Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?

*In an age of increasing global interdepen-
dence, Dr. Michael Karlberg asks whether
the Western model of democracy is the
natural and inevitable way to organize free
and enlightened societies.*

The triumph of the Western social order was widely heralded in the closing decades of the twentieth century. "The end of ideology" was proclaimed and an age of global prosperity anticipated, driven by the twinned forces of global free-market capitalism and liberal democracy.[1] In the ensuing years, the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with new tensions created by a perceived "clash of civilizations,"[2] has propelled advocates of free-market capitalism and Western liberal democracy to step up their efforts to export or impose these models around the world in former Communist states, Muslim nations, and elsewhere.

To date, the global free-market capitalism aspect of this project has been the subject of considerable critique in both the popular and academic press.[3] It has also spawned a network of global justice organizations and activists who have become ever more visible and vocal through various strategies, including mass protests and Internet organizing. Concerns have been raised about the increasing global disparities of wealth and poverty, the absence of environmental and labor standards and enforcement mechanisms in the global marketplace, the devastating impacts of currency speculation and transnational capital flight, the rising and largely unregulated power

of multinational corporations, the undemocratic nature of global financial institutions and trade organizations, and a host of other issues.

Significantly, these critiques of the global free-market capitalism project have frequently come from authors and activists within the Western world itself. The same cannot be said, however, of the project to export liberal democracy. Throughout the West, it is still generally assumed that the Western democratic model is the natural and inevitable way to organize free and enlightened societies.

But there is an alternative perspective. Could it be said that Western liberal democracy—or what might more accurately be called *competitive democracy*—has become anachronistic, unjust, and unsustainable in an age of increasing global interdependence?[4] "The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned," wrote Bahá'u'lláh, "inasmuch as the prevailing order appeareth to be lamentably defective."[5]

Competitive democracy

Western liberal democracy, at its core, is based on the premise that democratic governance requires individuals and groups to compete for political power. The most recognizable form that this takes is the party system. Political competition also occurs without formal political parties in many local elections, and when independent candidates run in provincial (or state) and national elections. In all of these cases, however, the underlying competitive structure is the same, and it is this underlying structure that has become anachronistic, unjust, and unsustainable.

Granted, competitive democracy represents a significant and valuable historical accomplishment. It has proven a more just form of government than the aristocratic, authoritarian, or sacerdotal forms of governance it has generally replaced. It also represents a reasonable adaptation to the social and ecological conditions prevailing at the time of its emergence. But the theory and practice of political competition emerged in the earliest days of the West's industrial revolution, when human populations were still relatively small and isolated. It predates the invention of electricity, the internal combustion engine, air travel, broadcast media, computers, the Internet,

weapons of mass destruction, appetites of mass consumption, and global free-market capitalism. In the past three centuries, our success as a species has transformed the conditions of our existence in these and many other ways.

Competitive democracies, for reasons that will be discussed here, appear to be incapable of dealing with these new realities. Yet Western populations are, by and large, living in a state of denial regarding the anachronistic nature of competitive political systems. When concerns are raised about the condition of these systems, they tend to focus on surface expressions rather than underlying structural causes. For instance, in many Western countries it has become commonplace to bemoan the increased negativity of partisan political rhetoric. Political discourse, some commentators suggest, is suffering from a breakdown in civility and a rise of mean-spiritedness. As a result, politicians are mired in a gridlock and cannot address the complex issues that face them.[6] Even many elected politicians have raised these concerns. In a collection of essays by retiring US senators at the close of the twentieth century, one was moved to "lament the increasing level of vituperation and partisanship that has permeated the atmosphere and debate in the Senate."[7] One observed that "bipartisanship . . . has been abandoned for quick fixes, sound bites, and, most harmfully, the frequent demonization of those with whom we disagree."[8] Another claimed that "there is much more partisanship than when I came to Washington two decades ago, and most of it serves the nation poorly."[9] Yet another wrote that "our political process must be re-civilized" due to the "ever-increasing vicious polarization of the electorate, the us-against-them mentality" that "has all but swept aside the former preponderance of reasonable discussion."[10]

Statements such as these raise legitimate concerns about the state of partisan discourse, but they obscure the underlying problem of political competition. According to these views, political competition and political parties are the natural, normal, and inevitable way to organize democratic governance; the problem arises only when partisan rhetoric becomes too adversarial or mean-spirited. As the sociolinguist Deborah Tannen states, "A kind of agonistic inflation has set in whereby opposition has become more extreme, and the adversarial nature of the system is routinely being abused."[11]

Tannen attributes this "more general atmosphere of contention," or this "new mood" in partisan politics, to a wider combative culture that is corrupting the partisan system and socializing politicians into more conflictual patterns of interaction, resulting in gridlock, the spread of corruption, and the breakdown of unwritten rules of civility, cooperation, and compromise.[12]

The seeds of competitive democracy

The breakdown in civility, the rise of mean-spiritedness, the problem of gridlock, and the spread of political corruption—assuming these things have indeed deteriorated over time—are not abuses or corruptions of the partisan system. Such developments are the culmination—the "perfection"—of a system that political scientist Jane Mansbridge refers to as "adversary democracy."[13] They are the sour fruit inherent in the seeds of competitive democracy. "No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united," wrote Bahá'u'lláh.[14]

These seeds, to be more precise, are the deepest assumptions about human nature and social order that underlie political competition. The first of these assumptions is that human nature is essentially self-ish and competitive. The second assumption is that different groups of people will naturally develop different interests, needs, values, and desires, and these interests will invariably conflict. The third assumption is that, given a selfish human nature and the problem of conflicting interests, the fairest and most efficient way to govern a society is to harness these dynamics through an open process of interest-group competition.

