

What are the contradictions implicit in the idea of a global civil society?

Written by Yulia Kiseleva

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YULIA KISELEVA, APR 29 2010

Introduction

'Global civil society' has been quite a popular expression for the last twenty years, and rightly so. Its overwhelmingly positive connotation appears to leave no room for objection and hardly anyone would question the overall good intentions behind it (*Glasius 2001:1-2*). However, it is precisely because of its 'easy global applicability' and 'universality' that it is important to be careful when using the term. For on closer inspection, different, sometimes not easily obvious, aspects of the idea of global civil society may prove to be quite revealing and, therefore, surprising for those who use it on a regular basis. In light of the aforementioned, this paper intends to identify those often-overlooked aspects of the global civil society concept that constitute its 'dark side', that is those components of the idea that seem potentially nebulous and are not necessarily in agreement with its usual, positive meaning or interpretation.

This is not to say that global civil society, to put it simply, is a bad thing or contains a lot of hidden agendas, with potentially adverse consequences for all. Rather, the paper merely attempts to point out that no concept or idea comes into this world absolutely 'impeccable' or 'smooth', including the idea of global civil society. For this very purpose, the paper asks the question: how good is this concept in terms of its formulation, historical background and coherence? Ultimately, the paper seeks to expose contradictions within the concept. So, the author admits in advance that the idea of global civil society is good, and proceeds to its inevitable 'flaws', that is contradictions. As regards the structure of the paper, the contradictions will be presented one by one.

Contradictions

1. Much of the criticism of the concept of global civil society revolves around comparisons between global civil society and its domestic counterpart, that is civil society understood within state boundaries and as a purely domestic and state-related occurrence (*Anderson & Rieff 2004:29-30*). These comparisons can constitute the basis for the first contradiction of the global civil society project. Simply to comprehend how this contradiction manifests itself, it is enough to look into the history of the evolution of civil society itself. As it is well-known, the civil society conception has never been static in its meaning and purpose. It is fair to say that at different times and epochs it reflected and was reflected by certain historically-driven circumstances that up until now have been moulding it, as a philosophical idea and as a political reality, into what it is now. Perceived as an inseparable part of a country's political system, as the medium between a growing class of merchants and manufacturers, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, or as the independent battlefield for rights and freedoms between the government and the people, civil society has, nevertheless, always been operational only within the state and deemed as such only in its relation to the state system (*Khilnani 2001:31*). This is where the first contradiction comes in for it is hard to imagine talking about global civil society without referring to the initial meaning of the term. The difference between the two concepts is obvious

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when one sees that, for example, there is no state at the global level where global civil society would be the intermediary between various peoples' grievances and the global government. Furthermore, it is also important to keep in mind that the relations between civil society and a state are determined and regulated by the state's legal system (based on the so-called mutually acceptable 'social contract'), a collection of laws which identify the state's and the people's responsibilities as well as respective rights to one another (*Kaldor 2003:30*). Although it can be argued that in this respect global civil society can appeal to international law, it is still unclear how global civil society as a whole, as a unified front, can force the non-existing government to adopt the necessary laws and define respective obligations and rights (including both sides), because international law is created by states which represent the interests of their respective peoples, not by the separate peoples of different states. Indeed, NGOs—arguably the most vocal representatives and the most definable embodiment of global civil society—do not seem to argue that they have their own responsibilities before the international community (of states) while demanding a certain responsiveness from the latter (*Baker 2002:931*).

Thus, drawing on the experience of 'domestic' civil society, one concludes that civil society was born out of the state, both as a response to its excesses and as a result of the state's reaction to these demands. In other words, these two categories determine and reinforce each other, and one cannot exist without the other, they function in tandem (*Khilnani 2001:32*). Modern civil society implies a certain type of relationship between society and the state which is reflected in the law of a particular country. Global civil society, in contrast, seems therefore a very vague concept for it possesses no boundaries and fights against an invisible 'enemy' (or against a group of individual states). In addition, proponents of global civil society themselves cannot agree on what exactly the phenomenon means—so many are the meanings and facets it can assume.

2. Concluding from all of the above, we have tried to answer the question of whether civil society can 'go global'? Theoretically, as we have seen, it is hardly possible. Practically, global civil society, embodied in the activities of various NGOs, cooperates with states, thus operating within the state-centric system that it is striving to change but compelled to accept (*Chandhoke 2002:74*). Some scholars argue that by doing so global civil society is actually reforming the current world order dominated by the state, thus unwittingly making it more resilient and durable in the long run (*Mathews 1997:64*). Facts serve as evidence when we witness multiple attempts by all sorts of NGOs to restore human rights and good governance in various 'broken', undemocratic states. Nation-building seems to be high on the agenda of many NGOs, whether they do it consciously or not. As a consequence, here a contradiction arises between what the proponents of global civil society profess and what is achieved as a result of their activity.

