The Idea of Global Civil Society

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The idea of global civil society

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I feel very honoured to be giving the Martin Wight memorial lecture. Although I never met Martin Wight, his written work had a deep influence on my own thinking. He studied international relations from the perspective of the history of ideas, and he tried to show how we might interpret events and trends by studying different, competing traditions; as he put it, 'by joining in the conversation'.[1] It is from this methodology that I have learned so much, even though the traditions of thought I favour are probably different from those favoured by Martin Wight.

I would probably be put in the category 'soft revolutionist' or possibly 'cosmopolitan'. I certainly would not object to being called a Kantian. But what I want to argue here is that this tradition is much more realistic than it was three decades ago, when Martin Wight was writing, because of the profound changes that have occurred in the world in the interim—changes we lump together under the rubric of 'globalization'. Martin Wight argued that one cannot talk properly about international relations before the advent of the state. What I think is happening today is that the growing interconnectedness of states, the emergence of a system of global governance, and the explosion of the movements, groups, networks and organizations that engage in a global or transnational public debate, have called into question the primacy of states.

This does not mean the demise of states. On the contrary, I think that states will continue to be the juridical repository of sovereignty, although sovereignty will be much more conditional than before—increasingly dependent on both domestic consent and international respect. Rather, it means that the global system (and I use the term 'global system' rather than 'international relations') is increasingly composed of layers of political institutions, individuals, groups and even companies, as well as states and international institutions.

The term 'global civil society' has only really come into use in the past ten years—although Kant had referred to the possibility of a universal civil society.

* This is a revised version of the Martin Wight memorial lecture, delivered on 31 October 2002 at the University of Sussex.

[1] Martin Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs and Leicester University Press, 1991), p. 1.

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My aim in this article is to explore the evolution of that idea and how it challenges the concept of international relations. I will start with a thumbnail sketch of the changing meaning of civil society. I will describe the reinvention of civil society simultaneously in Latin America and eastern Europe, and how its meaning at this juncture differed from earlier meanings. I then want to say something about how the idea has changed again in the 1990s and the competing versions of it that now exist. Finally, I will ask whether September 11 and the war in Iraq represent a defeat for the idea—a reversion to international relations.

Changing meanings of civil society

Civil society is a modern concept although, like all great political ideas, it can be traced back to Aristotle. (One of Martin Wight's key themes was that ideas and concepts keep recurring throughout history. You think you've had a new idea and almost invariably somebody else had it before you—usually Aristotle.) For early modern thinkers, there was no distinction between civil society and the state. Civil society was a type of state characterized by a social contract. Civil society was a society governed by laws, based on the principle of equality before the law, in which everyone (including the ruler—at least in the Lockean conception) was subject to the law; in other words, a social contract agreed among the individual members of society. It was not until the nineteenth century that civil society became understood as something distinct from the state. It was Hegel who defined civil society as the intermediate realm between the family and the state, where the individual becomes a public person and, through membership in various institutions, is able to reconcile the particular and the universal. For Hegel, civil society was 'the achievement of the modern world—the territory of mediation where there is free play for every idiosyncrasy, every talent, every accident of birth and fortune and where waves of passion gust forth, regulated only by reason glinting through them'.[2] Thus Hegel's definition of civil society included the economy and was to be taken up by Marx and Engels, who saw civil society as the 'theatre of history'.

The definition narrowed again in the twentieth century, when civil society came to be understood as the realm not just between the state and the family but occupying the space outside the market, state and family—in other words, the realm of culture, ideology and political debate. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci is the thinker most associated with this definition. He was preoccupied with the question of why it was so much easier to have a communist revolution in Russia than in Italy. His answer was civil society. In Italy, he said, 'there was a proper relation between state and society and, and when the state trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed.'[3] His strategy for the

[2] Quoted in John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Civil society and the political imagination in Africa: critical perspectives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 3.

[3] Quoted in John Ehrenberg, *Civil society: the critical history of an idea* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), p. 209.

Italian Communist Party, which, in fact, was followed right up until the 1980s, was to gain positions in civil society—in universities, in the media and so on—so as to challenge the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. It was Gramsci who drew the distinction between hegemony, based on consent, and domination, based on coercion.

Despite the changing of the content of the term, I want to suggest that all these different definitions had a common core meaning. They were about a rule-governed society based on the consent of individuals; or, if you like, a society based on a social contract among individuals. The changing definitions of civil society expressed the different ways in which consent was generated in different periods, and the different issues that were important at different times. In other words, civil society, according to my definition, is the process through which individuals negotiate, argue, struggle against or agree with each other and with the centres of political and economic authority. Through voluntary associations, movements, parties, unions, the individual is able to act publicly. Thus, in the early modern period, the main concern was civil rights—freedom from fear. Hence civil society was a society where laws replace physical coercion, arbitrary arrest, etc. In the nineteenth century, the issue was political rights, and the actors in civil society were the emerging bourgeoisie. In the twentieth century, it was the workers' movement that was challenging the state, and the issue was economic and social emancipation—hence the further narrowing of the term.