Based on these assumptions, it should come as no surprise that the fruits of competitive democracy include the aforementioned breakdown in civility, rise of mean-spiritedness, problem of gridlock and spread of political corruption. These are to be expected if we accept, and enact, such assumptions. In fact, this is the reason why some competitive democracies have set up complex systems of checks and balances in an effort to limit the excessive accumulation of power in the hands of any given interest group. It is also why some competitive democracies have tried to cultivate, within their political systems, codes of civility and ethics intended to restrain the

basest expressions of political competition. And this is the reason that most competitive democracies struggle, to this day, to reign in the worst excesses of political competition by experimenting with term limits, campaign finance reforms, and other stopgap measures. Yet none of these efforts fundamentally changes the nature or the fruit of the system, because the fruit is inherent in the system's internal assumptions—its seeds.

To grasp this inherent relationship, consider the market metaphor that is often invoked as a model for political competition. Competitive democracy is generally conceived as a political marketplace within which political entrepreneurs and the parties they incorporate try to advance their interests through open competition.[15] The "invisible hand" of the market allegedly works to direct this competition toward the maximum public benefit. As Lyon explains,

> Supporters of party government argue that if one looks at the larger picture and sees the "political market" in which several parties, the media, interest groups, and individuals all interact, democratic needs are served in a kind of mysterious way . . . [as though] another "invisible hand" is at work.[16]

Within this market model, political parties incorporate around aggregated sets of interests in order to pool their political capital. Contests then determine leadership and control within and between parties—as politicians and parties organize to fight and win elections. The logic of competitive elections, however, ensures that the goal of winning trumps all other values. As Held explains,

> Parties may aim to realize a programme of "ideal" political principles, but unless their activities are based on systematic strategies for achieving electoral success they will be doomed to insignificance. Accordingly, parties become transformed, above all else, into means for fighting and winning elections.[17]

Once political leadership and control is determined through electoral contests, processes of public decision making are structured in a similar manner. Decision making is organized as an oppositional process of debate. In theory, political debate functions as an open "marketplace of ideas" in which the best ideas prevail—again through the operation of some hypothetical invisible hand. In practice, the

logic of the competitive system transforms debate into a struggle over political capital. Victory results in a gain of political capital, defeat results in a loss. Debate thus becomes an extension of the electoral process itself, providing a stage for "permanent campaigns," or neverending contests over political capital, in anticipation of the next round of elections.[18]

Much political decision making also occurs outside of formal public debates. Indeed, these debates often serve as little more than a dramatic veneer on complex behind-the-scenes processes of political bargaining and negotiation. Yet these behind-the-scenes processes tend to be characterized by similar competitive dynamics.[19] These processes involve not only elected officials but also lobbyists, think tanks, media strategists, and numerous species of political action groups—all of which are vying with one another to pressure politicians, shape media coverage, and influence public opinion in ways that advance their own agendas and interests.

The fruit of competitive democracy

Interest-group competition has no necessary relationship to the goals of social justice and environmental sustainability. On the contrary, the track record of competitive democracy is clear. It is a record of growing disparities between rich and poor.[20] It is also a record of accelerating ecological destruction.[21] Therefore, the problems of competitive democracy, a few of which are discussed here, go well beyond the breakdown of civility and the rise of mean-spiritedness.

THE CORRUPTING INFLUENCE OF MONEY

In theory, when there are excesses and deficiencies in the operation of the market economy, a democratic government should be able to regulate and remedy them. The practice of political competition, however, makes this virtually impossible. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand. Political competition is an expensive activity—and growing more expensive with every generation. Successful campaigns are waged by those who have the financial support, both direct and indirect, of the most affluent market actors (i.e. those who have profited the most from market excesses and deficiencies).

The problem of money in politics is widely recognized and it largely explains the cynicism and apathy reflected in low voter turnout at the polls. The underlying cause of this problem, however, is seldom examined and never seriously addressed. We hear occasional calls for campaign finance reform and similar regulatory measures. Yet the root of the problem is political competition itself. From the moment we structure elections as contests, which inevitably require money to win, we invert the proper relationship between government and the market. Rather than our market existing within the envelope of responsible government regulation, our government is held captive within the envelope of market regulation.

