

**“Civil Society and Democracy in Global Governance”**

Jan Aart Scholte

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## **Civil Society and Democracy in Global Governance**

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### **Abstract**

Recent years have witnessed substantial civil society mobilisation on questions of global governance. This paper considers the implications of this development for democracy. After specifying concepts of ‘civil society’, ‘democracy’, ‘globality’ and ‘governance’, the paper identifies deep democratic deficits that have emerged as a consequence of contemporary globalisation. The discussion then outlines various ways that civil society can either enhance or undermine democracy in the governance of global relations.

Keywords: civil society, democracy, globalisation, governance

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

‘Civil society’ has moved centre stage in current discussions of globalisation. And well it might do after the recent high-profile protests of Seattle, Davos, Washington, Melbourne and Prague. Many observers are asking, with varying blends of curiosity and indignation: who are these people anyway? Why should we give them time and attention? What right do they have to interrupt – and even obstruct – the governance of global relations?

This paper considers these questions against yardsticks of democracy. Effective governance is regulation that achieves not only efficiency and order, but also participation and accountability. In building governance for expanding global spaces in the contemporary world, technocratic criteria have to date received far more attention than democratic standards. This paper addresses the neglected side of the equation by exploring the potentials and limitations of civil society as a force for democracy in global governance.

What *are* the implications of civil society mobilisation for democracy in global governance? Many observers have celebrated the rise of global civic<sup>2</sup> activism as a boon for democracy, while many others have decried it as a bane. Yet these assessments – both positive and negative – have tended to rest on little more than anecdote and prejudice. Arguments have not been tightly conceptualised and rigorously tested.

The following article elaborates a possible framework of analysis and on this basis hypothesises that civic association and activism offer important possibilities to reduce the major democratic deficits that have grown during recent decades in the governance of global relations. Given this promise of civil society, these experiments in new forms of public participation, consultation, representation and accountability should be pursued further. However, the democratic benefits of civil society engagement of global governance do not flow automatically. Moreover, civil society has potentials to detract from as well as add to

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<sup>1</sup>Earlier versions of this argument were presented at the Institute of Advanced Studies (Berlin), the World Bank, the Sussex European Institute, the University of Sheffield Department of Politics, the 10th Annual Conference of the European Network on Debt and Development, the University of Lausanne, and the 25th Annual Conference of the British International Studies Association. I am grateful to those audiences for helpful feedback.

<sup>2</sup>In this writing ‘civic’ groups and operations are taken to be the actors and activities in civil society.

democracy in global governance. So we do well to approach this subject with both optimism and caution.

The paper develops this general argument in four main steps. The first section presents working definitions of key concepts and lays out a framework of analysis. The second section identifies the challenges of building democracy in the governance of global spaces. The third section suggests six general ways that civil society can promote democracy in global governance. The fourth section suggests seven broad ways that civil society can undermine democracy in global governance.

The operative word in the last two sentences is a tentative ‘can’, as opposed to a definite ‘does’. This paper builds on my earlier theoretical work concerning globalisation and my previous empirical work on civil society involvement in global economic governance.<sup>3</sup> This research has led me to identify the promises and perils summarised here as a set of assessment criteria that might guide further studies of civil society and global governance. So only a framework of evaluation is suggested here. Much more empirical investigation is required before we can draw firmer conclusions regarding the relationship that has prevailed – and could prevail – in practice between civil society and democracy in global governance.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); R. O’Brien, A.M. Goetz, J.A. Scholte and M. Williams, *Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); ‘Global Civil Society’, in N. Woods (ed.), *The Political Economy of Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 173-201.

<sup>4</sup>Some important research has already been done on civil society and global governance; however, none of it has focused primarily, explicitly and rigorously on the question of civil society and *democracy* in *global* governance. Existing literature includes T.G. Weiss and L. Gordenker (eds), *NGOs, the UN, and Global Governance* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1996); P. Willetts (ed.), *‘Conscience of the World’: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN System* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1996); J. Smith, C. Chatfield and R. Pagnucco (eds), *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); J.A. Fox and L.D. Brown (eds), *The Struggle for Accountability: The World Bank, NGOs and Grassroots Movements* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); M. Keck and K. Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); P. Waterman, *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms* (London: Mansell, 1998); J. Boli and G.M. Thomas (eds), *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations since 1875* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); J.W. Foster with A. Anand (eds), *Whose Future Is It Anyway? Civil Society, the United Nations and the Multilateral Future* (Ottawa: United Nations Association in Canada, 1999); R. Cohen and S.M. Rai (eds), *Global Social Movements* (London: Athlone Press, 2000); A.M. Florini (ed.), *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000); R.A. Higgott, G.R.D. Underhill and A. Bieler (eds), *Non-State Actors and Authority in the Global System* (London: Routledge, 2000); M. Edwards and J. Gaventa (eds), *Global Citizen Action: Perspectives and Challenges* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming).

