

# THE LIMITS OF GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Neera Chandhoke

## The Three Sector Fallacy

There is something about modern modes of analysis—a propensity to analyse phenomena in terms of discrete categories perhaps—which attracts theorists to additive modes of social science. Thus, they first subdivide areas of collective life into separate spheres, endow these domains with their distinct logics, distinguish them from each other, and then add them together to form a whole. Witness how modern social theory first separates the public and the private, views each of these spheres as possessing a different logic of thought and action, and then adds them together to form an entity called 'society'. The point is that, whereas in the process the public becomes the field of the rational, the private is conceptualised as the site of unreflective emotions and affections.

Now on the face of it there is nothing wrong with employing this strategy as a heuristic device. There is absolutely nothing wrong in conceptualising the different ways in which people make their own histories even if they may not make those histories very well. The idea that whereas the state is stamped mainly by the logic of coercion, the logic of the market is that of competition, is perfectly acceptable. We can also agree that there is a difference between the community and civil society. Community as social anthropologists tell us, represents personalised and face-to-face interactions. Relationships in civil society on the other hand are contractual.

What *is* problematic is the assumption that appears to underlie theorising in this mode, namely, that these domains of collective existence do not *influence* each other, or that they do not *affect* each other, or indeed that they do not *constitute* in the sense of shaping each other (Chandhoke 2001). This is something that additive social theorists tend to ignore. They should read Copernicus, who was to write about the astronomers of his day thus: 'With them it is as though an artist were to gather the hands, feet, head, and other members for his images

from diverse models, each part excellently drawn, but not related to a single body, and since they in no way match each other, the result would be a monster rather than man' (Kuhn 1962: 83). The same problem seems to bedevil additive social science, for in this genre no one category influences let alone constitutes others, no category is central to human life, and no category determines how we approach other categories of activity. The questions that immediately confront us in this connection are the following: do categories of collective existence *not* constitute each other? Equally, does not a single logic, that of power, underpin these categories and bind them together?

To put it plainly, the separation of collective human existence into mutually exclusive spheres of thought and action *elides* the way in which each of these domains is constructed by power, which spilling over arbitrary boundaries underpins the whole. Consider the feminist critique of the public-private dichotomy: if we conceptualise the household as the site of affection and emotions as different from the power-driven state or from the competition-ridden economy, we end up actually legitimising patriarchal power. For, as a microcosm of society, the household cannot but condense the tensions of the social formation, it cannot but be permeated by power.

Of course, power manifests itself in and through different avatars that apparently have nothing to do with each other. For instance, globalisation, which is legitimised by its defenders as the rationalisation of economic life, may seem diametrically opposed to, say, fundamentalist movements. On the face of it fundamentalist movements look as if they are a knee-jerk *reaction* to the globalising project and thus possessed of a different logic. But note that *both* of these projects manifest different forms of power, simply because both limit the endeavours of human beings to make their own lives with some degree of autonomy. This admittedly is difficult to fathom, simply because various forms of power not only appear as contradictory, oppositional, and diffused, but also happen to operate in invisible and intangible

ways that escape the human gaze. Today theorists tell us and practitioners claim that it is difficult to decipher power since it does not originate from a single point. We have learnt that we can locate no meta-discourse but only the micro-politics of a power that is heterogeneous, dispersed, and even unpredictable. Nevertheless, power binds ostensibly autonomous institutions and practices in a myriad of ways, all of which constrain human autonomy and creativity and limit political initiatives. Power, in other words, *produces identifiable effects* even though its various manifestations do not always act in concert.

It is, however, precisely these insights that are at a discount when theorists suggest that civil society possesses a discrete and distinct *raison d'être* which marks it out as different as well as autonomous both from the state and from the market. Thus, civil society in contemporary political theory is often posed as an alternative to both the state and to the market. It simply emerges as the third sphere of collective life. Gordon White, for instance, conceptualises civil society as 'an intermediate associational realm between the family and the state populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values' (White 1994: 379). Charles Taylor suggests that civil society is 'those dimensions of social life which cannot be confounded with, or swallowed up in, the state' (Taylor 1991:171). If Axel Honneth (1993: 19) thinks of civil society as 'all civil institutions and organisations which are prior to the state', Jeffrey Isaac (1993: 356) speaks of the sphere as 'those human networks that exist independently of, if not anterior to, the political state'. Above all, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato in a rather well known definition, refer to a 'third realm' differentiated from the economy and the state as civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992: 18). In the hands of these two authors, civil society as a normative moral order is diametrically opposed to both the state and the economy.

The same kind of thinking is more than visible when it comes to global civil society. Many theorists seem to be of the view that global civil society represents a

'third sector', which can not only be distinguished from but which is an alternative to both the state-centric international order and the networks of global markets. Lipschutz, for instance, employs the concept of 'global civil society' to indicate a plurality of agencies such as social movements, interest groups, and global citizens. If the distinguishing feature of these organisations is that they defy national boundaries, the cornerstone of global civil society is constituted by the 'self-conscious construction of networks of knowledge and action, [and] by de-centred local actors, that cross the reified boundaries of space as though they were not there'. Global civil society actors, in other words, engage in practices that can possibly reshape the 'architecture' of international politics by denying the primacy of states or of their sovereign rights (Lipschutz 1992: 390). Other scholars are of the opinion that the anti-state character of global civil society is revealed through its projects, for example, through the promotion of values from below, which exist in tension with dominant statist conceptions of the state system (Falk, Johansen, and Kim 1993: 13–14). Or that global civil society moving beyond 'thin anarchical society' is in the business of inaugurating a post-foreign policy world (Booth 1991: 540).

In other words, contemporary thinking gives us a picture of a global civil society that seems to be supremely uncontaminated by either the power of states or that of markets. Moreover, many theorists believe that global civil society, consisting of transnational non-governmental organisations, political activists, social movements, religious denominations, and associations of all stripe and hue, from trade unions to business and financial groupings, can neutralise existing networks of power by putting forth a different set of values. Global civil society (GCS), it is said, represents 'a post realist constellation, where transnational associational life (TAL) challenges the conceit of the state system . . . GCS is touted as the antidote for the anarchical structure, inequality, and exclusions of the state system' (Pasha and Blaney 1998: 418).

Now, it is true that global civil society organisations have managed to dramatically expand the agenda of world politics by insistently casting and

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focusing widespread attention on issues such as human rights, the environment, development, and banning land mines. And all these issues, remember, have traditionally fallen within the province of state sovereignty. Global civil society actors have simultaneously challenged the new contours of the world economic order as mandated by the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund: think of the protests against the global economic dispensation at Seattle in November 1999, at Prague in September 2000, and at Genoa in 2001. But to conclude from this that these actors have drawn up a blueprint for a new or an alternative global order, or indeed to assume that they are autonomous of both states and markets, may prove too hasty a judgement.

