Contradictions Implicit in the Idea of Global Civil Society

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The concept of global civil society (GCS) has become of the most used terminologies used in world politics during the last decades. However, the term conveys a significant amount of ambiguity. What are the contradictions implicit in the idea of GCS? This is the question that this article seeks to uncover. It is argued that because GCS is relatively in an embryonic stage, there are fundamental contradictions within its global, civil and societal dimensions.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first part analyses the global face of civil society. The second segment shows the contradictions implicit in the civil dimension of GCS. Finally, using particularly the case of Vietnam, the last section illustrates some societal incongruities of GSC. It is concluded that the improvements necessary to advance GCS are significant; however, its potentialities are major as well.

The Global Dimension: Geographical and Ideological Limits

The growth of transnational movements in recent decades has been extraordinary. NGOs (non-governmental organisations), which are frequently considered to be the most representative actors of GCS, grew from 32 in 1874, to more than 50,000 at the turn of this century (Anheier, 2001, p. 37). Nevertheless, there are reasons to be sceptical about the global dimension of civil society. First, the term global may be inadequate for many NGOs which only have regional activity. Besides, "national level processes and ideologies still dominate much of the discourse and strategic thinking of activists who continue to organise around nationally defined aims" (Smith, 2005, p. 622). This is why several scholars have preferred to talk about a transnational rather than a global civil society (e.g. Price, 2003, pp. 579-606).

Second, civil society is highly concentrated in the western countries, which implies that it does not fully represent some parts of the world. In effect, 60% of the secretariats of NGOs are located in the European Union (EU), and 22 out of the 25 most active countries participating in NGOs can be considered western/industrialised states. France, for instance, lodges more than 3,500 NGOs, whereas in states such as Oman and North Korea were situated in average less than 160 in 2005 (Smith 2005, p. 622).

Third, while the term global should imply some sort of unity, the reality is that there is very little consensus of what GCS is. Thus, while the Greeks did not differentiate between the state and civil society (Pelczynksi, 1984, p. 61), and Karl Marx restrained the concept to economic realm (Marx, 1932); Gramsci defined it as a non-economic and non-state area (1999, pp. 494, 506). But the confusion has not been resolved yet even nowadays. For John Keane, for example, GCS is certainly non-governmental; but, it encompasses businesses (2003, p. 18). Neera Chandhoke, on the other hand, is very suspicious about the autonomy of civil society from the state (2004, p. 60). Additionally, there is no consensus eve about the voluntaristic charter of civil society. Louise Amoore and Paul Langly, for instance, warn us about "the assumption of global civil society as a voluntary association…" (2004, pp. 94-96).

Finally, the term anti-globalisation, which is one of the main movements of GCS, is contradictory to the word global. How can civil society be called global while it encompasses many anti-global movements? It is ironic that most of the anti-globalisation movements around the world are exceptionally global. First, because they frequently encompass

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people from almost the entire world, and second because they usually take advantage of global communications and transportations in order to accomplish their aims.

The four contradictions of the term global applied to civil society are due to the relative newness of the concept. Although the concept of civil society goes back until the Greeks, it was only after dissidents in the modern era struggled against authoritarian governments in Eastern Europe ad Latina America that the term re-emerged. Moreover, its linking with the word global is even more recent, it dates to the post-Cold War (Srinivas, 2005, p. 744). Indeed, it is because of the newness of the idea of GCS that there is no consensus about its meaning, that NGOs are still very concentrated in certain parts of the world and that many of them have not fully become global. Yet, since the turn of the 20th century these patterns seem to be changing. NGOs are diversifying their location and increasing their membership in non-western regions (Anheier, 2001, p. 39). In addition, while there are many NGOs that do not surpass a regional level in their activities, it would be inappropriate to them transnational (instead of global). This is the case for example of some organisations like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the Red Cross, or Save the Children.

Uncivility Within Civility: Which Values?

Some academics argue that if GCS is defined in terms of non-state subjects, then "…we will have to acknowledge that some non-state actors are not particularly civil." (Srinivas, 2005, p. 746). This is not necessarily the case because GCS connotes a sense of civility. Thus, it would not be logical to add Al Qaeda or mafias within GCS. However, who defies what is civil and what is not? In 1521 the 'civilised' Spanish Empire under the command of Hernan Cortes killed thousands of people of the 'uncivilised' Empire of the Aztecs and other surrounding native peoples (Donovan, 2013, p. 15) .