## **Framework of Analysis**

Each concept in the title of this paper – ‘civil society’, ‘democracy’, ‘global’ and ‘governance’ – is heavily contested. No attempt is made here to resolve these disputes, and many readers will indeed take issue with the positions adopted in this discussion. However, explicit working definitions are needed to lend clarity and internal coherence to the argument.

### ***Civil Society***

In the mid-1980s the World Economic Forum (WEF), with a membership of some 900 global companies, took the initiative in promoting the launch of an Uruguay Round of world trade negotiations. Concurrently rubber tappers and indigenous peoples mobilised against World Bank-sponsored development projects in the Brazilian Amazon. In 1995 over 30,000 women attended an NGO Forum alongside the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women at Beijing. Three years later 60,000 protestors encircled the Group of Seven (G7) Summit at Birmingham to demand the cancellation of poor country debts. What are we saying when we lump these diverse activities under the name of ‘civil society’?

Meanings of ‘civil society’ have varied enormously across time and place.<sup>5</sup> In sixteenth-century English political thought the term referred to the state, whereas contemporary usage tends to contrast civil society and the state. Hegel’s nineteenth-century notion of civil society included the market, whereas contemporary concepts tend to regard civil society as a nonprofit sector. Seventy years ago Gramsci regarded civil society as an arena where class hegemony forges consent, whereas much contemporary discussion treats civil society as a site of disruption and dissent.

This paper engages with ideas of ‘civil society’ less as they have appeared in the history of political thought and more as they might contribute to a theory of contemporary globalisation and governance. This is not to deny the importance of traditional western liberal concepts of civil society, but to suggest that they require adaptation in relation to world politics of the

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. J.L. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); K. Kumar, ‘Civil Society: An Inquiry into the Usefulness of an Historical Term’, *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 3 (September 1993), pp. 375-95.

twenty-first century. The aim is to extract talk of ‘civil society’ from present-day policy discussions and to sharpen it analytically in ways that give academics and practitioners a clearer understanding of current circumstances. Greater insight of this kind might in turn contribute to the construction of improved global governance.

With these objectives in mind, ‘civil society’ is taken here to refer to a political space where voluntary associations explicitly seek to shape the rules (in terms of specific policies, wider norms and deeper social structures) that govern one or the other aspect of social life. Some elements of civil society (often characterised as ‘social movements’) seek radical transformations of the prevailing order. However, civil society also includes reformist elements that seek only modest revisions of existing governance arrangements and conformist elements that seek to reinforce established rules. Indeed, many civil society initiatives show a mix of radical, reformist and conformist tendencies.

To be sure, the lines dividing voluntary activities from official and market practices can blur. For example, some civic associations may assist in the implementation of official policies or engage in commercial activities to fund their advocacy campaigns. Moreover, governments and companies may sponsor non-profit bodies to serve as front organisations. By strict criteria, however, veritable civil society activities pursue neither public office (so excluding political parties) nor pecuniary gain (so excluding firms and the commercial mass media).

From the perspective adopted here, civil society encompasses many sorts of actors. Civic groups can include academic institutions, business forums,<sup>6</sup> clan and kinship circles, consumer advocates, development cooperation initiatives, environmental movements, ethnic lobbies, foundations, human rights promoters, labour unions, local community groups, relief organisations, peace movements, professional bodies, religious institutions, think tanks, women’s networks, youth associations and more. In particular, this conception of civil society stretches much wider than formally organised, officially registered and professionally administered ‘NGOs’. Civil society exists whenever and wherever voluntary associations – of whatever kind – try deliberately to mould the governing rules of society.

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<sup>6</sup>This category includes both industry lobbies (where market and civil society often overlap) and business associations like the International Chamber of Commerce that address broad social and political issues.

With this inclusive conception, civil society encompasses considerable cultural diversity. In earlier Hegelian and Gramscian formulations, ‘civil society’ related to *western* politics in a *national* context. However, talk of ‘civil society’ today circulates all over the world and is sometimes applied to political practices (like so-called Civic Forums at village and district level in Thailand) that derive largely from non-western traditions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in contemporary politics civic associations often operate in regional and global spheres as well as local and national arenas. Conceptions of ‘civil society’ need to be adapted to reflect these changed circumstances.

### ***Democracy***

Like ‘civil society’, ‘democracy’ has known many meanings and instruments in different times and places. Ancient Athenian democracy was one thing, while modern liberal democracy is quite another. Representative democracy is one approach, while deliberative democracy is quite another. National democracy is one construction, while cosmopolitan democracy is quite another.

Yet a common thread runs through all conceptions of democracy: it is a condition where a community of people exercise collective self-determination. Through democracy, members of a given public – a *demos* – take decisions that shape their destiny jointly, with equal rights and opportunities of participation, and without arbitrarily imposed constraints on debate. In one way or another, democratic governance is participatory, consultative, transparent and publicly accountable. By one mechanism or another, democratic governance rests on the consent of the governed.

