

A World Political Party: The Time Has Come



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Shared problems require shared action. The world economy and deepening global risks bind us together, but we lack the collective global agency required to address them. A sustainable global future will be impossible without a fundamental shift from the dominant national mythos to a global worldview, and the concomitant creation of institutions with transformative political agency. A world political party would be well-suited to bring about such a shift. Although such a party will not materialize overnight, it can emerge from the chrysalis of activism and experimentation already forming on the world stage.

The transnational Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) is a compelling experiment in this vein, providing useful lessons for a world political party proper. Although the challenges to forming a transformative world party are profound, the risks of inaction are grave - and the rewards of success momentous.

Party Time

We now understand how small our planet has become. The local and global have become profoundly intertwined as our daily activities depend on the workings of the world economy. Common risks, like ecological crises and weapons of mass destruction, tie all our fates together.

Despite such interconnectedness, people's everyday experiences still differ

greatly. For example, consider the contrasts between a day in the life of a high school teacher in Finland, a textile worker in China, a CEO of a multinational corporation in Brazil, and a janitor in Kenya—a case study in lateral and vertical diversity. Their lives' possibilities are interwoven and shaped by the global economy, but in sharply divergent ways. Shared problems require shared action. But to achieve collective agency on the global level, disparate individuals must learn to see themselves (and their daily lives) as fundamentally connected to one another through common global structures, processes, and challenges. Such collective learning has the potential to politicize the world economy and the institutions that govern it. Rather than being treated as immutable, these institutions can and must become the subject of political contestation. Both radically reforming existing institutions and building new ones must be on the agenda. Seeing the world system as malleable goes hand in hand with the quest for globalized political agency, for advancing transformative visions of “another world.”

The roots of the contemporary quest go back to the formation of transnational political associations in the nineteenth century with the burgeoning peace and labor movements. A century later, in the 1960s and 1970s, new movements for gender and racial equality, nuclear disarmament, and environmental justice sparked global organizing and activism. In the 1980s, economic globalization became an era-defining issue. Then, as the walls of the Cold War came tumbling down and the Internet eroded barriers to communication, the concept of global civil society took hold. To this day, civil society carries the banner of transformative hope, expressed through pursuit of peace, justice, democracy, economic well-being, and ecological sustainability.

The growing organization and influence of global civil society can be seen in the human rights movement. For example, an international criminal court was first proposed in 1872 in response to the atrocities of the Franco-Prussian War. However, the NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court (ICC), which featured prominent human rights organizations, was not founded until 1995. By the time the Rome Statute was adopted in July 1998, more than 800 organizations had joined the campaign; in the early 2000s, the number was more than one thousand. The ultimate creation of the ICC, though noteworthy, was an achievement tempered by the nonparticipation of China, Russia, and the US, among others, and by accusations, especially by African states, that the court has

been guilty of applying double standards.

In another arena, civil society became a prominent bulwark against corporate-driven globalization, challenging the “Washington Consensus” and its policy agenda of trade liberalization, deregulation, privatization, and fiscal austerity. Counter-summits, mass demonstrations, and targeted campaigns resisted the power asymmetries, injustices, and environmental impacts of the corporate-driven world economy. Global media made the protests of this “alter-globalization” movement visible to people around the world.

The turn of the new century saw the creation of a self-consciously political expression of global civil society in the form of the World Social Forum (WSF), inaugurated in June 2001 with an international meeting of 12,000 activists in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In the years that followed, such global meetings grew larger, and regional meetings were spawned, providing a rolling series of vital platforms for interchange and networking among diverse civil society actors. However, the WSF has suffered from an internal contradiction between its promise to facilitate the transition to a better world and its central organizing principle of simply providing an open space.

Political agency requires transformative capacity, which a mere open space for discourse lacks. Because the WSF has remained hesitant to move into the realm of action, interest has waned, leaving the WSF’s future fragile and uncertain.

Without an overarching framework fostering solidarity, shared vision, and synergistic action, civil society remains fragmented across a plethora of organizations, issues, and places. Those who grasp the character and peril of planetary interconnectedness understand the need for new transnational agents and institutions that can tackle global ecological, economic, and security challenges. The times call for the creation of a world political party (WPP): an open ethico-political association in pursuit of a broad program of societal reorganization on a global scale. A WPP offers the most promise for fostering political coherence in civil society.