Not only did all these definitions have this common core of meaning, but also they all conceived of civil society as territorially tied. Civil society was inextricably linked up with the territorial state. It was contrasted with other states characterized by coercion—the empires of the East. It was also contrasted with premodern societies, which lacked a state and lacked the concept of individualism—Highlanders, or American Indians. And, above all, it was contrasted with international relations, which was equated with the state of nature because it lacked a single authority. Many civil society theorists believed that civil society at home was linked to war abroad. It was the ability to unite against an external enemy that made civil society possible. Thus Adam Ferguson, the Scottish Enlightenment thinker whose book *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* is one of the core texts on civil society, was deeply concerned about modern individualism. Like the other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, he wanted to develop a scientific approach to the study of social phenomena and believed this had to be done through empirical study of other societies. To understand the evolution of society, he studied the Highlanders and American Indians and became convinced that modern society had lost the spirit of community, natural empathy and affection among human beings. He believed, taking the example of Sparta, that the inculcation of patriotism and the martial spirit was one way to overcome the dangers of individualism. An even stronger version of this argument was taken up by Hegel, who believed that war was necessary for the 'ethical health of peoples... Just as the movement

of the ocean prevents the corruption which would be the result of perpetual calm, so by war people escape the corruption which would be occasioned by a continuous or eternal peace.'[4] Of course, not all civil society theorists took this view—Kant was the most important exception, believing that the perfect constitution of the state could be achieved only in the context of a universal civil society—but it was the dominant view.

The reinvention of civil society

The revival of the idea of civil society in the 1970s and 1980s, I believe, broke that link with the state. Interestingly, the idea was rediscovered simultaneously in Latin America and eastern Europe. I was deeply involved in the east Europeans' discussions and always thought it was they who reinvented the term. However, subsequently I discovered that it had been used earlier by the Latin Americans, notable among them Cardoso (until recently the president of Brazil). It is a fascinating task in the history of ideas to explore the way in which this concept proved useful in two different continents at the same time, but (so far as I am aware) with no communication between them—indeed, there seems on the contrary to have been widespread mutual mistrust, since by and large the Latin Americans were Marxists and the east Europeans were anti-Marxists.

In both cases, the term 'civil society' proved a useful concept in opposing militarized regimes. Latin Americans were opposing military dictatorships; east Europeans were opposing totalitarianism—a sort of war society. Both came to the conclusion that the overthrow of their regimes 'from above' was not feasible; rather, it was necessary to change society. Michnik, in his classic article first published in 1978, 'The new evolutionism', argued that attempts to bring change from above (as in Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968) had failed, and that the only possible strategy was change from below, changing the relationship between state and society.[5] What he meant by civil society was autonomy and self-organization. Thus the emphasis (and this was shared by the Latin Americans) was on withdrawal from the state. They talked about creating islands of civic engagement—a concept shared by both east Europeans and Latin Americans. East Europeans also used terms like 'anti-politics' and 'living in truth'—the notion of refusing the lies of the regime or 'parallel polis', of creating their own Aristotelian community based on the 'good', i.e. moral, life. (Martin Wight would have loved the east European dissidents. Forced into inactivity, especially in Czechoslovakia where they had to become stokers and window cleaners, they spent their time reading classical political thinkers and discussing them, which is why, I think, they were able to articulate the ideas of a generation. I remember a friend saying when I visited Prague in the early

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *The philosophy of right* [1820], trans. S. W. Dyde (London: Prometheus Books, 1996), p. 331.

[5] Adam Michnik, 'The new evolutionism', in *Letters from prison and other essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

1990s in the throes of revolutionary fervour: 'What I really miss are those evenings where understanding a passage from Plato's *Republic* seemed the most important thing in the world.')

As well as the emphasis on autonomy and civil organization, civil society also acquired a global meaning. This was a period of growing interconnectedness, increased travel and communication, even before the advent of the internet. The emergence of 'islands of civic engagement' was made possible by two things:

1 Links with like-minded groups in other countries. The Latin Americans were supported by North American human rights groups. The east Europeans forged links with west European peace and human rights groups, which supported them materially and publicized their cases, and put pressure on governments and institutions.
2 The existence of international human rights legislation to which their governments subscribed and which could be used as a form of pressure. For Latin America, it was the human rights legislation that was important. For eastern Europe, the Helsinki agreement of 1975, in which east European governments signed up to human rights norms, provided a platform for new groups like Charter 77 and KOR.

