The world today is falling under the influence of a new form of governmental power that has contradictory effects – both positive and negative – on governments and societies everywhere. This new polity can be called cosmocracy. Over time it has developed a certain coherence and uniqueness that now give it its identity. Understood as an emerging system of political power, cosmocracy is without precedent. It demands bold new political thinking, if only because it defies all previous textbook treatments of government.

Cosmocracy has four basic features.

Cosmocracy is global

Cosmocracy is the first-ever world polity. It is a system of worldwide webs of interdependence – of actions and reactions at a distance. Cosmocracy is a complex mélange of linked networks of legal, governmental, law enforcement and military interdependence worldwide. The fashionable talk in international relations and elsewhere of global governance, ‘spillover effects’, interdependence and the internationalisation of states is symptomatic of this trend. This is evident not only in the globalisation of military power and weapons procurement but in matters as diverse as trade policy, the harmonisation of immigration and extradition laws, and laws covering environmental protection and the internet.

Naturally, as a new type of polity, cosmocracy is dependent on modern communications technologies. These have the positive effect of nurturing its operations by almost eliminating barriers of time and space. The upshot is that governmental institutions of various shapes and sizes – local governments and courts, territorial states, regions and international bodies like the United Nations – find themselves, despite their many differences, increasingly caught up in thickening, fast-evolving webs of links, both bilateral and multilateral.

It follows too that those who wield power within the structures of the cosmocracy know that a single event, transaction or decision somewhere within the system – the accession of China to the WTO and the attacks on Washington and New York – can set off a string of consequences elsewhere in the system. Their decisions are potentially or actually unrestricted.
in scope and effect. What they say and do impinges upon the lives of others globally.

**An agglomeration of three zones of government**

The inner core of this agglomeration includes the political, legal and military structures governing the peoples of North America, Japan, South Korea, the Council of Europe countries, and Australasia. Here the webs of governmental interdependence, most of them constitutionally democratic, are longest and thickest; the density of efficient telecommunications is heaviest; and land and sea barriers to the movement of people, goods and information are consequently minimal.

This inner core is embedded within, and dependent upon, several outer zones of political power. One of them encompasses the populous, large-scale, quasi-imperial territorial states, like China, India, Indonesia and the Russian Federation. Except for India, these are not constitutional democracies. Their governing structures, although jealous guardians of their own territorial ‘sovereignty’, are nevertheless closely interlinked, both with each other and with the rest of the cosmocracy, so that for instance Russia has its most developed arms supplier-buyer relationships with India and China.

Then there is a third zone within the cosmocracy: the territorially-bound governments, some of them (like Brazil) potentially powerful actors on the global stage, but most of them – Nigeria, the Philippines, Thailand – less powerful. Although some of these governments are beginning to cluster, in the form of regional bodies like ASEAN and CARICOM and through recent agreements like the Free Trade of the Americas, the webs of governmental interdependence within this outer zone are thinnest and most frayed.

A few of these governments, like Zimbabwe and Pakistan, are failing states that totter on the extreme outer margins of the cosmocracy, where governing institutions give way to no-go areas. These outer fringes include whole areas, like parts of the Muslim world, where there is a high density of self-preoccupied, failing or failed states.

Finally, there is the nether world beyond cosmocracy. It includes regimes, Burma and Laos for instance, that are hyper-jealous of their territorial integrity, and whose authorities – despite some important connections with the rest of the world, in matters of drugs and guns – are openly hostile to cosmocracy. This outer zone also includes the world’s grim landscapes of war like Chechenya, Sierra Leone, southern Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where non-violent structures of government barely exist.

**Cosmocracy is dynamic**

Cosmocracy is a polity of many sides in motion – which is why it cannot be said to have acquired its final shape. It has no single, determining principle, and for that reason it defies comparison with the standard textbook treatments of different regime types that have associated aristocracy with virtue, oligarchy with wealth, tyranny with lawlessness, despotism with fear. Because of its hybrid nature, cosmocracy is a polity with ‘recombinant’ structures, which are themselves products of a constantly changing, permanently unfolding hybridisation of existing processes and decisions. This means that cosmocracy is a polity on the move. It is a moving target that produces unexpected outcomes.

**Cosmocracy is unstable**

Cosmocracy is an unstable form of government riddled with contradictions. These faultlines produce shock-effects on the whole system. Cosmocracy does not bring peace and good government to the world. It is mainly a destabiliser of all states and regions in the world, whether democratic or not. To see why this is so a few samples of these contradictions of cosmocracy need to be sketched.
Political entropy

Confusion and ineffectiveness in government come from entropy – the condition of inertness and self-degradation that results from formlessness – and cosmocracy displays definite signs of entropy. It suffers from the under-concentration of certain powers. It is true that we inhabit a world shaped by over a century of global institution-building. Arrangements like Universal Standard Time, the International Court of Justice, and United Nations treaties, from the Declaration of Human Rights to the Law of the Sea, are now more or less taken for granted. Yet under-concentration of global powers remains a basic problem for democracies everywhere. The lack of driving seats and steering mechanisms, and the ineffectiveness of many that currently do exist, are among cosmocracy’s striking weakpoints.

