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Global Civil Society: Royal Road or Slippery Path?

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Abstract Global civil society has become an important paradigm for progressive social change at a planetary level. It posits a bold new ethical project for global democratization. For its critics, though, it is just the social wing of neoliberal globalization diverting social movements from their tasks. It is also seen as irredeemably Eurocentric in its assumptions and orientation. A third option, proposed here, is to understand global civil society as a complex social and spatial terrain. By bringing politics back in, a progressive option can be presented to contest the dominant co-optive or reformist conception of global civil society.

Keywords Global civil society · International NGOs · Globalization · Social movements · Democratization · Gramsci

Introduction

> Global civil society manifests a previously unknown human capacity to self-organise on a planetary-scale with an unprecedented inclusiveness, respect for diversity, shared leadership, individual initiative, and a deep sense of responsibility for the whole. (Korten, Perlas, & Shiva, 2002, p. 26)

> "Global governance" is an extension of neoliberal ordering… "Upstreaming" and "mainstreaming," creating NGOs as they go, gathering local leaders, stakeholders and users, assembling stores of best practice and global benchmarks… Civic cosmopolitanism, then, is not just a discourse, but the official identity of the global neoliberal regulation of daily life. (Drainville, 2004, p. 154).

In a nutshell then, is global civil society (GCS) the royal road to democratization, market regulation, and "the good life" in short, or is it rather a slippery path for social movements that are being bamboozled by neoliberal globalization into a controlled environment where even

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critical voices serve the overall purpose of stabilizing the existing order? While of course we do not need to choose between these stark alternatives, considering them dialectically may well provide us with pointers on where the concept and practice of global civil society is going.

Royal road

While international NGOs had been in existence for a long time, as Falk and Strauss put it, "the early 1990's, however, was the time when civic transnationalism really came of age" (Falk & Strauss, 2003, p. 211). There was an exponential growth in the number of international NGOs and major international conferences followed in quick succession: Rio 1992 (environment), Vienna 1993 (human rights), Cairo 1994 (population), and Beijing 1995 (women). The presence of civil society—albeit mediated by its NGO "representatives"—was being felt in the global decision-making arena. What started off as a series of meetings parallel to the official inter-governmental meetings eventually acquired a dynamic of its own from the mid-1990s onwards. For their part many of the powerful states (not least the United States) became wary of these new civil society interlocutors and on key issues such as "global warming" began to take their own decisions based on narrow state self-interests. Perhaps one of the most enduring impacts of this period was the move towards setting up an International Tribunal for Human Rights which despite some pertinent reservations (Zolo, 2000) represents a major advance for a transnational conception of justice.

The academic study of what became known as "global civil society" took a leap forward with the emergence of the *Global Civil Society Yearbook* from the London School of Economics (LSE) at the turn of the century (www.lse.ac.uk/depts/global/1news1.htm). The editors of this influential yearbook began with what they called a purely descriptive definition of GSC as "the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organisations, networks, and individuals located *between* the family, the state and the market and operating *beyond* the confines of national, politics and economics" (Anheier, Glasius, & Kaldor, 2001, p. 171). This follows, more or less, in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci in locating a non-state and non-economic arena of social interaction vital to society and its reproduction. The fact that we do not as yet have a "global state" that GSC can interact with had been seen as a major conceptual hurdle for authors such as Shaw (2000). The LSE project was quite rightly not unduly concerned about this given the clear *tendency* for globalization to create increasingly internationalized economic, social, cultural but also political interactions, relationships, and conflicts.

The *Global Civil Society Yearbook* editors also argue that "while we recognise the global civil society is ultimately a normative concept, we believe that the normative content is too contested to be able to form the basis for an operationalization of the concept" (Anheier, Glasius, & Kaldor, 2001, p. 17). While efforts were made in later editions of the yearbook to capture religious and nationalist expressions of global civil society the emphasis in general is on the "civil" rather than the "uncivil" elements of civil society. Clearly there is a political choice being made even in terms of which data to capture. As a fairly self-referential intellectual/political policy-oriented network, the LSE *Yearbook* is set firmly in the Western liberal tradition. As a recent edition of the *Yearbook* admits they "do tend to give precedence to the 'nice guys,' the new global activists, even though we try to include extremist movements, representatives of political establishments and other kinds of civic institutions as well" (Kaldor, Anheier, & Glasius, 2005, p. 3). The problem is that who is an

extremist or a fundamentalist is often in the eye of the beholder. More broadly we can safely say that the creation of global civil society from this perspective meshes nicely with the onward march of history for capitalist modernization in a fairly self-congratulatory Western modality.

