

Does global civil society undermine or support contemporary global governance?

Written by Angelica Loureiro

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ANGELICA LOUREIRO, OCT 6 2010

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased debate about global civil society, especially because of the proliferation of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) since the 1990s, and the role they play in supporting global governance.

It has been common in the media to reduce global civil society to the Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs). Understanding global civil society from the Scholte's (2002) perspective, where civil society is a political space incorporating a plurality of actors that organizes themselves in many different ways, such as voluntary organizations, local associations, movements and so on to attempt to shape and influence forms of governance, would be an ambitious task to analyse their various activities as a whole. For that reason this study narrows its focus to the role of the NGOs.

Global Civil Society

The advent of contemporary global governance and its transnational authorities promoted a shift in the way civil society organized its activities. Not long ago civil society developed within a specific form of governance based on the nation state and its activities had a fixed space. (Kaldor, 2002) The classical concepts of civil society reflected national boundaries and the form of governance was solely based on the nation state. Nowadays it has become common to speak no more of civil society in the national context, but instead to speak of a global civil society transcending the territorial boundaries of states. (Scholte, 2001; Kaldor, 2002) The concept of global civil society is recent; dating back to the 90s, and since then has been widely used. (Keane, 2003)

According to Wapner, global civil society is the space in between state and individual, his emphasis relies on the role that the non- governmental individual can play and its growing autonomy. (Platiau, 2001). Recent conceptions focus on dissent and tend to separate civil society from the economical and political spheres; they are commonly referred as 'third sector'. (Scholte, 2001; Kaldor, 2002; Kamat, 2004) For Kenny (2003) the concept of global civil society is a 'liberal idealization' and has been used to describe diverse activities and a variety of private associations including the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), although they are neither neutral nor independent from the public and private sectors.

With the sovereignty of the nation states challenged by the authorities of international institutions of global governance and decisions being made elsewhere, civil society is transcending the borders of the states and widening its activities in an attempt to influence the new mode of governance. To understand the shift in civil society we have to analyse the shift in the mode of governance and the constitution of contemporary global governance, thereby shedding light on the changes in civil society. (Scholte, 2001)

Contemporary Global Governance

Under the transformations that took place in 1990, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, we

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have the constitution of Contemporary Global Governance. The end of the Cold War meant the institutionalization of globalization and a movement towards the consolidation of a “new global architecture” based on the expansion of free-market and liberal democracy. (Wilkin et al, 2003). With USSR leaving the scene the US sought rapid to occupy all the spaces left from the Soviet influence and to integrate the new emergent nation states into the world economy. As Cox puts it:

Washington obviously had much to celebrate. Its only serious rival had gone under, the Warsaw Pact had collapsed, in the former Communist countries the free market was fast becoming all the rage, while in the Third World one-time anti-imperialist regimes were beginning to sign up to a ‘new economic consensus’ that took the name from the American capital. (Cox, 2004, p.594 in Review of International Studies)

In an attempt to provide order, development and security we have the advent of new institutions and authorities of Global Governance committed to the expansion of globalization based on free market and liberal democracy. This kind of governance based on the expansion of neoliberal globalization meant not only the increased interdependence and integration of all nations under a world economy but also integration of social spaces.

Moreover the revolution of ICT (Information Communications Technologies) played a great role in making it all possible, social relations were not taking place anymore at the national context but at the transnational context facilitating the flows and exchanges of ideas among people. In a context of increased interconnectedness new issues such as global warming, economic crisis, crime, inequality and so on, were not any more particular to the national context but were a reality in the whole world. (Wilkin et al, 2003). Therefore we have the crescent inability of the prevailing mode of regulation based on nation states to regulate it by themselves. Commenting on the advent of globalization and governance, Scholte points out that:

The contemporaneous advent of the two terms is not accidental. Globalization-a reconfiguration of social space-has gone hand in hand with a reconfiguration of regulation. Where we used to speak of ‘government’, it is now suitable to speak of ‘governance’. (Scholte, 2001, p.10)

According to Scholte, globalization promoted shifts in all social structures including those of regulation, governance is thus the mode of regulation of the neoliberal globalization era.

Rosenau refers to ‘governance without government’, that is not to say that governments are excluded or not important in the process of governance, but is an attempt to show that they are not exclusive in this process. Governance is a system of rule and it is as extensive as encompassing realized not only through organizations and institutions but also by activities from private sector and civil society. Governance embraces international institutions, governments, and the private sector as transnational corporations and global civil society with its variety of actors, all the components are important for the maintenance of the system and order. A range of actors in a broad scope performs governance internationally, nationally and locally they are organized horizontally in a much decentralized way and lacking any formal authority. For governance to operate successfully and achieve order it requires consent of all its components or at least of the most powerful within the system. (Rosenau, 1992)

