

The “implosion” of the liberal international order? The future of democracy and multilateralism in times of crisis

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Abstract

The arguments pointing to a decline of the current liberal international order (LIO) are becoming more and more insistent. The LIO, which emerged after the Second World War, has proved itself to be incapable of facing many challenges that affect the world today. Furthermore, the presence of new emerging powers (such as China) have given a severe blow to the leadership of Western countries, especially the US, which have represented the soul of the LIO. However, this decline is not only attributable to external/international factors such as, for example, the emergence of these new international powers. In our view, the crisis related to the LIO is above all a crisis that concerns its essential structural and internal component: liberal democracy. More specifically, it is within the liberal democratic system that this crisis has shown itself the most. We identify some specific areas - belonging to the economic, political and socio-cultural scopes - that are paradigmatic in describing the emergence of this crisis. Closely interconnected to one another, these issues are the mirror of the malaise of an entire world-system - precisely that of the LIO - and of its key component (democracy). Is this system “imploding” (as it happened for the Soviet Union)? Our argument is the following: in order to avoid this implosion, which seems underway, civil society should play a major role in the future international order, which should have a greater capacity to respond to human needs. Civil society, which thus far has not had a key role in decision-making processes, represents a pivotal hinge between people and institutions. Thus, it should represent a key means by which to revitalize a more participatory democracy (which is “the sovereignty of the people”, at least in its original meaning) and enhance multilateralism.

1. Introduction

According to various scholars (Cooley and Nexon, 2020; Mearsheimer, 2018; Mandelbaum, 2016; Stuenkel, 2016; Acharya, 2014), the (Western/US-led) Liberal International Order (LIO) which emerged after the Second World War is currently in crisis. The “bipolar world” that lasted for most of the second half of the last century, after the fall of the Soviet Union, was followed by a “unipolar system”. Nowadays, the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990) has ended and new challenges are opening up. It goes without saying that the changes in this system are due to multiple reasons: from the emergence of new global powers, to the increasingly central role of the economy and therefore of large financial groups; from problems related to climate change to those of migration, and, last but not least, the recent and ongoing pandemic. In short, there are many factors that lead to a continuous reflection on the part of multiple authors about what the future global order will be.

However, at the moment one can only speculate as to what possible development the current system may have, and what future world order will take its place in the coming decades. In the view of many authors, the LIO will not disappear (Ikenberry, 2018, 2020b; Lake, Martin, and Risse, 2021), because its achievements (in terms of trade, interconnection, international institutions functioning, rule of law, etc.) represent enormous progress that is difficult to deny. What these authors question is the leadership within this system, i.e. if the future LIO is to be led by the US and the West, or if new actors (like China) will reshape it entirely. It is a hard question to answer at this moment in time. As the recent pandemic - but also the current wars - has (once again) showed, an unexpected event can send history down a different path, paving the way to something that could lead humanity in new directions. Thus, in our view, making analytical previsions is something that is not (always) viable as well as believing that the structure of the international framework will always be the same, even if the main actors (the states) change.

On the contrary, what we can do is to analyze the most pressing issues concerning the current international context and call for specific actions to address them. The current issues we are facing, can be seen as a product of the current world system. Thus, analyzing these issues could open up some normative prescriptions on what the future global order should take into account first.

In this sense, what more and more opinions seem to converge on is that the international system, in view of future global challenges, cannot be exclusively welded to the preponderant weight of individual nation states. Although states tend to maintain the main management of national issues, the problems that have characterized recent decades have instead made it clear that without a general coordination of global problems, there cannot be an international order oriented towards a healthy functioning. To describe this need to find global agreement on issues that are of interest to the whole world, in the last decades the term (and the practice) of global governance (GG) has been introduced in Global Studies and International Relations disciplines. Broadly speaking, GG describes an attempt to find common solutions to global issues such as climate change, global (uncontrolled) finance, terrorism, etc. However, the word itself has several epistemic limitations, resulting from the English origin of the term (Friedrichs, 2005 p. 52)¹ and its recent use in the above mentioned fields of study. Furthermore, in the view of emerging powers, and following the criticisms by several scholars, GG has often been interpreted as a new way on the part of (the liberal) Western countries to control global issues (Friedrichs, 2009; Hermet, 2008; Stiglitz, 2002), thereby imposing their (new) hegemony on the rest of the world. In this sense, GG seems to represent a new tool to justify and impose the US/Western-led LIO.