Global civil society in contemporary foundational texts such as those of Kaldor (2003) and Keane (2004) is based on universal moral norms and values. This normative vision owes much to the work of Jürgen Habermas, in particular the importance of communicative dialogue to fulfil the promise of the European Enlightenment. Thus GSC is an ideal or virtual space, quite distinct from the actually existing civil societies around the world. This normative space is characterized by non-instrumental dialogue and ethical principles. It eschews all that smacks of self-interest and, of course, the merest hint that force might play a role in progressive social change and democratization. Reflecting its origins in Eastern European oppositional discourse pre-1989, this view of GSC is deeply imbued with the notion of "anti-politics," the rejection of all state-oriented or party or mass politics in favour of an ethical, moral, and individualistic conception of good politics.

The LSE (now LSE/UCLA) project is of course not the only one seeking to achieve an adequate mapping of GSC. The Centre for Civil Society Studies at The Johns Hopkins University has through its comparative nonprofit sector project made a major effort "to document the scope, structure, financing and role of the non profit sector for the first time in various parts of the world" (Salamon, Wojciech Sokolowski, & List, 2003, p. 1). Taking a refreshingly broad conception of the civil society sector—including religious and sporting bodies for example—this study is also very conscious of the distinctive civil society development paths in developing and transitional societies. From a rather different political context we also have to mention the Centre for Civil Society in Durban, South Africa that in its recent research report (Centre for Civil Society, 2005), focuses on "problematizing resistance" and is much closer to the World Social Forum movement from Porto Alegre 2001 onwards. The South African project sees itself as more "autonomist" than other GSC projects with an explicit emphasis on the contemporary social movements that form a part of GSC, but are not, however, the main interest of the more mainstream GSC organic intellectuals and organizations.

Over and beyond the different conceptions of GSC—and these are really quite considerable—we find a very ambitious set of objectives for this new political entity or project. Thus in the wake of the Battle for Seattle in 1999—widely seen as the coming out party for the anti-globalization movement—Nicanor Perlas declared that: "It was global civil society as the third force that actually determined the outcome of the WTO talks in Seattle. We now live in a tripolar world of large businesses, powerful governments and global civil society" (Perlas, 2000, p. 1). It is doubtful that such an analysis actually captures the complexity of WTO/national government/social movement interactions, but for a time this seemed a plausible global reformist project. The international economic institutions were soon busy co-opting or even creating civil society interlocutors to improve their communications and legitimacy as managers of the new global capitalism. The United Nations organized a Millennium NGO Forum in 2000 that brought together some 1,500 NGO representatives who agreed to set up a Civil Society Forum. This forum would be the site for global civil society participation in global decision-making and many GSC activists saw is "as the first step toward the establishment of a [global] popular assembly" (Falk & Strauss, 2003, p. 212). Maybe globalization could be "civilized" by this emerging coalition of social movements, civil society organizations, and NGOs.

Slippery path

If NGOs are to be a prime component of this emerging global civil society then how we envisage their role is a key determinant of how we view GSC. Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s was a region where the NGOs played an important role in the democratization processes then unfolding. The human rights discourse proved particularly effective at generating a broad coalition of local and global social actors against the abuses of the military regimes. Yet by the 1990s, as globalization was consolidated along with the return to democracy in most countries, the role of the NGOs began to seem more ambiguous. Thus Petras and Veltmeyer wrote bitterly of how "the NGOs in this historic conjuncture were contracted by international organisations—and the governments engaged in the inter-national development project—to spread the gospel of the free market and democracy" (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2005, p. 11). The NGO as vanguard of neo-imperialism seemed unlikely but clearly their complexion was not simply progressive bulwark against the authoritarian state. Whereas in one historical conjuncture the NGOs could act as agents of progressive historical change, in another they were to become social "transmission belts" for the new imperial project of global neoliberalism in which political development was promoted through an impoverished version of democracy.

