In 15 years, the international community has been blamed for recurring too easily to the use of force in some countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo), and also it has been blamed for intervening too late or not at all in other crises (Rwanda, Bosnia and today Sudan). Even today, the crucial issue of international scenario is the legitimacy for the use of force. David Chandler, professor of International Relations at University of Westminster (UK) and Daniele Archibugi, director at National Research Council (Italy) and professor at Birkbeck College (University of London), discuss about the use of force, how the theory and practice of warfare and humanitarian intervention have evolved in the contemporary world and on the international responsibility of states in the last years.

Nieves Zúñiga: The idea that force can be used for self-defense has been traditionally accepted in international law. How has the concept been expanded in the last years?

David Chandler: I think the main way that it has been expanded is that it’s no longer seen as a universal right of self-defense. So for some powers, the self-selecting American led “coalitions of the willing” have argued that they have a right to self-defense that other countries don’t necessarily have. That brings the definitions of self-defense – who makes the decisions about self-defense and what it entails – into a new era. It is no longer something adjudicated by the UN, limited to an image of threat, but has been expanded much more broadly. Not merely in terms of the willingness to use force, but also in the idea that for some countries it’s legitimate to use self-defense, but not for others. You’d never get people arguing that India or Pakistan have the right to self-defense or pre-emptive strikes against potential threats. It’s very clear that this is a definition that stands outside any formal framework of international law. No-one is arguing for a broader extension of the right to self-defense.

Daniele Archibugi: The legitimacy of self-defense is one of the problems of international life, but it is not the only one. An equally important problem is the effectiveness of self-defense. Even if the United Nations Charter and international law guarantee the right to self-defense to almost everybody, the real problem is that some powers are able to defend themselves while others are not. For example, a weak political entity such as the Palestinian people might have the legal right to self-defense but this is not very useful since they lack the instruments to exercise this right. And therefore this should induce us to look forward. The international system should evolve from a situation in which the strong players have and can exercise their right to self-
defense to a system of collective security that will make self-defense useful for all players, including the weak ones. In turn, this requires that self-defense is guaranteed by international institutions and international organizations. This is going to be in the interests of the weakest rather than of the strongest.

D. Ch.: Who would give those weak states more rights? In a period where the framework of international relations is much more hierarchical than it was before, how would you possibly attempt to resurrect an order of rights and constitutionalism reminiscent of the UN Charter framework of the Cold War period?

D. A.: I think David is touching on one of the many points on which we disagree. Shall we understand the legal framework as something which is the interest of the stronger or something which is the interest of the weaker? Let’s assume that it was possible today to get rid of the UN and of the existing norms of international law. Would this be in the interest of the weaker or of the stronger? My opinion is that the weaker would have more to lose, because by going back to a state of nature the stronger would not have any legal constraints on their use of power.

D. Ch.: That’s true, but what Daniele is talking about is pure idealism. It’s not the case that during the Cold War period and the UN Charter that it was international law that prevented countries from undertaking self-defense or that maintained a period of so-called peace. It was much more the balance of power which meant that any interventions in countries or breaches of sovereignty risked a superpower conflict. It was that balance of power between America and the Soviet Union that helped protect the independence and the sovereignty of smaller countries. This suggests an understanding of the law independently of social relations and reality. To argue that international law on its own could solve the problems would merely be a legal cover for interventionism. As we’ve seen in the discussions about changing the international laws, it’s the major powers that are calling for reform, not the small countries. So I think there’s a real danger in this idealist framework.

D. A.: Sometimes it seems that once upon a time there was a golden period. This golden period was supposedly when two states had enough weapons to destroy each other and every form of life in the planet. I contest the view that during the Cold War developing countries were better off then they are now. On the contrary, they were used by the United States and the Soviet Union as weapons in a rival international strategy. There were often local wars fought with the weapons, the money and the dictatorial political leaders provided by one of the two superpowers. Local wars were more frequent then than now, and more people got killed then than now.

I am not saying that the situation has improved much now. The international situation is very gloomy today as it used to be in the past. And it is quite bad because there is a hegemonic power with too much power and there not other counter-balancing forces. But can we go back to a situation where there is a Leonid Brezhnev able to contrast the American hegemony? For me, this is not only undesirable, it is simply impossible. If this is the case, what we need to do is to develop some checks and balances that will be able to tame the abuses of American power.

