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The Role of Communication in Global Civil Society: Forces, Processes, Prospects
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Abstract

The author examines the concept of global civil society (GCS) through the use of theoretical tools and empirical evidence related to the study of International Communication. He demonstrates that scholarship on GCS tends to simplify the process through which information becomes knowledge and that the state system-GCS relationship often is presented in terms of an ahistorical power dichotomy. In relation to these problems, what the author calls "GCS progressives" tend to underplay political-economic factors shaping GCS, including the implications of structural power; they tend to emphasize the importance of spatial integration while neglecting related changes in temporal norms; and, more essentially, they often under-theorize the importance of socialization processes and relatively unmediated relationships in the ongoing construction of "reality." The author concludes that through a more focused analysis-concentrating on how new technologies can be used to organize nationally and locally, and on lifestyle changes associated with communications developments-more precise analyses and fruitful strategies for GCS progressives may emerge.

The concept of global civil society (GCS) involves some extraordinary claims Through emerging forms of transnational associational life, a new political, economic, and cultural order is said to be under construction. The agents of these developments are a "medley of boundary-eclipsing actors-social movements interest groups, indigenous peoples, cultural groups, and global citizens" (Pasha and Blaney, 1998:418). Structurally, new interactive communications technologies are providing groups and individuals with unprecedented capacities to form meaningful transnational networks. These, in turn, have the potential to circumscribe status quo (state system-based) ways of relating and thinking. The formation of some kind of global civil society, most probably modeled after liberal-democratic ideals and liberal-market economies, thus may well be the outcome of the turbulent post-Cold War era (Rosenau, 1994).

In this article, such claims regarding the potential formation of a global civil society are assessed through concepts and empirical issues related to the subject of communication. There are two reasons for this focus. One involves the status of communication in the analyses of GCS theorists. For a global civil society to emerge, transnational intersections of culture, meaning, and identity are required; and these entail the shared development and sustained implementation of a range of technological, organizational, and institutional media. A central pillar in this grand conceptualization is the recent growth (if not explosion) of electronic forms of transnational communications. Relatively new applications in telecommunications and computers, exemplified by the Internet and e-mail, are thought to be essential. Together, such developments are lauded as the means through which a prospective revolution in the exchange of information, consciousness, and, thus, world order is being made possible.

The other reason for my focus on communication involves the epistemological assumptions entailed in a communication-based perspective. In keeping with the views of GCS theorists, such a perspective assumes that the standards of rational thought, and even reality itself, are historically conditioned. As such, it is reason- able to postulate that changing conceptions of what is "real" and "unreal" or "imaginable" and "unimaginable" can facilitate (or retard) efforts to reconstitute world order. It is with this in mind that a communication-based approach is an appropriate perspective from which to assess the extraordinary claims related to the concept of GCS. Simply put, a communication-based approach shares significant components of the epistemological framework used by global civil society theorists. As a result, the theoretical and empirical tools it brings to the debate facilitate a critique of the GCS literature in the context of the latter's own fundamental assumptions rather than through some kind of external and potentially hostile mode of intellectual engagement.

Communication, in sum, lies at the core of GCS prognostications-in terms of the opportunities associated with new technologies and in terms of its general assumptions regarding how communication is related to consciousness, identity, and conceptions of reality. However, as I demonstrate in what follows, the writings of GCS theorists contain significant weaknesses in relation to both. In an effort to draw attention to these, and to

suggest alternative ways of understanding issues related to communication-related developments, this article is organized into four sections. The first examines an essential component of GCS claims-that more transnational information is generating more transnational ways of "knowing" and that these emerging global realities themselves signal the potential formation of a more organized and potentially progressive trans- national politics. In reviewing the work of what may be referred to as "GCS progressives," I find these claims to be questionable, most fundamentally because they are based on a rather dubious notion of how information is related to knowledge.

The second section builds on the first by assessing the role of new technologies in the annihilation of temporal and spatial barriers and the implications of this development in the potential reformulation of identity. Here I argue that GCS theorists are typically naive in their assumptions regarding the potentials of such developments to significantly modify how people identify and conceptualize themselves. As demonstrated in this section, the ascendancy of transnational communications itself does not necessarily stimulate the kind of progressive global community anticipated by many GCS theorists. Instead, relatively mediated forms of communication (and the conceptual mediations applied in the process of "knowing") are playing an indirect role in reshaping community and identity through, most importantly, their influence on changing lifestyles. Also in this section, the tendency among GCS theorists to make extrapolations from particular case studies is redressed, in part, by recognizing that the development of new and entrenched "global" ways of knowing are, to say the least, varied and extraordinarily problematic.

The third section examines the treatment of both the inter-state system and the state in the GCS literature. It demonstrates how GCS progressives tend to convey an ahistorical understanding of state-civil society and state system-global civil society relations. The most egregious problem that emerges from this is the concept of GCS can tell us remarkably little on issues related to global power structures and disparities. The implications of this point then are pursued through a brief discussion of how GCS theorists tend to be uninterested or misinformed on issues concerning the political economy of transnational communication developments.

In the final section-the article's conclusion-further consideration is given to some of the key points made in previous sections and these are related in what is admittedly a pessimistic evaluation of GCS potentials in the new century. In light of this critique and evaluation, I end with some thoughts on how to explain the apparently rising status of global civil society as a conceptual category despite its many and significant limitations.

Information and Knowledge

Arguably, the most remarkable aspect of GCS theorizations is the primacy of transnational arrangements and global identities in relation to states. Emerging transnational networks are thought to be compelling new ways of thinking that

increasingly are divorced from territorially or nationally defined boundaries. The subsequent demand for rights among the occupants of various configurations of community, it is assumed, will lead to the wrestling away from states of many of their sovereign powers (Shaw, 1996:56-57). Of course this is not to say that the agents of GCS can ever be completely autonomous of states.1 At the very least, individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions rely on states to regulate essential aspects of local, national, and international life.