Thus democracy as a general condition needs to be distinguished from liberal-national democracy as a particular historical and cultural form of ‘rule by the people’. Democracy is constructed in relation to context and should be reconstructed when that context changes. As is argued at greater length later in this paper, contemporary globalisation constitutes the sort of change of situation that requires new approaches to democracy.<sup>8</sup> The more particular

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. C. Hann and E. Dunn (eds), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models* (London: Routledge, 1996). Indeed, some critics have suggested that the very term ‘civil society’ carries such western cultural baggage that other terminology is needed to reflect and nurture pluralism in political practices.

<sup>8</sup>For other arguments making the same general point see, e.g., D. Archibugi and D. Held (eds), *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995). For a suggested set of criteria for

question at hand here is: what role can civil society play in a reconfigured democracy for global governance?

### ***Globality***

The democratising potentials of civil society are being evaluated here in respect of the governance of global relations. However, what more precisely is the ‘global’ quality of global relations? In a broad sense, ‘globalisation’ designates a growth of connections between people across the planet, but globality can also be conceived in a more specific fashion that opens up distinctive insights into contemporary world affairs.<sup>9</sup>

This perspective identifies globalisation as deterritorialisation or, as I prefer to characterise it, a rise of ‘supraterritoriality’. On these lines, globality refers to a particular kind of social space, namely, a realm that substantially transcends the confines of territorial place, territorial distance and territorial borders. Whereas territorial spaces are mapped in terms of longitude, latitude and altitude, global relations transpire in the world as a single place, as one more or less seamless realm. Globality in this sense has a ‘transworld’ or ‘transborder’ quality. A supraterritorial phenomenon can appear simultaneously at any location on earth that is equipped to host it and/or can move more or less instantaneously between any points on the planet.

Countless conditions in today’s world manifest globality. For example, electronic finance and climate change encompass the whole planet simultaneously. Telecommunications and electronic mass media move anywhere across the planet instantaneously. Many goods are manufactured through transborder production processes, and countless more are distributed and sold through transworld markets. Surrounded by global symbols and global events, current generations think of the planet as home far more than their forebears did.

When globalisation is understood along these lines – that is, as a transformation of social geography – then the trend has mainly unfolded during the past half-century.<sup>10</sup> The world of 1950 knew few or no airline passengers, intercontinental missiles, satellite communications,

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democratic globalisation, see W.D. Coleman and T. Porter, ‘International Institutions, Globalisation and Democracy: Assessing the Challenges’, *Global Society*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2000), pp. 388-90.

<sup>9</sup>The following points are elaborated in *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, ch 2.



global monies, offshore finance centres, computer networks or ozone holes. The scale of transborder production and markets was likewise a small fraction of its current proportions. When globality is defined in terms of supraterritoriality, then its current scale and recent growth are historically unprecedented.

This is by no means to argue that the old geography of territorial spaces no longer matters. On the contrary territorial locations, territorial identities and territorial governments continue to exert very significant influences. The point is not that globality has taken over from territoriality, but that territoriality no longer has the monopoly on social geography that it exercised fifty years ago. We no longer live in a territorialist society. Rather, territorial spaces now co-exist and interrelate with global spaces.

Nor has contemporary globalisation encompassed all of humanity to the same extent. In terms of regions, North America, North East Asia and Western Europe have acquired considerably more global connectivity than the rest of the world. Across the planet, urban centres are generally much more enmeshed in global networks than rural areas. In terms of class, managers, professionals and wealthy people generally inhabit global spaces far more than manual workers and the poor. In terms of gender, multiple studies have shown that men tend to be online much more than women.

Nevertheless, having made these key qualifications, we can still say that globality is important. It involves a different kind of social space, one that has expanded to very substantial proportions in contemporary history. Moreover, geography is deeply interconnected with other dimensions of social relations: culture, ecology, economics, politics, psychology, and time. Globalisation – as a reorganisation of social space – is therefore likely to both reflect and promote shifts in other social structures, including those of governance.

### ***Governance***

So we come to the fourth often vague and widely contested concept in the title of this paper. Like ‘global-speak’, talk of ‘governance’ is a new addition to the vocabulary of politics. The

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<sup>10</sup>More evidence to support this chronology is presented in *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, ch 3.

contemporaneous advent of the two terms is not accidental. Globalisation – a reconfiguration of social space – has gone hand in hand with a reconfiguration of regulation.<sup>11</sup> Where we used to speak of ‘government’, it is now suitable to speak of ‘governance’.

The territorialist geography of old was deeply intertwined with a statist mode of regulation. Social relations unfolded almost exclusively in territorial frameworks (especially countries and their subdivisions), and regulatory arrangements were made to match (especially through national and local governments). The epitome of territorialist regulation was sovereign statehood, where a centralised public authority apparatus exercised – both in principle and also largely in practice – supreme, comprehensive, unqualified and exclusive jurisdiction over a designated territorial space and its inhabitants.