As long as governance is organized in a competitive manner, this relationship cannot be fully corrected. Any scheme to tweak the rules here and there will merely cause money to flow through new paths. This is what occurs, for instance, with attempts to reform campaign financing. New forms of contribution merely eclipse the old. Even if societies could eliminate campaign financing entirely, money would simply flow through other points of political influence such as the constantly evolving species of political action groups that exert strategic influences over media coverage of issues, public opinion formation, electoral outcomes, and many other political processes. In a competitive political system, where candidates are vying for favorable coverage, public opinion and votes, money will always flow to the most effective points of political influence just as water always flows to the point of lowest elevation. We can alter the path of that flow, but we cannot stop it.

This problem is a primary cause of the growing disparities of wealth and poverty that are now witnessed throughout the world, including within the Western world. The expanding income gap is not simply a result of the market economy itself. It is a result of the competitive political economy that is coupled with it. Through this political economy, the wealthiest market actors define the market framework within which they accumulate wealth. This framework comprises systems of property law, contract law, labor law, tax law, and all other forms of legislation, public infrastructure, and public subsidies that shape market outcomes. In competitive democracies, this framework is defined, over time, by the wealthiest market actors, owing to the influence of money on political competition. The result

is a political-economy feedback loop that serves the swelling interests of the wealthiest segments of society.

The subordination of governance to market forces also has implications for the environment. In unregulated markets, production and consumption decisions are based solely on the internal costs of manufacturing, which include labor, materials, manufacturing equipment, and energy. These internal costs determine the retail prices that consumers pay for products, which influences how much people consume. These costs do not, however, always reflect the true social or ecological costs of a product. Many industries generate external costs, or *externalities*, that are never factored into the price of a product because they are not actual production costs.[22] For instance, industries that pollute the environment create substantial public health and environmental remediation costs that are seldom factored into the actual costs of production. Rather, these costs are borne by the entire society, by future generations, and even by other species. Because an unregulated market does not account for these external costs, the prices of products with high external costs are kept artificially low. These artificially low prices inflate consumption of the most socially and ecologically damaging products. For these reasons, market economies are ecologically unsustainable unless carefully regulated by governments that factor such costs back into the prices of goods through "green taxes" and other means.[23] As discussed above, however, markets are not responsibly regulated within a competitive political system because the system subordinates political decision making to market influences. Markets regulate competitive democracies rather than the other way around.

Finally, the social and environmental costs of political competition converge in the case of "environmental racism" and related environmental injustices.[24] The poor, ethnic minorities, and women tend to suffer the most from the effects of environmental deterioration because they are more likely to live or work in areas of increased environmental health risks and degradation. These segments of the population are least able to influence political decision making because of their economic disenfranchisement. As a result, environmental practices that are seldom tolerated in the backyards of more affluent groups are displaced onto groups that are politically and economically marginalized. These are the people who pay most of the costs of such environmental externalities.

PERSPECTIVE EXCLUSION AND ISSUE REDUCTION

In addition to the problem of money, political competition does not provide an effective way to understand and solve complex problems because it reduces the diversity of perspectives and voices in decision-making processes. There are a number of reasons for this. First, political competition yields an adversarial model of debate which generally defaults to the premise that if one perspective is right then another perspective must be wrong. In theory, the most enlightened or informed perspective prevails. This assumes that complex issues can be adequately understood from a single perspective. However, an adequate grasp of most complex issues requires consideration of multiple, often complementary, perspectives. Complex issues tend to be multifaceted—like many-sided objects that must be viewed from different angles in order to be fully seen and understood. Different perspectives therefore reveal different facets of complex issues. Maximum understanding emerges through the careful consideration of as many facets as possible.

Political competition militates against this process because it assumes the oppositional rather than the potentially complementary character of diverse views. One cannot gain political capital at the expense of one's opponent unless there is a winner and a loser. As a result, political competition reduces complex issues into binary oppositions in which only one perspective can prevail. This is what Blondel calls "the curse of oversimplification."[25]

This problem is exacerbated by the hyper-commercialized media sectors that are emerging in most Western societies—products of the political economy discussed above. These are driven by the logic of manufacturing mass audiences in order to sell them to advertisers. The cheapest, and therefore most profitable, way to manufacture a mass audience is through the construction of spectacle—including partisan political spectacle. Political coverage is thus reduced to a formula of sound-bite politics in which emotionally charged sloganeering becomes the ticket into the public sphere. As a result, simplistic political mantras echo throughout the public sphere, distorting the complex nature of the issues at hand, constraining public perceptions, and aggravating partisan divisions. In such a climate, it is virtually impossible to solve complex, multidimensional social and environmental problems.

A closely related consequence of this competitive model is the exclusion and inhibition of diverse voices who avoid or withdraw from the arena of public service because of its simplistic and hostile atmosphere. Such an atmosphere does not attract individuals who, by nature or nurture or some combination of the two, are neither inclined toward, nor comfortable with, simplistic adversarial debate—even though they may have important contributions to offer. Partisan mudslinging aside, adversarial debate does not elicit the best reasoning even among the most confident individuals. Such conditions can entirely silence less confident and less aggressive—or simply more thoughtful and caring—individuals.