In other words, through international links and appeals to international authorities, these groups were able to create political space. Keck and Sikkink, in their book on transnational activism, talk about the 'boomerang effect', whereby instead of directly addressing your government, appeals to the international community bounce back, as it were, and put pressure on governments to tolerate certain activities.[6]

This transnational or global aspect of the new understanding of civil society has been widely neglected by Western commentaries on the period, perhaps because they understood civil society within their own traditions of thought. Yet it was stressed by the new thinkers themselves, certainly in eastern Europe. George Konrad, the Hungarian writer, and my favourite of these thinkers, used the word 'globalization' in his book *Anti-Politics* written in 1982. Vaclav Havel talked about the 'global technological civilisation'. 'The post-totalitarian system', wrote Havel,

> is only one aspect—a particularly drastic aspect and thus all the more revealing of its real origins—of the general inability of modern humanity to be master of its own situation. The automatism of the post-totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilisation. The human failure that it mirrors is only one variant of the general failure of humanity ... It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilisation and the industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being

[6] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

dragged helplessly along. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in post-totalitarian societies ... In a democracy, human beings may enjoy personal freedoms and securities that are unknown to us, but in the end they do them no good, for they too are ultimately victims of the same automatism, and are incapable of defending their concerns about their own identity or preventing their superficialisation or transcending concerns about their own personal survival to become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny.[7]

Thus the new understanding of civil society represented both a withdrawal from the state and a move towards global rules and institutions. The groups who pioneered these ideas were central to the pressures for democratization in Latin America and the 1989 revolutions in eastern Europe. It is sometimes said that there were no new ideas in the 1989 revolutions—that the revolutionaries just wanted to be like the West. But I think this new understanding of civil society was the big new idea, an idea that was to contribute to a new set of global arrangements in the 1990s.

Global civil society in the 1990s

In the aftermath of 1989, the idea of global civil society changed its meaning and was understood in very different ways. In good Wightian tradition, let me describe three main meanings—paradigms, if you like.

1 First of all, the term was taken up all over the world by the so-called 'new social movements'—the movements that developed after 1968 concerned with new issues, like peace, women, human rights, the environment, and new forms of protest. The language of civil society seemed to express very well their brand of non-party politics. The concept was enthusiastically taken up in South Asia, Africa—especially South Africa—and western Europe. During the 1990s, a new phenomenon of great importance was the emergence of transnational networks of activists who came together on particular issues—landmines, human rights, climate change, dams, AIDS/HIV, corporate responsibility. I believe they had a significant impact on strengthening processes of global governance, especially in the humanitarian field. Notions of humanitarian norms that override sovereignty, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, the strengthening of human rights awareness—all these factors were very important in the construction of a new set of multilateral rules: what we might call a humanitarian regime. Towards the end of the 1990s, the emergence of a so-called anti-globalization movement—concerned with global social justice—used the concept of civil society in the same way. I call this understanding the 'activist version'.

[7] Vaclav Havel, 'The power of the powerless', in John Keane, ed., *The power of the powerless: citizens against the state in central–eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 90–1.

2 Second, the term was taken up by the global institutions and by Western governments. It became part of the so-called 'new policy agenda'. Civil society was understood as what the West has; it is seen as a mechanism for facilitating market reform and the introduction of parliamentary democracy. I call this the 'neoliberal version'. The key agents are not social movements but NGOs. I regard NGOs as tamed social movements. Social movements always rise and fall. And as they fall, they are either 'tamed'—institutionalized and professionalized—or they become marginal and disappear or turn to violence. Becoming 'tamed' means that you become the respectable opposition—the partner in negotiations. Historically, social movements were tamed within a national framework. Campaigners for the suffrage or against slavery in the nineteenth century became absorbed into liberal parties. Labour movements were originally universalist and internationalist but became transformed into official trade unions and Labour and Social Democratic parties. What was significant in the 1990s was that the new social movements became tamed within a global framework. There have always been international NGOs like the Anti Slavery Society or the International Committee of the Red Cross, but their numbers increased dramatically in the 1990s, often as a result of official funding.[8] Indeed, NGOs increasingly look both like quasi-governmental institutions, because of the way they substitute for state functions, and at the same time like a market, because of the way they compete with one another. The dominance of NGOs has led some activists to become disillusioned with the concept of civil society. Thus Neera Chandhoke, a civil society theorist from Delhi University, says civil society has become a 'hurrah word' and 'flattened out'. 'Witness the tragedy that has visited proponents of the concept: people struggling against authoritarian regimes demanded civil society, what they got were NGOs. If everyone from trade unions, social movements, the UN, the IMF, lending agencies, to states both chauvinistic and democratic hail civil society as the most recent elixir to the ills of the contemporary world, there must be something gone wrong.'[9] And Mahmoud Mamdami, a brilliant African political scientist, says 'NGOs are killing civil society.'[10]