Now that, with globalisation, many social relations substantially transcend territorial geography, territorialist governance has become impracticable. National and local governments are quite unable by themselves to effectively regulate phenomena like global mass media, global ecological problems, and global finance. Transborder flows cannot be tied to a strictly delimited territorial space over which a state might endeavour to exercise unilateral full control. Moreover, globalisation has also loosened some important cultural and psychological underpinnings of sovereign statehood. Supraterritorial networks have given many people loyalties (e.g. on lines of class, gender and transborder ethnicity) that supplement and in some cases even override state-centred nationalism. In addition, many people in the contemporary globalising world have become increasingly ready to give ‘supraterritorial values’ related to, say, human rights and ecological integrity a higher priority than state sovereignty and the associated norm of national self-determination over a territorial homeland.

As stressed earlier, this is not an argument about the demise of the (territorial) state. However, we have seen the demise of *statism* as the prevailing mode of regulation. Governance – a collectivity’s steering, coordination and control mechanisms – now clearly involves much more than the state.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary governance is multilayered. It includes

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<sup>11</sup>Earlier versions of the following points can be found in ‘The Globalization of World Politics’, in J. Baylis and S. Smith (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 13-30; and *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, ch 6.

<sup>12</sup>J.N. Rosenau, ‘Governance in the Twenty-First Century’, *Global Governance*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 13-43; Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighbourhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

important local, substate regional, suprastate regional, and transworld operations alongside and intertwined with national arrangements. Moreover, governance has in recent decades also increasingly operated through private as well as public instruments. In this situation, regulatory authority has become considerably more decentralised and diffuse.

The governance of global relations shows these post-statist features particularly starkly. For one thing, much regulation of global flows occurs not through unilateral state action, but through intergovernmental consultations and coordination. Some of this multilateralism transpires at ministerial level, for example, in meetings of the G7 and summit conferences of the United Nations. In addition – albeit with a much lower public profile – significant interstate collaboration in global governance occurs through transgovernmental networks of technocrats (in economic, environmental, judicial and further policy areas).<sup>13</sup>

Other steering of global relations has been permanently institutionalised in suprastate agencies with both regional and transworld coverage. Much of this alphabet soup is well known: BIS, EU, IMF, MERCOSUR, OECD, UN, WTO, etc.<sup>14</sup> Over 250 such bodies are active today. Of course ‘suprastate’ does not mean ‘nonstate’, in the sense that these institutions have gained full autonomy from national governments. States – especially more powerful states – continue to exert considerable influence over regional and transworld governance arrangements. However, suprastate mechanisms have also acquired initiatives and impacts that elude close and constant monitoring and control by national governments.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, some regulation of global flows has devolved to substate bodies at provincial and municipal levels. For instance, transborder companies now arrange much of their investment with local governments. To take another example, substate authorities have developed considerable direct transborder collaboration to combat global criminal networks. On such occasions global governance is also local governance.

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1995); W. Reinicke, *Global Public Policy: Governing without Government?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998); M. Hewson and T. Sinclair (eds), *Approaches to Global Governance Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup>A.-M. Slaughter, ‘Governing the Global Economy through Government Networks’, in M. Byers (ed.) *The Role of Law in International Politics: Essays in International Relations and International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 177-205.

<sup>14</sup>The acronyms designate, respectively, the Bank for International Settlements, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the *Mercado Común del Sur*, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organisation.

Finally, it should be noted that significant regulation of global relations has come to reside in the private sector.<sup>16</sup> This privatisation of governance is evident, for example, in respect of various Internet codes, many telecommunications standards, several global environmental agreements, and multiple aspects of transworld finance. Thus governance of supraterritorial spaces also entails more than government in the sense that it involves private as well as public arrangements.

Encompassing multiple tiers as well as both public and private spheres, global governance is proving to be anything but a ‘world government’. The model of the centralised public regulatory apparatus has not been – and shows no signs of being – transposed from the national arena to a planetary realm. Instead, global relations are regulated in a ‘post-statist’ fashion that has no single centre of authority.

With the above conceptual clarifications in hand, we have some parameters for a study of ‘civil society and democracy in global governance’. It says something about the fluid condition of contemporary politics that each of the words in the title of an paper requires rudimentary explication. The first two terms – civil society and democracy – need to be substantially rethought, while the other two – globality and governance – are new altogether. Politics at the start of the twenty-first century is indeed different.

## **The Challenge of Democracy in Global Governance**

Governance of global spaces is not only different, but also lacks democratic legitimacy. On the whole, current arrangements to regulate global communications, global ecology, global markets, global money and finance, global organisations, and global production rest – at best – on the thinnest consent of the affected publics. In each area of global policy popular participation, consultation, transparency and accountability are generally weak.

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<sup>15</sup>B. Reinalda and V. Verbeek (eds), *Autonomous Policy Making by International Organizations* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. A.C. Cutler, V. Haufler and T. Porter (eds), *Private Authority in International Affairs* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999); K. Ronit and V. Schneider (eds), *Private Organisations, Governance and Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 1999).