Can global civil society provide us with a third and presumably an alternative way of organising international relations? Or is it bound by the same logic that characterises the other two systems?

This is not to say that global civil society can be *reduced* to the logic of the state-centric world order or to the workings of the global economy. All I wish to suggest is that we should treat with a fair amount of caution the assumptions that (a) global civil society is autonomous of other institutions of international politics, that (b) it can provide us with an alternative to these institutions, or (c) that it can even give us a deep-rooted and structural critique of the world order. Global civil society may well reflect the power constellations of existing institutions. To put it bluntly, should our *normative* expectations of civil society blind us to the nature of *real* civil societies whether national or global?

In this chapter I address the concept of global civil society by asking two questions. The first question has to do with the perennial preoccupations of political theorists, i.e., what are the implications of the development of global civil society for issues of representation and political agency? After all, civil society in classical political theory is conceptualised as the space where ordinary men and women through the practices of their daily life acquire political agency and selfhood. Do the organisations of global civil society enhance this empowering process or constrain it? The second question that I wish to explore is the following: to what extent can global civil society be autonomous of the state-centric world system and of

the system of markets? In other terms, can global civil society provide us with a third and presumably an alternative way of organising international relations? Or is it bound by the same logic that characterises the other two systems? Just one point here: I take it as given that both the international political and the international economic order are dominated by the countries of Western Europe and by the United States. Is it possible that actors from the same parts of the world dominate global civil society? In sum, rather than begin with the presupposition that global civil society constitutes a third, alternative sphere, we should perhaps explore the context of the emergence of the sphere itself in order to understand what precisely it is about. We may well find that it

has thrown up genuine alternatives, or we may find that global civil society actors work within a particular historical conjunction: that of the post-cold war consensus among the powerful countries in the world. Let us see.

## The Making of Global Civil Society

The idea of internationalism has, of course, been central to working-class politics since the end of the nineteenth century. In a parallel development Henri La Fontaine, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1913, created the Central Office of International Associations in 1907 to link up non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in different countries. The United Nations institutionalised procedures for consulting with these organisations in 1945. It is estimated that whereas in 1948, 41 NGOs enjoyed consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN, by 1968 the number had risen to 500. By 1992 we were to see the Economic and Social Council consulting 1,000 or more NGOs. If we add to this number NGOs that interact with other bodies of the United Nations, and which often participate directly in the proceedings, the number rises to tens of thousands (Korey 1998: 2). It is perhaps not surprising that global civil society has come to be dominated by NGOs, even though other



*Above:* Commemoration of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in Dili. © Irene Slegt/Panos Pictures.

*Right:* Frontline between the army and protesting students near the Indonesian Parliament. © Chris Stowes/Panos Pictures.



actors, such as political activists networking across borders and anti-globalisation movements, were playing an important role in this sphere. It is indicative of the power of the non-governmental sector that civil society has come to be identified with NGO activism both in influential tomes on civil society and in policy prescriptions of international institutions today. The discussion that follows therefore shifts between NGOs and other civil society actors, even as it recognises that NGOs play a larger-than-life role in global civil society.

It was, however, at the turn of the 1990s that we were to witness a veritable explosion of NGOs, which, networking across national borders, propelled critical issues onto international platforms. The power of global NGOs was first visible at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, when about 2,400 representatives of NGOs came to play a central role in the deliberations (Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor 2001: 326). By putting forth radically different alternatives, by highlighting issues of global concern, and by stirring up proceedings in general, these organisations practically hijacked the summit. Subsequently, they were given a central role in the Committee on Sustainable Development created by

the Rio Summit. At the 1994 Cairo World Population Conference, increasing numbers of international NGOs took on the responsibility of setting the agenda for discussions. And in 1995 this sector almost overwhelmed the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Almost 2,100 national and international NGOs, consisting largely of advocacy groups and social activists, completely dominated the conference (Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor 2001: 328). Since then we have seen that international NGOs either participate directly in international conferences or hold parallel conferences, which incidentally attract more media attention than official conferences. And in the process they have won some major victories.

One of these major victories occurred when global NGOs launched a campaign to pressurise governments to draft a treaty to ban the production, the stockpiling, and the export of landmines. Almost 1,000 transnational NGOs coordinated the campaign through the Internet. The pooling and the coordination of energies proved so effective that not only was the treaty to ban landmines signed in 1997, but the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and its representative Jody Williams were awarded the Nobel

Peace Prize. The citation at the award-giving ceremony spoke of their unique effort that made it 'possible to express and mediate a broad wave of popular commitment in an unprecedented way'. A similar pooling of energies can be seen in the crusade that led to the 1998 Rome Statute on an International Criminal Court (see Chapter 6).

Other triumphs followed in the field of human rights: in the battle that led to the ousting of Soeharto in Indonesia in 1998, for instance. After the Indonesian military had massacred more than 150 participants in a funeral procession in Dili, East Timor, in 1991, transnational human rights organisations mobilised massively against the political abuses of the Soeharto regime. Under pressure from these organisations, Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands froze economic aid to Indonesia, and the US, Japan, and the World Bank threatened similar measures. Soeharto appointed a National Investigation Commission, which issued a mildly critical report of the incident; and aid was resumed (Glasius 1999: 252–64). But Soeharto lost control of events as human rights groups in Indonesia and East Timor mobilised under global human rights organisations to criticise and publicise the violation of human rights. Opposition mounted even as Soeharto designated a national human rights commission, whose reports added to the general discontent. In 1996, even as the leaders of civil society in East Timor—Jose Ramos Horta and Bishop Ximenes Belo—were given the Nobel Peace Prize, the *Blitzkrieg* launched by global human rights organisations strengthened the general atmosphere of dissatisfaction, despite the intensified repression launched by the regime. In late 1997 the country was buffeted by an economic crisis and mass protests led to the resignation of Soeharto. Transnational human rights organisations had managed to spectacularly overthrow a regime on the grounds that it was not respecting the basic rights of its people.