For many reasons, a detailed blueprint for a WPP is neither advisable nor possible. Yet, we can explore the broad contours of a diverse, democratic global political formation. Any process for advancing new institutional arrangements, to be legitimate, needs to be responsive to all significantly affected actors—and thus

robustly democratic. Theory and practice must align. Transformative practice itself must thus embrace adaptive learning, seek democratic consensus, and have the capacity for collective decision-making. Meeting these desiderata takes us far beyond open space venues like the WSF and single-issue civil society arenas.

Skepticism about the feasibility of a world political party is understandable, especially in light of the discontent with political parties in national contexts. Across the world, major parties have become “post-democratic” as private money rules in politics and power is increasingly concentrated in a narrow elite.[i] Often, the anti-elite backlash has been nationalist, xenophobic, and authoritarian. Many countries, especially in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, are sliding towards full-scale authoritarianism.[ii] A viable WPP must be able to respond to the moral and political criticism of existing national parties, while cultivating a democratic ethos within global civil society and exercising effective political agency. Such broad-based political capability presupposes the emergence of public consciousness rooted in shared elements of a wider and deeper worldview. This evolution, in turn, fosters the willingness to engage in collective processes to build trust and commitment.

A world party cannot be created overnight, but rather can emerge out of today’s activism and experimentation in the context of intensifying global crises. One instructive experiment is the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25). DiEM25’s successes and failures provide critical lessons for forging organs of collective agency beyond one continent.

The Shape of a New Formation

The earliest analogues for a new world party are the socialist internationals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Marx and Engels’s declaration of “Proletarians of all countries, unite!” helped inspire the International Workingmen’s Association, or “First International.” In the years before World War I, socialist and labor parties joined together in the Second International. Then, after the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union formed the Third International, or Comintern, as a vehicle for controlling communist parties worldwide. In parallel, organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World saw themselves as part of a global organizing project, captured in the IWW’s vision of the OBU (“One Big Union”). The reformist, postwar Socialist International—a descendent of the Second International—still exists, but its constituent social democratic parties lack the sense of solidarity and collective agency of their predecessors.

The top-down character of an organization like the Comintern would certainly meet strong opposition in a contemporary civil society culture skeptical of hierarchy. Recognition of equality is part and parcel of human collective learning. The prolific English writer H. G. Wells presaged a better way, exploring the idea of a WPP in essays and novels, with the 1928 *The Open Conspiracy* his most daring effort.[iii] Rather than a centrally organized party, Wells's "open conspiracy" comprised a mass movement united by a humanistic faith and understanding of the world. The diverse set of actors in this movement-party could, he argued, collectively forge a rational and democratic world republic.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, amid lively discussions about the meaning and future of the alter-globalization movement, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri developed the idea of a "multitude," a complex network of a plurality of actors. In part inspired by the experiences of the alter-globalization movements, in part a modern substitute for the Marxian working class, this concept bears some resemblance to Wells's open conspiracy (indeed, Wells, too, used the term multitude). Like Wells, Hardt and Negri developed these ideas in response to the global problem of war, arguing that the war on terror waged against a largely unspecified enemy served to justify and reinforce Great Power domination. However, the global governance reforms Hardt and Negri espouse are quite modest, with a global currency transaction tax the most far-reaching proposal.[iv]

The war on terror in 2001, and the opposition to it, proved to be a turning point, sidelining the alter-globalization movement. Another turning point was the global financial crisis of 2008-9, which increased the socioeconomic insecurity and anxiety of people everywhere.[v] In the years since, wage stagnation, unemployment growth, and skyrocketing inequality have undermined social stability, while the concentration of capital has eroded democratic institutions, enabling a moneyed elite to rig economic and political systems. This inequality and instability, in turn, have fanned the flames of resurgent nationalist populism.

A far-sighted response to the contemporary crisis would be to build a world political party. Such a party would contribute to the process of constructing a global demos, best seen as a pluralist, evolving political community of world citizens exercising political rights in a globalized public sphere. A WPP would welcome a range of different ideological agendas concerning how common global institutions might best be organized. The party would constitute a transnational public sphere, where the sufficiently like-minded—i.e., members of the

party—could freely debate issues and make collective decisions. The *raison d'être* of the party lies in advancing new institutional forms for organizing the planetary public realm.