Certainly the meaning of civility has changed significantly today. While in the past the word used to be synonymous of politeness, in contradiction to rudeness; today the term has different meanings. "It means not only "non violent, but also "respectful of others", tolerant", "even generous"." (Keane, 2003, p. 199). Yet, even with this kind of approach, the limits of civility are hardly defined. Take the example of mafias. At first glance it appears clear that they are not part of GCS even though they might be non-governmental and at times global; but if one takes a closer look at their activities some of them are rather civilised. In Mexico for example, these people very often give significant monetary contributions to churches and poor suburbs (Pimentel, 1999, p. 22). Are these activities within the category of civil? Is it necessary for non-governmental transnational actors to be 'good' all the time in order to be included in GCS? What are 'good' and what are 'bad' actions? Again, there is no consensus among scholars. Some argue that the concept of GCS does not embrace uncivil acts (Anheier et.al., 2012, p. 14), while others replay that, actually, conflict is central to the notion (Munck, 2002, p. 354).

It appears necessary to add the element of civility to GCS; nevertheless, if a normative approach is taken, the risk to exclude ideals o principles from certain actors is high. In this sense, some have asserted that the concept of GCS can hardly carry universal values because it is western and "…can serve as a code-word or cover for capitalism." (Wood, 1990, p. 65). It is true that currently GCS is primarily present in western states; however, it is also correct that it is at an infant sage, and expanding globally. And second, although there may be some actions of GCS that are pro-capitalism, one of the main movements of the GCS is precisely against it. Indeed, GCS is frequently an ambiguous space occupied by contradictive interests. Thus, it is mistaken and simplistic to affirm either that GCS is pure pro or anti-capitalism.

The Social Element: A Non-Governmental Democratic Structure?

According to John Keane, the society dimension of GCS refers to a "…non-governmental constellation of many institutionalised structures, associations and networks within witch individual and group actors are interrelated and functionally interdependent." (2003, p. 11). In other words, the society element denotes a space of numerous relations among multiple non-governmental actors. However, the governmental autonomy of GCS varies considerably in every country. In the case of Vietnam, for instance, freedom of assembly is one of the most remarkable rights established by the 1992 Constitution, but in practice there is no legal space in the country to create

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autonomous organisations. Professional institutions, religious and charity associations, health care organisations and even the media are part of the institutional structure of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Put simply, within the country, the Party has absorbed the entire civil society organisation and when there is open dissent that threatens its interests, repression is used as an efficient instrument (Blanc, 2004, pp. 157-159).

Hence, the example of Vietnam illustrates that NGOs are not always autonomous from the state. Thus, propositions new terms such as "…GONGOs (government-organised NGOS), DONGOs (donor-organised NGOs), and QUANGOs (quasi NGOs)", have been made (Sikkink, 2002, p. 312). Moreover, the case of Vietnam demonstrates that the state remains crucial in the progress of GCS. In effect, "global civil society actors need states and their institutions to substantiate and codify their demands in law" (Chandhoke, 2002, p. 74).

Specifically, democratic states tend to be a better space for GCS. In these kinds of countries, GCS is better able to highlight abuses of multilateral institutions or state, expand the agenda of world affairs, proposed and redefine international norms, and demand for more democratic procedures in the world system. Yet, paradoxically the praxis of GCS does not always correspond with its democratic demands. First, because many NGOs while asking for greater democratisation are not internally democratic. This is evident with the lack of opportunities that many of them offer to their members in order to participate more in the activities in which the organisations are involved. Most of the time, these players speak on behalf of their members without even consulting them. Furthermore, NGOs leaders are commonly self elected and indefinitely (Aart, 2004, pp. 231-232).

Second, GCS actors often lack transparency and accountability. Repeatedly, NGOs demand these characteristics from other global actors and yet a considerable number of them do not publish their financial activities (Aart, 2001, p. 22). Finally, there is a shortage of representation of people and issues around the world. Indeed, GCS do not address all global problems and do not provide (yet?) the opportunity for all world citizens to participate in their activities. However, GCS is not fully developed yet. While it is not a panacea to all humankind problems, it has the potential to expand considerably and become a more efficient counter-balancing force to the dominant actors in world affairs.

Conclusions

There are significant contradictions implicit in the idea of GCS. Globally, the term can be inadequate because most NGOs are only transnational and located win the western countries. Additionally, there is no agreement about the term GCS and there is an incongruent terminology in the anti-globalisation movement of 'global' civil society. Civilly, it is difficult to delineate the framework of what is civil and what is not. Furthermore, GCS has been accused to reflect only western values. Socially, there are contradictions about the non-governmental character of GCS and the accomplishment of the democratic discourse of NGOs

In definitive, there are many improvements to be done for the idea of GCS. Certainly it is not a panacea of all human tribulations and its current power should not be exaggerated. However, its potentiality must not be understated either because it may do important contributions to global governance. After all, GCS is only in an early stage at the present time.

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