By extension, adversarial contests also tend to privilege males who, again by nature or nurture or some combination of the two, tend to be more aggressive than women and thus gain the advantage within an adversarial arena.[26] The resulting disadvantage experienced by many women may also be experienced by some minority groups which, in order to survive, have learned to adopt cautious and guarded postures in relation to dominant social groups. Moreover, women and minorities may be further disadvantaged because even though male or dominant-group expressions of aggression are often considered natural and appropriate, the same kinds of expressions, when employed by women or subordinated minorities, are often viewed as unnatural and inappropriate. Thus, the same rewards do not necessarily accrue to women and minorities for the same adversarial behaviors.[27] By inhibiting and excluding various social groups in these ways, political competition and adversarial debate tend to impoverish public discourse and undermine the resolution of complex problems.

THE TIME–SPACE PROBLEM

Partisan politics is also inherently incapable of addressing problems across time and space. Complex social and environmental issues generally require long-term planning and commitment. Competitive political systems, however, are inherently constrained by short-term planning horizons. In order to gain and maintain power, political entrepreneurs must cater to the immediate interests of their constituents so that visible results can be realized within relatively frequent election cycles. Even when long-term political commitments are made

out of principle by one candidate or party, continuity is often compromised by succeeding candidates or parties who dismantle or fail to enforce the programs of their predecessors in order to distance themselves from policies they were previously compelled to oppose on the campaign trail or as the voice of opposition. The focus of campaigns and political parties on constituencies-in-the-present therefore undermines commitment to the interests of future generations. Prominent among the interests of future generations is environmental sustainability. As we degrade our environment today, we impoverish future generations.

Many social problems, from poverty to crime to drug dependency to domestic abuse, also require long-term strategies and commitments. Sustained investments in education, the strengthening of families, the creation of economic opportunities, the cultivation of ethical codes and moral values, and other approaches that yield results across generations, are required. Yet the competitive pressure to demonstrate visible actions within frequent election cycles tends to lead instead toward investments in things like new prisons and detention centers to hide the growing social underclass in many countries, new mega-schools to warehouse increasingly alienated and anonymous children and youth, and new shopping malls to distract citizens with short-term material enticements.

Furthermore, just as competitive political systems are responsive to constituents-in-the-present to the exclusion of future generations, they are also responsive to the interests of constituents-within-electoral-boundaries to the exclusion of others. This is the problem of space—or territoriality—which is especially the case at the level of the nation state owing to the absence of an effective system of global governance. Again, this has significant social and ecological implications. The supranational nature of modern environmental issues—such as ozone depletion, global warming, acid rain, water pollution, and the management of migratory species—signals the need for unprecedented levels of global cooperation and coordination.[28] Competitive notions of national sovereignty, however, render the existing international system incapable of responding to these ecological imperatives. Today, cross-border coordination is sacrificed to the pursuit of national self-interests because political entrepreneurs have no choice but to cater to the interests of their own voting

citizens. The consequence is an anarchic system of nation states vying with one another in their rush to convert long-term ecological capital into short-term political capital.

The problem of territoriality is equally significant when it comes to social issues. Challenges such as poverty, crime, the exploitation of women and children, human trafficking, terrorism, ethnic conflict, illegal immigration, and refugee flows do not respect national boundaries any more than most ecological problems do. These problems cannot be solved by national governments alone. Yet political competition within nation states undermines effective commitment and coordination between them. Political competitors are responsive to the interests of voting constituents-within-electoral-boundaries to the exclusion of nonvoters outside of those boundaries. This creates an irresistible incentive for political competitors in wealthy nations to externalize the worst manifestations of these social problems on poorer nations. Consequently, in the long run all of these problems tend to fester and spread until they again threaten the interests of the wealthiest nations. Competitive politics is not about planning for the long term; it is about securing electoral victories in the short term. Hence, the problem of space is inseparable from the problem of time in competitive democracies.

THE SPIRITUAL PROBLEM

Other challenges associated with competitive politics are less tangible, but no less important. These are the spiritual costs of partisanship and political competition. Again, these problems stem directly from the assumptions that underlie the model: that human nature is essentially selfish and competitive; that different people tend to develop conflicting interests; and that the best way to organize democratic governance is therefore through a process of interest-group competition. By organizing human affairs according to these assumptions, we are institutionally cultivating our basest instincts. In the process, we become what we expect of ourselves. The Universal House of Justice has observed that "it is in the glorification of material pursuits, at once the progenitor and common feature of all such ideologies, that we find the roots which nourish the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive. It is here that the ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants."[29]

These culturally formed expectations, however, have no solid basis in the social and behavioral sciences. In these fields, the emerging new consensus is that human beings have the developmental potential for both egoism and altruism, competition and cooperation—and which of these potentials is more fully realized is a function of our cultural environment.[30] This insight is also familiar to many of the world's philosophical and religious traditions. Metaphors that allude to humanity's "lower" and "higher" nature, or "material" and "spiritual" nature, convey this insight, as does the Eastern concept of "enlightenment." However, contrary to the theory and practice of political competition, the primary impulse behind these philosophical and religious traditions has been to cultivate these more cooperative and altruistic dimensions of human nature.