In India the power of global civil society organisations was revealed in a different way. Soon

after independence, a massive project was inaugurated to dam the gigantic Narmada River, which runs through the three States of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra in western India. The Narmada Valley Development Project consists of 30 major dams, 135 minor dams, and 3,000 small dams. The largest dam is the Sardar Sarovar Project, which ultimately will submerge 92,000 acres of land, displacing and affecting more than 300,000 people, a majority of whom are tribals or forest dwellers. In the mid-1980s a number of voluntary organisations began to mobilise the tribals for better resettlement and rehabilitation policies, as the existing ones had been found sadly wanting. Even as these organisations linked up with international NGOs to pressure the government of India into granting better resettlement and rehabilitation for the displaced, in 1988 about 20 groups formed the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) or the Save Narmada Movement. The NBA launched a massive struggle against big development projects and for the right of the people *not* to be displaced. At the same time, international NGOs such as the Environment Defense Fund and Oxfam began to lobby the World Bank and the Japanese government to withdraw from their commitments to fund the project. The World Bank, now under public scrutiny, laid down conditions for better resettlement policies, conditions that the Indian government refused to fulfil. In 1993 the government decided to ask the World Bank to withdraw from the project rather than face the embarrassment of having the Bank draw back on its own. Soon afterwards the Japanese government also retracted its funding commitments. Whereas most of the pressure against the dam was generated by the NBA, the matter would not have come to international attention in quite the same manner without the support of international NGOs, which publicised the issue and pressurised centres of power in the West, (Chandhoke 1997). That the Indian government

*Right:* Anti-dam activists and tribal men protest against the building of dams along the Narmada River as the monsoon waters rise rapidly, flooding land and homes in Domkhedi village, Narmada Valley, Maharashtra, India. © Karen Robinson/Panos Pictures.



has now decided to build the dam on its own, after the Supreme Court authorised it to do so in a judgement delivered on 18 October 2000, may point to the limits of political mobilisation in civil society.

However, the most dramatic manifestation of global civil society so far was to appear in what came to be known as the 'battle for Seattle'. At the end of November 1999, massive protests involving some 700 organisations and about 40,000 students, workers, NGOs, religious groups, and representatives of business and finance who were there for their own reasons brought the third ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle to a halt. The WTO was to set in motion a new multilateral round of trade negotiations. Collective anger at the relocation of industries to the Third World, at the unsafe and abusive work conditions in the factories and sweatshops found there, at environmental degradation, and at the widespread exploitation of working people, exploded in a series of angry demonstrations. Though large-scale protests against the WTO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank were not new, what was new was both the scale of mobilisation and the intensity of protest. Angry demonstrations by student unions, environmentalists or 'tree huggers', economic and xenophobic nationalists, church groups, anarchists, protectionists, consumer groups, NGOs, and even business and financial groups were hailed by some scholars as 'globalisation from below' (Kaldor 2000) or as heralding a new internationalism.

There were two aspects of the 'battle for Seattle' that proved significant for the consolidation of global civil society. First, for the first time hitherto single-issue groups coalesced into a broad-based movement to challenge the way the world trade and financial system was being ordered by international institutions. Second, whereas in the late 1960s protest groups in the US and in Western Europe had targeted the state, at Seattle they targeted global corporations and international economic institutions. The protests

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themselves bore the mark of collective ire and resentment at the way in which globalisation that had been set in motion two decades earlier had exacerbated inequality and injustice. And matters did not stop here. Mass protests have become a regular feature of annual meetings of the World Economic Forum, the IMF and the World Bank, and the WTO. At the same time we have seen students across university campuses in the US demonstrate against the unethical practices of large corporations such as Nike, Reebok, the Gap, and Disney, which use cheap labour in the Third World. Novel methods and vocabularies of protests captured the attention of the international media and generated considerable excitement at the idea of renewed political activism. And the phrase 'global civil society' became an integral part of political, corporate, and technical vocabularies.

In sum, global civil society organisations have emerged as a powerful and influential force on the world stage, affecting as they do both domestic and international policies, deciding as they do the fate of some authoritarian governments at least, and laying down agendas as they do. They not only have the power of influencing international public opinion and mobilising it against policies that they consider undesirable, they do so in ways that are sensationally visible and therefore effective.

Arguably two factors have strengthened the mandate of these organisations. One, the informational revolution, has increased their capacity to collect, collate, select, and publicise information on a variety of specialised issues ranging from development disasters, to the environment, to the effect of WTO policies such as patenting, to human rights violations. In fact, governments often just do not possess the capacity to gather and assemble specialised information or mobilise public opinion in quite the same way as NGOs organised on a global scale can do.

Moreover, the unprecedented and phenomenal revolution in information and communications often described as the 'third

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industrial revolution' has allowed organisations to network across the world through the fax, the e-mail, the Internet, and teleconferencing. Loosely structured movements have used the Internet to set up web sites that inform prospective participants about the timing of the meetings of international institutions, on the organisation of protests, and about transportation and accommodation. In fact we have witnessed a new phenomenon bursting onto the political scene: *cyber-space activism*. Via this form of activism, members of a group who may never see each other come together, through cyberspace, around issues that they consider important. Informational networks have allowed concerned organisations to gather and put together data on, for example, violations of human rights, muster opinion and activism around the issue, publicise information through the international media, and pressurise both national and international organisations to change both their mind and their manners.

The revolution in communications and information has allowed NGOs to form coalitions, as for instance the Conference of Peoples Global Action Against Free Trade, that held its first meeting in Geneva in May 1998, the Third World Network, which as a union of Third World NGOs is based in Malaysia, and the formation of the International Federation of Human Rights, a Paris-based transnational NGO, which consists of 89 human rights groups in 70 countries. In fact, the revolution has also facilitated a new phenomenon: the development of intermediary NGOs, which act as 'facilitators' to help voluntary organisations to find funds from donor agencies such as Action Aid (India) or Charity Aid Foundation (UK). Intermediate organisations are, in other words, involved in the channelling of money and information from one NGO to another or from donor agencies to NGOs.

Second, global NGOs have become influential simply because they possess a property that happens to be the peculiar hallmark of *ethical* political intervention: moral authority and legitimacy. And they possess moral authority because they claim to represent the *public* or the *general* interest against official- or power-driven interests of the state or of the economy. Though the idea that they are truly representative can be challenged as I suggest below, this is not to deny that NGOs have raised normative concerns in the domain of global civil society. As the upholders of an *ethical* canon that applies across nations and cultures, international actors in civil

society now define as well as set the moral norms, which should at least in principle govern national and international orders. To put it differently, global civil society actors legislate and mandate a normative and thus a morally authoritative structure for the national and the international community. Because they lend moral depth to the agenda of global concerns and because they articulate a global and ethically informed vision on how states should treat their citizens, global civil society actors command the kind of attention that normally does not accrue to political activism within states. And they command this kind of attention because they have access to the international media, they possess high profiles, and they put forth their ideas in dramatic ways.

This as a matter of course has significant implications for our traditional concepts of state sovereignty. Traditionally states, pleading sovereignty and state security, have resisted any intervention by outside agencies. Today global civil society actors act as the guardians of a morally informed consensus on the minimum that is due to human beings. As the keepers of a moral conscience that applies across borders, global civil society organisations question the monopoly of the nation state over the lives of its people. But they also challenge the workings of international institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, as well as opposing the working of giant economic corporations. If the demonstrations at Seattle questioned the viability of economic arrangements set by international institutions, the charting of norms for, say, the banning of child labour, or exploitation of resources, or environmental protection, has mediated the operations of powerful economic corporations.

