

Interpreting Global Civil Society

Rupert Taylor¹

This paper argues that, to date, current research into global civil society suffers from weak description and inadequate theorization. The way forward requires interpreting global civil society as a progressive multiorganization field with innovative network forms and transformative purpose.

KEY WORDS: global civil society; international nongovernmental organizations; social movements; multiorganizational field.

INTRODUCTION

The term “global civil society” is now fairly commonplace—within academia, in the mass media, and amongst a broader public. This has been of recent occasion—within the last decade or so—and at least one commentator has remarked that the provenance of the term is not well grounded (Waterman, 1996, p. 170) and that “global civil society” has not yet passed “through the forge of theoretical clarification or the sieve of public debate.” Indeed, when employed, the term has generally served as a kind of catchall term for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or social movements, of all shapes and sizes, operating in the international realm.

Typical is the view of *The Economist* (1999), which refers to a diverse and diffuse range of actors, campaigns, and events as falling within the ambit of global civil society: NGOs and citizen’s groups; 50 Years is Enough and Jubilee 2000; the Rio Earth Summit and the battle of Seattle. Here, as elsewhere, the ever-increasing number of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) is emphasized to signify the advent of a global civil society. The figures vary, but the trend is clear. One of the most authoritative sources—*Yearbook of International Organizations* (2002)—cites a figure of 25,540 INGOs, compared with around 6,000 in 1990

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Wits 2050, South Africa. E-mail: rupert_taylor@yahoo.com

(at the turn of the twentieth century the number of INGOs was put at less than 200, and before the Second World War, in 1939, some 700).

The rise in number of INGOs has been spurred by increased scope for NGO involvement, participation, and networking in, and through, the United Nations (UN)—especially through the holding of parallel summits at major UN conferences. International relief and development NGOs are now responsible for delivering more aid than is the UN system. And more generally, increased ties between NGOs and international governmental organizations (IGOs) have resulted in the growing formation of coalitions and networks to push nation-states to implement progressive reform.

Action has been mobilized around issues of global concern, whether it be, for example, relating to human rights, the environment, international trade, or core labor standards. Today, many of the larger INGOs promoting global campaigns are well known: Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, *Médecins sans frontières*, Oxfam, and Plan International. And international organizational campaigns that have hit the headlines in recent years include the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the call for a Tobin-type tax by the France-based civic movement ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transaction for the Aid of Citizens), the Jubilee 2000 “third world” debt forgiveness campaign, and transnational alliances in the global fight against HIV/AIDS (as in securing the use of generic drug treatment) (Clark, 2003, forthcoming).

More spectacular have been a series of mass demonstrations around the world, directed at challenging misguided or undemocratic policies and projects of the major institutions supporting and driving the debilitating practices of neoliberal globalization associated with Washington Consensus politics: the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank—“the big three,” as well as the G-8. In this regard, events in Seattle (the United States) and Genoa (Italy) are both momentous and portentous.

In Seattle, from November 29 to December 3, 1999 (N29-D3), protests from a wide-ranging coalition of organizations and movements—at the center of which was labor, the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations)—involved around 50,000 people organized in over 500 protest groups. This hastened the collapse of the Millennium Round meetings of the WTO; with protest mimicked in cities across more than 20 countries. And in Genoa 3 days of demonstrations—July 19–21, 2001 (J19-21)—against a G-8 summit in the city, saw some 300,000 protesters taking to the streets. Genoa, with rings of steel, sealed and restricted zones, and intimidating police action—including the death of protester Carlos Guiliano, presented scenes foretold in bleakest science fiction. No longer can the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and G-8 hope to meet without confronting mass protest—unless, of course, meetings are held in the most remote or repressive of places.

Beyond challenging major IGOs, concerted pressure has also been put—through exercising consumer or labor power—on the renegade or corrupt market-driven practices of transnational corporations. Notable cases include Nike's exploitation of sweatshop labor in low-wage countries, Royal Dutch/Shell's disregard for the rights of the Ogoni people in Nigeria, and McDonald's handling of the McLibel trial—or to refer to these corporations in terms of their all-pervasive logos, “The Swoosh, the Shell and the Arches” (Klein, 2001, pp. 365–396).