In its most tangible form, GCS can be viewed as a transnational community in which legal norms, codes of conduct, social mores, and so forth transcend and stand above the sovereign authority of individual states. A global citizenship based on "globalization from above," in which we see the "identity of elites arising from the integration of capital," and a "globalization from below," involving "a growth of human solidarity arising from an extension of democratic principles," constitute the polar extremes of what appears possible (Falk, 1993:40). For GCS progressives, however, global civil society holds at least the potential to universalize, and make politically accountable, basic standards of human rights, environmental protection, and other such demands. Through an emerging consciousness characterized by nascent global communities and, hence, global identities, a relatively more peaceful world may even be on the horizon.

Proponents of this perspective attach great importance to the transformative potentials of transnational communications. Information, and the process of its exchange, is thought to be inherently affecting. But implicit in this thinking is an overly simplistic understanding of the relationship of information with knowledge- the relationship of what is communicated with what is known. GCS theorists, for the most part, tend to treat information and knowledge as if they are one and the same. Emerging transnational associations, facilitated by eroding technological and cultural barriers, involving a broad range of people exchanging information, are seen to be the bases of nothing short of a transformation of consciousness into "global" ways of knowing (Brecher et al., 1993:xv-xvii).

The Internet, for example, is perhaps the core technology through which information will transform the ways in which people understand both the world and their identities in it. Because the Internet enables people to exchange information instantaneously and at relatively low cost, more people will share and be exposed to more information. More precisely, this belief that significant improvements in electronic communications lead to improvements in the lot of humanity involves the assumption that, according to Nancy Stefanik, "all the world's residents [will] learn from each other" (Stefanik, 1993:264). Or, as Howard Frederick asserts, the "decentralizing and democratizing qualities of new computer technologies" will facilitate the development of a "global movement for the common good" in which people may "rise above personal, even national, self-interest and aspire to common good solutions to problems that plague the entire planet" (Frederick, 1993:286).

A more guarded optimism-avoiding this kind of borderline technological determinism-

can, of course, be found in the work of several GCS theorists. Richard Falk, for one, presents a more balanced approach. For him, the Inter- net, for example, is being used by a range of interests, including actors representing the aspirations of transnational corporations. Rather than endorsing the Internet as a tool for democracy, corporations instead generally use such new technologies to promote a disciplined and flexible workforce as well as new and loyal consumers. Nevertheless, the Internet also constitutes a medium of potential emancipation. In the hands of progressive activists, Falk also believes that the "worldwide web allows for an empowerment of globalization-from-below in a manner that seems presently difficult to subdue or ignore" (Falk, 1999:6).

Falk's general point is correct. From the much cited Zapatista movement in Mexico, to the less well known resistance efforts of the James Bay Cree Indians in northern Quebec, to the networking of a range of interests leading to the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, many examples can be cited to illustrate the utilization of new technologies in support of a broad range of progressive activities (Whitaker, 1999:166-168). But although the Internet, e-mail, and other such technologies have largely annihilated the spatial and temporal barriers of electronic forms of communication, the assumption that these breakthroughs also are facilitating a historically significant qualitative transformation in how people think clearly requires more investigation. As Sydney Tarrow points out, in the absence of long-term data, it is too early to embrace the Internet, for instance, as a medium through which the collective consciousness of progressives will be disseminated and adopted globally (Tarrow, 1998:193-194).

At its extreme, the position taken by many GCS progressives constitutes a throwback to the classical empiricists who argued that people understand their lives and worlds as a result of what they accumulate through the use of their senses. For Bacon, Locke, and others, human beings acquire knowledge through their innate information-absorbing capabilities. There are significant problems with this position. For one thing, it generally renders us unable to explain the ability to understand information in the absence of relevant experience. Indeed, the problem facing empiricists in conceptualizing the relationship between information and knowledge can be summed up in the difficulties they have answering the following question: if what is known is dependent on what information already has been absorbed, how can new information (i.e., a new experience) be interpreted "reasonably"? The answer to this has become a key component in subsequent efforts to explain how we come to know what we know (Levinson, 1988).

To understand how we make sense of information without some previous exposure to relevant data or experience-while also rejecting the tautology that we know what we know because, in essence, we already know it-it has been proposed that people learn to interpret information in particular ways. Rather than understanding the mind to be some kind of information-absorbing sponge, instead, people learn how to select and process information into knowledge. As developed in this article, the empiricist tendencies in the work of many GCS progressives

generally lead to a neglect of the historical and structural contexts in which people do precisely this. In sum, the ways in which we select and process information into what is known (i.e., what is "reality") is not innate-it is socially conditioned.

This conceptualization of the relationship between information and knowledge is a core philosophical building block in the interdisciplinary area of social science called the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). One its fundamental postulates is that reality is neither God-given nor simply a product of what is observed in the material world. What we know, instead, is a complex and varied outcome of "our own eyes, a mixture of us and the outside world, and in a sense a reflection of ourselves" (Levinson, 1988:71). From this perspective, the assumption in much of the literature on GCS that information directly shapes what its receiver knows is shown to be seductively simplistic. A related assumption, that the quantity of these exchanges roughly corresponds to a growing sense of understanding and community, constitutes a large and rather sloppy leap of logic.

What is missing in many accounts of GCS are assessments of precisely how information modifies interpersonal and intercultural understandings, identities, and realities that go beyond the assumptions held by the classical empiricists. To take this point one step further, the very logic used to prognosticate a cosmopolitan and even progressive GCS, essentially, is the same as that used in anticipation of a far more disturbing future. The concept of cultural imperialism, for example, brought into prominence through the political activism of mostly Third World governments calling for a "New World Information and Communication Order" beginning at the end of the 1960s, involved similar assumptions (MacBride, 1984). In the literature associated with this movement, telecommunications satellites and other developments involving information technologies and trans- national communications were directly associated with the interests of giant corporations and their Northern nation-state benefactors (Schiller, 1992). Given the interests and structural conditions shaping the implementation and use of these technologies, it was assumed that more information crossing borders would lead to a world characterized by ever-growing consumer appetites, pro-free market ideologies, and, ultimately, a consent-based form of American hegemony (Becker et al., 1986).