## The Historical Context for the Emergence of Global Civil Society

The two factors set out above have certainly facilitated as well as legitimised the advent of global civil society actors as influential players on the world stage. However, the causes of this phenomenon have to be sought elsewhere, in the deeper structural changes that have occurred in the international political and economic order in the last two decades. And the major change that has taken place in the world system since the 1980s is of course globalisation. Now globalisation is difficult to characterise as it consists of a number of overlapping



*Above:* Children are taught to use an Apple laptop at Gatchi outstation, Arnhem Land, Australia. © Penny Tweedie/Panos Pictures.

and even conflicting projects. However, though it is increasingly difficult to define globalisation, the implications of this process—or, rather, of this series of processes—are increasingly clear. Globalisation has, for one, enabled the transmission of capital across the world as if national boundaries were non-existent. Correspondingly, through the processes of globalisation natural and national resources have been appropriated in the cause of capital. Local knowledge systems have been harnessed and patented for the same purpose. And flows of information and messages that tell people how they should think and what they should think have legitimised the process itself.

Therefore, despite the difficulty in capturing the essence of globalisation, we can accept that its core is constituted by a distinct phenomenon: capital's restless and relentless pursuit of profit across the world and across national borders. Today we see capital flitting across national borders as if they were just not there. But note that there is nothing natural or given in the processes of capital flows that ensure this much-needed erosion of state boundaries. In other words, globalisation demanded and demands sustained political intervention for one main reason.

Recollect in this context that the post-Second World War period was to widely disseminate and institutionalise the idea that the state should intervene in matters relating to the production and to the reproduction of the economy and of society. The interventionist state was to take many forms: the Soviet model of the state that commands the heights of the economy, the welfare state that looks after the basic needs of its people, the Keynesian state that regulates the market, or the developmentalist state in the post-colonial world that commandeers both material and human resources to offset the legacies of colonial underdevelopment.

Therefore, if capital more often than not originating in the West had to cross boundaries in order to pursue accumulation on the world scale, the state had to be rolled back from its hitherto legitimate tasks of regulating the market as well as providing social services to the people. In other words, the legitimisation of the ability of the market to regulate itself, as well as to provide for both growth and well-being, demanded the delegitimisation and the consequent withdrawal of the state from the market. The state had to be rolled back both to



encourage the unhindered flow of capital and to enable the market to display its dynamics.

It was precisely this understanding that underpinned what came to be known as the neo-liberal agenda, or what John Williams termed the 'Washington consensus', which reined in the centres of power in the Western world in the late 1980s. The consensus manifested itself in the form of ten policy recommendations, imposed on particularly debt-ridden Third World countries by international financial and lending institutions. Among these recommendations were the following: trade liberalisation, clearing all hurdles to foreign direct investment, privatisation, deregulation, strengthening property rights, and tax reforms. If we translate these economic imperatives into political terms, we find that the consensus dictated the following: (a) the state, particularly in Third World countries, should withdraw from the social

sector; (b) the market should be freed from all constraints; and (c) people in civil society should organise their own social and economic reproduction instead of depending on the state.

Ironically, the idea that people in civil society should organise their own reproduction has emerged at exactly the same moment as globalisation has drastically eroded the capacity of the same people to order their own affairs. And reliance on the market for this purpose is inadequate, since the market, remember, has room for only those people who have something to sell and those who have something to buy. In other words, the market does not provide for those people who cannot participate in its transactions because they have nothing with which they can buy, or because they cannot find buyers for what they sell: labour, for instance. The unleashing of the market simply meant that massive sections of the people had to now fend for themselves in the sense of providing the conditions for their social reproduction.

It was in this particular historical conjunction that NGOs emerged on the horizon to take over functions hitherto reserved for the state, such as providing health and education, instituting income-generating schemes, creating safety nets, and encouraging people to be self-reliant. The space cleared by the rolling back of the state came to be known as 'civil

society', and NGOs were transformed into the guardians of civil society even as they subcontracted for the state. To put it in stark terms, the emergence and the growing power of NGOs whether national or global has been actively facilitated by the Washington consensus.

The role of the non-governmental sector has been further strengthened by what came subsequently to be known as the post-Washington consensus. The mid-1990s were to witness a sharp swing in the mood of international trade and financial institutions. For the rhetoric of these institutions was to move away from an emphasis on a free and untrammelled market to the idea that both the market and the generic processes of globalisation had to be governed. The shift had largely to do with one main factor. Doctrines of free trade and unregulated markets had run into trouble ever since 1994, when

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Mexico was hit by financial devastation. The second financial crisis, which began when the government of Thailand devalued the bhat, and which then spread to the rest of East Asia, Japan, Brazil, and Russia in 1997 and 1998, impoverished millions, and generated rage and discontent. We saw an inkling of this dissatisfaction when Korean workers rose to defy the IMF. Many scholars saw these economic and financial crises as a consequence of unfettered globalisation, as a result of the working of the free and unregulated market (Rhodes and Higgot 2000). The neo-liberal agenda had after all failed to deliver the much-promised benefits of greater growth, stabilisation of financial markets, and political order. Income disparities had increased, the number of the poor had grown drastically, and people had been deprived of their livelihoods and security of life. A global economic order had been forged through globalisation without any prospect of justice, or democracy, or redistribution. And this posed problems for the defenders of globalisation. For if a system is widely perceived as unjust, it will necessarily engender resistance.

Therefore, whereas in the 1980s and the early 1990s free market liberalism had been left to private corporations, this strategy had to be rethought since it had proved counter-productive. In fact, as early as in 1995 the economist Paul Krugman had suggested

that the Mexican crisis marked the beginning of the deflation of the Washington consensus (1995: 31–5). The very idea that globalisation had rationalised capitalism came to be questioned because what we witnessed was the globalisation of a crisis. Consequently, the managers of international financial and economic institutions were to realise, somewhat late, what Marx had argued in the late nineteenth century: that there is nothing natural or self-regulating about markets and that they unleash their own oppressions. If markets were to endure they had to be controlled or, in the new parlance of international financial institutions, 'governed'. Alternatively, the dominant approach to development needed to be rethought, since neo-liberal policy prescriptions had not only failed, they had intensified dissatisfaction and hostility particularly in the countries of the Third World.

This realisation led to a radical shift in the rhetoric of globalisation: the replacement of the language of the market by that of governance, accountability, transparency, and democracy. And the World Bank, under the influence of the economist Joseph Stiglitz, known for his critique of the unfettered market, moved from a narrow economic focus on development to what came to be known as the Comprehensive Development Framework. Even as policies of structural adjustment were replaced by notions of partnership between the Bank and borrowing governments, the language of the Bank shifted from macroeconomic theory that focused on economic growth to the recognition of the centrality of governance, albeit a notion of governance that was stripped of politics (Jayal: 1997). The shift was not radical inasmuch as the dominant themes of neo-liberalism continued to dominate the political imagination of most, if not all, of the international financial institutions. But now international financial institutions were to cushion neo-liberalism in a vocabulary that spoke of the regulation and the moderation of the processes of globalisation. In effect, these institutions opted for strategies of conflict management.