N. Z.: Can preventive war be considered self-defense?

D. A.: Of course not. Preventive wars cannot be sold as defensive wars. They are and they have always been a form of aggression which is banned by international law and by international organizations. Since today the world is dominated by democratic states, it is crucial that these states incorporate within their internal constitution the existing norms of international conduct. The most important thing today in international
relations is to get a regime change in the US to get a government which repudiates entirely the legitimacy of preventive wars.

D. Ch.: It seems difficult to tame American hegemony through an ideal framework of law. In the UN Charter period we had a certain clarity about what international law and wars of aggression meant. Wars of aggression were defined as wars not supported by the UN Charter chapter 7. I think that your question about whether a preventive war is a war of self-defense or a war of aggression reveals the subjective nature of our judgment, because there is no clear framework of law. The problems with the clarity of international law on this subject started in the '90s when people argued that we needed preventive wars: wars of humanitarian intervention. Once the restrictions on preventive wars were brought into question, the floodgates were opened. The removal of a shared consensus about what the law was has created a framework where US hegemony can be promoted in a more direct and hierarchical way.

N. Z.: In spite of the overall architecture of the international system, there are recurrent international crises with massive human rights violations and genocides. Do the most powerful states have an obligation to intervene to prevent and stop these genocides?

D. A.: Genocides have continued to occur since the end of the Second World War, and it does not seem that the end of the Cold War has generated any significant change. Whenever there were some humanitarian crises, the reaction of the international community has been very weak both in terms of prevention and intervention. Certainly, people endangered, either in the former Yugoslavia or in Rwanda, have not been helped at all by the skeptical statements of those people defending the dogma of sovereignty and of non-intervention. Something more effective should be done: if there is a problem of humanitarian crises, an international society should be able to provide answers by creating appropriate accountable institutions. The alternative is to behave as the international society did in the Rwandan crisis in 1994, namely doing nothing, leading to the killing of about 800,000 people. I hope that we have learnt the lesson.

D. Ch.: I think that in Rwanda, as with Bosnia, the international community was closely involved from the beginning. People were aware that there was already international reform of the governing process that created instability. There was also a war going on: an invasion from Uganda that was supported by America and Britain. One of the reasons that there was an unwillingness to intervene was that the international community was already so involved. The understanding that the genocide came out of nowhere, is as ridiculous as the idea that the genocide in Bosnia came out of nowhere without international intervention, which ignores the whole international involvement in the break up of Yugoslavia, the recognition of the separation of the republics and the undermining of the rights of the federal state to defend its borders.

Unless we look at who we are asking to intervene, how the intervention is made accountable or isn't accountable, the discussion is purely an ideal one, a fantasy world, where the good guys come in on their white horses to save people who are either too stupid or too uncivilized to resolve their own problems. My point is that phrasing the discussion in these terms isn't really related to the real issues of international relations. It seems peculiar that in a world where there's a breakdown of traditional frameworks of international relations and an undermining of the rights of smaller states, everyone should be going around discovering the savagery or the lack of political legitimacy of smaller countries in other parts of the world. Rather than looking at the problems in our own countries, why is it that Western States, Western politicians, and critical liberal theorists need to feel good about themselves by criticizing governments in other parts of the world?
D. A.: Of course, any historical circumstance is preceded by a long chain of events. In this long series of events it is very likely that players have been driven by their interests, and certainly the Western world has a long past of brutalities. But it seems equally a caricature to present the world history as idyllic, with peoples loving each other until the “stupid white man” has started to be involved. Of course the white man is often as stupid as men of any other colour. Part of this stupidity is the periodic outbreaks of mass murders. When these occur, a humanitarian intervention should be performed by proper institutions. Surprisingly enough, Western democracies have a very bad record in carrying out humanitarian interventions so far. In his comprehensive review of the historical cases, Nicholas Wheeler indicates three successful cases of humanitarian intervention: India in East Pakistan in 1971, Tanzania in Uganda in 1979 and Vietnam in Cambodia in 1979. None of them was carried out by a Western democracy. This suggests that we can do better by creating multi-lateral institutions with the participation of Western democracies, but not dominated by them.