3. Besides, it is also worth noting that, examined from a normative perspective, global civil society is even harder to define and position in the present world system. Firstly, if it is an end point in history (what Fukuyama once described as 'the end of history'), then one runs into difficulty trying to prove that 'domestic' civil society must be the culmination of the political life of every state (*Kaldor 2003:27*). As we all know, civil society has not become a common feature of political life in all countries. It is therefore highly contestable that civil society itself is an ideal type for everyone (at least as a phenomenon inherently characteristic of the Western state), let alone something that marks the end point in the history of all mankind, something that represents the logic of history as a whole (if not fatality). Secondly, even if we assume that on the domestic level civil society is what all nations must come to sooner or later, this presupposition does not allow one to infer that global civil society is a direct copy of its 'younger brother' and so too is destined to represent the final destination for the whole world (*Keane 2003:29*). There is simply no valid evidence to claim that civil society has a global, universal application (*Chandhoke 2002:37*). Thus, the normative aspect of the concept of global civil society also appears nebulous.

4. Another contradiction resulting from our attempts at understanding global civil society as a reality is the very word 'global'. As we have already found out, theoretically, many scholars do not agree with the notion that civil society can become global. Notwithstanding this, in practical terms, if one supposes that civil society is capable of 'globality' and certain universality, is it a reality on the ground? This is where one of the most controversial debates around global civil society arises. Facing these debates, global civil society is questioned on the grounds of its legitimacy, representation and accountability (*Baker 2002: 930*). Firstly, legitimacy is supposed to be something that is earned by the state and granted by the people to the state, which means the government must be sanctioned by society to act on its behalf. The controversy related to the topic of this essay is that global civil society is not 'elected' like the

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state, and so far there have been no mechanisms for this process (like democratic elections embedded in the political structures of the nations with civil society). Hence, it follows that global civil society is not so global for it is not a product of popular consensus as to whom it represents and whose interests it protects (*Chandhoke 2002:37*). Taking the example of NGOs, it is evident that they exist in great numbers, which by definition allows for an incredible multiplicity of voices, opinions and causes promoted by such international 'interest groups' (*Clark 2001:22*). However, there is no single voice which could represent all people on the planet. In this regard, the state looks more viable and effective because, ideally speaking, the state's very existence is conditioned upon its unique ability to liaise between various social groups in society and seek compromises between their competing concerns and desires (*Walzer 2002:39; Kaldor 2003:38*). In the words of Walzer, 'a decent civil society requires state action' (*2002:47*). Global civil society, the way it is now at least, does not possess such an ability. In other words, global civil society requires a global state to 'discipline' its own multiple voices (*Anheier & Glasius & Kaldor 2001:11*). Moreover, taking into account the fact that many NGOs come from the North (or the West) it is again difficult to assert that global civil society is truly representative of all people on whose behalf it purports to act (*Bleiker 2002:201*).

5. Secondly, as a result of the situation described above, global civil society also lacks accountability for if you do not get elected, neither do you have anyone to be accountable to. This does not necessarily imply chaos and disorder. However, it does not rule them out, either. In the case of international NGOs, they are supposed to be accountable to the people whose interests they represent and advance (*Anderson & Rieff 2004:30*). But accountability also presupposes independence and freedom in taking necessary and timely decisions. Most NGOs, depending on state funding (which comes as no surprise considering the state-centricity of the world order), are forced to allocate the money they receive to particular projects and to define specific areas most in need of those means. In fact, many NGOs depend on state funding and have to adjust its practices in order not to lose their governments' trust and support. In this light, it can even be argued that NGOs are rather accountable to their respective states than the people for whom they have been established to work (*Anderson & Rieff 2004:31*). The 'civility' of global civil society is questioned here.

6. The final contradiction in the notion of global civil society is the simple question of whether everyone is involved in its process, or rather, does everyone want to be involved in global civil society and represented by it? (*Chandhoke 2002:38*) 'Globality' can hardly be achieved and defined as such if it does not embrace at least the majority of the Earth's population. While global civil society may be a reality as an occurrence that has no precedent in history, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that global civil society is 'global' in the way it is envisioned by its most ardent supporters. This is a problem of definition, rather than the reality this definition endeavors to describe.

Conclusion

Thus, global civil society, for all its attainments and strengths, cannot be fully considered as a readily accepted phenomenon without its flaws and imperfections. It is true that whatever happens out there in the world today is 'global' and certainly unprecedented. However, it is not necessarily 'global civil society', at least as we have seen, not the global civil society many would want it to be. It is a particular period in human history, and much more time has to pass before proper judgements can be made on what it was that was sweeping the world at the turn of the 21st century and whether it represented a nascent 'global civil society'.

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Written at: **Australian National University (ANU)**

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Date: **18 August 2009**

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This is not to say that global civil society, to put it simply, is a bad thing or contains a lot of hidden agendas, with potentially adverse consequences for all. Rather, the paper merely attempts to point out that no concept or idea comes into this world absolutely 'impeccable' or 'smooth', including the idea of global civil society. For this very purpose, the paper asks the question: how good is this concept in terms of its formulation, historical background and coherence? Ultimately, the paper seeks to expose contradictions within the concept. So, the author admits in advance that the idea of global civil society is good, and proceeds to its inevitable 'flaws', that is contradictions. As regards the structure of the paper, the contradictions will be presented one by one.

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