This perspective remains an important framework for several students of the political economy of communication (Mosco, 1996). For them, the opening up of national borders for commercial interests is viewed as a contributing factor in the relative commercialization of the public sphere and the ascendancy of neo-liberal regulatory regimes. Private corporations and states who accommodate or promote their interests are chiefly responsible for encouraging quite the opposite of the cosmopolitan global citizen envisioned by GCS progressives. Instead, these forces will stimulate the predominance of a critical and perhaps anti-intellectual thinking. Even the Internet, because of the dominance of private sector interests in its development, is far more likely to promote a global consumer society than some kind of harmonious global civil society (Schiller, 1993). Unlike the ideals of GCS progressives, a global consumerist society (a quite different kind of "GCS") instead may be emerging, characterized by

individualistic interests and the pre- dominance of materialistic pursuits.

Again, like the optimism in the writings of many GCS proponents, a central problem that emerges in this "critical" position lies in the formula that information is knowledge. Simply put, people are not intellectual sponges. The information we receive-whether it is an advertisement promising happiness through consumption or an e-mail from an NGO compatriot involved in a human rights campaign-does not always (and straightforwardly) become an ingrained part of one's own "reality." In response, GCS theorists might argue that this comparison is inappropriate. After all, the interactive qualities of new communications technologies facilitate a circumvention of status quo mass media and its messages. Unlike, for example, the transnational direct broadcast satellite systems that were being planned in the 1970s, the Internet-based technologies of the twenty-first century enable people to be directly involved in constructing their global identities. In other words, new technologies facilitate globalization "from below" because, for the first time, people, rather than states or corporations, control the flow and exchange of information.

But again, this way of looking at things too readily equates information with knowledge, and far more analytical rigor is needed before we can embrace such rosy predictions. If GCS (or any civil society) involves the development and maintenance of a deep sense of involvement and identity with others through an exchange of electronic forms of information, a careful consideration of the specific processes involved is required. This, I believe, can be done, first, by recognizing that as individuals are socialized, they develop what have been called "conceptual systems" (Comor, 1998a:25-28). These are what people use to process information into knowledge (i.e., what is understood to be reality). At any particular moment, one's senses are deluged with information and from the moment of birth we are involved in the task of learning how to manage it. What is relevant and new must be sorted out from what is seemingly irrelevant and routine. In this way, human beings learn to cope with the incalculable number of sights, sounds, odors, tastes, and textures that inundate us. The alternative to this socialization process-this process of learning how to process information-would be madness (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

To communicate anything, from a simple desire to a complex message, those involved must share similar references and associations or must, at the very least, have some preexisting familiarity with what is being conveyed. If, however, people do not share a language, cultural references, and so forth, information may be conveyed but little (if any) of it will be understood (Hall, 1959). As we are socialized, our conceptual systems become both entrenched and more complex. As we learn to mediate and interpret information in our particular cultures and relevant subcultures, we also learn to sort out what information is "good" and what information is "bad," what is "rational" and "irrational," "realistic" and "unrealistic." As such, all information is mediated into what we know using learned, intersubjective, and implicitly power-laden conceptual systems. One GCS theorist who has escaped the limitations of empiricism is Ronnie Lipschutz. In his support of the argument made by James Rosenau - that world populations are becoming more analytically astute and thus politically capable

(Rosenau, 1994)-Lipschutz writes:

> It is not the contact [i.e., the communication of information] itself but the ability to use data as knowledge that is the critical element-data are the electronic bits transmitted by communication systems; knowledge involves having the skills to use the data toward specific ends. The relevant skills have been spread, perhaps unwittingly, by the growth of post-secondary educational institutions around the world, as well as by changes in the world economy. Because political systems are so diverse, the particular channels of articulation of this new competence vary from one country to the next. However, the general effect is one of the creation of networks of global political activity in parallel to the state system. (Lipschutz, 1996:114-115; emphasis in original)

Lipschutz elsewhere goes beyond this focus on "skills" and acknowledges the role of culture and local experience in shaping how people come to understand their world.3 In his writing on changes in the meaning of nature, for instance, Lipschutz recognizes that what "whale" or "forest" means to someone whose livelihood is directly related to them usually will differ from the interpretations of people brought up and working in other contexts. Lipschutz goes on to argue that these infrastructures need not determine how people interpret information (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:60-62). Larger or external cultural forces can intervene "via various channels of information" and can, he says, modify "the meaning of self in relation to place" (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:63). Lipschutz theorizes the information-to-knowledge process in terms of what he calls "social learning" and, borrowing from Haas, argues that the processing of information involves socially learned "understandings about cause-and-effect linkages" (Haas, in Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:65).

Beyond this instrumentalism (informed by the assumption that people process information in accordance with their perceived interests), Lipschutz understands human knowledge to be both more complex and varied:

> Every human society has its own system of beliefs (myths, norms, rules), social relations, and production practices that form a single, more-or-less coherent framework.... Within each one's framework, these beliefs, relations, and prac- tices must operate in a regular fashion if the overall fabric of the society is to remain intact and be reproduced over time. (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:68)

Human beings thus do not process information into what is known in necessarily "rational" or instrumental ways. Instead, our mediating conceptual systems are shaped by lifestyles, work experiences, customs, language, mythologies-by cultures. In the contemporary era of globalization involving instantaneous trans-national communications, however, Lipschutz believes that such personal and local biases are being increasingly "influenced by knowledge and practices originating elsewhere" (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:72). A continuous struggle between the global and the local is under way and this, he says, is due in part to the relevance and resilience of local cultures.

Lipschutz thinks that what we know is ultimately a process of the mind and thus what shapes this process is essential in efforts to assess the transformative implications of communications. He concludes that, as a result of globalization and related communication and transportation developments, new forms of collective identity are emerging (Lipschutz, 1996:117-118). Lipschutz also believes that, ultimately, transnational networks of knowledge and practice will transcend significant aspects of the state system (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:74).