So it is no exaggeration to say that contemporary globalisation has provoked a crisis of democracy.<sup>17</sup> This crisis derives from two major structural problems, which are in turn reflected in a host of institutional deficiencies. These points are elaborated below.

### ***Structural Problems***

The first of the two structural problems in contemporary constructions of democracy is the disjunction between supraterritorial spaces and territorial self-determination. While many social relations have gained a substantial global dimension, practices of democracy have largely failed to keep pace. On the whole people, including most politicians, continue to look to government as the sole site for democratic governance. Yet even if territorial (national and local) mechanisms for regulating global spaces were maximally democratised, it would still not be enough. The state, being territorially grounded, cannot be sufficient by itself as an agent of democracy *vis-à-vis* global relations. Territorial democratic mechanisms are not adequate to bring transborder actors and flows under the collective control of the people that they affect. Democratic global governance cannot be derived from democratic government alone.

The second structural problem relates to the changing contours of the *demos* under contemporary globalisation.<sup>18</sup> Territorialist geography and statist governance tended to exist in tandem with a nationalist structure of community. In other words, people identified their *demos* – their public – in national terms. Democracy meant self-determination for the nation. Yet globalisation has loosened the links between territory and collective destiny. The growth of supraterritorial flows has encouraged individuals to identify their ‘people’ in multiple fashions in addition to the state-nation. As a result, contemporary world politics involves communities including substate and transstate ethno-nations (including indigenous peoples) and a host of transborder solidarities (*inter alia* on lines of class, religion and sexuality). Moreover, globalisation has arguably encouraged some growth of cosmopolitan bonds, where

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<sup>17</sup>D. Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); A. McGrew (ed.), *The Transformation of Democracy? Globalization and Territorial Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); P.G. Cerny, ‘Globalization and the Erosion of Democracy’, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 36, no. 1 (August 1999), pp. 1-26; B. Holden (ed.), *Global Democracy: Key Debates* (London: Routledge, 2000); *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, ch 11.

<sup>18</sup>The following points are elaborated in *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, ch 7. See also D. Archibugi, D. Held and M. Köhler (eds), *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

people identify the *demos* in terms of humanity as a whole. Yet conventional democratic mechanisms tend to define ‘the people’ only in territorial-state-nation terms.

### ***Institutional Deficiencies***

These structural problems are evident in democratic deficits that pervade all institutional sites of the governance of supraterritorial spaces. In terms of states, for example, even governments with the top democratic credentials have generally given limited publicity to their activities in respect of global governance. State bureaucracies have on the whole conducted sparse if any consultation of the public or its elected representatives about policies on global issues. Only very rarely have governments held popular referenda on these matters. Election debates and the programmes of political parties have usually accorded only marginal attention to issues of globalisation and its governance. National representative bodies have generally exercised only lax oversight of their state’s involvement in multilateral conferences, transgovernmental networks and suprastate agencies.

Democracy has been still more diluted in intergovernmental governance mechanisms. For example, the G7 is a major force of global economic management, but it gives a seat to only a handful of states whose collective population amounts to around 10 per cent of humanity. Meanwhile transgovernmental networks of technocrats have operated almost completely outside the public eye and democratic scrutiny. These officials have concluded countless multilateral memoranda of understanding that bypass traditional procedures of treaty ratification.

Suprastate institutions have tended to hold even flimsier democratic credentials than national governments.<sup>19</sup> Like the G7, the BIS and the OECD exclude most of the world’s states, even though their rulings have transworld impacts. Although the WTO includes 140 states as members, nearly a third of them have no permanent representation in Geneva, and the capacities of many other delegations are severely overstretched. The IMF and the World Bank have almost universal state membership; however, the quota regime means that the five

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. R. Dahl, ‘Can International Organizations Be Democratic? A Skeptic’s View’, in I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón (eds), *Democracy’s Edges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 19-36; N. Woods, ‘Good Governance in International Organizations’, *Global Governance*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January-March 1999), pp. 39-61; J. Bohman, ‘International Regimes and Democratic Governance: Political Equality and

largest shareholder states between them today hold 40 per cent of the vote. At the lowest extreme, meanwhile, twenty-three states of Francophone Africa together hold just over 1 per cent of the vote.<sup>20</sup> At the United Nations the principle of one state one vote in the General Assembly is hardly satisfactory as a democratic formula, giving China and Saint Lucia equivalent weight. The veto of the five permanent members of the Security Council also has no democratic justification.

Global legislatures are not the answer. Although regional institutions in Central America and Europe have acquired popularly elected representative assemblies, it is not practicable to transpose this model to transworld governance bodies. For one thing, hundreds of millions of would-be global citizens are not equipped to vote in world-scale competitive multiparty elections: they have never heard of the agencies concerned, let alone understand their mandates and *modus operandi*. Moreover, transworld political parties like the Liberal and Socialist Internationals are not set up to conduct intercontinental election campaigns for global parliaments. We also lack technical means like electoral rolls and tallying mechanisms to undertake planetary ballots. Nor is a broadly acceptable formula for representation on a world scale available; political cultures across the planet are far too diverse to reach a consensus on this matter. Furthermore, as already noted, the nature of the global *demos* is so multifaceted and fluid that it is not clear *who* should be represented in popular assemblies for transworld governance institutions.