Thus, the domain of global civil society is a complex multifaceted one. The meaning of these developments, however, has so far been barely grasped by social scientific inquiry. In fact, if anything, research has tended to constrain understanding and served to hinder full interpretation of global civil society. Unfortunately, current research has done little to illuminate what is best seen as an active and ever-emerging multiorganizational field marked by innovative network forms and transformative purpose.

CURRENT RESEARCH

The kind of “grab-bag” descriptive approach so evident in mass media accounts has also been pursued in third sector scholarship, where the dominant tendency has been to eschew normative considerations and theory building in favor of objective data collection. The editors of the *Global Civil Society Yearbook* (2001)—Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, and Mary Kaldor—put it starkly, “we believe that the normative content is too contested to be able to form the basis for any operationalisation of the concept” (p. 21). And yet, from a progressive standpoint, the key motivating force of global civil society is its moral concern to create a better world through advocating a fairer, freer, and more just global order—whether it be with regard to economic, political, or social issues. So, how far are we going to get within a normative vacuum?

The answer, it would seem; is descriptively—too far, theoretically—not far enough. For, with global civil society defined as “the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organizations, networks, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market and operating *beyond* the confines of national societies, polities, and economies” (Anheier et al., 2001, p. 21), we confront a universe that could take an eon to grasp—as it would include all the aforementioned 25,540 INGOs, and more besides. The scope of analysis has to be defined with more rigor and precision than this: for what then? What would be the meaning of this universe?—especially when not all actors that would fall within this definition are tied to progressive values to further a better world. Surely, empirical social research must be combined with moral and political understanding (consider Horkheimer, 1972); questions of organizational form cannot be separated from questions of organizational ideology and practice. Partly in recognition of this, Anheier et al. (2001) do suggest a typology in terms of the ideological positions taken on core issues relating to (an undertheorized notion of) globalization—“supporters,”

“rejectionists,” “reformists,” “alternatives” (pp. 13–15)—but having posed this, it is developed no further.

Within third sector research, this problem of descriptive inflation is made worse by a degree of conceptual conflation. To present the sum of discrete country-by-country descriptions of civil society around the world is not homologous to global civil society; nonetheless this is the overriding approach of Lester Salamon et al.’s (2000) *Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector*. As the size of civil society is expanding country-by-country, we may indeed talk of a “global associational revolution” (Salamon, 1994, p. 109), but this is not, *per se*, the same thing as saying that a global civil society is coalescent.

If this state of affairs is not disconcerting enough, those schooled in mainstream political sociology have come up with a counter-paradigmatic position that argues that the term “global civil society” cannot be used to guide analysis. This position has been put forward on the grounds that as there is no global state, how can there—by definition—be a “global civil society”? Drawing, in particular, on the insights offered by social movement theory on resource mobilization and political opportunity structures (e.g., McAdam et al., 1996), it is asserted that the sociological preconditions for a global civil society are lacking. That is, without a global state there is limited resource infrastructure to support global civil society organization, and few openings to build—through face-to-face interaction—the close-knit social networks required for transnational identity formation and collective action. In particular, given the state-centric view of politics framing mainstream political sociology (Nash, 2000, chapter 1), the dictates of nation-state sovereignty—supported by the persistence of national, linguistic, and cultural differences—are seen to trump any form of global power.

On such a basis, Sidney Tarrow (1998), one of the leading scholars in the field, maintains that the prospects for global civil society are weak. This, however, is a somewhat remarkable conclusion, as it is clearly the case that relatively little research has been done on social movements operating beyond the nation-state. The one widely cited work—Robin Cohen and Shirin Rai’s (2000) edited collection *Global Social Movements*—is largely descriptive and does little to address theoretical concerns. And where comparative analysis has been pursued, it has primarily sought to explore cross-national differences—not a global context (see, e.g., Kriesi, 1996). More than this, the view of Tarrow begs the question: if, indeed, the collective action problems are so severe, how *do* we account for the Seattle protests or J19-21 Genoa? Here, to tie global civil society to the existence of a global state is not especially compelling; for, what drives global activism is that “we have a system that might be called *global governance without global government*, one in which a few institutions—the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO—and a few players—the finance, commerce, and trade ministers, closely linked to certain financial and commercial interests—dominate the scene” (Stiglitz, 2002, pp. 21–22).