Martin Shaw also is optimistic about a prospective GCS. Like Lipschutz, Shaw's prognostications are based on a kind of dialectical analysis. But perhaps more so than Lipschutz, Shaw bases his optimism on what may be described as a more functionalist argument. While the complex and often contradictory dynamics of globalization will, for Shaw, generate environmental, cultural, and economic crises, "it is through such crises that we can increasingly identify global society and the development of its institutions" (Shaw, 1994:4). Through, for instance, the "global coordination of communications ... ideas and values ... become increasingly commonly held" (Shaw, 1994:11). Conflict in this emerging configuration of shared realities is the precondition to an eventual integration of people sharing common global interests. Indeed, the conflictual aspects of diversity, where cultural differentiation is linked to political conflict, can be seen under the rubric of global integration. Conflict sharpens awareness of mutual dependence and promotes the development of common responses and institutions for regulation, which in turn involve cultures of cooperation. (Shaw, 1994:13)

Unlike Lipschutz, but like many GCS progressives, Shaw substantiates his optimism by relying on what is essentially an empiricist notion of how information is processed into knowledge. A growing awareness of global injustice and environ- mental degradation, forged mostly through nonstate communication networks, somehow will lead to a shared sense of global responsibility. But again, to assess such claims, we need to examine more than just what information is being exchanged, who is involved, and how its communication is taking place. We also need to carefully assess those factors conditioning conceptual systems in this period of globalization and, more precisely, the role of transnational, national, and local communication in relation to this conditioning.

Before proceeding, a few words regarding Falk's recent book, *Predatory Globalization*, is warranted in relation to these conditioning factors (Falk, 1999). As mentioned above, the optimism expressed by Falk is tempered by his awareness that any progressive transformation will entail a political struggle against vested interests possessing significant resources. Indeed, those seeking a "people- oriented" form of globalization are largely limited to "guiding [the] ideas" that underlie how globalization is being structured-a development, for the most part, being driven by corporate-based interests (Falk, 1999:140-141).

Of course, as Falk himself recognizes, there are specific exceptions to this general tendency. RonaldJ. Deibert, for one, has investigated the use of the Internet to enable transnational lobbying networks opposing the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (Deibert, 2000). Richard Price, similarly, on the subject of inter-

national security norms related to landmines, has documented the process in which Internet-based networks have facilitated the kinds of communities and discourses needed to modify (or, using his term, re-socialize) state policies (Price, 1998). But these examples-praiseworthy as they are-and the many other studies emphasizing the importance of such networks in support of progressive interests are in and of themselves not my concern here. Instead, what I am arguing is that the ahistorical and dichotomous treatment of civil society-state relations, the generalizations made as a result of this conceptual starting point, and the general absence of structural power concerns in much of the GCS literature are all too commonplace. More generally, as elaborated below, the inherent idealism of such studies involves a questionable understanding of the relationship between ideas and material conditions. Despite the apparent analytical sophistication of Lipschutz, Shaw, and Falk, for example, all under-theorize qualitative aspects of how information is processed into knowledge. As such, political potentials and strategic options are subjected to gross miscalculations.

Time, Space, and Conceptual Systems

The prognostications of GCS progressives and those who, instead, anticipate some form of globalization "from above" entail assumptions regarding the annihilation of temporal and spatial barriers. With their removal through new technologies human beings, it is assumed, can develop identities that are as affiliated with "t global" as with "the national" or even "the local." Shared information and mostly mediated "virtual" experiences will generate conceptual systems that are relatively inclusive and cosmopolitan. Information involving environmental crises, human rights abuses, economic disparity, and other issues will be interpreted more and more in terms of the global commonweal than the problems of distant "others One of the most influential theorists shaping these perspectives is Anthony Giddens (see, e.g., the use of Giddens in Shaw, 1994). According to Giddens, globalization is an extension of modernization. It involves what he refers to as the process of time-space distinction. Through the use of new technologies, conceptions of time and space are becoming increasingly removed from the here-and-now. It is in this sense that social relations are being established and maintained in ways that are removed from local contexts (Giddens, 1990). As Giddens summarizes,

> we live "in the world" in a different sense from previous eras of history. Everyone still continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space. Yet the transformation of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what "the world" actually is. (Giddens, 1991:187)

Like all forms of knowledge, conceptions of time and space, while always related to the here-and-now, are understood through the mediation of conceptual systems. In the absence of the capacity to process information into ways of knowing that accommodate global identities, any form of global citizenship-and its implications-would be impossible. How then can we evaluate the probable effects and wide-scale use of contemporary

time-space annihilating communications technologies on conceptual systems? Although there cannot be a universally applicable answer to this, I think it is safe to say that while the information gathered through various transnational media may have some effect in modifying conceptual systems (as developed below), the information garnered through early-life socialization and day-to-day experience warrant existential priority (Tomlinson, 1996).

At one level, this distinction between the effects of here-and-now vs. long- distance communication can be simplified in terms of the direct vs. indirect (i.e., relatively mediated) qualities of each. Of course there is no such thing as a human relationship that is unmediated. At the very least, some form of language or, more basically still, some shared meaning is required (such as a common under- standing of what is indicated by a facial expression or hand gesture). Socialization, cultural context, and, of course, conceptual systems always are employed in the mediation and subsequent construction of reality. Most importantly, different relationships are qualitatively different and a distinction should be made between those involving communications that are relatively direct and those involving communications that are relatively indirect. At the core of this difference lies the relative (but not absolute) importance of face-to-face relationships in the formation and shaping of conceptual systems.

The essential roles played by what sociologists call our "significant others" during infancy forever impress upon us the need for some amount of intimacy in our more meaningful relationships. This usually involves some time in the physical proximity of another and this intimacy can be sustained, at least temporarily, even if the other person moves far away from direct physical contact (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The accumulation, over time, of relatively direct relationships and experiences constitutes the bases of our ever-mediating conceptual systems and, eventually, our identities. This is not to say that hours of television watching, book reading, and Internet surfing do not have varied and sometimes significant effects on conceptual systems (as most students of cultural imperial- ism, for example, would assert). Nor is it to say that Giddens and GCS progressives are entirely wrong in their claims about the transformative implications of time-space distanciation. Instead, *I am arguing that our more mediated relationships are relatively limited in their potential to directly shape one's sense of identity and interpretations of reality.* It is with this in mind that the ascendancy of transnational communications itself does not-and under present political-economic conditions (as discussed later) cannot-directly stimulate the kind of progressive global community anticipated by most GCS theorists. Instead, relatively mediated forms of communication are playing an indirect role in reshaping community and identity by, most importantly, influencing lifestyles.