Perhaps the Bank had no choice. For global civil society actors in various demonstrations insisted that

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'Fifty Years is Enough', a slogan that overshadowed the golden jubilee of the Bank. Even as James Wolfensohn was appointed President in June 1995, he was faced with the need to restructure the policy of the World Bank in the face of sustained criticism by global civil society. In an attempt to legitimise the Bank, the President engaged global NGOs in dialogue and entered into collaborative ventures to reshape the policy prescriptions of the world body.

The result was the adoption of a new language of sustainable development, preservation of natural resources, equitable development, and democratic development.

It is of some significance that some global civil society actors, who had earlier emerged on the political scene in and through the politics of protest, now became partners in decision-making activities. NGOs now attend the annual meetings of the World Bank and the IMF as special guests. In 1982 the World Bank had created a discussion forum in the shape of an NGO-World Bank Committee, which ensured the active involvement of the non-governmental sector in implementing

projects. Now NGOs came to be involved in policy formulation. In 1996 the WTO General Council adopted guidelines that provided for increased contacts between the Secretariat and the NGOs. This of course raises an important methodological question: can we continue to call agencies that become a part of global decision-making structures 'civil society organisations' that supposedly challenge the workings of the global order? But more of that later.

In sum, in marked contrast to the earlier two decades that focused on the opening up of national borders to the free flow of global capital and the doctrines of free trade, the post-Washington consensus concentrates on the governance of these activities. For decision-makers recognised that the deep tensions that had been engendered by the processes of globalisation had to be managed if they were not to spiral out of control. To put it bluntly, international trade and financial institutions realised that the processes of globalisation could not be legitimised if they were left to private agencies such as corporate houses or to some 'invisible hand' of the market.

The post-Washington consensus was therefore to focus on three issues. First, globalisation was too important to be left to the unrestricted corporate world and should be mediated through 'governance' that ensured transparency, accountability, capacity building, and safety networks. Second, the state needed to be replaced not so much by the market as by civil society organisations that represented the aspirations of the people and that strengthened democracy. This of course meant that the fields of the market and of non-market transactions were, in policy prescriptions, separated. Third, the new consensus opined that only a strong civil society under the guidance of NGOs can further democracy. Note, however, that this avatar of civil society is not marked by democratic contestation but by the building of 'social capital' and 'trust' among the inhabitants (Harriss: 2001). In effect, the earlier move away from the state to the market has now been replaced by a move away from the state to civil society based on networks of trust.

However, despite some changes in rhetoric, the post-Washington consensus continues to retain significant elements of the earlier neo-liberal consensus. For neither was the idea that a free market encourages democracy put aside, nor was the role of the state in institutionalising and realising democracy reconsidered. In the current dispensation, both a minimal state and a free market continue to provide the conditions of a strong and democratic civil society. More importantly, the international policy community now concentrates on the management of discontent, which has erupted in reaction to the liberalisation and the deregulation process that lies at the heart of globalisation (Higgot 2000: 138)

The post-Washington consensus, in other words, views protest and struggle, which happen to be an integral part of civil society, as problems that have to be resolved through managerial techniques. It still does not recognise that a democratic civil society is about struggling for a better world, that it is about politics and not only governance, that it is about visions and aspirations and not only about neutralisation of tensions. Nor does the present consensus address issues such as unequal power relations either in the world or within states. And

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civil society continues to be identified, as in the earlier version, with NGOs. To put it differently, if earlier versions of neo-liberalism cleared the space for global civil society actors, the present consensus legitimises their activities. Conversely, the activities of most if not all NGOs legitimise the post-Washington consensus, for instance by linking civil society to an apolitical notion of governance. All this, as argued below, has depoliticised the very concept of civil society. This of course requires some elaboration of what civil society is about.

## What Does Civil Society Mean?

Now civil society has been subjected to considerable over-theorisation in the post-1989 era. The concept, never too clear at the best of times, has turned into the proverbial will-o'-the-wisp that eludes understanding. It has come to mean many things to many people: as the space of solidarity, as a project of projects, as the area of associational life, as a site of contestation, and as a third sector. This may not necessarily be a problem. For, as the editors of *Global Civil Society 2001* argue, multiple meanings of civil society can provide a space for dialogue (Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor 2001: 12). On the other hand, when people come to this overlapping space armed with their own meanings of what civil society is about, we may find that such a dialogue becomes impossible. For any dialogue needs at the least a common referral as a starting point for an exchange of ideas. And such a referral can best be provided by classical political theory.

If we were to reach back into the annals of political theory to investigate the idea of civil society, it would look something like this. The concept of civil society signifies both a space and a set of values. As a space it is metaphorically located somewhere between the state, the market, and the family. Here people come together in projects of all kinds to make their collective histories. Histories are in turn made through the politics of affirmation as well as conflict-ridden encounters, the politics of solidarity as well as that of struggle. Civil society possesses no one characteristic, no one core, no one essential nature. Civil society is what its

inhabitants make of it. It is a site where projects overlap, where they reinforce each other, and where they challenge each other. This is possible, for civil society, unlike pre-modern communities, allows its inhabitants to make their own lives and their own destinies perhaps independently, perhaps in concert with others, in some degree of freedom. For the values of civil society are those of freedom, accessibility, and publicness. On this ground alone no one is in theory barred from civil society, everyone is allowed entry into the sphere, and everyone—again in theory—is free to link with others to make their own histories even though these histories are not made, as Marx told us long ago, in conditions of their own choice. Thus is associational life born and thus is an activity called politics born.

For arguably, it is only when people in and through social associations translate their everyday experiences into expressed vocabularies, and it is only when people interpret the experiential through the prism provided by the expressive, that we see the birth of politics. Politics in the first sense is about translating the experiential into the expressive. As individuals bring their own world-views into social associations, they transcend individual beliefs into socially responsive and responsible political projects through dialogue as well as through contention. Conversely, politics is about interpreting the experiential in terms provided by the expressive. Consider, for instance, the women's movement. The movement was to gain shape and clarity only when some women—and some men—were to express their discontent with patriarchal structures of oppression in terms of feminism. In turn, feminist insights gave other women the tools with which they could interpret the injustice that was inflicted on them by patriarchy.

Politics is, in short, a two-way activity. It moves from what is experienced to the interpretation of these experiences in terms of specifically political categories such as feminism. In turn, political formulations allow other people to make sense of their experiences. What is important is that the activity is empowering inasmuch as, when ordinary men and women engage in political activity, they acquire agency, they recover selfhood, and they earn

self-confidence. This is politics in the best Aristotelian tradition: politics as self-realisation.