Generally, the main approach to studying organizations and movements operating beyond the nation-state has been through descriptive case studies of individual organizations or campaigns. At the forefront stand Ann Florini's (ed.) (2000) *The Third Force* and Michael Edwards and John Gaventa's (eds.) (2001) *Global Citizen Action*. Here, reflecting mainstream focus, the tendency has been to see cases as very much embedded in national-level civil society and politics. For example, in the case of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines—which resulted in the Ottawa treaty which entered into force on March 1, 1999—it is concluded that “although the cause was global, the focus of the work was mostly domestic,” and that “the initiative and readiness to start projects had to come from the national civil society” (Mekata, 2000, pp. 148, 153; see also Scott, 2001). Elsewhere, Marcos Ancelovici's study of ATTAC is also a good example of how analysis is overdetermined by mainstream state-centric social movement literature (Ancelovici, 2002); for here the driving force of ATTAC is primarily presented in terms of domestic (French) issues, and is understood to be strongly structured by “previous national contentious episodes” (p. 454).

As a result of their descriptive nature and paradigmatic predilection the individual case study approach lacks a sense of the totality of the multiorganizational field within which cases fall, and without which understanding cannot be significantly advanced. A sense of just how far there is to go is reflected in Florini and Simmons' attempt to frame the collection of case studies presented in *The Third Force* outside any understanding of “global civil society” on the formalistic grounds that no organization is “truly global, in the sense of involving groups and individuals from every part of the world” (Florini and Simmons, 2000, p. 7).

More sophisticated is the work on “transnational advocacy networks” by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in *Activists Beyond Borders* (1998). Drawing on the political opportunity structures approach, Keck and Sikkink engage in inductive reasoning from a number of case studies—human rights, environmentalism, and women's freedom from violence—to show how the success of international advocacy NGOs derives from the “boomerang effect” of issue networking, whereby international norms are advanced through national NGOs networking with INGOs who exercise more effective suasion within the former's host country.

A limitation here, as Paul Nelson (2002) has argued, is that this approach is too restrictive in that it only covers specific issue areas and forms of INGO political action—it does not apply to financial policy and trade issues. The approach is biased toward middle-class activism (Waterman, 1999), with labor issues “very much in the background” (Evans, 2000, p. 233). It makes sense, therefore, to see what Keck and Sikkink present as a particular part of a broader multiorganizational field. Keck and Sikkink, though, are not concerned to theorize network structures and do not positively link their work to global civil society (1998, pp. 32–34). They maintain that “Modern networks are . . . vehicles for communicative and political

exchange, with the potential for mutual transformation of participants” (p. 214), but to deliver on this insight the relationship of these transnational advocacy networks to global civil society has to be addressed and unpacked.

Altogether then, there has been little attempt to articulate a systematic understanding of the multiple overlapping organizations and movements that progressively promote global civil society. What has happened is that rather than recognize that perhaps it is the case that we have not yet thought through the best means by which to offer a social scientific interpretation of global civil society, emphasis has been placed on seeking to understand new developments through a mix of descriptive empiricism and pregiven theory—an emphasis that has done more to hinder than to advance insight.

THE WAY FORWARD

What is required to interpret global civil society is what existing approaches have failed to offer: namely, a global approach for, and to, studying a global phenomenon. An approach that—more than has hitherto been the case—embraces interpretative and contextual research methods to probe people’s subjective experiences, perceptions, and feelings. First and foremost, this requires moving beyond state-centric perspectives to view the domain of global civil society as a complex and highly dynamic multiorganizational field in which the intrinsic meaning of what is experienced by actors within this field forms a central part of analysis. This multiorganizational field encompasses both those organizations that tend to work within the INGO and nation-state system and are involved in complex multilateralism, and those movements—antineoliberal and anticorporate alike—committed to street protest and other forms of direct action. The former do not stand in marked opposition to the latter—Seattle, Genoa, and the rest would not have been possible without broad collective action (see, e.g., Neale, 2002).

Research has barely begun to focus on, and reveal how, the work of those organizations lobbying and agitating for progressive change within the WTO, IMF, and World Bank are linked to the campaigns on the street. What distinctions can be drawn between NGOs and social movements in terms of their degree and type of involvement inside or outside of established economic and political institutions? How are different forms of collective action interrelated? How symmetrical are power relations? And to what extent are antagonistic relationships present?