Transnational communications and a range of other developments associated with globalization are having an impact on how we live our lives from day to day. An awareness of how others live undoubtedly opens conceptual doors and these have facilitated (but have not in themselves determined) the formulation of innumerable cultural hybrids. But there are, of course, material limits to such lifestyle possibilities. As John Tomlinson observes, "such lifestyle choices are made within an experiential context that remains, in important ways, stubbornly local" (Tomlinson, 1996:75). Simply

put, *local relationships tend to prescribe the context through which global influences are potentially adopted and understood and transnational communications can, over time, modify this context by influencing changes in lifestyle that, in turn, affect conceptual systems.*

The importance of changing lifestyles is not completely ignored in the GCS literature. For example, transnational communications have been associated with a growing awareness of those (mostly indigenous people's) lifestyles that appear to be in some state of harmony with the natural environment. Lipschutz, for instance, argues that even in a community that depends on the exploitation of the environment for its livelihood, an awareness of other lifestyles can challenge long-standing practices. This, however, involves more than the straightforward reception of information and its adoption into personal knowledge. Modifications in "everyday worldviews and practices" also are involved (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996:64). This emphasis on awareness facilitating changes in lifestyles that then modify conceptual systems, from an analytical perspective, is far more palatable and useful than the notion of information itself directly reshaping consciousness.

At the risk of being labeled an "essentialist," how we live is relatively more affecting than what we read, see, or hear in shaping the conceptual systems used to process information into what is known. In relation to this, information from afar can and does affect how people live their lives and, indeed, the gathering of such information and interaction with others around the world through new technologies may constitute a significant aspect of one's life. But having said this, the conceptual systems through which information is processed into knowledge are themselves most directly the expressions of "ways of life" that are inescapably rooted in personal history and material realities (Harding, 1998:150). As such, the act of doing more work or spending more leisure time or engaging in more politics online-in communicating with others across spatial and temporal barriers-is affecting insofar as it involves changing lifestyles. GCS progressives who recognize that the taking on of an activist lifestyle itself both reflects and can revise an individual's conceptual systems thus make a most salient point. As Paul Wapner argues in relation to the efforts of transnational environmental activist groups, their role in organizing participatory forms of local politics "can alter the way people interact with each other and their environment" (Wapner, 1995:336). As such, and like most forms of participatory democracy, some modification in how one thinks is often a consequence of one's actions.

In recognizing that what we "know" involves a process of complex mediations, and that socialization and lifestyle are most influential in conditioning the conceptual systems employed in the task of interpreting information, this and the preceding section have sought to provide what is now generally lacking in the GCS literature: the sociological and communication-based concepts needed to assess its more ambitious claims.6 Following this section's focus on lifestyle, the next assesses the role of structural power in shaping those communications developments that may influence how people live from day to day. It also critiques a tendency in the GCS literature to portray the state system-global civil society relationship as ahistorical and dichotomous. These points are tabled to emphasize the importance of assessing GCS in light of the context and

consequences of a global capitalist political economy. Developments involving trans-national communications technologies and their complex cultural implications subsequently are assessed with this structural context in mind.

GCS, the State, and Structural Power

I begin this section by reiterating aspects of the argument made by Pasha and Blaney in their aptly titled evaluation of GCS, "Elusive Paradise" (Pasha and Blaney, 1998). In it, they argue that while both GCS developments and the discourse related to it are part and parcel of the globalization of economic and social relations, these relations are rarely conceptualized in the context of "the unequal and alienated relationships of capitalism" (Pasha and Blaney, 1998:419). Moreover, proponents of GCS tend to see it as an almost autonomous process, removed and in opposition to the state system. Martin Shaw, for example, views GCS developments as a response to the failings of states. According to Shaw, a struggle is under way "between the instincts of statesmen to maintain the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, and the pressure from global civil society to transcend them" (Shaw, 1996:58). Richard Falk conceptualizes globalization to be taking place in opposition to the state system. "Territorial sovereignty," according to Falk, "is being diminished on a spectrum of issues in such a serious manner as to subvert the capacity of states to control and protect the internal life of society, and non-state actors hold an increasing proportion of power and influence in the shaping of world order" (Falk, 1997:125).

Given this orientation, the state system-GCS dichotomy clearly is in need of some contextualization. The very notion that the political characteristics and capacities of any form of civil society are comprehensible in the absence of some developed notion of structural power is itself remarkable, and this is especially the case given the importance of the day-to-day in shaping conceptual systems. By structural power, generally I am referring to "the power to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises" (Strange, 1988:25).

Left to itself, notably in the context of capitalist social-economic relations, ideals of legal equality often stand alongside profound economic inequalities. While states, in some instances, enforce these inequalities, state structures also may be modified and/or mobilized (usually as a result of sustained and organized pressure and/or political-economic crisis) to implement policies aimed at reform. The important point here is that economic injustice is not simply the outcome of state involvement in the marketplace. Instead, both the state and civil society exist and develop in the historical context of capitalism. The democratic or undemocratic conditions perpetuated by either the state or civil society (if such clear distinctions are possible) cannot be understood without some comprehension of the dynamics entailed in this complex relationship.

In a predominantly and increasingly liberal-capitalist global political economy, acceptable behavior (and indeed the norms often required to achieve economic success and status) includes such things as competitiveness, hard work, and conspicuous

consumption. As these cultural characteristics become norms, they are, for the most part, de-politicized (Pasha and Blaney, 1998:423), becoming, over time, ingrained within conceptual systems. It is with this in mind that a more grounded (i.e., less idealist) assessment of the power dynamics characterizing prospective GCS developments may be developed.

Along these lines, the role played by capitalism constitutes an integral part of the discussion. Historically, prior to the ascendancy of the capitalist mode of production in Europe, political sovereignty--the sovereignty of the feudal lord- was directly and explicitly implicated in the process of surplus extraction. As such, political inequalities were formalized as legal and even cultural norms. For economic production and social reproduction to take place in feudal and most other precapitalist societies, political power was exercised through relatively unmediated structures. Capitalism, in contrast, is characterized by more complex, relatively mediated power relations.