We might look to local democracy through substate governments to right at least some of the deficits of popular participation and accountability in global governance. Indeed, following the principle of subsidiarity, more regulation of supraterritorial flows might be devolved to local bodies than is currently the case. However, global spaces cannot be effectively governed through district councils alone. Moreover, as experience has all too often shown, there is nothing inherently democratic about local government. Global players can cut deals with a local ruling clique who are no more accessible or accountable to the public than the most remote of suprastate agencies.

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Influence in Global Institutions', *International Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 3 (July 1999), pp. 499-514; Coleman and Porter.

<sup>20</sup>International Monetary Fund, *Annual Report 2000* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2000), pp. 176-9.

The governance of global spaces is obviously democratically deficient when it comes to private regulatory mechanisms. Nonofficial formulators and implementers of rules like the International Accounting Standards Committee, the Derivatives Policy Group and the European Telecommunications Standards Institute have no provisions for public participation or consultation. Bodies like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, Moody's Investors Service, and the World Conservation Union face no public accountability when their regulatory activities cause damage. As for public transparency, most people (including many democratically elected representatives) have not even heard of private sites of global governance.

Hence from local to global levels, and in private as well as public spheres, the regulation of supraterritorial realms is riven with democratic deficits. Contemporary global spaces are not democratic spaces. Global governance is not democratically legitimate. We do not have a situation where the governed have accorded the right of rule to existing regimes.

Is this to say that 'global democracy' is an oxymoron? Do we concede that the governance of supraterritorial spaces is unavoidably authoritarian? Or are alternative mechanisms available to advance popular participation and accountability in global governance? More particularly, in what ways and to what extent might civil society contribute to this end?

## **The Democratic Promise of Civil Society**

Given the democratic deficits outlined above and the inadequacy of state mechanisms to resolve them, it is understandable that increasing numbers of citizens have considered civil society as a way to enhance public participation, consultation, transparency and accountability in global governance. Across the continents – albeit to uneven extents – business forums, grassroots associations, NGOs, religious institutions, think tanks and trade unions have turned their attention to the management of globalisation. Although the power of civil society in global governance can be exaggerated,<sup>21</sup> it is clear that these forces make an impact.

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. P.J. Spiro, 'New Global Potentates: Nongovernmental Organizations and the "Unregulated" Marketplace', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 18 (December 1996), pp. 957-69; J.T. Matthews, 'Power Shift', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 1 (January/February 1997), pp. 50-66.



But what are we to make of this influence in terms of advancing democracy? The following paragraphs identify six potential contributions. Then the next section examines seven potential downsides. As noted before, the purpose of this discussion is to identify possible effects rather than to calculate actual outcomes in specific cases.

First, in terms of positive impacts, civil society might enhance democracy in global governance through public education activities. Effective democracy depends on an informed citizenry, and civic associations can raise public awareness and understanding of transworld laws and regulatory institutions. To this end civil society groups can prepare handbooks and information kits, produce audio-visual presentations, organise workshops, circulate newsletters, supply information to and attract the attention of the mass media, maintain listservs and websites on the Internet, and develop curricular materials for schools and institutions of higher education.

Second, civil society might make positive contributions to democratic global governance by giving voice to stakeholders. Civic associations can provide opportunities for concerned parties to relay information, testimonial, and analysis to governance agencies. In particular, civil society organisations can hand the microphone to social circles like the poor and women who tend to get a limited hearing through other channels (including constitutional representative assemblies). In this way civic activism can empower stakeholders and indeed shift politics toward greater participatory democracy.

Third, civil society can fuel debate in and about global governance. Democratic governance rests *inter alia* on vigorous, uninhibited discussion of diverse views. Inputs from civil society can put a variety of perspectives, methodologies and proposals in the policy arena. For example, civic groups have been instrumental in generating debate about the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’. They have also raised ecological issues, advocated qualitative assessments of poverty, and promoted schemes of debt reduction in the South. Thanks to such contributions, policy discussions can become more critical and creative. In addition, if we posit that openings for dissent are as necessary to democracy as securing of consent, then civil society can offer sites for objection and challenge.

Fourth, civic mobilisation can increase the public transparency of global governance. Pressure from civil society can help to bring regulatory frameworks and operations into the

open, where they become susceptible to public scrutiny. Often citizens are not aware what decisions are taken in global governance, by whom, from what options, on what grounds, with what expected results, and with what resources to support implementation. Civic groups can also interrogate the currently popular official rhetoric of ‘transparency’ by asking critical questions about what is made transparent, at what time, in what forms, through what channels, on whose decision, for what purpose, and in whose interest.