Cosmocracy has spawned no investment treaty and has no institution that could impose restrictions on the destructive flows of hot money. It has no properly functioning parliament through which representative demands from global civil society could be peacefully channeled. There exists no executive power, for instance an elected, fixed-term and impeachable president of the world. There are no political parties that campaign globally, on a regular basis, in search of support for certain policies. There is no global army that could act decisively to bring order within and across the territorial boundaries of states and whole regions. And there is no global criminal justice or policing system.

Where global steering mechanisms do exist, the system of cosmocracy is often paralysed by other forces internal to the system. Entropy is reinforced by funding shortages, understaffing, and low reputation. A case in point is the main global agency for monitoring and preventing world-wide money laundering, the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Set up by the Group of Seven governments in 1989, mainly to counter money laundering by global drug cartels, it currently operates with a staff of five and a budget (for 2001) of only FFr 5.8 million (US$ 810,000). That is laughable, considering its strategic importance for the whole system of cosmocracy, and despite its formal backing by the European Commission, the Gulf Co-operation Council, and 29 states.

Political entropy is compounded by bureaucratic sclerosis and inertia caused by demarcation disputes and the opacity of the tangled structures of decision making. Some of the worst examples are found within and around the United Nations. Consider the difficult business of setting up the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the launch of which was delayed for 15 months because of wrangling within the United Nations Security Council.

Unaccountability

Quite a few of the institutions that comprise the system of cosmocracy are publicly unaccountable. Cosmocracy is not quite a species of absolutism, since its core zone (plus India in the second zone) contains rich networks of democratic procedures designed to expose and oppose hubris. But cosmocracy is full of rotten boroughs, whose political processes are opaque. The ingredients of representative democracy are in short supply, or entirely absent: time-limited power granted on the basis of open electoral competitions and the obligation of power-wielders to solicit different opinions, explain and justify their actions and resign in cases of gross mismanagement or misconduct.

Whether in Beijing or Berlin, Dohar or Washington, those who wield power feed
upon various alibis for concealing their motives and actions. They say that it is foolhardy to reveal one’s hand to one’s opponents and enemies. This could be called the Rumsfeld Rule: ‘In difficult situations, governments do not discuss pressing matters’. Power-holders within the cosmocracy also repeat some version of Plato’s Rule that affairs of government are too complex and difficult to explain to the public.

These familiar alibis of unaccountable power are regularly supplemented by others. One of them is related to the problem of complexity: the fragmentation of political authority, combined with a technocratic mindset among officials and a lack of public-friendly, well-trained administrative staff, ensures that many parts of the cosmocracy are closed off from either mutual or public scrutiny of any kind. Matters are worsened by what can be called the hubris of distance: despite the noblest public-spirited motives, decision makers find it difficult or outright impossible to grasp the ways in which decisions at one point within the system of cosmocracy have long-distance effects.

Sometimes these various alibis converge, as when the institutions of cosmocracy—the in camera tribunals set up under NAFTA, the ‘green room’ system operated by the WTO—deliberately shield themselves from public scrutiny because their aim is openly to favour a corporate power group within global civil society. Using such techniques as secrecy, spin, and legal coercion, these authoritarian arrangements give a bad name to global governance. They threaten the authority of democratically-elected governments. The power of property feels unchecked. A sense spreads that governments are powerless in the face of mysterious forces operating ‘out there’ and the world feels less and less democratic, as if in the grip of buccaneering forces who take no notice of anybody except themselves.

Destabilised by a dominant power
The body politic of cosmocracy contains a destabilising anti-body: a dominant power, the United States. Like all previous modern dominant powers—from Habsburg Spain to the Pax Britannica of the 19th century—this one seeks mastery of the whole system. There are even times when its leaders catch a glimpse of themselves as the world’s first unchallenged global imperial power, as a sequel and effective replacement of the old system of 19th- and 20th-century imperial powers that once ruled the world, and have now collapsed. The United States tends to behave arrogantly and undemocratically despite historical evidence that all previous dominant powers produce geopolitical instability, and despite the fact that the world has become too large and complicated to be governed by a single power.

The dominant power nevertheless behaves bullishly because its political elites feel themselves compelled to secure its flanks and protect its privileges. Their perception is accurate. Considered as a political sub-system of cosmocracy, the dominant power is the heartland of the turbo-capitalist economy, the driving force of the global telecommunications and entertainment industries, and the homeland of the mightiest army in the world. The Gulf War of 1991, the Bosnian pacification of 1995, the overthrow and arrest of Milosevic after the war in Kosovo all showed that decisive military action at the global level depended on the US. So too has the war against the government of Afghanistan, which collapsed quickly under the impact of the most advanced military technology known to humanity.

The dominant power can and does throw its weight around. Its leaders know that money, information, blood and iron count in world affairs. They are tempted, like every previous dominant power of the modern era, to act as a vigilante power, to see their power as the ability to measure their strength against
all of their rivals combined. It does so partly through straightforward designs of aggrandisement and partly by appealing – here the emphasis is quite different – for the global observance of governing structures that promote democratic solidarity and unity.

