

Global Civil Society

Concept: Global Civil Society

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Description The concept of civil society is a contested one, and scholars disagree over whether or not to include, for instance, corporations or other for-profit actors or non-political associations. I consider civil society to include the spaces of social life that lie outside of markets and states. Of course, these areas overlap and influence each other, but each offers a different logic that guides the actions of participants. Thus, in markets, actors focus on maximizing profits, in states they emphasize governance and policy, and in civil society they are motivated by both practical and emotional needs for social solidarity.

Globalization has led many people to speak of a "global civil society." This is because the integration of national economies into a single global economy fundamentally transforms how markets operate. Similarly, growing numbers of international treaties and international political organizations generate new modes of governance that require people to organize differently. Partly in response to these changes (but also contributing to them), we see that growing numbers of people are forming transnational ties outside of markets and states. Thus a global civil society parallels and complements those found in national contexts. Scholte (2000) characterizes global civil society by its emphasis on transnational issues and by its reliance on forms of communication, organization, and identity that all transcend national boundaries. Global civil society is therefore a space where people can organize and act collectively, and across national borders, to pursue shared aims (Wapner 1996).

Michael Burawoy is not alone in viewing states and markets as "tyrannical" in their demands upon civil society (Burawoy 2004). Many political leaders prefer taxpayers and soldiers who do not question their authority. Market actors want compliant workers that help maximize the profits of investors, and their disproportionate wealth enables them to enjoy considerable success in promoting state policies that favour companies over workers. But there would be little of interest in any society made up of political subjects or workers who simply reflected the needs of states or markets. Culture and politics and all we know of social life require free spaces where people interact and help define both the character and the boundaries of states and markets. Civil society, Burawoy argues, is "colonized and corroded" by state and market, but it is also a space for contesting these forces. Whereas the power of markets rests in their economic power, and the power of states in their control of legitimate coercion, civil society's power rests upon shared values (Korten 1990).

Because civil society is autonomous from the state, it is difficult to argue that it is necessarily national in scope. However, even as globalization encourages more transnational ties across different societies, it is clear that global civil society is not likely to be representative of and accessible to all the world's people. We should also ask how much this civil society is integrated through regularized communications and through shared ideologies and cultures. Is global civil society robust, or will national identities and boundaries divide it if we face new challenges to global solidarity, as was seen in the demise of the Socialist International under nationalist pressures of the world wars? Some analysts (Rootes 2002; Tarrow 2001) question the very presence of a global civil society by pointing to the limits of its global-ness and the weakness of the actual transnational interactions it incorporates. They emphasize that national level processes and ideologies still dominate much of the discourse and strategic thinking of activists, who continue to organize around nationally defined aims.

Global civil society is best viewed along a continuum, where increasing numbers and frequencies of relevant transnational interactions — reflected in the numbers of associations or meetings and conferences — both indicate and contribute to its strengthening, while a decline in such interactions weakens it. By these measures, global civil society has flourished in recent years. For instance, the number of transnational civil society organizations rose from less than a thousand in the 1950s to around 60,000 today (Pianta and Silva 2003). These organizations are also more representative of the world's people, even though there are still significant inequalities in representation from poorer and from non-Western countries (Boli, Loya, and Loftin 1999; Smith 2004). And perhaps most significantly, global civil society is becoming more "networked," with rapid growth in the number of ties between different transnational and national organizations as well as between civil society groups and international agencies (Smith 2004; Bennett 2005).

Significantly, most of these organizations report holding more frequent international meetings, representing exponential increases in the numbers of transnational interpersonal interactions that provide a foundation for civil society. Also, since 2001, civil society groups have been meeting at an annual World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil and in Mumbai, India. The World Social Forum now attracts over 100,000 activists, and it has spawned the creation of regional and local social fora that help expand the range of people who can participate in what is being called the "social forum process" (Teivainen 2002). Analyzing transnational meetings of civil society groups in 2002 and early 2003, Pianta and Silva concluded that these events are much larger, more coordinated and more inclusive of a range of divisive global issues. Moreover, global meetings are more frequent and more likely to take place in the Global South (Pianta and Silva 2003). There is growing evidence of a culture of global civil society that further blurs distinctions between the national and global by encouraging "flexible identities and multiple belongings," that help unite people despite

(and often in celebration of) their differences (della Porta 2005).

Where citizens are free to join voluntary associations for leisure or for religious or professional affinity, they are also more likely to have access to skills and spaces for other forms of civil and political engagement. Thus, all forms of transnational associational activity help enrich global political life. Global civil society enables people to think about themselves in a transnational social context while helping them develop the social and political skills (as well as the organizational structures) to be actors in that transnational space. Without this important civic foundation, globalization can never be democratic.

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