D. Ch.: I think you'll find that those three cases may have had positive outcomes from a humanitarian point of view, but they were also driven by a certain national interest. The idea that we should formalize an idea of a right or an obligation to intervene where there is no national interests and just assume that because states have the power to intervene, they have a right or duty to intervene in the affairs of other countries when they don’t have an interest in the outcome of stability or concern for that region’s future, leaves the whole project a hostage to fortune. Governments may appeal to popular opinion and say we’re doing something to save the poor uncivilized Rwandans or Bosnians or people in Darfur but we know that those policies are purely led by the image of themselves rather than any real interest. And I think there’s a problem in giving rights: we’ve already discussed the fact that there’s no universal right to intervene or that states have a right to intervene to stop the death penalty in America. This so-called right or obligation is a responsibility that major powers take on that is very dangerous, because it’s a narcissistic responsibility that cares nothing for the outcome. We can see the same thing when you look at all sorts of policies in relationship to Africa and to non-Western states when there’s all this talk of poverty reduction and ethical policies but it’s actually about creating the self-image of the generous West with a policy of values and forming a self-identity with a sense of purpose for the EU and the UN. Also, I think that the disassociation between the power of the policy maker and the people whose lives are affected on the ground is inevitably going to result in problems. The notion that only outsiders who intervene can solve the problems is crazy. In our domestic politics no-one says if only the government would intervene, it would solve the problems of child abuse, violence on the streets, or improve education. It’s only in the international sphere that you can have this fantasy of an external source of power magically resolving all the problems. If we were to think of it in a more political sense, we would realize that these governments aren’t even capable of dealing with problems in their own country. That might make us think twice before we give them new rights and mandates to intervene in other places around the world.

N. Z.: In that case, what is the role of development aid from developed states?

D. A.: From what David just said the straightforward policy conclusion is that the development aid should be cancelled. There’s no reason why Western states should give money to developing countries: it’s narcissistic. The danger of this approach is that it looks mainly at the motivations rather than impact. Any action due to self-interest or image is fine. I do not expect humans to be entirely altruistic agents. Even if they are not, the outcome might sometimes be positive, so development aid should not be cut,
but increased. The bulk of the budget spent by any government is for domestic purposes. A minority of the money, 0.1% in the US and 0.3% in the EU, goes to development aid. It’s clear that the rich part of the world doesn’t do much. It’s wrong to say that they are particularly concerned with what’s happening abroad, they are mainly concerned about what they should do at home. Should the tiny responsibility of the global sphere be improved or abandoned? We shouldn’t forget that in the 20th century, 75% of the people that died as a result of political violence, died because of internal political violence and 25% died because of international political conflicts. So I would say there’s still a problem with ways in which we can control the power of governments to defend their own subjects. This applies not only to the developing world but everywhere, for example to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union which were not underdeveloped countries when massive genocides took place.

D. Ch.: There’s an idea that there’s a perfect solution and all we have to do is get rid of politics and the people can make governments accountable, and do all the right things and solve all the problems because we know all the answers. The only problem is that the ‘we’ concerned doesn’t really exist. And there are a few political problems at the moment, in terms of even making our own governments accountable, let alone making them accountable for what they do within the international sphere. One problem is Daniele’s confusing narcissism and self-interest. International intervention today is very different from in the Cold War and rather than some imperialist carve-up for resources or invading Kosovo because of oil pipelines or wanting more regulation and intervention in Africa to exploit raw materials, I think there’s very little of that old-fashioned, coherent planning and design to regulate control and so it’s not really a matter of self-interest. If there was, there might be some semi-rational outcomes to it. These policies towards Africa and other international issues, like the environment, are much more narcissistic. They’re governments trying to evade the domestic sphere by arguing that the real problem is the environment.

With regard governments focusing on the domestic sphere, if you look at the press coverage, you’ll see it’s the opposite, that the international sphere, whether you look at America, Europe or anywhere else has dominated the press over the last decade or so. Even in Britain it’s clear that the only issue where Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have any credibility is over Africa. Tony Blair’s leading the Commission for Africa; Gordon Brown hasn’t got much of a reputation for the British economy and budget, but he’s over there lecturing the African governments about corruption. That doesn’t mean that a lot of money is spent in the international sphere and that’s what I mean about narcissism. It’s about rhetoric; it’s about counterposing us as a good government to other countries, whether it’s Eastern Europe, Asia or Africa, who have bad governments. There’s a constant rhetorical sphere of declarations condemning other countries and quite often an unwillingness to undertake to do anything because you can always blame America, or someone else. Aid isn’t really concerned with the economic problems of African states and the development of their economies and their industries. There’s simply no way that development aid could be a solution to these broader things.

