - be it called multiculturalism, postmodernism, or something else - to make a dichotomous opposition between the enlightened values and those of the others. I agree with Wagar's commonsensical but often forgotten insistence that desired values must be defended even at the cost of sacrificing diversity, but have some doubts about his definition of the options we face. If the only alternative to hard-core universalism really were pure relativism, one would be forced to make a difficult decision indeed. Probably so difficult that many would not be willing to make it. In this sense, the dichotomous options given by Wagar may have immobilizing implications for the construction of better futures.

A pragmatic reason for not being as unambiguously universalist as Wagar argues for being is that a political movement based purely on his ideas would be unlikely to find many allies, or perhaps even members. It is, of course, certainly conceivable that "the great mass of humankind" would be at some point persuaded to accept the moral authority of the universalist values of the European Enlightenment. This possibility is, in the long run, a sine qua non for his project to succeed. It is, however, quite unlikely that it would happen in any near future. Instead of waiting for a conspiratorial enlightened vanguard to take action sometime in the distant future and lead everyone into the promised global

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democracy, we should start building alliances between different movements around the world representing various standpoints right now. A "world party" committed to the task of conciliating the various standpoints and persuading more particularistic movements to take seriously the objective of global democratic institutions would

certainly be an important - even necessary - element of the process. In terms of what Immanuel Wallerstein (1990: 52) has called intermovement diplomacy, the world party should, however, show more humility about its own standpoint.

Apart from the tactical reasons for being less unambiguously universalist than Wagar, I find his insistence on the desirability of a consensual single civilization to be somewhat disturbing. I do not believe in the possibility of a total reconciliation of different value claims, nor do I find it desirable. Rather than striving for an unambiguous universalism, we should make sure that there will always be some room for ambiguousness. In other words, in my preferred possible future, there should always be political arenas where existing antagonisms can be played out peacefully within a shared framework of rules. A utopia of consensus and unanimity implies the end of politics, and without politics there can be no democracy.

Even though Wagar begins his paper by ridiculing a quotation from the program of the 90th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, I think the challenge of finding a "shared framework in which many colorful elements find a new place ... [in] a community of communities" could be taken more seriously. This does not mean that I would agree with the program as such, but only that I find the metaphor of "shared framework" to be politically more useful and desirable than that of "single consensual civilization". As Wagar correctly points out, the problem with the

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use of such a "nice" metaphor is that most of its multiculturalist, postmodernist or communitarian proponents make few attempts to problematize what it could imply in terms of the future of the world-system. But this should be no reason for not trying to explore the metaphor further and, as Wagar does, simply opting for hard-core universalism.

SHARED FRAMEWORKS OR SINGLE CIVILIZATION

Wagar's dichotomous presentation of the alternatives we face is also apparent in his vision of the future beyond the 21st Century. Once we look that far ahead, we can find a world of self-governing communities, but only after the necessary stage of a hard-core universalist world state. At first sight, there is a very marked difference between the necessary stage of a universalist world state and the following stage of autonomous communities. First total unity, then total diversity. What these two utopian visions, however, share, is that in both of them there is little room for global and transnational politics. In the first one, the political struggles are suffocated by the enforced consensus supported by a rather totalitarian security apparatus of a world state. In the second one, there is little interaction transgressing the boundaries of the self-governing communities, and thereby

basically no need for transnational or global politics.

It seems that in Wagar's conceptual framework, "community" is considered a closed unit with rather unambiguous territorial and moral boundaries. Therefore, he argues, we need to first dissolve all communities into one global community. Within this single community humankind can develop to a stage where the big brother is no longer needed, and we can have a clearly demarcated set of self -

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governing communities. I think that it would be both more realistic and politically more helpful to regard communities as being more flexible and overlapping units. There can certainly be many conflicts within a particular subject position that is simultaneously situated within, for example, an Islamic community, a lesbian community, the French national community, and Civitas Humana. In terms of the praxis of world integration, rather than trying to simply erase the more particularistic identities, one should consider the possibility of finding shared frameworks within which these multiple identities can be articulated in a relatively democratic and peaceful manner.

The "postmodernists" are epistemologically right when they claim that there will never be a total reconciliation of the conflicts implied by the multiplicity of our identities, but they are politically wrong if they thereby refuse to consider the possibility of finding shared frameworks within which global and transnational democratic institutions can be imagined and constructed. Even though some of her arguments over-emphasize fragmentation and plurality, I find Chantal Mouffe's attempt to conceptualize possible democratic orders by making a distinction between the categories of "enemy" and "adversary" quite helpful. Within a political community (and even if Mouffe clearly refers to particular communities, we can extend her arguments to the context of a possible global community), this distinction implies that the opponent should be regarded not as an enemy to be destroyed, but rather as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We can fight the adversary's ideas, but not her or his rights to defend them, if (s)he accepts the shared framework based on democratic rules. (Mouffe 1993: 4-5.)

Of course, one could argue that the one and only basis for a

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democratic framework is the European Enlightenment, in which case the Mouffean distinction would be quite compatible with Wagar's vision of a single civilization. Without delving deeper into the issue of what the true essence of, say, Islam or precolombian

heritages in the Americas might be, I believe that one can find justification for democratic forms of coexistence also from other sources than the European Enlightenment. Moreover, the processes of transnationalization, transculturalization and hybridization have been constant features of the 500-year-old modern world-system, which means that it is often futile to argue that a particular set of values originates truly and only from one territorially demarcated civilization.

As regards the final utopia of Wagar, the world of perfectly autonomous self-governing communities, I frankly think it is impossible. I am generally sceptical of necessitarian perspectives that argue:= "because X has happened, therefore we cannot reach a stage where X does not exist". In the particular case of X being the ability and incentives of the inhabitants of the planet earth to participate in the process of human cross-pollination across territorial divides, I do think we have reached a point of no return. As to the desirability of this vision of the future, I am aware of my particular biases as a North European vagabond, male internet-user, and so on. In any case, I do not think that it is realistic to imagine that the tension between unity and diversity could in any foreseeable future be resolved by the simple trick of establishing self-governing territorial units with no politics beyond them. We will always have transterritorial political struggles, and in order to make them as democratic as possible, one of the worst things we could do is to imagine that they cease to exist.

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