The romance around the concept of civil society in Latin American and then in the Eastern/Central European transitions to democracy had been intense but now seemed to be cooling. By the time the discourse was mainstreamed in the 1990s the historical context was different and the politics were more ambiguous. As Biekart puts it, in a dense study of NGOs in Central America, "the (re) discovery of civil society by political pluralists, modernisation theorists and others contributed to convert 'civil society' into a political slogan for a wide variety of purposes" (Biekart, 1999, p. 31). The concept was becoming more fluid, contradictory, and promiscuous to put it that way. It had entered fully into the World Bank's development strategy that emphasized "governance" and preached the virtues of "empowerment" and "bottom up" development. Whether NGOs have actually become agents of imperialism as Petras and Veltmeyer argue is a moot point. What is clear is that there has been in the 1990s a very marked "NGOization" of once autonomous social movements. The price of professionalization and of even just "being heard" has meant that many civil society organizations have ceased being agents of progressive social change and rather, can be seen to serve as the "human face" of neoliberal globalization.

The second critical strand to consider hinges around the argument made by Craig Calhoun that "the cosmopolitan ideas of global civil society can sound uncomfortably like those of the civilizing mission behind colonialism" (Calhoun, 2003, p. 92). While in its etymological sense, democracy, never mind "empowerment," cannot be imposed from the outside, in practice that is how these concepts and perhaps GSC are perceived in the majority world. A human rights discourse that can even seek to invent a new category of "humanitarian war" as happened during the Balkans wars seems oblivious to this contradiction and assumes its standpoint is a universal and timeless one. Cosmopolitanism is, of course, firmly embedded in the liberal political tradition and its roots are equally set unambiguously in the European Enlightenment. Yet while as Baxi puts it "overall human rights discursivity was and still remains, according to the narrative of origins, the patrimony of the West" the circumstances of globality have given rise to alternative ethical politics that "draw heavily on cultural and civilizational resources richer than those provided by the time and space of the Euro-enclosed imagination of human rights" (Baxi, 2002, p. 24, p. 41). In this way, the notion of global civil society as a smooth a-cultural space may yet have to give way to an intercultural conception of GSC if it is to go beyond its narrow North Atlantic remit.

In an avowedly polemical piece, Anderson and Rieff have recently drawn a parallel between the international NGO movement of today and the Western missionaries of the colonial period. They both carry the gospel to the rest of the world and thus seek salvation and goodness. The international NGO movement is seen by these authors as:

> a movement with transcendental goals and beliefs. It is self-sacrificing and altruistic. It asserts a form of universalism that builds into its transcendentalism and legitimises it. It appeals to universal, transcendental but ultimately mystical values—the values of the human rights movement and the "innate" dignity of the person—rather than to the values of democracy and the multiple conceptions of the good that, as a value, it spawns. (Anderson & Rieff, 2005, p. 32)

This is, to my mind, a powerful analogy, right down to the association between many major NGOs and religion. It might not apply directly and certainly not across the board. However, I find disingenuous the response by the editors of the *Global Civil Society Yearbook* that "The problem with Anderson and Rieff is that they are nostalgic for the era of national simplicities" (Kaldor, Anheier, & Glasius, 2005, p. 16). This is simply not the case and Anderson and Rieff are quite right to appeal to the Gramscian dictum of a situation where the old (national) society has died and the new (global) society has not yet been fully formed. It is that transitional or liminal period that we need to explore in more open-ended manner than through the lens of a GSC fundamentalism.

There is an underlying notion of globalization within the dominant GSC discourse that sees it almost automatically creating a counter-hegemonic social opposition at a global scale. The nation-state is simply assumed to be too weak to act as vehicle for democratic social change today. As Chandler puts it "Globalisation is held to explain the need for global civic activism and to create the possibility of its success" (Chandler, 2005, p. 154). This optimistic scenario is based on a misunderstanding of the uneven and combined development of globalization as process and project. Furthermore, there is an implicit reliance on the global governance mechanisms being put in place by the neoliberal architects of globalization to create the new transnational ethical terrain on which Habermas's communicative rationality realm will be delivered.