3 Yet a third concept of global civil society is what I call the 'postmodern version'. Social anthropologists criticize the concept of society as Eurocentric, something born of the Western cultural context (according to this argument, Latin America and eastern Europe are both culturally part of Europe). They suggest that non-Western societies experience or have the potential to experience something similar to civil society, but not based on

[8] For numbers, see the data collected in the yearbooks edited at the LSE: Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor, eds, *Global Civil Society 2001* and *Global Civil Society 2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 and 2002).

[9] Neera Chandhoke, 'A cautionary note on civil society', paper presented at the conference on 'Civil society in different cultural contexts', LSE, September 2001.

[10] Intervention at 'Expert conference for *Human Development Report 2002*', New York, 2002.

> individualism. They argue, for example, that in Islamic societies, institutions like religious orders, the bazaar or religious foundations represent a check on state power. Thus for postmodernists, new religions and ethnic movements that have also grown dramatically over the last decade are also part of global civil society. Global civil society cannot be just the 'nice, good movements'.

Civil society has always had both a normative and a descriptive content. The definition that I gave at the beginning of this article was a normative definition. I said that civil society is the process through which consent is generated, the arena where the individual negotiates, struggles against, or debates with the centres of political and economic authority. Today, those centres include global institutions, both international bodies and companies. I think that all three versions have to be included in the concept. The neoliberal version makes the term respectable, providing a platform via which more radical groups can gain access to power (both 'insiders' like NGOs and 'outsiders' like social movements). In normative terms, it might be argued that service-providing NGOs, especially those funded by states, should be excluded because they are not engaged in public debate and are not autonomous from the state. Likewise, it could also be argued that communalist groups should be excluded because central to the concept of civil society is individual emancipation; if communalist groups are compulsory, then they cannot be viewed as vehicles for individual emancipation. But in practice, in actually existing civil society, it is almost impossible to draw boundaries between who is included and who is excluded.

What has happened in the 1990s, I would argue, is that a system of global governance has emerged which involves both states and international institutions. It is not a single world state, but a system in which states are increasingly hemmed in by a set of agreements, treaties and rules of a transnational character. Increasingly, these rules are based not just on agreement between states but on public support, generated through global civil society. Of particular importance, in my view, is a growing body of cosmopolitan law, by which I mean the combination of humanitarian law (laws of war) and human rights law, brilliantly analysed by Geoffrey Best in his Martin Wight lecture delivered at the London School of Economics on 9 March 1995.[11] Cosmopolitan law is international law that applies not just to states but to individuals—something Martin Wight thought was impossibly utopian. This broadening and strengthening of cosmopolitan law, both immediately after the Second World War and in the 1990s, was largely a consequence of pressure from global civil society.

In other words, global civil society is a platform inhabited by activists (or post-Marxists), NGOs and neoliberals, as well as national and religious groups, where they argue about, campaign for (or against), negotiate about, or lobby for the arrangements that shape global developments. There is not one global civil

[11] See Geoffrey Best, 'Justice, international relations and human rights,' *International Affairs* 71: 4, October 1995.

society but many, affecting a range of issues—human rights, environment and so on. It is not democratic; there are no processes of election, nor could there be at a global level, since that would require a world state. And such a state, even if democratically elected, would be totalitarian. It is also uneven and Northern-dominated. Nevertheless, the emergence of this phenomenon does offer a potential for individuals—a potential for emancipation. It opens up closed societies, as happened in eastern Europe and Latin America, and it offers the possibility to participate in debates about global issues. And it is my view that the emergence of this phenomenon—this new global system—makes the term 'international relations' much less appropriate.

After September 11

How have these trends, this activity, been affected by September 11 and the war on Iraq? Do terror and war on terror mark a reversal of the developments I describe? Both terror and war on terror are profoundly inimical to global civil society. Terror can be regarded as a direct attack on global civil society, a way of creating fear and insecurity that are the opposite of civil society. President Bush's response, I would argue, has been an attempt to re-impose international relations; that is to say, to put the threat of terrorism within a state framework. The United States is the only country not hemmed in by globalization, the only state able to continue to act as an autonomous nation-state: a 'global unilateralist', as Javier Solana puts it, or the last nation-state. Bush declared the destruction of the World Trade Center towers as an attack on the United States, using the analogy of Pearl Harbor, and he identified the enemies as states that sponsor terrorism or possess weapons of mass destruction—whether Afghanistan or Iraq or the 'axis of evil'. The term 'war' implies a traditional state conflagration. The language of war and war on terrorism closes down debate and narrows the space for different political positions. And the American determination to go to war with Iraq unilaterally has caused a profound crisis in the institutions of global governance.