D. A.: Are you suggesting to cut development aid?

D. Ch.: What I’m saying is that development aid hasn’t been shown to be effective. People say that aid doesn’t often lead to sustainable, coherent frameworks of development, and that serious economic policy making, if there was a real concern about African development would take an entirely different approach. Expecting international governments to rationally assist other countries is as ridiculous as to expect them to rationally develop their domestic policies. It’s very difficult for
governments to structure a clear political strategy because there’s a political crisis within the West. That’s why governments want to transfer their focus abroad.

If you look at the new relations between Western institutions and, particularly, African states, you find that the problem with aid and debt reduction is that it comes with strings attached about political governments, African sovereignty and independence. And the debt reduction is specifically managed through new frameworks of internationalizing the African states, where Western institutions tell African governments how to allocate their money and how to manage their governments. The problem isn’t giving money to African states at all: it’s the political conditionalitiy that comes with it. The main impact hasn’t been poverty reduction and the development of Africa and greater African independence. The impact has been a loss of Africa’s political autonomy. So despite the rhetoric of empowerment and capacity building etc., I would argue that the new mechanisms of regulation should be opposed. And that’s not a critique of giving aid in itself, it’s a critique of the new elitist, patronizing climate where the aid’s donors think that they can manage African economies and societies better than African people themselves.

N. Z.: It is clear that the international system is based on some relations of dependency unfair for several states. How could a fair international system be possible?

D.A.: The problem is that we are still in the infancy of an international society in which there are a few powers which have too much power, principally the US, and we must try to find some way to tame it. The good news is that part of the West has some form of accountable democratic government and the bad news is that the accountable and democratic government sometimes applies internally but does not apply at all at an international level. That is why if we want to have a fairer international society, we need to expand the checks and balances that have been successfully created in some countries at an international level. Sometimes this can work, for example when America’s Supreme Court decided that the Guantanamo Prison is illegal. And this is the way that international society can be constructed. If we took the arguments used by David and applied these arguments used one or two centuries ago in many countries, you would argue that democracy was impossible, narcissistic and a way of diverting attention away from other things. But even if theatrical and narcissistic, democracy has managed to tame power much more than other regimes. Now the same thing should be done at an international level.

D. Ch.: The point about world democracy and taming the US is that this is a highly elitist view of the management of international affairs. Even though like Western governments and international institutions, Daniele talks about democracy and its importance, you can see that underneath the excellent scheme that he outlines, the one thing that’s missing is the people: that in effect he’s arguing that European states should play a greater role in international society as a counterweight to America, as if the Europeans could be good imperialists and good interveners and spread democracy or spread nicer market relations than America. This is his view of taming America, of the European elite playing a much more forceful and interventionist and counterbalancing role.

N. Z.: What role should Europe play in this scenario?

D. Ch.: I think that this idea of the good Europeans versus the bad Americans is a particular European conceit. If we look at the policies that the EU pursues, for instance in the enlargements in Eastern Europe, you can see that the internationalization of those state structures, the imposition of 80,000 pages of European acquis in effect
undermines those countries’ sovereignty. The EU doesn’t promote democracy any more than America does. And I think that the argument that the EU is somehow preferring a nicer capitalism or is somehow more ethical and more moral, is believing the EU’s PR machine and taking press releases at face value. While it's true that the EU affects more than one state, it doesn’t mean that it’s a new post-national constellation as Habermas would argue or a post-modern actor that’s no longer pursuing any form of interests or power in the world, as Robert Cooper would argue. It’s very dangerous to talk about taming American power in this way because rather than looking at political problems and the American people’s capacity to tame American power, to challenge the policies of the government, the policies are immediately given over to other elites. In fact the more you look at so-called cosmopolitan democracy advocates, the less substantial democracy you see.