Obviously, a discussion of global problems in their entirety would require a more extensive study. Therefore, in this paper, our intention is to describe what could be some of the key issues to deal with as soon as possible in order to give a more human direction to the future international order. However, we believe that the current decline of the LIO is not understandable if external (i.e. international) factors are only considered: i.e. the relations among states, or if we consider the LIO as a cyclical order under the influence of dominant powers². In our view, the LIO finds itself in crisis above all because of the decadence of its internal and structural component: liberal democracy. In particular, the crisis of democracy is evident in three main fields: economic, political and socio-cultural.

¹ On this aspect, Friedrichs states: “[...] Given its difficult translatability into languages other than English, it is reasonable to assume that the term “global governance” is culturally not neutral. [...] It is relatively clear that the conceptual diffusion of global governance into other language areas would be unthinkable if America was not the center, and if English was not the lingua franca of the international relations discipline”.

² In our view, this is the case, for example, of Giovanni Arrighi (1999), who mostly considers, in his researches, the relations among hegemonic states as a vehicle of change in the international order.

2. Structure and methodology

After a brief and introductory historic reconstruction of the evolution of the LIO starting from the Second World War, the first argument of this paper is the discussion of the internal factors we believe have a central role in shaping the current world order. In this sense, we share the view of building a global future understood in a post-hegemonic sense. This post-hegemony, has to take into consideration internal factors too: i.e. a more democratic inclusion of people, and broadly speaking of Civil Society (CS), in order to enhance multilateralism. Post-hegemony should not to be understood as multipolarity: i.e. “as a global redistribution process among an increasing number of actors” (Laidi, 2014 p. 350). In fact, multipolarity “does not imply the linear development of cooperative arrangements” (Laidi, 2014 p. 350). Rather, we state that the post-hegemonic order should be devoted to multipolarism: i.e. a network of many actors interconnected by political, economic, and socio-cultural ties. These actors interact and participate in global politics. “These networks result in a state of mutual interdependency. Multilateralism other than multipolarity is shaped by commonly agreed-upon ideas from institutions and stages of deep cooperation, even integration” (Kortunov, 2018). Thus, there are important differences between “multipolarity” and “multipolarism”. In fact: “a multipolar world is built from blocs that balance each other, while a multilateral world is built from complementary regimes. A multipolar world develops by periodically adjusting the balance of power, while a multilateral world develops by accumulating elements of mutual dependency and creating new levels of integration” (Kortunov, 2018).

Thus, in this post-hegemonic framework, a holistic and multilateral approach to global issues should be taken. However, the obsolete elements that the current system still contains are undoubtedly fundamental limitations.

After introducing the characteristics of the current LIO, we discuss gaps in the three areas aforementioned (economy, politics and socio-cultural fields), which we identify as the most emblematic examples of the crisis of the liberal democracy (which we consider as the structural component of the LIO), and share the idea that a central role should be covered by the CS in promoting democracy, multilateralism and people inclusion/participation. CS has found itself to be increasingly divided and with little capability of taking an active part in decision making processes. Thus, CS should be empowered because it represents an important means of making the voice of citizens heard and in promoting multilateralism.

Our approach is theoretical in nature in the sense that it starts from considerations on the international system in the context of the current debates around it³, then tries to open breaches and understand if there are new ways of dealing with in a more decisive manner the increasingly pressing challenges facing the international system. We also use a historical approach in the sense that we conduct an analysis of the evolution of the international system in recent decades, at least its most characteristic components, and evaluate its possible changes and challenges. To carry out these analyses, we draw mainly on academic literature. We also draw on non-academic sources such as journals, interviews and presentations. At the same time, our analysis is conducted in the light of various theories of international relations, such as the (Neo) Realist, the Critical and the Global Development theories.

3. The evolution of the international system (LIO) after the second World War

In the long period that followed the Second World War, and which was represented by the absence of direct conflicts between the two dominant super powers, namely the US and the Soviet Union, the international system experienced a period of relative stability. In fact, if we exclude the conflicts in third countries such as Vietnam and Korea, just to give a few examples, in general the so-called Cold War period did not record direct clashes between these countries. According to Kenneth Waltz (1979), a bipolar international system, such as that of the Cold War, is stable because two (hegemonic) powers counterbalance each other: they avoid clashing directly out of fear of a (potential) mutual annihilation that could occur as a result of a war between them.

However, although they were both super powers that divided the world in two spheres of influence (in Europe this division took the form of the so-called “Iron Curtain”, as described by Winston Churchill in 1946), the post-World War II period generally recorded a continuous hegemonic model: there is a general acknowledgment that this was the LIO (Costigan, Cottle and Keys, 2019). Thus, “in the aftermath of World War II, the US and its partners built a new type of international order”, which can be defined as an order “organized around open trade, cooperative security, multilateralism, democratic solidarity, and American leadership. Regional and global institutions were established to facilitate cooperation, enshrine shared norms, and bind societies together” (Ikenberry, 2020a, p. 1). Built in order to promote liberal democracy worldwide, and to take advantage of the “liberal democracy’s security, welfare, and progress” (Ikenberry, 2020a, p. 6), this period “was a golden era of economic growth and social advancement” (Ikenberry, 2020a, p. 2).