A nascent world party would spawn nodes at different levels and contexts, each attuned to salient issues at its level within an overarching global perspective and strategy. The various chapters would share a core program while maintaining their autonomy, adopting additional planks into their platform as appropriate (provided that they resonate with the overall agenda). Within this complex transformative agency, balance would be sought between pluralism and unity. Cultivating a sense of mutuality, trust, and sensitivity among diverse participants is key to developing a viable global political community and public sphere.

Collective Learning and Cosmopolitanism

Although ancient Greek city-states had cliques and parties of opinion, the contemporary understanding of political parties is rather recent. Until early European modernity, the metaphor of a “body politic” dominated the political imagination. In this view, a conflict or contradiction in one organism or body is not considered. Today, as a result of effectual collective learning processes, rules are no longer treated as external to individual actors, and thus sacred or unassailable, but rather as the product of free, mutual agreement of individuals endowed with autonomous conscience. This form of collective discourse first emerged in some ancient small city-states, typically among free males, but was repressed by large-scale military-agrarian empires. The demand for equality re-emerged in a more radical form in complex large-scale society with modern political revolutions.

In the context of modernity, new ideas such as human rights and the rule of law became part of social reality. Notably, the trial of Louis XVI marked a break with the mythological view of the monarchy’s power, and the ascent of the understanding of citizens as autonomous actors with the right to revise prevailing rules and laws. For the Girondists, the king no longer embodied the law, but rather subject to it, just like any other citizen. All citizens are equally bound by the law.[vi]

The historical process of collective learning points towards cosmopolitan moral sentiments. In higher stages of reasoning, individuals gain an understanding that morality and ethico-political principles must have validity and application apart

from both the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles, and the individual's own identification with particular groups or institutions. Such is the moral foundation of world citizenship.

Of course, the movement toward cosmopolitanism is hardly inevitable, and not all social learning is progressive. Past lessons can be forgotten, and change can be regressive, undermining future learning. Economic uncertainty can amplify existential insecurity and anxiety, triggering regressive learning. Religion and nationalism can provide channels for diverting resentment and angst originating in socioeconomic conditions. Asymmetric power relations can undermine the learning process as well, by steering public consciousness towards perspectives that serve particular identities, interests, or elites.

Pushing back against such tendencies, a central aim of a WPP would be to nurture positive learning that creates a public more receptive to pluralist cosmopolitanism. This requires strategies for shaping the economic and social conditions that support individual and collective learning, and improving the skills and knowledge required for effective participation in the learning process. Educating the public about global affairs is essential for developing a collective democratic culture and deeper engagement in the global public realm.

Much of our thinking is unconscious, which further complicates learning processes. Thinking is based on prototypes, framings, and metaphors that are seldom explicit. This background is the source of "common sense" views of how we connect and interact and what our expectations are of one another and outsiders. Underlying normative ideas and images generate manifold stories about who we are, where we come from, and where we are heading. A problem for a global political party is that, compared to the rich poetics of national myths and narratives, cosmopolitan prototypes, metaphors, framings, and stories remain rather thin.

A promising way to counter parochial ideologies is to situate the contemporary problematique within a macro-view of cosmological, biological, and social evolution. This "Big History" approach expands both our understanding of "where we are" and visions of "where we want to go." A sweeping narrative can motivate transformative and progressive politics in the twenty-first century.[vii] The point of departure of Big History is that our common human capacities have emerged from the evolution of life, itself an emergent layer of cosmological unfolding. A

sweeping framework puts into context and underscores the import of the Anthropocene: the new geological age defined by the human impact on the whole Earth. Big History encourages narratives and values with a sense of global belonging—the Earth as our common home in the cosmos. This broad panorama suggests a new slogan: think cosmically, act globally.

DiEM25: A Seed Crystal?

Can we see rumblings of a WPP today? Perhaps future historians will look back to many precursors now in play. One promising contemporary initiative is the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25). Established in early 2016 in the aftermath of the Euro crisis, DiEM25 has assumed many of the characteristics of a WPP. As such, it offers an invaluable testbed for cultivating transnational ethical and political consciousness, deploying new technologies to enable widespread participation, overcoming legal obstacles to a supranational political party, and transcending identity-political fragmentation.