The uncivil nature of much partisan discourse, alluded to at the beginning of this essay, is an inevitable outgrowth of this inversion of material and spiritual priorities. When the pursuit of self-interest comes to be understood as a virtue, and selflessness is dismissed as naïve idealism, it is not surprising that politics becomes an uncivil arena. In this regard, the reality of partisan politics is better captured by war metaphors than by the market metaphors discussed earlier. A *campaign*, after all, is a military term, not a market term. Like military campaigns, political campaigns are expensive. Candidates amass "campaign war chests" as they prepare to "fight" election "battles." In an age of mass-media spectacle and sound-bite politics, this translates into an escalating cycle of negative advertising, insults, and mudslinging, as political campaigns and debates become a "war of words" conducted from "entrenched positions."

In the abstract, debate is about ideas rather than people. In practice, however, the competitive structure of the system erases the line between ideas and people, because if your ideas do not prevail, neither does your political career. Hence, political debate slides easily into the quagmire of egoism and incivility. On the sidelines, meanwhile, the public grows increasingly cynical and disaffected—yet another spiritual cost of this system.

Finally, competitive democracies exact high costs as they divide rather than unite susceptible segments of the public. Any process that routinely produces winners and losers within a population will be divisive. When governance is structured as a process of

interest-group competition, the pursuit of material interests becomes more important than the cultivation of mutualistic social relationships. Furthermore, the formation of political parties, which requires the arbitrary aggregation of distinct and widely varied interests, results in the artificial construction of oppositional identity camps that become increasingly entrenched—and reified—over time. Consider, for instance, the American two-party system with its "left vs. right" or "liberal vs. conservative" camps. In reality, American collective life is characterized by countless complex issues, each of which may be viewed from multiple perspectives. However, to construct a manageable political contest, the two dominant political parties reduce all possible issues to simple binary conflicts and then aggregate conflicting positions on every different issue into two opposing super-camps. Over time, this artificial aggregation has begun to appear natural to many people. Moreover, segments of the population that initially identified strongly with one or two salient positions in any given camp have begun to embrace other aggregated positions through simple association. The result is that diverse people, who do not naturally fall into simple oppositional camps, come over time to separate themselves into such camps—a process that can be accelerated by astute politicians who make emotionally charged "wedge issues" the centerpieces of their campaigns in an effort to create and enforce partisan loyalties. The social divisions that result are further spiritual costs of competitive democracy.

An alternative to political competition

Winston Churchill once stated that "democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the other forms that have been tried."[31] More accurately, this statement describes competitive democracy because this is the only form of democracy that has been tried, to date, as a model of state governance. In keeping with Churchill's sentiment, apologists defend the prevailing system with the argument that it is the most rational alternative to political tyranny or anarchy. The problems inherent in the system of political competition are simply accepted as "necessary evils." All systems of government are imperfect, the argument goes, and competitive democracy is the best we can do.

This argument is premised, however, on the faulty assumption that processes of social innovation have come to an end. According to this "end of history" thesis, the social experiments that have characterized so much of human history have finally played themselves out and Western liberal models have emerged as the only viable models of social organization.[32] Yet this is an entirely unsupportable thesis. Indeed, it would be more plausible to say that the history of humankind as a single, interdependent species, inhabiting a common homeland, is just beginning. Under conditions of increasing global interdependence, brought on by our reproductive and technological success as a species, we have barely begun to experiment with just and sustainable models of social organization.

Processes of social innovation have clearly not come to an end. The example of the international Bahá'í community suffices to illustrate this point. The Bahá'í community is a vast social laboratory within which a new model of social organization is emerging. With a current membership of over five million people, drawn from over 2,000 ethnic backgrounds and residing in virtually every nation on the planet, the community is a microcosm of the entire human race. This diverse community has constructed a unique system of democratically elected assemblies that govern Bahá'í affairs internationally, nationally, and locally in thousands of communities throughout the planet.[33] Significantly, in many parts of the world, the first exercises in democratic activity have occurred within these Bahá'í communities.

The Bahá'í electoral system is entirely nonpartisan and noncompetitive. In brief, all adult community members are eligible for election and every member has the reciprocal duty to serve if elected. At the same time, nominations, campaigning, and all forms of solicitation are prohibited. Voters are guided only by their own conscience as they exercise real freedom of choice in voting for those they believe best embody the qualities of recognized ability, mature experience, and selfless service to others. Through a plurality count, the nine individuals who receive the most votes are called to serve as members of the governing assembly.[34]

Because no one seeks election, elections are not a pathway to power and privilege. On the contrary, elections are a call to service and the elected sacrifice their time and energy, and often their

career aspirations, at the bidding of the community. As a matter of principle, and also because there is no incentive, no one calls attention to themselves or solicits votes in any way. In fact, Bahá'ís interpret solicitation of votes as an indicator of egoism and a lack of fitness to serve.