To be clear, even the critics of GSC recognise that the notion of social movements working together to forge an alternative world order is an attractive one. However, from a global as against a Western perspective masquerading as one, things are not so simple. The main international NGOs are almost exclusively Northern in terms of their social base, their cosmology, and their politics. Can these NGOs "represent" global civil society in any meaningful way? As Neera Chandhoke puts it, "Considering that several INGOs are in the business of setting norms, we would like to know why certain norms are privileged over others, these others that may be more meaningful for the societies and inhabitants of the South" (Chandhoke, 2005, p. 370). Because of course even that most ostensibly universal of concepts that of "universal human rights" is cut across by the history of colonialism, imperialism, and cultural dominance. We certainly need to make "global civil society" more global, place it firmly within the context of imperialism, and consider it from various perspectives that do not see the world in the same way as predominantly western liberal advocates of GSC do.

Contested terrain

The counter posed positions I have articulated above show how fraught and contested the terrain of "global civil society" is today. While I believe that the critique of GSC is sometimes

overstated I do situate it overall in terms of promoting global governance and not contestation of the existing order. While I can see the value of measuring or mapping GSC I think overall that political and theoretical clarification is more urgent. John Keane has referred to the empirical concern with mapping GSC as follows:

> They call upon the facts to speak for themselves. They pursue what appears (to them, anyway) a straightforward empirical approach that supposes (as the American expression has it) that if something in the world walks like a duck and quacks like a duck then it is a duck. (Keane, 2004, p. 4)

Yet these data-gathering exercises are based on very clear *normative* and *political* preconceptions of when a certain beast is a duck or is not. GSC—in its dominant Western interpretations—is clearly a "big idea" and it is based on a certain ethic of where humanity should be heading. This is fine of course, but we cannot take GSC as a universal given simply seeking better measurement.

Antonio Gramsci is often taken as the precursor of modern usage of "civil society" from which GSC was born in the 1990s. During redemocratization in South America and Eastern Europe in the 1990s it was Gramsci's "positive" reading of civil society that prevailed. While the state was too strong to challenge, progressive inroads could be made within civil society thus moving towards hegemony even without taking on the state. This was a Gramscian paradigm shift in relation to the previous emphasis on the progressive role of the sate. Born of necessity the civil society/hegemony orientation became the dominant one during this particular period. Yet in Gramsci there was always another reading of civil society as those elements in society—the trade unions, churches, education system, etc.—that ensured popular consent to the state. Gramsci explicitly takes on board the notion of civil society "as understood by Hegel and as often used in these notes (i.e., in the sense of political and cultural hegemony of a social group over the entire society, as ethical components of the state)" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 208). Thus from Gramsci we can take our understanding of civil society (and global civil society) that is simultaneously the arena in which capitalist hegemony is secured but also where the subaltern classes forge social alliances and articulate alternative hegemonic projects.

GSC today is as Peter Waterman puts it "a concept worth defining; a terrain worth disputing" (Waterman, 2005). On the definitional issue I would tend to agree with Keane for whom GSC may well have "blurred edges" but "this does *not* mean—*pace* Anheier and others—that the term is uniquely imprecise or 'fuzzy' because of its youth" (Keane, 2004, p. 7). Certainly the evolution of GSC may well stretch any definition that we come up with. Of course any social theory or concept will only approximate to the thickness or just "messiness" of social reality. If civil society is the sphere in which social groupings represent themselves—in ideological and material ways—in relation to other groupings and the state, then GSC refers to that same sphere at the transnational level. Put slightly differently GSC is that terrain defined by globalization, which is betwixt and between the state and capital on the one hand, and the family on the other hand. This sphere covers the realms of production, consumption, politics, ideology, culture, and a wide range of social activities where the future of globalization is being debated forged and continuously recast.