Much needs to be done to trace the complex patterns and dynamics of networks within this multiorganizational field, at both a micro- and a macrolevel: from the personal to the local, from the national to the international (consider Fox and Brown, 1998; Scholte and Schnabel, 2002). In general: What is the autonomy of this field? To what extent do actors transcend national or state policy processes and interests? To what extent do the hegemonic designs of those leading the Washington Consensus constrain progressive action (consider Chossudovsky, 1997)? To what

extent do the politics of the international aid system restrain progressive work (consider Tvedt, 2002)?

Moreover, it has yet to be fully recognized that what is distinctive to global civil society is its innovative network forms and transformative purpose. The rise of new and complex organizational configurations challenge the terms of scholarly debate—quite significantly. New technology is enabling more and more INGOs to transform their global structures and governance, as through split headquarter functions, ring structure, or implementing Southern majority requirements in decision making (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001, chapter 5). And the Internet, in particular, has made much progressive global political action possible.

Virtual interaction through the Internet does not seem significantly less important in promoting effective mobilization than direct face-to-face interaction. New technological advances have altered the nature of social ties—especially with regard to the meaning of copresence (Cerulo, 1997). For example, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which linked 1,000 NGOs in around 60 countries, “never possessed a bank account or even a street address” (Mekata, 2000, p. 172). More dynamic forms of networking tied to means of communication that stimulate replication—such as “swarms”—have transformed the very nature of collective action. The label NGO “swarm” has been used to refer to new horizontal forms of organization that are decentralized, fluid, and multidriven clusters of NGOs, linked and mobilized through the Internet, that swarm in on a target with dramatic effect (Brecher et al., 2000, chapter 7).

Alongside all this, there is an emerging progressive global consciousness. Increasingly people are aware of how social issues—near or far—that were once differentially focused and geographically bounded are interpenetrated and interdependent. There is recognition of how everything affects everything else, such that “different campaigns don’t compete: they reinforce each other” (Neale, 2002, p. 105). Mass demonstrations have brought together people that previously had little to unite them; as, for example, in Seattle where trade unionists and environmentalists, “teamsters” and “turtles,” found common cause (Lichbach and Almeida, 2002). One way of putting this is to say that a sociological imagination is in formation on a global scale (Mills, 1959). Undoubtedly, this has profound political consequences—especially with regard to nation-state sovereignty (consider Scholte, 1999).

Already, a point of convergence for many activists is the network of organizations and movements constituting the World Social Forum (WSF)—an initiative to study, discuss, and propose global alternatives, such as the taxation of speculative capital and models for more sustainable development. The first WSF was held January 25–30, 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and attracted some 20,000 people. The second WSF, held January 31 to February 5, 2002, Porto Alegre, drew well over 50,000 people from over 120 countries. Many of those organizations and movements that had participated in the Seattle protests—such as 50 Years is Enough, AFL-CIO, ATTAC, Friends of the Earth, and Jubilee 2000—were in

attendance. At a virtual level, the WSF website (www.forumsocialmundial.org.br), which translates from Portuguese into English, French, and Castilian, registered half a million hits a day. Most significantly, the 2002 WSF “was the first time global civil society had come together on its own terms and around its own agenda” (Heinrich and Naidoo, 2002, p. 19; see also Hardt, 2002).

What is happening is that the multiorganizational field of global civil society is gaining momentum. Each and every action is building on the next, with increasing interconnectedness, creating synergy. As such, global civil society is in a constant state of becoming; for, as Katharine Ainger (2001), coeditor of the *New Internationalist*, has put this, “we need to become the change we wish to see enacted.” It is, though, precisely this transformative dimension—the creation of a fairer, freer, and more just future in the present through prefigurative politics—that has not been captured in existing social scientific approaches. Not only must such developments be understood in their own terms, but also theory must be advanced to identify, understand, and advance the emancipatory potential of global civil society. For, what seems to have been overlooked is how the task of “epic” political theory (Wolin, 1969) and the praxis of global civil society share a common goal: the creation of a better world. All told, this is a major task, best pursued through collaborative research—involving both academics and practitioners—at a global level.

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