³ Our work is based above all on the readings of Western political theories of International Relations (IR). We are conscious that this is a limit, and that without considering non-Western visions of IR, we cannot provide a full picture of the interpretation of the LIO.

Thus, first of all, this system was characterized by a leader country, namely the US, which provided “hegemonic leadership” (Ikenberry 2018, p. 7; Jervis et al., 2018), but also by other allied countries (Western, especially European) which contributed to the even more decisive establishment of this international system. The institutions created in Bretton Woods (GATT, later WTO, IMF and WB) played a key role in the formation process of building this system. In fact, these institutions provided support to this system from a commercial/economic standpoint. Furthermore, military alliances such as NATO (which is still alive today) have also played an important role in this context. A decisive function from the point of view of the promotion of international rights was represented by the United Nations (UN), with limitations due to the diplomatic confrontation between the US and the USSR (since both countries have the right of veto within the Security Council) (Weiss and Thakur, 2010), which still represents to this day the only organization with a global projection.

This diplomatic struggle that lasted the entirety of the Cold War, ended with the “implosion” of the Soviet Union. Implosion means a decay from within: i.e. a set of internal crises that undermined the Soviet’s stability and caused it to collapse inwards violently. The implosion of the Soviet Union represented the disappearing of “the last clear alternative to liberalism” (Ikenberry, 2020b p.139). Since that moment (occurred in 1991), there is (almost) unanimous agreement that the world has been characterized by a phase of unipolarity, due to a “disparity of power” between the US and competitor nations (Krauthammer 2002, p. 5). However, the US dominated the international system not only for its economic and military superiority over other countries, but also because of its “soft power” (Nye, 2004), that is, the ability to act as a political as well as cultural model for other countries. The US, in fact, represented precisely the embodiment of a new hegemonic power, capable of asserting itself from an economic, political, diplomatic, but also cultural standpoint (some examples include the Hollywood film industry and its worldwide diffusion). In practice, the US-led LIO reached its peak after the fall of the Soviet Union, and it then expanded itself outward across the globe. Furthermore, “this period represented an era of US and Western-led intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, typically under the guise of the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) doctrine. This doctrine is problematic as it was designed to provide a pretext for US intervention in the absence of a Soviet or Cold War pretext. This allowed the United States to pursue strategic objectives under the guise of humanitarianism” (Costigan, Cottle and Keys, 2019, p. 59-60). In certain authors’ critical view, the US-led LIO has taken on the characteristics of a new form of Imperialism (Parmar, 2018). In other authors view, US (and main allies) intervention in other nations’ issues has been mandatory and motivated by “good intentions” (Stephen, 2018) to “export” democracy and strengthen liberalism⁴.

This international system, despite its limitations, according to some authors was the “best possible” because it embodied the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992): i.e. the maximum achievement of welfare, civil liberties and political rights, as well as freedom of expression, as it had never occurred in history before. In one word, this system represented the maximum achievement of (liberal) “democracy”.

While in certain authors’ views, unipolarity would have led to a stable and lasting international order in the world (Wohlforth, 1999), this system appears to be heavily undermined by current global issues. First of all, from a theoretical point of view, according to Waltz’s neorealist theory (1979), the international system tends to be subject to crisis when it is “dominated” by a unique power (“unipolar” system). In this case, in fact, if there is only one hegemonic power in the world, other countries can join forces against, and thus create a counterweight that could lead to the decay of the system itself. This was, for example, the case of Napoleonic France: the rest of the European countries allied themselves (seven times) in order to fight and win against Napoleon.

However, in the current state of the arts, there is no clear picture as to what future order may emerge from the present. In our view, more than trying to understand what could and should happen in the coming years, it is important to understand what the factors of this crisis are, and what the main challenges are which we should address first with specific actions. In doing this, we cannot only consider “external factors”: i.e. the relations between states. We believe that too often the analysis concerning international changes mainly considers external factors. However, this explanation seems insufficient to explain what is currently happening globally. The crisis of the current system also (and above all) started from within it (although, of course, external factors are also important). Thus, we wonder if we can also talk of an “implosion” of the LIO, as it was used regarding the Soviet Union due to its internal issues. Or, at least, if we can talk about a US/Western-led LIO implosion.