Following Justin Rosenberg's rich historical treatment of the development of the state system in the context of emerging capitalist social-economic relations (Rosenberg, 1994), we would do well to avoid defining sovereignty in terms of the practical ability of the state to command the behavior of its citizens relative to nonstate or extraterritorial agents. Nor should state sovereignty be viewed as simply some kind of residual legal authority. Instead, it is far more useful to define sovereignty as the social form of the state in a society where political power is divided between public and private spheres. In so doing, we are compelled to recognize the complex relationship of state-civil society relations directly alongside structural power. This historically situated definition also provides relief to the shallowness and distorting effects of debates concerning the contemporary state and its "strength" or "weakness" in the face of globalization, whether its authority is "strong" or "weak," and so forth (Rosenberg, 1994:129).

As noted previously, many GCS theorists point to the interactive and potentially universal qualities of new communications technologies, enabling groups and individuals to form their own meaningful networks thereby circumscribing status quo (including state system) conceptualizations of reality. At one level, this general perspective underplays the ongoing role of states in setting and regulating the parameters of what communications technologies are made available and to whom.7 Furthermore, efforts to promote communications technologies and information-based products and services have been mostly led by large-scale commercial interests rather than by NGOs, indigenous peoples, or the working class and, for the most part, have unfolded in the structural context of mostly marketplace-based dynamics. The widespread adoption of "personalized" technologies, for example, arguably both constitutes a reflection of predominant market system realities (in which we are, above all, self-serving, ever-consuming individuals) and perpetuates these characteristics through day-to-day practices. Rather than being used to liberate individuals from status quo communications, for most-particularly those lacking either the knowledge, time, or incomes needed to escape the embrace of large-scale service providers (the AOL Time-Warner behemoth being only one of the most recent)-such technologies may well

deepen existing dependencies and, more essentially, be used in efforts to entrench already pervasive conceptual systems.

The Internet, for example, is fast becoming a transnational interactive marketplace of mostly sensual come-ons and commercial opportunities-a far cry from its promise to become a truly democratic forum for the exchange of information. Of course this latter use is still with us and is unlikely to vanish. But given the rate of its commercialization and the persistent (if not growing) dis- parities in world income and technological capacity, the predominance of capitalist political-economic structures and dynamics points to the very opposite cultural developments of those anticipated by GCS progressives. Not only is the experience of relating to others in cyberspace qualitatively different from meeting others in a coffee shop, pub, or union hall, "when information becomes increasingly thought of and treated as little more than a commodity, national and international laws and regulations tend to treat publics as consumers rather than as citizens" (Comor, 1998b:228).

In relation to the structural power of capital, the optimism of most GCS progressives should be tempered for yet another reason. Contemporary developments in transnational communications are being led and increasingly dominated by private sector interests whose profit-making priorities are most influential in determining both who will use new technologies and what they will be used for (Golding, 1998). As a result, the people most likely to participate in noncommercial transnational communications are the relatively wealthy and educated. Simply put, poverty constitutes the most obvious barrier in efforts to communicate (let alone fundamentally reshape conceptual systems) over space and time. The cost of a personal computer to a Bangladeshi, for instance, represents eight years of that country's average income. Moreover, and related to this poverty, the basic literacy capabilities needed to actively participate (including a working knowledge of English) remains underdeveloped in most parts of the world (United Nations Development Programme, 1999:62).

In much of the GCS literature, transnational communications technologies are welcomed as core media through which a vast array of interests and voices will be expressed and organized. But even in the absence of commercial structures and liberal-marketplace conceptual systems, generally speaking, the multitude of interests taking advantage of new technologies may have limited capacities in their efforts to involve mass audiences for sustained periods of time. Such sustained dialogues are probably needed if significant modifications in lifestyles and, subsequently, conceptual systems are to take place. As Robert Fortner writes,

> Discourse is not increased by such a system. It is channeled and is specialized: it is not enabled, but enfeebled. People are empowered to preach, but only to their own choirs.... The excess of information has the effect of reducing social inclusion even as it increases interest-based communion. (Fortner, 1995:139)

Putting aside the emphasis on ever-changing and fashionable issues among those commercial interests using new technologies to secure consumers, the kinds of

information exchanges foreseen by GCS progressives are unlikely to take place on anything approaching the global or temporal scales envisioned. Concerns over the disparate availability of communications technologies as conveyed, for instance, by some international organizations (ranging from the United Nations to the World Bank) are secondary to the actual potentials these technologies have in influencing how people conceptualize themselves, their realities, and thus what is "imaginable" and "unimaginable." Given both the political economy of their development-explicitly and implicitly promoting certain standards of behavior and thought-and the secondary status of relatively mediated forms of communication in shaping conceptual systems, the prospects for a progressive GCS forged through, as Falk puts it, some kind of "globalization from below," appear to be depressingly remote.9

Historically, one might well ask if the apparently limited powers held by citizens in any given liberal democracy have been the outcome of limited information and communication resources or have they, more fundamentally, been the result of more complex and structurally entrenched inequities? While such inequities obviously have involved disparate information and communication capabilities, they are almost certainly, and more directly, ongoing products of disparate capacities involving resources such as wealth, force, and knowledge (the latter, again, being quite different from "information"). In light of structural power and those aspects of it influencing the construction of knowledge, a GCS driven forward by a progressive global citizenry clearly would involve a revolutionary re-casting of conceptual systems-conceptual systems that are more firmly rooted in the soils of tangible-local political economies than virtual-global relationships.

Beyond the false state system-GCS dichotomy lies a form of structural power that shapes both the character of communication-based developments and, in relation to these, the potentials for new imaginings. The context of capitalism structurally embraces people as consumers, not citizens. While one cannot refute the many cases in which new technologies have been used to empower people, they also remain instruments of power for the status quo. Through the commercialization of more and more of our daily life (Gill, 1995), not to mention the vast extension of surveillance capabilities made available through the Internet and other technologies (Whitaker, 1999), a society or GCS characterized by hierarchies of wealth, force, and knowledge, far from being a sphere of democratic empowerment, more probably is the very site most in need of fundamental reform (Pasha and Blaney, 1998:423).