Fifth, civil society might promote democracy in global governance by increasing the public accountability of the agencies concerned. Civic groups can monitor the implementation and effects of policies regarding global relations and press for corrective measures when the consequences are adverse. For example, civic actors have pressed for – and subsequently participated in – independent policy evaluation mechanisms for the World Bank and the IMF. Through an accountability function, civil society can push authorities in global governance to take greater responsibility for their actions and policies.

Together, the preceding five enhancements of democracy can foster a sixth and more general basis of democratic rule: legitimacy. Legitimate rule prevails when people acknowledge that an authority has a right to govern and that they have a duty to obey its directives. As a result of such consent, legitimate governance tends to be more easily, productively and nonviolently executed than illegitimate authority. Engagement between civil society and global governance agencies can – if it bolsters public education, gives stakeholders voice, promotes debate, raises transparency and increases accountability – enhance the popular respect accorded to global governance. Civil society can offer a means for citizens to affirm that global governance arrangements should guide – and where necessary constrain – their behaviour. Likewise, civil society can also provide a space for the expression of discontent and the pursuit of change when existing governance arrangements are regarded as illegitimate. Thus we have recently witnessed concerted civic opposition to the OECD-sponsored Multilateral Agreement on Investment, the Millennium Round of WTO talks, and countless IMF/World Bank programmes.

Finally, before closing the positive side of this balance sheet, we should note that civil society engagement of global governance can also have spin-offs for the democratisation of territorial governance. For example, a number of development NGOs and think tanks who lobby for global debt relief and socially sustainable structural adjustment have gone on to scrutinise

public finances in national and local governments.<sup>22</sup> For their part, women's movements have often used global laws and institutions in their efforts to democratise the state on gender lines.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, civil society has considerable positive potential to democratise the governance of global relations. Of course the above positive potentials cannot be realised in the absence of deliberate efforts and adequate resources. Indeed, the overall returns to date have been relatively modest. Much greater efforts and resources would be needed for civil society to effect a more substantive democratisation of global governance. In order for civil society to make its full contribution, citizens would need to become more aware of the possibilities (as outlined above) and to have more people, funds, information and symbolic capital to mobilise effectively.

At the same time, the possible gains for democracy are such that we would be equally foolish to dismiss the inputs of civil society to global governance out of hand. We have arguably only witnessed the early stages of a long development. Indeed, the levels of civic activity in and contributions to global governance already far exceed the position just two or three decades ago, and we can reasonably anticipate major further rises in the years to come.

## **The Democratic Dangers of Civil Society**

The qualifications to arguments about civil society contributions to democracy in global governance go beyond issues of unfulfilled potential. In addition, civil society might in certain ways actually detract from democratic governance of global relations. In these situations it is not that civic activities fail to realise their democratising potential, but that they in fact obstruct popular rule. Seven general negative possibilities can be identified.

First, civil society activity might not pursue democratic purposes. Although the term *civil* society carries connotations of civility and virtue, voluntary associations do not ipso facto have the promotion of democracy on their agenda. On the contrary, elements of *uncivil* society may actually aim to undermine democracy. For example, some civic associations can employ underhanded tactics in the pursuit of special privileges for private interests. Other

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<sup>22</sup>See *inter alia* the work of the International Budget Project Network: <http://www.internationalbudget.org/>.

destructive groups such as racists, ultra-nationalists and religious fundamentalists can seek to suppress the democratic rights of others. Meanwhile, in their efforts to secure special interests in the governance of global relations, lobby groups may bypass – and thereby subvert – democratic processes through the state. In short, civil society is not intrinsically a force for democracy.

Second, civil society might detract from democracy in global governance if its interventions are ill-conceived in design and/or execution. For example, activists may lack clear objectives, or they may have little understanding of the mandates and *modus operandi* of the institutions of global governance, or they may neglect key global policy areas that require democratisation. Academics may fail to link theoretical models of global democracy to empirical evidence and political practicalities. True, an ill-informed and misdirected civil society effort can inadvertently produce beneficial results. More usually, however, low-quality initiatives are an unhelpful distraction and in some cases can cause actual harm, including to vulnerable social circles that well-intentioned civic associations may be aiming to help.

Third, democracy may suffer when the agencies of global governance are ill-equipped to handle civil society inputs. Regulatory bodies may lack relevant staff expertise, adequate funds, suitable procedures, or the necessary receptive attitudes to take advantage of the benefits on offer from civil society. For example, officials may consult civic associations only in the later stages of policymaking when the key decisions have already been taken. Governance bodies may fail to give civic groups adequate opportunities to shape the agenda and determine the information considered. They can treat the dialogue with civil society as a public relations exercise, or focus their contacts on sympathetic groups to the exclusion of critics, or dismiss out of hand civil society accounts that challenge ‘expert’ knowledge, or expect immediate results when relationships require time to mature. Needless to say, the onus for corrective action on such problems lies with official bodies rather than civil society

Fourth, civil society inputs to global governance might have negative consequences for democracy when civic elements become coopted, losing their previously highlighted positive potentials to stimulate debate and provide space for dissent. For example, civic groups may