If we examine the post-Cold War world system, the presence of external factors explains, in our opinion, only part of the reasons for the decline of the US-Western led order and the international liberal system. In fact, it is true that blocks of emerging powers have emerged in the last years (such as the BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) which act as a counterweight to the unipolar system of the US, and which have called

⁴ According to these scholars (Ikenberry, 2020a; Lake, Martin, and Risse, 2021), the international liberalism - and therefore liberal democracy - guarantees greater stability, peace and security. Thus, it has to be promoted and spread worldwide to create a “world safe for democracy”.

for greater reform of GG, especially from a financial point of view (Petroni, 2020). However, it is not the only reason why this primacy of the US has been undermined, and that it is most likely destined to an “unraveling” (Cooley and Nexon, 2020). The US led LIO, with its Western partners, has not only entered into a state of crisis for this reason, but also because: 1) it is proving incapable of responding to global issues, and to safeguarding global rights especially towards those countries that up to this point played a marginal role in the global context (for example, in the context of preventing the most vulnerable populations from the negative effects of climate changes); and 2) at the same time, the process of erosion is coming mainly from within the individual countries that have embraced this system. In fact, the LIO is experiencing multiple contradictions that characterize different areas of people's lives: work situation, social living, gender disparities, racism and so on. Therefore, in addition to the changed international context, and the general problems connected to it, a main role of this decay comes from the heart of Western countries, primarily the US: i.e. from the very structure of every country that has embraced international liberalism (and the capitalist system) and which are now experiencing contradictions that the liberal system should have instead prevented (as it claimed to have resolved, at least in theory with the “end of history” formula). In a nutshell, the core of the crisis originates in the very structure of the LIO: i.e. the liberal democracy.

At the same time, as mentioned, the US is proving that it is not sufficiently capable, on its own, of coordinating the world and coping with the global problems it faces. In this sense, therefore, while on the one hand it is emblematic that new international players such as China are increased their economic weight having (almost) reached that of the US, it is also legitimate to ask whether China's economic ascent can really be considered a paradigm shift at the level of global hegemony.

4. LIO and its crisis

The three main categories (economic, political and socio-cultural) with which we identify the most emblematic impact of the current LIO/liberal democracy crisis, are an expression of a broad “winter of democracy”: currently, democracy has only triumphed on the surface, with a loss of substance at depth (Hermet, 2007). At the same time, the crisis that the international system is experiencing can be traced back to factors both internal to the states and to transnational factors (i.e. inherent to the entire system as a whole). Thus, these problems are both *bottom up* and *top down*.

4.1. Economic issues and crisis of the welfare

As mentioned above, first and foremost the LIO is facing issues of an economic nature. Not only has the increased power of new international business actors (multinationals) brought about a change in the very organization of the system, but also the precarious condition that millions of people who live within this system has undoubtedly brought about a significant decline. Regarding the first issue, the growth of the so-called monopolies, this problem was already present at the end of the Nineteenth century, and had already been described by Karl Marx (1992). Marx predicted the end of capitalism because, in his thinking, this system had many contradictions (among these, the formation of monopolies) that would have led to its end in a short period time. However, this has not happened (yet). Currently, we live in a system that is characterized by the presence of large multinationals who determine the financial flows of the system itself (Maganaro, 2020; Battiston, S., Glattfelder and Vitali, 2011). Therefore, the system seems above all embedded in problems related to the excessive power of (a few) companies that have the potential to organize the economic order (like the organization of work) in the Western world. This system, in addition to creating a greater polarization of the economy between the rich and the poor, exacerbated by the recent pandemic (UNDP, 2021), has made human lives increasingly subject to precariousness, unemployment and/or lower wages. In general, in recent years the gap between middle and lower classes from the political/economic elites has been growing, magnified also by social inequality (Marx and Nguyen, 2018). Therefore, it seems that those who are really affected by this crisis are above all the middle and lower classes of Western countries⁵, which are increasingly losing faith in the political and economic system in which they live (liberal democracy). In practice, the international liberal system has created disadvantages for the many and advantages for the few (Bauman, 1998), especially in the West. Consequently, Western societies are experimenting with a progressive crisis of welfare, which at the beginning was considered among the main successful achievements of the LIO.

Furthermore, what is also evident - and important to remark - is that the current situation creates problems both in terms of standard of living, as well as with regard to the increasingly intensive exploitation of the planet with the consequent effects on climate (Klein, 2015) despite the countless COPs celebrated. The latter is not a new argument, as many scholars have developed studies on this issue (i.e. the relation between capitalism and climatic/environmental degradation) and countless scientists have warned about the consequences of the

⁵ In his book, Branko Milanovic (2016) explains that in countries such as China, Indonesia and Thailand, globalization has had a different impact on the middle and low classes, which have had some significant gains from it. For example, in China, millions of people were lifted above the poverty line.

exploitation of the planet's resources. However, this has not prompted governments (also progressive ones) to take concrete and drastic measures to mitigate the impact of capitalist practices on the environment, despite their claims. Even the US under Biden's leadership promised to reverse the direction of the policies undertaken by Trump in the field of climate change (which had even withdrawn from the 2015 Paris agreements) have not actually given consistent signals on their attitude to mitigate climate change. For example, Biden appears to have granted even more concessions to oil companies (Federman, 2021) than his predecessor in the White House.