For the most part, historical and macro-level conceptualizations of power generally, have been shelved by GCS progressives in favor of the micro-physics of interest group struggles and questions related to identity. In their analysis of transnational networks, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, for example, counter the focus on inter-state relations in mainstream International Relations by instead examining "dense webs of interactions and interrelations among citizens of different states which both reflect and help sustain shared values, beliefs and projects." As such, power in this world is viewed as "the composite o thousands of decisions which could have been decided otherwise" (Keck and Sikkink, 1998:213). Beyond the general

absence of structural power, this and related approaches simplify the dialectical nature of identity and society. Because conceptual systems are used to process information into knowledge, human beings are not simply "free" to pick and choose preferred versions of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:174-183).

Assumptions that "the self" essentially is the outcome of the rational or autonomous selections made by individuals from an expanding spectrum of global information sources are themselves shaping further assumptions about the implications of new technologies. What has been called the emerging "hypermedia environment" (Deibert, 1997), for instance, involves the absolute and relative growth of personalized and interactive information portals, the rapid growth of transnational communication networks, and a deepening awareness of "the global" as a shared spatial reality. But then to go on to argue that such developments likely will facilitate a progressive GCS-involving conceptual systems somehow reconstructed through virtual rather than material realities; involving the assumption that the structural power of capitalism will be lessened instead of enhanced; involving the assertion that human identities are ripe for some kind of revolutionary transformation-is itself a dubious proposition.

Such a transformation instead will require, first, a change in both practice and lifestyles. Day-to-day life (most essentially at the local level) will have to be restructured in ways that will encourage socialization processes quite different from those that are largely focused on facilitating capitalist accumulation and representative (rather than direct) forms of democracy. What has been called the global-local dialectic (Lash and Urry, 1994) will no doubt accelerate and intensify. Locally, this likely will continue to involve various degrees of indigenization in which different cultures incorporate different elements of foreign cultures in different ways. However, given the context of structural power and the wealth, force, and knowledge resources held by some in relation to others, it appears unlikely that many such interactions will take place on anything approaching some kind of equal exchange. Indeed, such disparities could well generate conflict rather than cooperation. As Arjun Appadurai writes,

> Globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing styles and the like), which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies, only to be repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues of national sovereignty, free enter- prise, fundamentalism, etc., in which the state plays an increasingly delicate role: too much openness to global flows and the nation-state is threatened with revolt- the China syndrome; too little, and the state exits the international stage, as Burma, Albania, and North Korea, in various ways, have done. (Appadurai, 1990:307)

Similarly, David Harvey has argued that the annihilation of spatial and temporal barriers is more likely to generate competitive and perhaps even reactionary forms of localism and nationalism than some kind of McLuhanesque "global village." The reason, again, involves the historically entrenched structures of capitalism. In a world characterized by rapid change, free-flowing capital, and falling spatial-temporal barriers, concerted efforts to make "the local" comparatively attractive for investors, or to portray its culture as

relatively (and chauvinistically) ideal, tend to become more rather than less likely (Harvey, 1990:271- 272). Moreover, in an increasingly interconnected world, characterized by rapid change and instability, and given the place-based conditions of day-to-day human existence, one's identification with a place most probably will remain an important psychological mooring. In the context of structural power and economic globalization, however, in this clinging to some kind of place-bound identity, "oppositional movements become a part of the very fragmentation which mobile capitalism and flexible accumulation" feed upon (Harvey, 1990:303).

I close this section with some thoughts in response to how GCS progressives tend to assess the implications of instantaneous communications. Generally speaking, the advantages of spatial reach have been emphasized but duration has been largely neglected. The new technologies associated with globalization are structurally oriented to shrink the time frames of decision-making. Whether such decisions involve the bombing of an enemy, the security of one's investments, the options one has in the workplace, and so forth, the Internet, the general commoditization of culture, and the related values placed on speed and efficiency arguably have set the stage for volatility and deepening political, economic, and cultural crises. As transnational investors respond to market "signals" with spasmodic acts of panic selling, as consumers fail to keep up with the demands of producers to buy more commodities more often, as the environ- mental crisis reaches a point of no return, and as people around the world become increasingly concerned with the here-and-now, the cultural capacity to appraise problems in terms of a relatively balanced consideration of both space and time appears to be in decline (Innis, 1982:61-91).

Along with its rapid growth, the Internet and related technologies are being structured to facilitate the ongoing development of mostly commercial interests to the detriment of their democratic potentials. As such, existing disparities in access to wealth, force, and knowledge, for the most part, most probably will be entrenched rather than challenged. Through the Internet and related media, the practices and thoughts of more people in more parts of the world are quite possibly becoming increasingly focused on immediate concerns and individual needs in relation to the long-term and collective. Rather than a condition of the structural power of capitalism directly, this may be a by-product of the related speed-up of everyday life. In its moment-to-moment use, the Internet, for exam- ple, links many in relations directly or indirectly stimulated by the systemic demand for efficiency. For many others, it links people in innumerable and instantaneous virtual communities. Either way, the relative intimacy of many noncommercial and face-to-face relationships tends to be pushed to the periphery of the human experience. As communication theorist Heather Menzies suggests,

> For all the contemporary talk about a postmodern information society ... a real test of change is whether the social movements using the Internet ... serve the bias of time-not just at the innovation stage and at the end-user level of inter- textual rhetoric, but at the stage of institutionalized technological development and the enabling infrastructures associated with it, not just at the level of language games, but at the material level of structures that determine who gets to speak about what

and who referees and designs the game plan. (Menzies, 2000:324)

The time needed to individually and collectively reflect and critically assess the undesirable implications of globalization "from above" is being reduced, not enhanced. In the context of competitive capitalism, and through the technology-facilitated annihilation of time and space in daily life, the demand to make instantaneous decisions and the mounting discontinuities of experience and consciousness from one moment to the next make the construction of transnational, progressive, and monumentalizing perspectives capable of radically reforming lifestyles and conceptual systems improbable in the coming decades.