D. A.: A democratic society should be based on checks and balances and the more checks and balances the better they are. Sometimes checks and balances are from non-elected judges, sometimes from the people and of course the American people should do much more than what they have done so far in order to tame this power. The EU has done much better than the US at democratizing other countries. Let’s take the example of other Eastern European countries. What I like about the EU is that as soon as they accept a new member country: the Czech Republic, Poland, the Baltic Republics and so on, they immediately provide to this country’s equal rights in the European condominium. Soon these countries will be the president of the EU for six months, for example. They will have members in the European Parliament and all these sort of things. The US have never done anything like that. If we expand the argument, we should argue that after they have been invaded by the Americans (and many European countries) Iraq and Afghanistan should become the 51st and 52nd members of the US. And of course that isn’t going to happen. So I see a basic difference in the way which Americans patronize other countries, even today pushing them to be democratic, and the way the EU does it.

In other words, the Americans use a power that is much more direct, while the EU, precisely because it is a union of states, has the inclination to use sub-powers. Maybe it’s also associated to the fact that it has less military capability and is an organization with power divided among different national governments. In any international situation, the more important powers you get, the better it is. And if the EU could manage to be a powerful organization to counter-balance the US, that would be very helpful. Take the case of Iraq. The Americans have managed to divide Europe. Half the European countries decided to join the “coalition of the willing” and the other half decided not to. It’s good enough that in at least two countries, Spain and Italy, the national governments that decided to join the coalition of the willing, were overthrown by the voters as soon as possible. I would like to see a powerful, regional organization in Latin America and in the African union. And the basic idea of cosmopolitan democracy is that we are not advocating a structural power on other people, but we are advocating structural power with other people. In any proposal carried out by the cosmopolitan democracy approach we always assume that the new institutions should be made by different people working together. These institutions would reflect developing countries more than Western countries, for the simple reason that developing countries have more people.

D. Ch.: I don’t think it’s true that American power is always exercised more directly than Europe’s. It’s true that America is a major military power but it hasn’t really used that military force that often. The invasion of Kosovo was supported by practically all European states, and the war in Iraq was supported by some of them. Britain is just as happy to use military power as America is. Britain has gone to war at least as many times as America. Look at the French interventions and the role of Italy in the Balkans
and Eastern Europe. The argument that the EU is promoting democracy in the EU and is giving Europe a set of choices isn’t borne out by any empirical evidence. If you look at the agreements for joining the EU, you find that the Eastern European states may have a vote when they get into it but they can’t opt out of any of the clauses from the extended European acquis, so the entire negotiation process is already loaded against Eastern Europe. If you look at the Balkans, you’ll find that the EU special representative has the job of being the high representative – the administrator – of Bosnia. And the EU has been more than happy to allow the dictatorial power – the EU representative – to sacculate politicians and to impose laws by edict. In fact this makes the American occupation of Iraq look weak and insignificant.

The idea that America can be blamed for dividing the European countries and creating uncertainty about foreign policy handily ignores the problems of the credibility of European governments and the way that they will try to use the pro-war or the anti-war card as a way of claiming moral credibility. The process of being for or against the war was a fairly arbitrary one and you can’t just blame America for it.

D. A.: There are clear differences between the US and Europe. Of course the UK and France have been to war many times but the EU as such hasn’t waged any war because it doesn’t have the institutions to do that. The only occasion on which the EU gave authorization for the use of force in the Kosovo war was through NATO. The fact that there is no EU army means that the EU can use certain instruments, but not others.

D. Ch.: So should there be an EU army?

D. A.: No.

D. Ch.: Should there be a UN army?

D. A.: Yes, possibly.

D. Ch.: So why not an EU army?

D. A.: Because it’s not needed. The EU should use its soft power: soft power is much more effective than hard power.

D. Ch.: So why does the UN need an army?

D. A.: Because in some cases of humanitarian emergencies, you need to intervene with some forces. This army should be different from other ones: a police force rather than an army.

N. Z.: One of the main political consequences of the invasion of Iraq was to lower the political credibility of the UN. American neocons argue that the UN is dead because it failed to provide its support to the world hegemonic power. Now global activists argue that the UN is equally dead because it has not managed to stop the Iraqi invasion. Is there still a function for the UN in this century?