Thus, in this context there is a clear dichotomy between what needs to be done to remedy a question of general interest, such as climate change, and what is actually being done. However, what is also emblematic, of course, is the attitude of other (Non-Western) major global polluters such as China and India during the 2021 COP in Glasgow, where the two countries influenced the final decisions by deciding for a delay in the reductions of their coal emissions (Mathiesen, 2021).

From an economic point of view, the Western powers, but also the new emerging powers, seem to be largely continuing to perpetuate an economic model that produces many divisions and seems unable to respond to the most current pressing issues. At the same time, this model is progressively eroding welfare and social protection/stability. In addition to the aforementioned analysis, it is also important to mention the fact that job insecurity (as well as other social issues such as gender inequalities in wages) represent major problems that undoubtedly undermine the stability of the system. Not to mention the low wages of precarious workers: emblematic of these situations are the so-called "runners", poorly paid and with few job protections, who are severely hit by the current system.

In short, the problems are many in the economic sphere. The LIO is suffering from a crisis which manifests itself, in addition to the aforementioned social situations, in the form social discontent and in a growing demand for more social justice.

4.2. Political setback and assaults on democracy

Among many issues, the current international system is deeply undermined by the growth of new forms of nationalist, sovereign and often even racist parties. The emergence and spread of nationalist parties can be considered the direct consequence of the situation that has emerged in recent years. These parties follow closely an anti-system rhetoric contrary to the LIO. Among their claims, they often demand the implementation of nationalist/protectionist measures. Trump's case was exemplary (Jervis et al., 2018), but such formations often receive broad support in many Western countries (just to give a few examples: the Alternative for Germany party - *Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD -, the League in Italy, Vox in Spain, or political figures such as Orbán, the current Prime Minister in Hungary, or Eric Zemmour, a far-right leader who was also a candidate for the presidential elections in France during the last elections), threatening to come to power and possibly hinder the liberal mechanisms of the international system. Among the major battles that these recent formations are waging, there is also an "ideological war" against the democratic and liberal system as it has been understood so far. Their narratives are based on the alleged observation that liberal democracies no longer represent the real people and they are even detached from them. On the contrary, and in their view, their parties *de facto* claim to represent the real interests of the people (Forti, 2021). In this sense, these political alignments can be considered just as the (wrong) fruit of the liberal system that is now showing its cracks. Furthermore, these claims look contradictory: at this time in history, it is the West (which defended liberalism, open trade, etc.) that now claims protectionism and sovereignty, thereby opposing itself to the liberal (democratic) ideology that it has been defending during the last centuries (Fortin, Heine, and Ominami, 2021).

As mentioned, today many of these parties receive significant support. In some cases, to avoid their possible electoral victory, technical governments are appointed to manage issues of public and collective interest, in line with the liberal democratic principles of the Western system. For example, in our opinion, this has been the case of the former Italian government of Mario Draghi, who was tasked with forming a government by the President of the Republic. His skills - and thus the accountability - acquired by working in international organizations, which are the fulcrum of the LIO, had a decisive weight upon his appointment as a Prime Minister. Beyond Draghi's undisputed abilities, however, this emblematic situation highlights an important aspect, in our view: the system is often forced to resort to anti-democratic practices, that is, not voting for one's own representative, to try to carry on democracy and liberalism (by the way, the subsequent Government, voted after regular elections, has been a far-right one)⁶. In short, by not allowing citizens to express themselves through the vote, the democratic principle of participation is undermined, and, absurdly, this is done to keep a democratic political system alive.

⁶ Actually, in Italy, representatives of Parliament are elected, rather than the Head of government being elected directly. However, typically, the role of Prime Minister is bestowed upon the leader of the party that garners the most preferences. In any event, in the case of Draghi's technocratic government, there were no elections held.

These are just a few examples of the contradictions of the current system. In addition to these, from a global political point of view, the emergence of new powers has obviously had a decisive impact on the balance of power. These emerging powers are dealing a severe blow to the structures of traditional global governance, and to the international system that has developed thus far: they are often in a position to demand a reform to global decision-making processes as a result of their economic, demographic and political weight, as in the case of the so-called BRICS⁷. There is no doubt that the future also depends on how the system will be able to respond to the demands of these countries. In our view, this is another essential argument in defense of a global multilateralism.