Following the 2015 defeat of the Greek left-wing party Syriza in its struggle against the Troika (the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and EU Commission), Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis resigned. Subsequent political meetings in France and Germany convinced him of the need to “band together regardless of nationality and transcend the divide between debtor and creditor countries.” The solution was clear: a new pan-European political movement to prevent a “descent into a post-modern 1930s.”[viii]

To advance this aim, DiEM25’s strategy is to convene a constitutional assembly that would reflect a genuine European democracy. It intends to have a draft constitution prepared by 2025 that, if adopted, would replace all existing European treaties. Beyond this process, the movement strives to overcome austerity and harmful competition in Europe with concrete policy proposals, including the dedication of 500 billion euros per year to green investment and industrial conversion, a European anti-poverty plan, a universal basic income (financed by a “public” percentage of companies’ profits), and a common and humane migration policy.[ix]

Rather than adhering to a single political ideology, DiEM25 is resolutely pluralistic, aiming to attract a broad spectrum of progressives, whether leftists, social democrats, greens, or liberals. Participants are united in their dissatisfaction with Europe’s economic and political establishment, and in their advocacy for a government by the people of Europe. In contrast to the

authoritarian, nationalistic populisms on the rise throughout Europe, DiEM25 exemplifies a form of democratic, transnational populism. Its concept of “we” is a pan-European demos that transcends national identity.

DiEM25’s inclusionary transnationalism manifests in the common front it is building for political activism. But the movement enacts transnationalism in another sense: its commitment to helping the most vulnerable people in the global political economy, especially refugees.[x] As stated in its manifesto, DiEM25 aspires to “an Open Europe that is alive to ideas, people and inspiration from all over the world, recognizing fences and borders as signs of weakness spreading insecurity in the name of security.”[xi] The movement thus offers a clear alternative to Fortress Europe.

Not surprisingly, given DiEM25’s expansive political philosophy, its participants are not exclusively European. Joining many well-known European intellectuals, are visible international figures such as Julian Assange and Noam Chomsky. The members of the Coordinating Collective that organizes and integrates DiEM25’s actions have wide international experience, including in the peace movement, the ICC campaign, Occupy, and the World Social Forum.

DiEM25 has some 70,000 members, mostly in Europe but from other continents as well, along with eight national collectives and a hundred ad hoc collectives around the world. Although more a movement than a political party for now, it will be presenting a list for the 2019 European Parliament elections, dubbing the effort the “European spring.” This “first progressive transnational list ever” includes both candidates directly chosen by DiEM25 and candidates nominated by DiEM25 to appear on the slates of conventional parties. This selection process, as with all DiEM25’s work, relies on modern IT technology to facilitate discussion among dispersed members, in parallel with in-person meetings and events across Europe.

In spite of such mobilization, DiEM25 has yet to become a high-profile actor in European politics. Its membership and budget remain small compared to those of the major national political parties, and the mainstream media largely ignores its activities and positions. Even after years of decline, Germany’s Christian Democratic Union, for instance, commands a budget of tens of millions of euros per year, while DiEM25’s is less than a half-million. Given its limited resources, DiEM25’s near-term electoral success will likely be modest at best. Nevertheless,

as it evolves and grows, it could become a model or, beyond, a seed germinating future world political parties.

Where We Are

While we live longer and value life more highly than ever, the world as a whole faces decades of unprecedented problems. The global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and the subsequent euro crisis are only one indication of how the fates of different countries and regions have become more and more intertwined. The conditions of everyday activities of all people are directly or indirectly affected by how the world economy works—or does not work. The next global crisis will have far-reaching consequences. The challenge then? How to reach the teacher, textile worker, and janitor, to name a few, with the vision and message to convey how a WPP can serve their needs and interests.

Perhaps the most serious immediate threat concerns the danger of global war, and especially nuclear war. Both the escalation of the conflict between Russia and the West and the confrontations in the South China Sea show that questions of global political economy and security have still not been answered on a sustainable footing. Similarly, climate change is a key part of a new geological era, the Anthropocene, in which human action is transforming the composition and processes of the biosphere. The expansion of human society has led, among other things, to the mass destruction of habitats, species, and whole ecosystems. This devolution continues at an accelerating pace, carrying threats to global civilization.