D. A.: The UN is in very bad shape because it has not yet managed to enforce its Charter. The Security Council did not approve the Iraq War, nor did it condemn it. This is for the simple reason that the US and UK are permanent members. So the situation is gloomy, and for this precisely reason the UN still has a vital role to play. This vital role will increase provided that more forces start actively working within the UN, that
some countries bring the public into the UN in a more direct way, and that it becomes more closely linked to the many global movements that have been active on global issues recently. All these actions are, of course, to counter-balance the attempts of the major powers to use the UN as an instrument of their foreign policy. Developing countries have so far been quite divided and they haven’t managed to stop as much as they should have. The European countries are also divided and some of them find an interest in using the UN in this form. Thus the status quo remains.

But in spite of all this, I don’t think the world be a better place without the UN. The UN is still a forum where everything can be discussed transparently. And the fact that Colin Powell had to go before the Security Council to present evidence for the alleged WMDs was a triumph for the UN. Once upon a time in international politics, Kruschev and Kennedy or Nixon and Brezhnev decided everything. And after a few months one country would go on the Western side; another country would go on the Soviet side. There were a lot of wars and people killed and there was no transparency or accountability. The people in the US and Europe didn’t know what to do and couldn’t even oppose what the governments were deciding because everything was secret.

Now, at least, there is a bit more transparency. The more we manage to use and improve the UN machinery for international politics, the better things will be.

D. Ch.: In the past the UN was a political organization. It was concerned with political consensus. It didn’t really do anything unless it had the wherewithal to act on it, which is why all the exciting stuff happened in the smoke-filled rooms where the diplomats got together and did their deals, and on the UN conference floor we had fairly bland agreements. Today we seem to have the opposite situation: everything happens out on the conference floor. It’s very peculiar for a political organization that’s meant to be engaged in having a genuine framework of consensus-building. That seems to have disappeared from the UN. If anything, the UN acts like an NGO, making great moral statements, or as a platform for other people to make moral declarations about poverty, AIDS, women’s rights and the environment – declarations that have got very little to do with reality or actually putting the resources or political will behind them. The UN plays a vital role as a whipping boy who can be blamed when these grand declarations eventually come to nothing. The façade of the UN that gives some political legitimacy to a process that no longer involves any genuine framework of negotiation, that no longer involves policy-making that’s at all accountable, is a very dangerous one. The UN’s role in legitimizing this pseudo-politics, where you can just make declarations and everyone thinks it’s fine, and maybe in ten years’ time we look at whether anything actually happened and who’s to blame, is problematic because now, if ever, we need to have some framework of political accountability. At least in the past there was a political process, and the UN was a political and legal framework where sovereign states took responsibility for their actions. Today there’s a real danger of rhetoric being distanced from the real world.

N. Z.: What actions can be taken in order to increase the powers and functions of the UN?

D. Ch.: The UN doesn’t have power as an independent organization: it’s an association of states. It’s a bit like increasing the power of the EU. If the EU member states don’t have a consensus of agreement on policies, the EU won’t have a lot of power in that particular area. Maybe what we’re asking is ‘How can we have a clear and stable international order?’ I think the problem in attaining one is that international politics is increasingly about rhetorical statements. Governments and international institutions aren’t being sufficiently held to account. So the only way we can begin to rein in the fantasy realm of the international is by holding domestic governments to account and
unfortunately there are no easy solutions to reviving the process of getting people re-involved in politics. There are no easy shortcuts.

D. A.: I’ve got very clear views on what can be done to make the UN stronger. Firstly, we can get at least one UN ambassador to be directly elected by the people of each country. A UN ambassador will not just be an ambassador, but accountable to some people. Also, the people will know what the UN is doing because advertising campaigns will present evidence on UN actions and that will possibly make them want to interact more with what’s going on in New York. Secondly, many people, including myself, suggest creating a UN people’s assembly and the peace movement in Italy has already done some general tests. In several occasions, the Perugia’s Assembly of the Peoples of the United Nations invited representatives of citizens that are not necessarily associated to their governments. This gives an idea of what could look like a World Parliament: it could be made by a few hundred representatives, with a majority of the deputies would come from developing countries. Even if such a new Parliament would not have many powers, it will indicate that democracy is not a Western monopoly.

One of the problems of the Reagan and Bush Jr. administrations is that they assumed that since they were elected, any foreign policy decision they took was legitimate. I think that increasing democracy in international organisations would be a very good way in which you could destroy the rhetorical tool so often used by American and the European politicians. A global parliament will show that there is another and wider democratic consensus.