4.3. Socio-cultural issues and detachment of people from the democratic institutions

Finally, we believe that another great problem of this historical moment is represented by a socio-cultural crisis, with repercussions both at political and economic levels. In particular, without entering into the many aberrations that characterize our societies (terrorism, violence against women, and so on), we believe that an important aspect of this current context in which many things are not working can be put down to (global) civil society's (CS) absence of weight (in decision making mechanisms).

Several authors have studied CS in the last centuries (such as Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Habermas, etc.). In any case, to have a more precise and concrete picture of the aims and scope it should cover nowadays, here we refer to CS as "the medium through which social contracts or bargains between the individual and the centres of political and economic power are negotiated, discussed and mediated" (Kaldor, 2003, p.12).

However, despite its mission being so important, CS finds itself to be very limited in carrying out its role, which is precisely that of being the spokesperson for social problems, which in turn would open the way to new discussions in the public sphere⁸. We consider this crisis to be a cultural one because the lack of effective participation of CS in decision-making processes represents a threat to the democratic culture of our societies. In fact, "civil society activities are an enactment of citizenship, that is, they are practices through which people claim rights and fulfill obligations as members of a given polity" (Scholte 2011, p. 34). Thus, the little weight that CS does exert entails a decreasing participation in democratic principles, and therefore a lower awareness on the part of the population. The latter is undergoing a dramatic distancing from national political institutions but also, and above all, from international ones. In our opinion, the absence of a hinge between institutions and citizens, represented by CS, creates gaps in the social and cultural formation of people.

The reasons for this limited participation, and therefore for the limited possibility of affecting both public debate and public policies, are manifold. First of all, this lack could be attributed to intrinsic limits of CS itself, such as the lack of coordination, the divergence of interests, the dichotomy between civil societies from the Global North and those from the Global South (Petroni, 2021). Furthermore, it seems that the fundamental problem of this crisis is above all linked to a cleavage that is increasingly evident between the CS and the political/economic institutions. Political and economic powers seem too distant from the everyday reality of the ordinary people and the common good, something that is represented by CS. Thus, CS is practically devoid of the ability to influence decision and policy making. This lack of weight in decision-making processes has already been documented for many years, summarized by the expression "nothing but consultation" (Kroger, 2008). The latter means a very low possibility on the part of CS to give specific voice to social issues when it comes to adopting crucial political and economic decisions in key institutions.

Furthermore, it seems that the lack of capacity to influence, on the part of CS, is reflected in an ever greater detachment of citizenship from politics, highlighted perhaps more symptomatically by the increasingly low turnout in the election records. In short, this issue is emblematic of what we call a socio-cultural crisis, because precisely this need to make one's voice heard falls into a situation of complete deafness. At the same time, this situation is one of the (major) symptoms of a broad decline of liberal institutions and of a democratic regression that has been recorded in the last two decades, particularly among the G-20 countries (Diamond, 2021).

⁷ BRICS are among the biggest countries in the world: they bring together 41% of the world population and 24% of the global GDP; they account for 50% of world economic growth and 30% of the world land area. Source: BRICS India (2021), Evolution of BRICS. Link: <https://brics2021.gov.in/about-brics>.

⁸ According to the definition that the Commission on Global Governance gave in 1995, CS is composed by "a multitude of institutions, voluntary associations, and networks— women's groups, trade unions, chambers of commerce, farming or housing co-operatives, neighborhood watch associations, religion-based organizations and so on. Such groups channel the interests and energies of many communities outside government, from business and the professions to individuals working for the welfare of children or a healthier planet [...] citizens' movements and NGOs now make important contributions in many fields, both nationally and internationally. They can offer knowledge, skills, enthusiasm, a non-bureaucratic approach and grassroots perspectives, attributes that complement the resources of official agencies" (Commission on Global Governance 1995, pp. 32–33).

5. Interconnected problems

These three issues are entirely interconnected with one other. Moreover, these three aspects underline the lack of real democratic participation, and therefore highlight the crisis of the concept of democracy understood as “the sovereignty of the people” (Hermet, 2007).

In short, the Western liberal system, if we take these three aspects as an example (but we could consider other more specific aspects such as the gender gap, ethnic discrimination, or the so-called “state of exception”⁹ which has recently been resorted to during the pandemic), appears to be in crisis precisely because of its inherent structure, that is to say from its foundations up. It is the very concept, and the practice, of democracy that has entered a state of crisis in the LIO. If, on the one hand, the West has always been believed to be a bulwark of freedom, exemplified by the aforementioned “end of history”, the current situation highlights just the opposite, namely that the current world suffers from an increasingly and progressive lack of democracy.