The United States differs from all previous dominant powers in two fundamental ways. Not only is it the first such power to find itself in a position to lay claim to world hegemony. It is also unusual because it is a dominant power equipped with a revolutionary worldview: republican democracy based on the original Philadelphia model. In this sense, America differs from 19th-century Britain, which, even at the height of its power, acted pragmatically. It sensed the folly of risking everything, including its fleet, to conquer the world. Where it perceived that it could not intervene successfully, in continental Europe or South America, it refrained from doing so. The US does not act in this way. Like revolutionary France and Soviet Russia before it, it is a territorial power dedicated to transforming the whole world in its favour, even if this requires using the very methods that its democratic ideology abhors: violence, manipulation and ‘bossism’.

Whether the US will succumb to the temptation of aggrandisement, or whether it will instead play the role of catalyst of a more dynamic, publicly accountable and egalitarian form of cosmocracy, is among the great, if highly dangerous political questions of our time.

**How to reform cosmocracy**

Whatever transpires, the search for something like accountable government and the rule of law on a global scale must and will continue, to overcome the weaknesses of the present system of cosmocracy.

The immediate trouble is that there is no consensus about what form this agenda might take. This is partly because of the inordinate strength of those forces that champion legally-regulated, free market turbocapitalism über alles. It is also partly because some activists within the emerging global civil society slam ‘globalisation’ in the name of stronger and more nationalist territorial states, or through vague and unhelpful notions of ‘deglobalisation’ and the ‘deconcentration and decentralisation of institutional power’ through ‘the re-empowerment of the local and the national’. Matters are not helped by far-fetched thinking that foolishly turns its back on the actually existing system of cosmocracy, in order to predict the arrival of ‘world government’.

Meanwhile, political thinkers are divided about what should or can be done. Some defend the principle of a transnational democratic legal order, a community of all democratic communities, of the kind implied in Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: ‘Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realised.’ Others anticipate a second-best scenario: a complex international system of nominally sovereign, democratic states that are the voting members in a variety of international fora. Still others foresee a possible compromise between these two options: a ‘cosmopolitan democracy’ in which citizens gain a ‘two-tiered’ voice, within their own states and in sites of power among their states.

None of these options seem realistic, if only because the political system of cosmocracy is
far ‘messier’ and more self-contradictory than most people yet realise. It defies the simplifications and confusions of prevailing theories of ‘globalisation’ that think in the old-fashioned terms of (potentially) ‘sovereign’ territorial states or ‘multi-level governance’. That is why brand new democratic thinking and policies are required. Giving it a name is a start: as Hannah Arendt once observed, giving a dog a name greatly increases its chances of staying alive. But naming is only a first of many difficult steps. It should not be supposed that long-lasting remedies for the weaknesses of cosmocracy can be found within contemporary political acceptability.

**System or anarchy?**

In discussions of the system of global governance – or cosmocracy – the word ‘system’ commonly comes in for a battering. It is often greeted with puzzlement, or outright derision, mainly because the tangled mess of governmental and para-governmental institutions that have global effects seem to defy description, let alone political judgement. This so-called ‘system’ seems to be one of anarchy: it seems that no institution or body regularly occupies the seats of power. It is as if there are no rules or regulations and nobody is in charge, which induces a feeling of despair.

This despair comes in two forms and is an enemy of hopes for a more democratic world order. Some people feel they know who really rules the world: it is the rich and powerful, or the big multinational corporations, or the United States. And that’s that and nothing can be done about it. Others do not know who rules the world and do not much care. Both groups agree that there is no point in wasting words on the subject, because whatever is said or done about it the governing forces always get their way.

The compulsion, complexity and contradictory nature of the system of cosmocracy arguably reinforces this feeling of fatalism which distorts visions and paralyses action. Fatalism is a principal curse of the political project of renewing democracy in the world, for instance by overcoming the contradictions that currently bedevil the system of cosmocracy. Fatalism produces inattention towards the framework of governance within which contemporary democracies function. Fatalism is the silent enemy of political thinking about how to secure a future for democracy.

Among the principal reasons why the last major growth spurt of ‘globalisation’ failed was because no effective or efficient or legitimate structures of global government were put in place. By the 1930s, people and institutions were fed up, overwhelmed by the intense contradictory pressures of a globalised world. Governing institutions were overburdened by economic crises and long-standing political resentments. Luckily, the lethal ingredients of a 1930s-style revolt against globalisation and democratic institutions are today missing. There are no Soviet Unions or Third Reichs on the horizon. The thought that the now-defunct Taliban regime or the Burmese junta or Chinese-style capitalism in post-totalitarian form could serve as universal counter-models to strengthened democratic institutions and cosmocracy in more democratic form is laughable.

What is required is a strong dose of clear thinking about the web of governing institutions that presently cover the earth. This is what the analysis of cosmocracy seeks to do. Whether and to what extent it can succeed is for other citizens and political figures of the world to decide.