All decision making within these assemblies is, in turn, guided by consultative principles that enable decision making to be a unifying rather than a divisive process. These principles include striving to enter the process with no preconceived positions or platforms; regarding diversity as an asset, and soliciting the perspectives, concerns, and expertise of others; striving to transcend the limitations of one's own ego and perspective; striving to express oneself with care and moderation; striving to raise the context of decision making to the level of principle; and striving for consensus but settling for a majority when necessary.[35]

Unlike competitive systems in which decision makers must continually negotiate the demands of constituents, campaign contributors, lobbyists, and activists, the Bahá'í system is shielded from external lobbying and other pressures to influence decisions. This is accomplished in two ways. First, as discussed above, those who are elected to assemblies do not seek election and they have no interest in re-election. Elected members are not political entrepreneurs seeking to build or retain political capital, and campaign financing opportunities do not exist because there are no campaigns. Second, elected members decide matters through the application of principle, according to the promptings of their own conscience (one of the primary qualities for which they were elected), and not according to the dictates or pressures of competing interest groups. In this regard, elected members are expected to weigh all of their decisions in a principled manner, even if this means forgoing immediate local or short-term benefits out of consideration for the welfare of distant peoples or future generations.[36]

In all of these ways, the Bahá'í electoral system embodies neither a contest nor the pursuit of power. Since no one seeks election, there is no concept of "winning." At the same time, the electoral process remains eminently democratic. This model has been used for more than three-quarters of a century within the Bahá'í community, which, as it grows in capacity and prominence, is increasingly attracting the attention of outside observers.[37]

Beyond the hegemony of political competition

As the example of the Bahá'í community illustrates, processes of social innovation have clearly not come to an end. Given the problems inherent in partisan systems, along with their rising social and ecological costs, why are democratic populations not.actively searching for alternatives to political competition? To answer this question, some historical context is helpful. Current forms of competitive democracy arose from the thinking of emerging political classes at the dawn of the industrial revolution. These emerging political classes were trying to wrestle absolute power away from the aristocracy. Competitive democracy advanced the interests of these classes because it ended absolute rule while, at the same time, it continued to privilege those exercising wealth and power. This opened the arena of governance to merchants and lesser landowners and other people of means, while limiting the influence of the underclasses.

Although the transition to competitive democracy was marked by violent revolution and the threat of revolution in many countries, the force of ideas played a powerful role in fomenting these transitions, and an even more powerful role in buttressing and sustaining systems of political competition once they were established. This was possible because the same political classes who benefited most from the contest model were increasingly occupying positions of cultural leadership—as statesmen, writers, philosophers, educators, and so forth—through which, either consciously or unconsciously, they were able to cultivate and sustain assumptions regarding human nature and social organization that underlie the contest model.

The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci described this form of cultural influence with remarkable insight in the first half of the twentieth century.[38] His concept of *hegemony* has since entered the lexicon of cultural theorists around the world and it provides a useful framework for understanding the emergence and perpetuation of these contest models. In brief, Gramsci borrowed the term *hegemony*, which traditionally referred to the geopolitical dominance of some states over others, and he reworked it to refer to the cultural dominance of some social classes over others. Gramsci pointed out that geopolitical hegemony, which is achieved and maintained largely by force, is an obvious focus of resistance by oppressed populations and is therefore relatively difficult to maintain over time. Cultural

hegemony, on the other hand, is achieved and maintained through the cultivation of "common sense" belief systems which are less visible and which therefore generate less resistance. In other words, if privileged social groups can naturalize the existing social order in the minds of subordinate groups, the latter will unconsciously consent to their own subordination.

An example of this can be seen in the traditional exclusion of women from many arenas of public life. This exclusion was reinforced by the cultivation of "common sense" notions regarding the "appropriate" role of women in society. Of course, not all women accepted these notions and many struggled against them. Yet, remarkably, many women did accept these notions, as demonstrated by women who organized in opposition to women's suffrage movements on the "common sense" conviction (among others) that the moral purity of women would be compromised by their entrance into public life and that the entire social fabric would thereby be weakened.[39]

The theory of cultural hegemony is also useful in explaining the widespread consent given to prevailing systems of competitive democracy. Consider again the assumptions that this system rests upon: that human nature is essentially selfish and competitive; that different people develop conflicting interests; and that the best way to organize democratic governance is through a process of interest-group competition. These cultivated "common sense" assumptions have become part of the popular worldview—even though they do not serve the interests of most people. These assumptions are cultivated in civics classes and political science courses within our educational systems; they are cultivated in our mass media systems; and they are cultivated through institutionalized forms of competitive behavior that structure activity in our political, legal, and economic systems. All of these systems, however, are cultural constructs that embody the values, interests, and beliefs of the privileged political classes which constructed them.

This is not to suggest a conscious conspiracy on the part of those who benefit from the existing social order. This order often appears natural and inevitable to those who benefit from it because people tend to have an unconscious affinity for ideas that promote their own interests.[40] When these people also happen to be from educated and affluent social groups who control the means of cultural production

(i.e. education, media, and other social institutions), it is quite natural that they end up cultivating, within the wider population, beliefs for which they themselves have a natural and unconscious affinity. Indeed, members of these influential social groups may be acting out of the most sincere motives while contributing to this process of cultivation, because they may have come to believe that the existing social order benefits everyone in the same way it benefits themselves. The result, whether intentional or not, is a powerful form of cultural hegemony.