This aspect can be seen, for example, in the economic field for the aforementioned reasons: i.e. for this increasingly divergent dichotomy between economic power and social reality characterized by precariousness and exclusion, thereby by erosion of social welfare. It is also evident in the political sphere due to this ever-greater distancing between the electorate and politicians, as well as for the increasing presence of parties that desire sovereign closure instead of a process of widening participation. Finally, the setback of democracy is also evidenced in the sphere of CS, where there is a strong lack of possibility to influence public policies.

The crisis of the Western liberal system brings together a whole series of contradictions within the system itself: social, political and economic, and have class, gender, regional and national origins. Thus, a whole series of inequalities emerges. Indeed, the international system, which has recently been severely hit by the Covid crisis, has highlighted an increasing inability to respond to questions of common interest. In our view, this inability is precisely the result of several gaps that show the limitations originating in the very foundation of the LIO (democracy). Furthermore, this decline is also a result of failed attempts to create more participation (at least in theory) in global decision making, this being the case for why “global governance” does not work.

These issues, reported internationally, have practical repercussions on issues of the utmost urgency at a global level such as climate change. In the end, we state that it is precisely the presence of important gaps in the practice of democracy that has led to the lack of coordination and consensus in global decision making on several of the most pressing issues (such as climate).

6. A new world order?

In the following paragraph we speculate if we are moving towards a new world order. The presence of new “giants” such as China undoubtedly raises this important question. Also, it seems to us that Biden's initiative to exclude China in the 2021 Democracy Summit (Firstport, 2021), as well as his strategy of a democratic alliance against China, hides certain fears of losing leadership on the part of the US.

However, bearing in mind the aforementioned limitations, it seems rather unlikely that unilateral initiatives could still be oriented towards attaining these outputs. Instead, it is more important and necessary to try to offer global answers, above all by trying to initiate specific democratization processes. Of course, a reform of democratic processes will have repercussions on the three areas we have mentioned and, consequently, on global issues. In short, to overcome “gridlock” (Hale, Held, and Young, 2013), significant initiatives must be undertaken concerning the institutional, social and economic spheres. Enhancing democracy should result in enhancing multilateralism (Keohane, Macedo and Moravcsik, 2009)¹⁰.

In this context, it seems unlikely that we can think of a state or a block of leading states. Rather, we believe that it is important to have a holistic approach to issues, through a global development and multilateral approach,

⁹ Giorgio Agamben (2020), on the basis of Carl Schmitt theories, describes a “state of exception” as the practice of governments, especially the Italian one (the first to be most affected in Europe by the pandemic), as a violation of people's freedom, through the suspension of their fundamental democratic rights (freedom, movement, etc.) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁰ In the authors' view “democracy-enhancing multilateralism should comply with three conditions. The first is encouraging policies that benefits the majority of the population as opposed to policies that benefits mostly powerful groups that can mobilize substantial resources to make their preferences prevail. In other words, it should help the citizens solve the collective action problem that emerges when the gains of any individual actor are too small to justify her paying the cost of engaging in the policy arena. The second condition is strengthening the protection of civil rights, especially in the case of vulnerable groups and minorities. Constitutional democracy entails that the majority cannot overrule the civil rights of minorities and/or groups that do not hold enough political or economic power to defend their rights. The third condition is strengthening the deliberative capabilities of the society by opening the policy debate to a variety of actors (from both the public and private sectors) and perspectives, making it more transparent and allowing these actors to contribute with structured, informed arguments to the analysis. The quest for an open public debate makes it easier to protect the diffuse interests of the majority, since prevents the most powerful actors from having privileged access to information and policy-makers” (Bárcena and Porcile, 2019 pp.17-18). In our opinion, CS plays a key role in guarantying and checking these conditions be satisfied, because of its above-mentioned prospective scope.

attempting to overcome the divergences between the Global North and the Global South, in a concrete sense (Horner and Hulme, 2017).

The recent Covid crisis has highlighted all the more dramatically the fact that there is an urgent need to find common solutions to global problems. Therefore, promoting greater participation in decision making processes is key.

The LIO really lacks a holistic bottom-up approach. That is, the current system finds itself increasingly distant from CS. This is one of the biggest problems. In fact, the role of CS, when effective and concrete, is fundamental for several reasons: first of all, it leads to a greater democratization of decision-making processes (Arato and Cohen, 1992); at the same time, CS is the spokesperson for those problems that often find little space in the public arena, such as the condition of workers, gender discrimination, wage differences, access to resources to mitigate climate change, etc. In practice, a more participatory CS is of primary interest in order to cope with the challenges that humanity continually faces. At the same time, the role of CS is also important in overcoming the divisions that often characterize the policies of various governments, and it can even represent a concrete answer to war (Kaldor, 2003).