Therefore, for most theorists of civil society, social associations are vital to collective life simply because they allow people to realise their selfhood through collective action. But note that social associations are significant only because membership in these groupings is voluntary as well as revocable. It is the individual who is the primary actor in civil society; social associations merely enable him or her to realise their own potential and their own projects. Social associations, in other words, are nothing but aggregates of individuals, which in turn reflect the wishes and the desires of their members.

It is this interpretation of civil society that finds it difficult to accommodate NGOs, for two reasons. First, though it is possible that individuals who come together in associations transform their association into an NGO, a number of important and influential NGOs are not created through this process. Global NGOs come in from the outside armed very often with their own ideas of what is wrong and what should be done to remedy the situation. At precisely this point the issue of representativeness arises to bedevil thinking on civil society. Second, the arrival of global NGOs onto the scene may carry important and not so positive implications for notions of political agency. For if they have their own ideas of what should be done and how should it be done, ordinary human beings who have experienced, say, injustice in their daily lives are denied the opportunity to frame their responses in their own terms. NGOs more often than not have their own programmes, they more often than not speak a highly specialised language that may well be incomprehensible for the inhabitants of the regions in which they operate, and they may well have their own ideas of what is politically permissible and what is not.

Ordinary individuals, it is evident, possess little opportunity to influence agendas that are formulated in far-off places. Associational activity at the global level tends therefore to acquire a life of its own, a life that is quite distinct from the everyday lives of the people who do not speak but who are spoken for.

**When ordinary men and women engage in political activity, they acquire agency, they recover selfhood, and they earn self-confidence. This is politics in the best Aristotelian tradition: politics as self-realisation.**

Bluntly put, people are disempowered rather than empowered when highly specialised, professional, and more often than not bureaucratised civil society actors tell them what is wrong with their daily existence and how they should go about resolving the problems of their collective lives. In the process civil society may undergo both depoliticisation and disempowerment.

Admittedly, some global civil society actors have initiated novel ways of bringing the problems of everyday existence of poor and impoverished people of the Third World to international platforms and propelling them into the glare of the media spotlight. But can all this substitute for the activity we call politics? Let me put this differently: when individuals who are otherwise far too preoccupied in eking out a bare and minimum subsistence in adverse conditions come together and think through how to resolve their situation, they are empowered because they are politicised. And to be politicised is to acquire consciousness that collective endeavours offer

possibilities of self-realisation. To be politicised is to be made aware that certain rights accrue to every human being by virtue of being human. It means that people who have been constituted as subjects and not as citizens by the policies of the state can rise to demand justice, equality, and freedom; to demand that the state delivers what it has promised in theory. Political activity simply makes for aware and self-confident human beings because these human beings acquire agency in and through politics. And thereby ordinary men and women make the transition from subject to citizen.

It is precisely this notion of politics that is devalued when global civil actors commandeer political initiatives and once again constitute human beings as subjects of political ideas arrived at elsewhere, or, worse, when they constitute individuals as consumers of agendas finalised elsewhere. For we must ask this uncomfortable question of even the most well-meaning of NGOs: *who* was consulted in the forging of agendas? *When*? And *how* were the local people consulted: through what procedures and through what modalities? Were they consulted at all? Do, in short, global civil society actors actually represent people, particularly of the Third World? Or are they self-styled spokespersons of people who do not have even a remote chance of influencing these agendas?

Do these more often than not well-funded and often well-organised civil society actors actually speak from below? Or do they claim to do so in order to gain legitimacy?

Certainly cyber-savvy global activists are influential because they know the language that will win attention and perhaps applause. But it is precisely this that causes unease, for whatever happens to people who do not know any language that may have resonance in the world of international politics? What happens when ordinary human beings do not have access to computers through which civil society actors wage their battles? What happens when activists who feel passionately about certain crucial issues are not in a position to participate in acts of resistance at the annual meetings of the international financial institutions? And now consider the somewhat formidable range of issues that have been taken up by global NGOs. Today they dictate what kind of development should be given to Third World people, what kind of education they should receive, what kind

of democracy should be institutionalised, what rights they should demand and possess, and what they should do to be empowered.

We have cause to worry. For what we see is the collapse of the idea that ordinary men and women are capable of appropriating the political initiative. What we see is the appropriation of political programmes in favour of the agenda of the global civil society actor.

Frankly, it is unclear whether international NGOs strengthen or weaken the role of the community. First, NGO activism, which straddles national boundaries to create global coalitions, is no substitute for self-determining and empowering political action born out of specific experiences. Second, whereas the Third World State has proved notoriously non-responsive to the demands of civil society, it is also a fact that, at moments of crisis, this very civil society has mobilised to hold the state accountable. In December 2001, for instance, the streets of Buenos Aires were filled with agitating and agitated Argentinians who demanded the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa. Even as the country descended into financial chaos and anarchy, even as people banged pots and pans on their balconies, even as the streets of the city overflowed with crowds, and even as deadly riots took the lives

We must ask this uncomfortable question of even the most well-meaning of NGOs: who was consulted in the forging of agendas?

of 30 people, the President had to resign. At some point he was held accountable.

To whom, we may ask, are the international NGOs accountable? Witness, for instance, the response of Lori Wallach, whose organisation Public Citizen orchestrated the battle for Seattle. In an interview published in *Foreign Policy*, she was asked the following question: 'You're referring to the idea of democratic deficits in multilateral organizations . . . Some people argue that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like yours also have a democratic deficit—that you also lack democracy, transparency, and accountability. Who elected you to represent the people at Seattle, and why are you more influential than the elected officials . . .?' The answer Ms Wallach gave was the following: 'Who elected Mr Moore? Who elected Charles Barshefsky? Who elected any of them?' (*Foreign Policy* 2000: 36). This, to put it mildly, is no answer simply because it evades the issue. In another question she was asked who Public Citizen is responsible to. 'Our members', she replied. 'How do they express their oversight?' 'Through their cheque-books', she replied, 'they just stop paying their membership dues' (2000: 39). Note that no longer are people expected to realise their selfhood in and through associational life, their participation is confined to the payment or withdrawal of membership dues.

We have cause for unease. For much of the leadership of global civil society organisations appears to be self-appointed and non-accountable to their members, many of whom are passive and confine their activism to signatures to petitions circulated via e-mail. Also note that, whereas we see huge crowds during demonstrations against the WTO or in alternative forums such as the World Social Forum, between such episodes activity is carried on by a core group of NGOs. It is possible that participants in demonstrations are handed a political platform and an agenda that has been finalised elsewhere. This is hardly either democratic or even political, it may even reek of bureaucratic management of participatory events. It may even render people, as suggested above, consumers of choices made elsewhere.