But I do not think Bush can reverse the process of globalization. The consequences of trying to do so will be a still more uneven, anarchic, wild globalization. If you like, it will be a situation in which the 'outside' of international relations, at least in a realist conception, comes 'inside'; in which we can no longer insulate civil society from what goes on outside. The distinction between war and domestic peace made by the classical theorists of civil society no longer holds. Global civil society offers the promise of bringing the 'inside' outside. The war on terror offers the opposite. The polarizing effect of war is likely to increase rather than reduce terrorist attacks. It is the nature of war to discriminate among groups of human beings; however much the coalition forces insist on saving civilian lives, in practice their own lives are privileged over the lives of Iraqis, both military and civilian. The war has already generated tremendous anger and resentment, especially in the Middle East. Moreover, the

difficulty of stabilizing the region in the aftermath means that the kind of conditions that nurture terrorism—repression, sporadic violence, inequality, extreme ideologies—are likely to be reproduced for the foreseeable future.

Is there an alternative? Could we imagine domestic politics on the global scene—something else Wight thought impossibly utopian? What I have been trying to say here is that this is exactly what has been happening over the last decade. Moreover, global civil society, especially the activist strand, has not gone away. The anti-globalization movement is very active, especially in Latin America. There are new synergies between the anti-globalization movement, the peace movement and Muslim communities, which have burst forth in a global anti-war movement, historically unprecedented in size and geographical spread. Many states, notably Germany and France, have followed public opinion and not the United States. On the one hand, this is the reason for the crisis in multilateral institutions. On the other hand, a new responsiveness to global civil society offers the possibility of a system of global institutions which act on the basis of deliberation, rather than, as in the past, on the basis of consent for American hegemony.

What happens depends on politics, on the agency of people who make history. The idea of global civil society is an emancipatory idea, which allows every individual the potential to engage in this debate. I do think we are living through a very dangerous moment: the war in the Middle East could spread, there could be a new war in South Asia, including the possible use of weapons of mass destruction, and we are likely to witness an increase in global terrorism. To what extent can global civil society convince states to adopt an alternative multilateralist framework for dealing with dictators, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, not to mention poverty, AIDS/HIV, the environment and other desperately important issues? Many commentators pointed out that the attacks of September 11 should have been dealt with in the framework of international law. They should have been treated as a crime against humanity; a war crimes tribunal should have been established by the Security Council; and efforts to catch and destroy terrorists, even if they involve the use of military means, should be considered not war but law enforcement.[12] And the same argument can be made about the situation in Iraq. There were ways of dealing with Iraq, which might have been gleaned from the experience of eastern Europe in the 1980s; United Nations Security Council resolutions, especially 687, emphasized human rights and democracy as well as weapons of mass destruction and could have been used in the same way as the Helsinki Agreement to put pressure on the regime; weapons inspectors could have been accompanied by human rights monitors; and the international community could have made it clear that it would protect Iraqis from Saddam Hussein's forces in the event of an uprising, as it did in northern Iraq in 1991 and failed to do in the case of the Shiite uprising.[13]

[12] See Michael Howard, 'What's in a name?', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2002.
[13] See Mary Kaldor, 'In place of war: open up Iraq', at www.opendemocracy.net, 12 March 2003.

I do not see any other way out of the current dangerous impasse than trying to establish a set of global rules based on consent. We have to find ways to minimize violence at a global level, in the same way that early modern thinkers envisaged civil society as a way of minimizing violence at domestic levels. And this means opening up the conversation about what might be done.

I would like to end with a quotation from George Konrad. He was worried about the threat of nuclear war, the risk of a 'global Auschwitz', as he called it (he himself is a survivor of Auschwitz). That is the It he refers to, although I think it could also apply to terror and the war on terror. Konrad concludes his book by saying: 'Of course, I am small before the great, weak before the powerful, cowardly before the violent, wavering before the aggressive, expendable before It, which is so vast and durable that I sometimes think it is immortal. I don't turn the other cheek to it. I don't shoot with a slingshot; I look, and then I collect my words.'[14]

[14] George Konrad, *Anti-politics: an essay* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1984) (written in Hungarian in 1982), p. 243.