If GSC is conceived of as a terrain—understood in complex spatial, political, and social terms—then it is a site for political intervention and it is not a pregiven. In the same way that social classes do not exist independently but only in conflictual relation to one another, so GSC needs to be conceived as being constantly being constructed by diverse social groupings. Put bluntly, Al Qaeda is as much part of the making of GSC at a global level today as are the various INGOs with their own differing visions of where humanity should be heading.

As I see it we need to break from conceptions of civil society and groups within it as "good" or "bad." A large-scale survey of grassroots civil society views on how to democratize the global economy concluded on the basis of the complex and contradictory findings that "all this makes clear that civil society is not inherently either a democratic or counter-democratic force in the global economy" (Scholte, 2003, p. 3). The issue at stake is thus not really a definitional one—as though by *fiat* we could decide who to allow into GSC and thus define it—but, rather, a political challenge of how the various actors within the broad field of GSC might best achieve the move towards democratization of the global economy.

Bringing politics back in

We do not need to go along with the conception of politics as the continuation of war by other means, to realise that civility and value dispositions are not at the forefront of contemporary global politics. What is necessary, I believe, is to bring politics back in to the debate around global civil society. The dominant normative conception of GSC based on Habermasian communicative rationality, is profoundly inimical to actually existing politics. Individual moral autonomy, in a thoroughly Western guise, is raised to an absolute principle that bypasses the political sphere. In this normative project, the overall objective is the GSC project itself constructed in a thoroughly self-referential manner. Celebrating civilized conversation and a liberal "live and let live" philosophy, becomes an end in itself. In denying politics their messy and conflictual space (including the national one) GSC becomes a conservative force.

David Chandler, quite correctly in my view, argues that "Despite protestations to the contrary... global civil society cannot have a transformatory dynamic. It cannot have any collective agency, because this would constitute a consensus bringing dialogue to an end" (Chandler, 2005, p. 134). In valuing conversation as an objective in its own right, it denies the actual role of political contestation as an engine of democratic transformation. In turning its back on political engagement in favour of individual morality, it closes the door on social change. By preaching non-instrumentalism as a moral principle for individual lives, GSC in its current guise disallows and cannot comprehend mass movements for social change, as global political Islam is undoubtedly becoming, in the contemporary era.

We all know by now that nationalism was/is an "invented tradition," it is not pregiven, a natural emanation from a piece of land. However, the cosmopolitan theories of global civil society sometimes forget that their post-national political categories are equally constructed. The notion of "global citizenship" is quite clearly constructed, an invented tradition, not to say fiction. Contemporary cosmopolitan theories argue implicitly for advocacy rights over the traditions of representative democracy. They argue for individual lived politics against the mass politics of ideologies and political projects. These are plausible political positions to take, but they are not "beyond" politics and they are arguably elitist positions, that have not established their legitimacy through democratic means, nor do they travel well to the badlands where civilized conversation is not the norm.

Finally I believe we are now past the "magic" phase of GSC, a new realism has set in, with events wiping away the naivety of the 1990s to some extent. We are now "taking global civil society seriously" (Taylor & Naidoo, 2004) in terms of moving beyond abstract typologies to construct its politics in a progressive direction. We are probably in an era of paradigmatic transition in all realms. The terrain of global civil society will also inevitably share these fluid and complex paradigmatic tensions. We have articulated here a presentation of GSC as royal road to a global democratic polity but also the deeply critical view of those who see it as a slippery slope towards becoming the social wing of the neoliberal offensive against the

subaltern peoples and regions of the world. I have concluded that we do, indeed, need to take global civil society seriously but in terms of a terrain or field constantly "under construction" in which various social political and cultural forces will dispute hegemony of the actually existing globalization process. The terrain might be a new one—reflecting the ever-increasing influence of globality—but the struggle between the ever-expanding reach of the free market and societal reaction to this, is an old one. Karl Polanyi had already discerned for an earlier era how the expansion of the free market calls forth social counter-movements that might take progressive or reactionary forms. Globalization and its contestation (Munck, 2006) will take more complex forms than a simple unfolding of global civil society as privileged terrain for progressive social change based on shared moral values. The future of this dialectic will be resolved through political struggle and cannot be short-circuited by definitional fiat that declares GSC a ready-made royal road to global democracy.

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