No longer are people expected to realise their selfhood in and through associational life. Their participation is confined to the payment or withdrawal of membership dues

Moreover, as has been widely observed, international NGOs resist attempts to make their own functioning transparent even as they demand transparency and accountability from international financial organisations. Observers have commented that, since most global NGOs do not issue financial or activity reports or any declaration of objectives, it is difficult to gauge their nature (Scholte 2000: 119). Even if they do issue such statements, does this make their activities more transparent? And remember that it is precisely these organisations, whose own processes of decision-making are closed to public scrutiny, who happen to be in control of people's lives and destinies.

We also need to wonder how democratic the organisations of global civil society are given the great inequalities of resources between the North and the South. It is more than possible that Third World organisations get sidelined when it comes to the making of global agendas. For instance, Hart-Landsberg reports that influential groups such as Public Citizen and leaders of labour organisations in the US focused on keeping China out of the WTO at Seattle, citing exploitative working conditions and the unfair trade practices of the Chinese government. However, no independent movement of Chinese workers has called for international support for a campaign to keep China out of the world body. 'In fact, even organizations operating in Hong Kong that seek to promote independent labour organizing in China have refrained from supporting such a campaign' (Hart-Landsberg 2000:106).

To cite another example, environmental NGOs have persistently campaigned for lower emission levels in the atmosphere through control of polluting industries and vehicular traffic. In Delhi, at the beginning of the new millennium, 'polluting industries' were closed down and vehicles that did not meet the standard laid down were abandoned by a decision of the Supreme Court, which was under pressure from the environmental lobby. However, in the process people were condemned to homelessness, massive hardship, and unemployment (Delhi University 2001). The gap between the demands of environment-conscious NGOs and the need of the

poorer sections of society was just too starkly visible. We discover dissonance in the way Third World activists envisage crucial matters and the way in which global civil society actors largely based in the West view them.

Certainly we need to acknowledge the outstanding services rendered by some global civil society organisations. We should be grateful that some of these groups have brought issues of crucial importance to the top of political agendas. Nevertheless, the domination of global civil society by organised and well-funded NGOs hailing from the West poses some very vexing questions for issues of political representation, political agency, and politics in general. They may even be a part of the project that seeks to disable activism in civil society and depoliticise it. Is it possible that NGOs perhaps unwittingly form an integral part of the same plan that characterises the state and the market? Is it possible that the same logic of power underpins the activities of international civil society actors?



Above: Dependence on US food aid in Mogadishu, Somalia.  
© Crispin Hughes/Panos Pictures.

## Global Civil Society Actors and International Politics and Economics

My second set of questions has to do with whether global civil society actors can counteract deep-rooted structures of global capitalism and the state-centric global order, or provide an alternative to the system. There is a much wider methodological issue that confronts us here: what is the relationship between civil society, whether national or global, and the other two domains of collective existence, namely, the state and the market. For, as suggested above, contemporary political theory tends to assume that different sectors of collective life can counter each other and perhaps even provide an alternative to each other because each of them has a specific *raison d'être*.

Let me begin this part of the argument by suggesting that civil society is not only constituted by the state and the market but also permeated by the same logic that underpins these two spheres. Recall, for a start, that civil society as a peculiarly modern phenomenon *emerges through the same historical processes that generate both the modern impersonal state and the modern market system*. These processes have to do with the separation of the economic and the political, the appropriation of the economy by a private class of proprietors, and the concomitant rise of the institution of private property. They have to do with the emergence of the notion of the autonomous individual and self-directed individualism. They have, further, to do with the dissolution of community as 'face to face' interaction and with the carving out of a space where individuals meet, in the words of Marx, as 'bearers of commodities'. Classical theory called this space 'civil society' which, peopled by legally autonomous individuals who may well be strangers to each other, was marked by impersonal and contractual relations. And all this carried its own problems, as the theorists of early modernity were to tell us in some detail.

For instance, Hegel, arguably *the* most distinguished proponent of civil society, in 1821 was to hail the propensity of modern civil society to enhance freedom in contrast to the 'unfreedom' of pre-modern societies (Hegel 1942). But at the same time he was profoundly ambivalent about the democratic potential of the sphere or of its capacity to institute ethicality in the Greek sense, or what he called

*Sittlichkeit*. For if the material context for the realisation of the self and for the recognition of rights is bourgeois or *bürgerliche* society, this, as he was quick to realise, carried its own momentum. Because even as modern life witnesses a dramatic expansion of the sphere of social interaction in civil society, this interaction is permeated deeply by the ethos of the capitalist market, that of self-serving and instrumental action. And this can pose a problem for the very reproduction of the sphere; it may well disintegrate under the influence of self-centred reasoning, which is the hallmark of the capitalist market system. In sum, Hegel was to teach us an important lesson: that civil society is shot through with the same power equations as the market, for it is constituted by the market system.

More significantly, there is another problem that confronts classical political theory: even as the market constitutes transactions in civil society, the market order presupposes a stable and sturdy civil society in order to function efficiently. Market relations simply need to be embedded in non-market relations in order to function with some measure of success. But not any kind of non-market relations, let me hasten to add, will do. Market transactions need disciplined, predictable, and socialised behaviour as a prerequisite for their successful operation. If Adam Smith put forth his theory of 'moral sentiments' in 1759 (Smith 1976) to accomplish this, a contemporary theorist such as Francis Fukuyama (1975) argues that capitalist accumulation needs the presence of trust. And James Coleman and Robert Putnam suggest that 'softer' social norms that guarantee expectation, such as social capital, should buttress economic transactions, *if* we want the domain of these transactions to expand (Coleman 1988: S95-S120; Putnam 1993; 1995). Civil society and the market, we realise, are dependent on each other; they need not provide an alternative to each other at all.

Therefore, whereas it is perfectly true that global civil society has critiqued the workings of the international economic order, is a critique of corporate managed globalisation, we are compelled to ask, the same as a critique of capital in search of global markets? The problem is that global civil

society tends to be broad-based, comprising as it does many groups with divergent purposes and aims. Kaldor, for instance, accepts that only a few of the protestors at Seattle were actually against globalisation; the others wanted to reform international trade and financial institutions as well as make them accountable (Kaldor 2000: 112). And the same theme was echoed at the World Social Forum that met in Porto Alegre in Brazil in February 2002. The meeting, which was attended by 50,000 delegates and which was meant to be a parallel to the meeting of the World Economic Forum in New York, put forth the idea of an alternative world: 'Another world is possible', went the slogan. However, according to a newspaper report, 'delegates bristle at the WSF being called the "anti-globalisation" meet. They argue that they are not meeting

here to register protests but to work out concrete proposals that will be superior to what will be floated at the New York meeting of the WEF' (*The Hindu*, 3 February 2002: 10).