How then does a population transcend the constraints of its culturally-structured consciousness? Furthermore, how can this occur in a manner that does not result in further conflict—which would only reinforce the assumptions about human nature and social order that underlie and buttress the prevailing system of political competition? The metaphor of a game can be helpful to answer these questions. Cultural institutions—like our system of competitive democracy—can be understood as "games" that operate according to specific sets of "rules."[41] The rules of competitive democracy ensure not only that there will be winners and losers, but that the most powerful players are most likely to win. When less powerful players agree to join in this game they are consenting to play by rules that tend to promote their own defeat. Adversarial strategies of social change are consistent with these competitive rules. They simultaneously legitimize the old game while they ensure that the most powerful players continue to prevail within it.[42]

There is, however, another strategy. That strategy is to withdraw time and energy from the old game in order to construct a new one. The only thing perpetuating the old game is the fact that the majority of the people consent to the rules. If an alternative game becomes more attractive (i.e. it demonstrates increased social justice and environmental sustainability), then it will begin to draw increasing numbers of people to it (i.e. the majority of the people whose interests and values are not well served by the old game). If enough people stop playing by the old rules and start playing by new ones, the old game will come to an end not through protest and conflict, but through attrition.

This strategy is one of *construction*, *attraction*, and *attrition*. It is entirely nonadversarial and it reconciles the means of social change

with the ends of a peaceful, just, and sustainable social order. Social change does not require defeating oppressors or attacking those who profit most from the old rules. Rather, it requires that we recognize the hegemonic nature of the old game, withdraw our time and energy from it, and invest that time and energy in the construction of a new one.

Increasing numbers of people are beginning to intuitively recognize this. Nonpartisan electoral and decision-making models are beginning to emerge in many sectors, through constructive experiments with social change. Most of these experiments are still below the radar of many political observers because nongovernmental organizations, rather than states, have taken the lead in this regard. Yet these emerging models constitute important sociopolitical experiments.

Again, the example of the international Bahá'í community is instructive. Bahá'ís believe that partisan models of governance have become anachronistic and problematic in an age of increasing global interdependence. Yet Bahá'ís do not protest or attack existing partisan systems. On the contrary, Bahá'ís express loyalty and obedience to whatever governmental systems they live within and they may exercise their civic responsibilities to vote in those societies that afford the opportunity to do so. At the same time, Bahá'ís avoid active participation in partisan politics in order to focus their energy instead on the construction of an alternative system of governance which they offer as a model for others to study. Experiences such as these provide naturally occurring experiments that we would do well to monitor and learn from—if not participate in.

Conclusion

The prevailing system of competitive democracy is proving itself unjust and unsustainable in an age of increasing global interdependence. Yet this system is not repairable because its problems lie in its deepest internal assumptions. The corrupting influence of money, the exclusion of diverse perspectives, the inability to solve complex issues, the short-term planning horizons, the lack of cross-boundary coordination, the rise of incivility and mean-spiritedness, the aggravation of social divisions, the cultivation of public cynicism and disaffection,

and the generally corrosive effect on the human spirit—these are the culmination of this system, the sour fruit inherent in its seeds.

"How long will humanity persist in its waywardness?" asks Bahá'u'lláh. "How long will injustice continue? How long is chaos and confusion to reign amongst men? How long will discord agitate the face of society? . . . The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divideth and afflicteth the human race is daily increasing."[43]

Competitive democracy has now become a costly anachronism. How long will the populations who bear these costs continue to live in a state of denial? It is time to move on. History is just beginning.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[2] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[3] Refer, for instance, to Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002); Jeffry Frieden, *Global Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); John Cavanagh, *Alternatives to Economic Globalization* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002); Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2002); David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1995).

[4] This essay derives in part from the author's previously published book, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004). Permission has been granted, by the publisher, to extract and adapt sections of that book for the purpose of this essay.

[5] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2005), section CX.

[6] Refer, for example, to Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture* (New York: Random House, 1998).

[7] Norman Orstein, "Introduction," in *Lessons and Legacies: Farewell Addresses from the Senate* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), p. xi.

[8] Howell Heflin, "Farewell Address," in *Lessons and Legacies*, p. 79.

[9] Paul Simon, "Farewell Address," in *Lessons and Legacies*, p. 172.

[10] James Exon, "Farewell Address," in *Lessons and Legacies*, p. 57.

[11] Tannen, p. 96.

[12] Ibid., pp. 96–100.

[13] Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[14] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, section CXII.

[15] Refer to discussions of this theme in Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1976) and Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

[16] Vaughan Lyon, "Green Politics: Parties, Elections, and Environmental Policy," *Canadian Environmental Policy: Ecosystems, Politics, and Process*, ed. Robert Boardman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 129.

[17] David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 170.

[18] Sydney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign* (Boston: Beacon, 1980).