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. H. Pietilä and J. Vickers, *Making Women Matter: The Role of the United Nations* (London: Zed, 1994 rev'd edn).

come uncritically to render services to governance agencies or take funds from them. Campaigners may meet officials in a continual stream of convivial exchanges, without ever laying down deadlines for action. Certain civil society campaigners may even ‘cross over’ to work for organisations that they have previously challenged. Some civic associations have engaged in what they call ‘critical cooperation’ with global governance institutions; however, beyond a certain point the critical element becomes diluted and eventually lost altogether. Meanwhile official institutions may coopt the language of civil society critique, subtly recasting it to their own purposes. Such captures of discourse may have occurred recently as global agencies have embraced a rhetoric of ‘participation’, ‘good governance’, ‘social capital’, and ‘poverty reduction’.

Fifth, civil society might undermine democracy in global governance when it suffers from inadequate representation. If civil society is fully to realise its promises, then all interested parties must have access – and preferably equal opportunities to participate. Otherwise civil society can reproduce or even enlarge structural inequalities and arbitrary privileges connected with class, gender, nationality, race, religion, urban versus rural location, and so on. The capacities of civil society to advance democracy in global governance can be compromised if the participants are – as is currently often the case – drawn disproportionately from middle classes, men, Northern countries, whites, Christians, and urban dwellers. Hierarchies of social power operate in civil society no less than in other political spaces. Civil society is itself a site of struggles to be heard.

Sixth, and related to the problem of representation, civil society engagement of global governance might rest on an overly narrow cultural base. Civil society may not reflect and respond to all of the contexts for which it purports to speak. In particular there is a danger that civil society in the South and the former communist-ruled countries becomes monopolised by western-styled, western-funded NGOs led by westernised élites. For all that such campaigners might criticise prevailing conditions of global governance, they have stronger cultural affinities with global managers than with local communities. Thus NGOs and other professionalised civil society bodies may – perhaps quite unintentionally – marginalise grassroots circles that could give better voice to the diverse life-worlds that global governance affects.

Seventh and finally, civic activity in respect of global governance might suffer from undemocratic practices. Civil society groups – including those that specifically campaign for greater democracy in global governance – can fall short of democratic criteria in their own activities. A lack of internal democracy within civil society circles is not only objectionable in itself, but also contradicts civic efforts to bring greater democracy to society at large. For example, civic associations might offer their members little opportunity for participation beyond the payment of subscriptions. Civil society organisations may purport to speak on behalf of certain constituencies without adequately consulting them. The leadership or group culture of a civic organisation may impose preemptory constraints on debate. Civil society can become a realm of exclusionary cliques no less than many political parties and official circles. A civic organisation can also be run with top-down authoritarianism. In addition, policy making in civic bodies can be quite opaque to outsiders – or even some insiders. Civic groups can be further lack transparency if they do not publish financial statements or declarations of objectives, let alone full-scale reports of their activities. Moreover, the leadership of civic organisations can be self-selected, raising troubling questions of accountability and potential conflicts of interest. In short, the operations of civil society are no more intrinsically democratic than those in the public sector or the market. Several codes of conduct for NGOs have appeared in recent years in response to these concerns.<sup>24</sup>

Given these potential problems, we do well to balance enthusiasm for civil society engagement of global governance with due caution. Much can go right, but much can also go wrong. Civil society can be a means to good ends, but it is not the end itself. There are circumstances where civic involvement in global governance may actually detract from democracy. It is therefore quite proper to demand of civic associations that they not merely assert – but also demonstrate – their democratic legitimacy.

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<sup>24</sup>E.g. T. Kunugi and M. Schweitz (eds), *Codes of Conduct for Partnership in Governance: Texts and Commentaries* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1999); M. Edwards, *NGO Rights and Responsibilities: A New Deal for Global Governance* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has set the contemporary rise of civil society engagement of global governance in the context of wider historical trends of globalisation. The new geography has raised opportunities for human betterment, but also major challenges for democracy. Existing arrangements to govern global spaces suffer from major democratic deficits.

Civil society can make important contributions to a democratisation of global governance. Civic associations can advance public education, provide platforms, fuel debate, increase transparency and accountability, and enhance the democratic legitimacy of governance arrangements. Of course civil society does not provide a complete answer to democratic deficits in global regulation. Improvements require not only quality inputs from civic elements, but also the will and capacity for change in official quarters and market circles. However, positive interventions from adequately resourced and suitably participatory and accountable civil society can infuse global governance with greater democracy.

But we must retain caution. As we have seen, the promises of civil society for democratic global governance are not realised automatically, and these activities also carry potential dangers for democracy. Civil society can pursue anti-democratic goals, employ anti-democratic means, and produce anti-democratic consequences. These risks are by no means grounds to exclude civil society, but they give reason to treat it with care.

So we want neither romanticisation nor demonisation of civil society as a force in global politics. A sober assessment of the record to date and the possibilities for the future should help us to achieve the greatest democratic returns from civil society mobilisation on questions of globalisation.