Actually, the movement against globalisation can be split into (a) radical individuals and groups who oppose capitalism but are rather clueless as well as powerless when it comes to alternatives and (b) established NGOs that work at the margins to 'reform' the system. The latter would rather that the present system is reformed and made more accountable and humane. They consequently focus on institutional reform rather than on an alternative to the system. And the ones that are anti-capitalist globalisation and dream of a better international order are relegated to the fringes of global civil society, dominated as it is by professional bodies who now are partners in world decision-making forums.

Global civil society, it is evident, by and large prefers to work within the parameters of a system that has been found wanting by many critics both from the Third World and from the advanced capitalist world. Given the plural and somewhat contradictory nature of the protest movements, they can hardly provide us with an alternative system. In tandem with the post-Washington Consensus, some global civil society actors would humanise the capitalist system rather than think of another system

Civil society as a peculiarly modern phenomenon emerges through the same historical processes that generate both the modern impersonal state and the modern market system



that may be able to deliver justice and equity. Therefore, they may reform the neo-liberal platform but they are unable to map a new course. And the anti-capitalist globalisation groups are more romantic than pragmatic when it comes to alternatives. We seem to live in a world of disenchantment where activists either refuse to dream dreams of an alternative world system or are doubtful about what they want in its stead. For, as Scholte put it in the context of Seattle, 'halting a new round of trade liberalisation is not the same as building a better world order' (2000: 116). In the meantime liberalisation, privatisation, and exploitation of Third World resources continue to coexist with the rhetoric of human rights, environment, democracy, and what the World Bank now calls the Comprehensive Development Framework.

Global civil society by and large prefers to work within the parameters of a system that has been found wanting by many critics both from the Third World and from the advanced capitalist world

When we come to the state-centric international order, we find that the relationship between states and global civil society is profoundly ambivalent. It is true that global civil society actors have through the techniques of 'naming and shaming' embarrassed individual states and even succeeded in overthrowing individual governments. But it is equally true that states are not at all ceding their power over matters that they consider crucial. Consider the response of the US to the mobilisation of international public opinion in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Political activists were connecting via the Internet, peace marches dotted the landscape from Delhi to Washington to Berlin, and writers were authoring impassioned pieces on why the Bush government should not punish the innocent people of Afghanistan by bombarding the country. And yet the American government went ahead and declared war on Afghanistan, adding to the already considerable woes of the people of that country. The US, which incidentally claims to speak for the 'free world', refused to heed the voice of global civil society and proceeded to violate the freedom of the people of Afghanistan. The sovereignty of the US remained intact despite considerable criticism by civil society actors.

On the other hand, global civil society actors need states and their institutions to substantiate and codify their demands in law. Transnational organisations may critique the practices of states in, say, the field of

human rights, but they also require states to create political and legal frameworks that facilitate setting up of the rule of law, civil and political rights, or environmental protection. Women's groups can hardly demand, say, gender justice without the corresponding demand for state protection and the demand that states set up appropriate institutions for protection of women's rights. Alternatively, civil society groups fighting, say, violations of civil liberties will need the state to punish offenders. They simply will need human rights commissions, sympathetic judges, and a sensitive police to realise their objectives. I could cite a number of other such examples; the point, however, I hope is clear. Efforts in civil society will come to naught unless states codify these efforts in the form of law or regulations. In effect, what I am trying to suggest is that civil society

actors will draw upon states both to redress violation of human rights and to reform civil society itself through enacting laws restricting sexual harassment in the workplace, for example. This again means—and this is a point that is not generally grasped by many current advocates of civil society—that states constitute the limits of civil society, as well as enabling political initiatives in global civil society. In effect, the very states that global civil society supposedly opposes *enable* the latter in the sense that only they can provide the conditions within which the civil society agenda is realised. In effect, vibrant civil societies require strong and stable states as a precondition to their very existence. After all, we hardly expect to find a civil society in countries like Afghanistan and Somalia, where the state itself leads a precarious existence as a result of the civil wars that have wrecked the countries and their polities. The shade of Hegel, who suggested that the state is a precondition for the existence of civil society, looms especially large here.

Finally, we should recall that not only Third World governments but also informed critics belonging to that part of the world argue that the values of global civil society reflect those held by a narrow group of influential states in the international order. Any attempt to institutionalise these values in states of the Third World, is seen as an imposition. This is particularly true of human rights, which are considered to be embedded in a set of norms and historical processes specific to

Notions of governance remain devoid of politics as self-realisation even as global civil society fails to have an impact on the unequal distribution of global wealth

Western Europe and the US and therefore inappropriate for other societies. Incensed critics regard the imposition

of human rights upon societies that may possess other notions of how relationships between individuals and governments should be arranged as an extension of imperialism. Whether these critiques are valid or invalid is not the issue here; the point is that global civil society actors, particularly human rights organisations, are seen as embedded within an ideology that is highly Euro-centric: liberal democracy. For even though some of these

organisations have moved in the recent past to embrace ideas of social and economic rights, which for long have been seen as the preconditions of meaningful civil and political rights, it is the latter, not the former, that inform the consensus on human rights.

This really means that global civil society actors reflect the consensus that liberal democracy is the only form of democracy that remains of value in the aftermath of the fall of communism in 1989. Therefore, even as we accept that global civil society actors can launch, and have launched, a critique of the practices of some states, we must ponder upon whether, in doing so, they do not codify values that belong to another set of states. Can global civil society transcend the existing tension between the Western world and the Third World that permeates the international legal, political, and economic order? Or will it merely work within the parameters of a system that has already been laid down by a few powerful states? Can global civil society ever be truly global? Or is it fated, as national civil societies are, to function within the framework laid down by hegemonic states?

## Conclusion

In sum, global civil society has managed to give a new vocabulary to the state-centric and market-oriented international order. The achievement is not meaningless, for at least international financial and trade institutions have become more responsive to public opinion, they have reformed earlier strategies of corporate managed globalisation, they have added issues of social concern to their agendas, and they have called for greater governance of

globalisation. But notions of governance remain devoid of politics as self-realisation even as global civil society fails to have an impact on the unequal distribution of global wealth. In the meantime, the WTO concentrates on the widest and fastest possible liberalisation of the flow of goods across borders.

Therefore, the notion that global civil society can institutionalise normative structures that run counter to the principles of powerful states or equally powerful corporations, which govern international transactions, should be treated with a fair amount of caution. Of course, actors in global civil society have made a difference, as actors in national civil society make a difference. But they function as most human actors do, within the realm of the possible, not within the realm of the impossible. Ultimately, global civil society actors work within inherited structures of power that they may modify or alter but seldom transform. But this we can understand only if we locate global civil society in its constitutive context: a state-centric system of international relations that is dominated by a narrow section of humanity and within the structures of international capital that may permit dissent but do not permit any transformation of their own agendas.

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