[19] Refer, for example, to Eleanor Clift and Tom Brazaitis, *War without Bloodshed: The Art of Politics* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

[20] Frank Ackerman, *The Political Economy of Inequality* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000); Isaac Shapiro and Robert Greenstein, *The Widening Income Gulf* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1999); Albert Fishlow and Karen Parker, *Growing Apart: The Causes and Consequences of Global Wage Inequality* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999); Stephen Haseler, *The Super Rich: The Unjust New World of Global Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

[21] Lester Brown, Christopher Flavin and Hilary French, eds., *State of the World 2000: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress toward a Sustainable Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000); David Suzuki and Holly Jewell Dressel, *From Naked Ape to Superspecies: Humanity and the Global Eco-Crisis* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2004); Lester Brown, Michael Renner, Linda Starke and Brain Halweil, eds., *Vital Signs 2000: The Environmental Trends That Are Shaping Our Future* (New York: Norton, 2000).

[22] For an overview of the problem of externalities, refer to James A. Caporaso and David P. Levine, *Theories of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 89–92.

[23] Refer, for instance, to proposals in Henk Folmer, ed., *Frontiers of Environmental Economics* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2001); Thomas Aronsson and Karl-Gustaf Löfgren, *Green Accounting and Green Taxes in the Global Economy* (Umeå: University of Umeå, 1997); and Robert Repetto, *Green Fees: How a Tax Shift Can Work for the Environment and the Economy* (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1992).

[24] Refer, for instance, to Michael Heiman, *Race, Waste and Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Joan Nordquist, *Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement: A Bibliography* (Santa Cruz, CA: Reference and Research Services, 1995); Jonathan Petrikin, *Environmental Justice* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1995); Robert Bullard, ed., *Confronting*

Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993).

25 Jean Blondel, *Political Parties: A Genuine Case for Discontent?* (London: Wildwood House, 1978), pp. 19–21.

26 Janice Moulton, "A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka, eds., (Boston, MA: Kluwer Boston, 1983); Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

27 Moulton, "Adversary Method"; Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*.

28 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

29 The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985), p. 7.

30 For a joint declaration of this consensus by an international assembly of social and behavioral scientists, refer to Seville "Statement on Violence, May 16, 1986," in *Medicine and War 3* (1987). Refer also to discussions in Signe Howell and Roy Willis, "Introduction," in *Societies at Peace: Anthropological Perspectives*, Signe Howell and Roy Willis, eds., (London: Routledge, 1989); Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *Origins: What New Discoveries Reveal About the Emergence of Our Species* (London: MacDonald & Jane's, 1977); Gary Becker, "Altruism, Egoism, and Genetic Fitness: Economics and Sociobiology," *Journal of Economic Literature* 14.3 (1976); Howard Margolis, *Selfishness, Altruism, and Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Stefano Zamagni, ed., *The Economics of Altruism* (Aldershot, England: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1995); Teresa Lunati, "On Altruism and Cooperation," in *Methodus 4*, (December 1992); Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Theodore Bergstrom and Oded Stark, "How Altruism Can Prevail in an Evolutionary Environment," in *American Economic Review, Papers, and Proceedings* 83.2 (1993); Steven Rose, R.C. Lewontin, and Leon Kamin, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1987); John Casti, "Cooperation: The Ghost in the Machinery of Evolution," in *Cooperation and Conflict in General Evolutionary Processes*, John Casti and Anders Karlqvist, eds., (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994); Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

31 Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 11 November 1947.

32 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1993).

33 Bahá'í World Centre, *The Bahá'í World* 1996–97 (Haifa: World Centre Publications, 1998).

[34] For further details regarding Bahá'í electoral principles and practices, refer to *Bahá'í Elections: A Compilation* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990).

[35] For details regarding Bahá'í consultative principles and practices, refer to *Consultation: A Compilation* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980).

[36] Refer, for instance, to discussions of these themes in the Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office, *Prosperity—an Oral Statement Presented to the Plenary of the United Nations World Summit for Social Development* (Copenhagen, Denmark: 1995); see also the BIC UNO, *Statement on Nature* (New York: 1988).

[37] United Nations Institute for Namibia, *Comparative Electoral Systems & Political Consequences: Options for Namibia*, Namibia Studies Series no. 14, N.K. Duggal, ed., (Lusaka, Zambia: United Nations, 1989), pp. 6–7.

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[39] Robert Cholmeley, *The Women's Anti-Suffrage Movement* (London: National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 1970); Jane Adams, "Better Citizens without the Ballot: American Anti-Suffrage Women and Their Rationale During the Progressive Era," in *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*, Marjorie Wheeler, ed., (Troutledge, OR: New-Sage Press, 1995).

[40] Refer, for instance, to the concept of *elective affinity* articulated in Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Girth and C. Wright Mills, trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 62–63 and 284–85. See also W. Clement, *The Canadian Corporate Elite: An Analysis of Economic Power* (Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), pp. 92 and 283–84.

[41] Refer, for example, to Ludwick Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. Anscombe, trans., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974); Raymond Cohen, *International Politics: The Rules of the Game* (London: Longman, 1981); J.S. Ganz, *Rules: A Systematic Study* (Paris: Mouton, 1971).

[42] For a more in-depth discussion of this problem, refer to Michael Karlberg, "The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest," in *Peace & Change*, 28 (2003), pp. 329–51.

[43] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, section CX.