CS has been deeply affected by the recent pandemic crisis, first of all because it has had little opportunity to network due to restrictions related to opportunities to gather in public spaces. In this sense, social distance has exacerbated the possibility to make the voice of the people heard, and to collaborate in common goals and pursue common social fights. Thus, in the near future, giving CS more weight (both nationally and internationally) is a key step in order to move towards a more equitable international system.

7. Conclusions

Talking about the current crisis of the West, and comparing it to the fall of the Roman Empire, the Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti stated - in a video interview - that the main reason for the decay of the Empire was from within: i.e. corruption of morals, and, we can deduce, an increased distance between the rich and the poor (patricians and plebeians). Thus, broadly speaking, a general crisis of the political system deriving from this social deterioration¹¹.

Nowadays, in the international context, it is clear that problems are increasingly shared at a global level. The recent pandemic, climate change, but also the current wars, cyclical financial crises, terrorism and many other problems that affect everyone are forcing us to seek new forms in dealing with these issues. Certainly, trying to solve these problems at a national level does not seem a suitable and sustainable approach. Therefore, it seems anachronistic and dangerous to believe in an ideology of this type. At the same time, the idea of developing a Nineteenth-century-style concert of powers among the United States, China, Japan, and India (White 2011, 2012) also seems hardly acceptable in view of the global nature of the current challenges. A system of this kind would in any case enter into crisis, if we stick to Waltz's analysis, because even within this concert of powers divisions would arise (Waltz, 1979). However, what seems most significant to us is that such a system would not keep global problems in mind adequately, and therefore it would lack a holistic and global approach to the current problems and future challenges.

We need multipolarism more than multipolarity. This is a key moment in time to put in place multilateralism and indeed, the achievement of the Agenda 2030 SDG goals could be the first benchmark of many targets in this sense and a watershed moment towards a multilateralism that works. However, as Adolf Klocke-Lesch (2021) states: "if we wanted to achieve the SDGs by 2030 by just using the governance structures of the pre-2015 world, we would end up in that world again, or even worse. For several years, our domestic political systems and the global governance architecture have been struggling to respond effectively to people's changing needs and aspirations, as well as to present and future threats to our societies. The COVID-19 pandemic has further laid bare the deficiencies of how our societies, as well as humanity as a whole, deal with common and collective problems".

In this context, the role of CS is pivotal. As expressed by the Hamburg Declaration of 2016, a forum to discuss civil society and how to improve its functioning by advising the OECD, important measures should be taken in the protection and expansion of the spaces related to CS and the rapid decrease of opportunities for civic participation in public policy matters. Consequently, priority should be given to the protection of CS spaces (WUNR, 2016).

A recent study (Ortiz et al., 2021) shows that the citizens of the world are increasingly mobilized and, for structural reasons, are asking for a real democracy in the face of the widespread feeling of failure of the systems of political representation. This research shows that in the last two decades, there has been an increase in the

¹¹ Galimberti, U. (2019) "Decadenza dell'Occidente – Monologo di Galimberti", the video interview is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TheAysFxyE&t=29s> [in Italian].

number of demonstrations attended by more than one million people. These trends occur in both high-income and low-income countries. Furthermore, an important fact is that the groups that traditionally led mobilizations (NGOs, trade unions, and civil society associations in general) were joined by non-activist middle-class citizens who feel excluded from the system. If this upward trend continues, this data would indicate that general discontent is increasingly persistent and that the traditional alliance between the middle classes and the elites could break (Iglesias, 2021). Above all, this discontent could be misled by the demand for more democracy, and be easy prey for populist parties.

For this reason, it is necessary to rediscover the fundamental hinge that is represented by CS, and to ensure that representative democracy modernizes itself and actively involves citizens in decision-making processes. This is a fundamental step for the future of multilateralism, which becomes an empty word without a greater inclusion of citizens. At the same time, concrete measures to strengthen democracy and fight against economic injustice should be actively taken. Also, in this context, a more inclusive process of participation in decision-making would send an important message in this sense as a demonstration of intentions, thereby enhancing multilateralism. In practice, more active measures should be directed towards improving economic/labor conditions, for example, addressing “labor rights by incorporating labor clauses directly into international trade agreements” (Rodrik, 2018 p.6). More broadly speaking, measures should be taken to safeguard the welfare and create more accountable democratic institutions.

Thus, the current system is not going to implode (maybe) if necessary measures are taken in order to reform it in a more human, democratic and multilateral way. Global challenges require a multilateral response, and multilateral responses are not possible if the needs of citizens are not taken into account.

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