The concept of “world risk society” helps situate our task.[xii] The current epoch, in this conceptualization, is the second phase of modernization, in which actors and movements begin to respond to the problems generated by the consequences of the first phase. The primary feature of this new phase is the emergence of a common world with no outside and no exit. Societal risks demand that we acknowledge the real dangers and threats we confront. At the same time, these risks contain a collective condition and power that creates new ethical, political, and technological opportunities for shaping futures to sustain us and new modernities to dream by.

As humankind is thrilled by scientific discoveries of new planets with the possibility of extraterrestrial life, we become increasingly aware of the peril our technological civilization poses for the future of life right here on Earth. Human

curiosity about our place in the cosmos and the awareness of the great ethical-political choices before us demand a new phase of collective learning and promotion of practices and institutions matched to our common challenge.

Our ability to secure a sustainable global future depends on a fundamental shift from the currently dominant national mythos to a global imaginary. The mechanisms and processes of collective learning through institutional change differ from those of individual growth. Collective learning and institutional change require politically capable transformative actors. Practical and political problems can be overcome by building better common institutions.

The world political party envisaged in this essay embraces this grand task.[xiii] As Wells proclaimed almost a century ago, way ahead of his time, “the alternative before man now is either magnificence of spirit and magnificence of achievement or disaster.” The choice could not be clearer today. The future we want is one that removes constraints on human well-being and enables human flourishing. Navigating history towards collective self-determination on this planet, and one day perhaps beyond it, will take bold, transformative practice.

In our troubled world, the need for global transformative agency is greater than ever. The future is not yet settled, and the path there depends on the choices we make. Our expectations become a feedback loop in the making of the future. Pessimists argue that a series of limited-scale crises or wars—or a full global catastrophe—must erupt before a significant force can coalesce for rational, peaceful, and democratic transformations of global governance.

However likely that view, we cannot stand passively by until crises explode before working for social transformation. If and when a window of opportunity opens, the capacity for such action must already have been established. The time has come, then, to devote our efforts to building a world party as an overarching organizational expression of global citizens’ power.

Notes

[i] Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

[ii] For different views on the decline of democracy, see Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017: 5-15); the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2017, which reports “the worst decline in global democracy in years” (available at

<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracyindex>); and John Weeks, "Free Markets and the Decline of Democracy," *Open Democracy*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/john-weeks/free-markets-and-decline-of-democracy>.

[iii] There are many different editions of this work, with different titles (including *What Are We To Do With Our Lives?*, available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0201081h.html>). See, in particular, H. G. Wells, "The Open Conspiracy," in *The Open Conspiracy: H. G. Wells on World Revolution*, ed. W. Warren Wagar (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

[iv] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 290–306. The global currency transaction tax they propose relies on a working paper by Heikki Patomäki and Teivo Teivainen, later published in *A Possible World: Democratic Transformation of Global Institutions* (Zed Books: London, 2004), 163–182.

[v] I analyze the global financial crisis and the Euro crisis in *The Great Eurozone Disaster: From Crisis to Global New Deal* (Zed Books: London, 2013).

[vi] Based on Alan R. How, "Habermas, History and Social Evolution: Moral Learning and the Trial of Louis XVI," *Sociology* 35, no. 1 (February 2001): 177–194.

[vii] As discussed in Heikki Patomäki and Manfred Steger, "Social Imaginaries and Big History: Towards a New Planetary Consciousness?" *Futures* 42, no. 10 (2010): 1056–1063.

[viii] Yanis Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 483–485.

[ix] "European Parliament Elections: Launching the European Spring Transnational List," *DiEM25*, June 2018, <https://diem25.org/european-parliament-elections-launching-the-european-spring-transnational-list/>.

[x] See Panos Panayotu, "Towards a Transnational Populism: A Chance for European Democracy (?) - The Case of DiEM25," *Populismus Working Papers*, 2017, no. 5, <https://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/panayotu-final-upload.pdf> 11. *DiEM25*, "A Manifesto for Democratising Europe (long version)," 2016, https://diem25.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/diem25_english_long.pdf.

12. Beck Ulrich, "Global Risk Society," in *Encyclopedia of Globalization*, ed. George Ritzker, vol. II (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2012), 836–838.

13. Heikki Patomäki, "Towards Global Political Parties," *Ethics & Global Politics*

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