Conclusions

The optimism conveyed by many GCS progressives is premature. The reformation of conceptual systems through, for example, a sustained and collective demand for ecology-friendly policy reforms is unlikely to take place on a truly global scale. Beyond ahistorical questions of state versus nonstate sovereignty and authority, the kind of pervasive and ingrained lifestyle changes and sub- sequent conceptual system modifications required (in which, for instance, the word and object "automobile" would become associated with "waste" rather than "success") is limited under foreseeable political-economic conditions.

This is not to say that the progressive sentiments of many people in disparate parts of the world will not continue to boil up and, through the Internet and other transnational media, express themselves in occasional uprisings. Globalization activities, particularly those involving corporate-based interests in direct opposition to popular local or national demands, appear to be stimulating significant but, on the whole, fragmented or temporally limited movements. While many GCS progressives recognize the role of culture and local experience in shaping one's capacity to think and act holistically, creatively, and perhaps even progressively, the GCS literature generally tends to overestimate our collective capacity to be re-socialized directly through communications and ideas, the power of individuals and groups to overcome the structural conditions of their lives, and the importance of spatial integration despite the related dismantling of time.

The construction of global networks, despite their structural affinity for consumerism and individualism, may, of course, spark further resistance activities as the effects of globalization "from above" are experienced. But still, a shared awareness of these conditions is not by itself the precondition to globalization "from below." The main reason for this, as discussed previously, involves the kinds of conceptual systems most likely to be promoted through the everyday use of instantaneous transnational communications technologies. Such conceptual systems most probably will be shaped by the general impoverishment of shared memories, sustained attention, and reflexive (rather than reactionary) modes of mass activism. In this context, *the application or even lifestyle appropriation of new technologies by social movements and others may well serve to facilitate the exchange of data and the spatial coordination of activities,*

but, paradoxically, they also may weaken the reflexive capabilities of collectivities, inspiring rapid mobilization but leaving little time for critical reflection.

Contemporary structures of economic disparity generally do not stimulate sustained and organized forms of resistance against environmental degradation, human rights abuses, and other apparently universal concerns. The conceptual systems being used by those seeking a globalization either "from above" or "from below" generally remain focused on how best to generate or distribute wealth. What Stephen Gill calls an emerging "market civilization" (Gill, 1995) directly involves the predominance of culturally embedded capitalist relations in a broad range of technologies, organizations, and sociological institutions. A related rea- son to doubt the optimism of GCS progressives on environmental issues involves the successful promulgation of ecologically unfriendly consumerist lifestyles. Indeed, it is a global consumerist society rather than an environmentally sensitive global civil society that continues to be most decisive in changing lifestyles among the world's varied populations (United Nations Development Programme, 1998).

Movements and protests against the thinking that underlies contemporary status quo economic policies-as in Seattle in 1999-for the most part constitute a continuum of ongoing but generally fragmented resistance efforts. To read such activities as more than this both ignores the arguments made in this paper and, I believe, grossly underestimates the relative capacities held (and being aggressively developed through communications technologies) by pro-growth, pro- consumption interests to widen and deepen structurally established conceptual biases. Transnational communications may well have a significant influence on lifestyles, but precisely what these changes will be and how they will in turn affect conceptual systems involves yet another level of thoughtful analysis-a level thus far generally underdeveloped in the work of most GCS progressives.

In sum, not only do GCS progressives lack the kind of evidence needed to substantiate their extraordinary claims, in the context of the theoretical and empirical arguments made in this paper it is remarkable that the concept itself has not been challenged more widely and concertedly. But, of course, as Leo Panitch reminds us, "the rise and fall of theories is not merely the product of intellectual competition with the most fruitful coming out on top" (Panitch, 1997:4). Instead, for a conceptual approach to be "in fashion" it requires little more than some kind of consensus among more established or influential intellectuals. Our contemporary interest in GCS is not simply a reflection of some kind of obvious or irreversible empirical "trend"; rather, its cache is more comprehensible in light of recent intellectual developments.

Not only have we seen a decline of analyses that take complex capitalist- related dynamics seriously (ironically, at the very time that capitalism is more globally pervasive than ever before), we also have witnessed the emergence of an academic and policy culture that has adopted categories popularized by the New Right. States, commonly now, are assumed to stand as impediments to markets and the public sector is simplistically contrasted with the private (Panitch, 1997:6). In light of this way of

thinking, it is not surprising that an intellectual construct like GCS has found a place in the Academy. Related to the ascendancy of neoliberalism is the general distancing of influential intellectuals from working class or peasant-based movements and, instead, their closer affiliations with more particular interests, social movements, and NGOs. Conceptualizations of "significant problems" among progressives possibly reflect these emerging connections and these, in turn, may well reinforce the present lacunae regarding the historical relationship of our complex and historically entrenched system of production and reproduction with state-civil society formations.

From this gloomy analysis, GCS progressives would do well to assess the role of communications technologies in terms of their strategic usefulness as organizational tools without conflating them with grand re-socialization potentials. Historically, progressive political movements often have been inspired and informed by international events and contacts. At best, GCS progressives should continue to promote transnational movements as supplements to national or local movements where state powers remain crucial, where people in fact live their lives, and where political mobilization is relatively affective.

Lifestyles are changing as a result of transnational communication, travel, and trade. Much of the resulting cultural hybridization, however, propels forward the relative and often implicitly resisted ascendancy of commercial interests and consumerist orientations, rather than deepening democratic institutions and sustained dialogues. The antidote to such developments surely involves a concerted effort-paradoxically involving the Internet and other such technologies-to organize nationally and locally to provide tangible alternatives for those seeking relief from economic globalization, its commercial pressures, and the re-balancing of space and time toward the latter. The utilitarian aspects of communications technologies and our knowledge of the role and importance of conceptual systems can directly inform these efforts. The ideals expressed in the work of GCS theorists such as Falk, Lipschutz, and Shaw remain vaguely imaginable. The task at hand, however, is complex and politically daunting, and the role of communication is less than straightforward.

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