D. Ch.: I’m surprised that an advocate of democracy should understand democracy in such empty and formal terms. The problems of democracy, accountability and the international arena are not going to be resolved by holding more and different elections. What we need are political ideas and political alternatives. Just trying to rearrange the game differently and have the UN ambassador come to schools or getting people to vote in an election can’t change the balance of power or the balance of social relations in the world or even people’s views about what’s possible and what the sensible alternatives are. I think it’s a very peculiar and dangerous idea because you would only end up giving more legitimacy to an institution that doesn’t deserve to have independent legitimacy because it would still be an institution dependant on political consensus between its member states. And even worse, since an independently elected representative to the UN may not even be a member of the same political party as the government, this would just lead to the UN being even more of a rhetorical, non-policy-making forum. The idea that we can only solve the problems of politics by adding different elections is a purely bureaucratic response.

D. A.: All the arguments that David has provided against a UN people’s assembly of elected ambassadors to the UN, can be applied in any country. And in the same argument you should probably say that the Prime Minister in Britain should not be elected and that the parliament in this country is useless. The arguments are precisely the same. A clear causal relationship between formal institution and substantial institution doesn’t exist: the two things progress hand in hand. They did, in an imperfect way, within countries because we managed to get elected governments and parliaments. If you read the old realist arguments against democratic governments and parliaments, you see that are the same of those used today by David. In spite of these scepticism, democracy managed to progress in some countries. By pushing forward with incremental innovations at a world level, we would plant some seeds that, in time, may bring us closer to global democracy.
D. Ch.: How would you possibly get closer to global democracy? If you took your scheme seriously, you would be saying that state sovereignty wouldn’t be relevant, and that would be creating a superpower that could override the rights of states. This can only give more rights to power: it can only reinforce the status quo. The international system is composed of states. Because we don’t live in a fantasy world where we all share the same interests, where politics doesn’t exist, those ideas are very dangerous.

D. A.: Structures of power do not destroy each other. In Italy, we managed to have city governments in medieval times. As Robert Putnam showed in his book in 1993, city governments were quite effective five or six centuries ago. Local government is still quite effective now in spite of the existence of national government. The national government has not managed to destroy the good governments of cities like Siena, Florence and so on. Likewise, adding another form of government doesn't in any way imply that you reduce the existing forms of government. On the contrary, you make them stronger because you provide a way in which issues which are beyond their competences can be addressed.

N. Z.: Before finishing, I would like to ask you something related to the US. This country is known to have violated international law and it has paid a very small price. What instruments would be effective to impose international laws and regulations on the US?

D. Ch.: Unfortunately, there’s no law without power and unless we have a world government able to impose its law on the US, it seems unlikely that we could formally hold America to account, or even to talk, about the violation of international law. International law cannot really exist in a hierarchical, unipolar world. One lawyer can say something is self-defense and legal while another will say the opposite because international law has always depended on and reflected power relations in society. So the real danger in attempting to construct institutions or new laws or norms to contain the US is that power relations will probably win out. It will mean that you'll end up legitimizing the status quo. Rather than discussing formal, empty, legal frameworks or a voting system that could constrain America, we should think about this as a political problem – about what political arguments we need to mobilise people to support alternative ideas.

D. A.: The way we can counteract American hegemony doesn’t require one solution only: we must look at various things. It would be good to link American society with world society. Global movements do a good job creating associations; we also need to look at ways of institutionalising these linkages. A world people’s assembly might be one because the American people would also be represented in it and they would have to explain their views to their colleagues from other parts of the world. Also, the judicial power has a role. For example, if the rulings of the International Court of Justice were compulsory, quite clearly there would be a verdict against acts of invasion.

D. Ch.: And who would impose it?

D. A.: Nobody.

D. Ch.: How would it be compulsory?

D. A.: I am suggesting compulsory jurisdiction without enforcing power. In international politics we agree that we don’t want a world government more powerful than any individual state. But still, we should create a framework of legitimacy because legitimacy is a part of power. For a start, the US president should explain to the American public why, for example, the country gets a verdict condemning the invasion
of Iraq. It would be just a piece of paper, but it's better than nothing and it may induce the US public opinion to think twice about the choices of their leadership.