On the contrary, Hardt and Negri assert that; what seems disorganized and even chaotic takes a pyramidal shape and reveal some points of reference. This pyramid is composed of three layers that broaden progressively from the top. At the very top we have a centralized authority and hegemonic power, the US. Below them there are a set of international institutions controlled by nation states such as International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization. These institutions of global governance amongst others are crucial for the execution of neoliberal policies. (Wallerstein, 2006)

The networks of transnational capitalist corporation together with nation states, that are usually subordinated to the power and interest of the former, compose the second layer. As Hardt and Negri point out: *‘The single and univocal pinnacle of world command is thus articulated by the transnational corporations and the organization of markets.’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000; p.310)* The associations of civil society with the objective to represent the interests of people form the third and wider layer. As global civil society cannot be represented as a whole in the constitution of

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global power we have some mediators such as the nation states and associations of civil society, often referred as non-governmental. (Hardt & Negri, 2000)

This new system of governance where authority moved from the nation states to transnational institutions makes possible a reorganization of the activities of civil society. In an era where the main structure that exercised governance was the nation state the activities of civil society tended to be directed to the former. Nowadays with new structures exercising governance in a wide scope their activities has varied towards international institutions and corporations in an attempt to influence governance.

Scholte has shown that the current system of global governance has generated a democratic deficit. The regulation of global issues; such as finance, ecology and so on concerning and affecting people as a whole lacks transparency, consultation, participation and accountability. As have been evidenced earlier in this paper, people are represented through their nation state in the global constitution, but national governments have not been transparent and efficient at consulting and informing the population of what has been decided internationally and how the policies can affect their lives. And even their participation is unequal if we take the G7 and IMF as examples of institutions deciding on matters that have global impact, in the case of the former only '10 per cent of humanity' is represented through their national governments. (Scholte, 2001) Furthermore above the interest of governments we have the interests of transnational corporations committed with global capital.

As a consequence, NGOs have been experiencing a growing autonomy and authority to speak in the name of the people in the global constitution, trying to widen participation and influence the new instances of governance, and the decisions that affect daily life. To be more precise, instead of representing global civil society as whole, they represent certain groups concerned to specific subjects and they have been constantly identified by many as agents capable to democratize from below structures of global governance. (Kamat, 2004). As the author notes this pattern has to be seen with caution, Kamat points out:

(...) that unlike governments and state bureaucracies, there are no mechanisms by which NGOs can be made accountable to the people they serve (...) (Kamat, 2004, p.156)

The term NGO was coined by the United Nations in 1950, when they wanted to consult organizations that were independent from government and at the same time was non-profitable, they referred to these organizations as NGOs to differentiate them from the public and private sector. (Teegen et al, 2004) As it defined today by the United Nations:

Any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies and encourage political participation at the community level. They provide analysis and expertise; serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, the environment or health. (Quoted in Teegen et al, 2004; p.466)

The United Nations itself has been responsible for juridical recognition of the role and technical expertise of the NGOs on subjects such environment, human rights amongst others, incorporating them through consultative resolutions where they can contribute on themes of global governance. (Kaldor, 2002; Barros-Platiau, 2001)

Barros-Platiau has shown how the NGOs committed with environmental issues has been contributing in the elaboration of the international environment law bringing solutions, pointing to the gaps and helping in the implementation and regulation of the norms. The UN depends on the activities of the NGOs and the latter are participating in a range of overseas activities of the former from conflict management to control of epidemics such as HIV/AIDS. (Kamat, 2004)

Moreover the NGOs appropriation of the notion of civil society as against the state is a 'key notion' to understand that is not part of the NGOs ambition to undermine contemporary neoliberal global governance. As Sader argues:

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The very act of defining themselves as 'non-governmental' explicitly rejects any ambition on the NGOs part for an alternative hegemonic project which would, by its nature, have to include states and governments as the means through which political and economic power is articulated in modern societies. They therefore either insert themselves, explicitly or implicitly, within the liberal critique of the state's actions, or else limit their activity to the sphere of civil society- which, defined in opposition to the state, also ends at the boundaries of liberal politics. (Sader, 2002; p.93)

Conclusion

For the NGOs there is no attempt to undermine the neoliberal contemporary global governance, rather their attempt lies on influencing and participating in decision-making within the current system. The current global governance is made possible by the proliferation of the activities of the NGOs worldwide. They have been incorporated to the structures of global governance and some institutions as the United Nations recognize their participation. The latter are themselves dependents of the expertise and activities of the former in the regulation of specific issues overseas. As Kamat suggests: (...) *a balanced relationship or partnership between states and NGOs can best serve the interests of society. (Kamat, 2004, p.156)* Concluding it has become a consensus among the neoliberal international institutions that NGOs help to legitimate the benefits of free market and liberalism and they are seen as providing 'good governance'. (Kenny, 2003)

In the project of neoliberal governance where we have seen the retrenchment of the state from the social, the NGOs are stepping in to fill the gaps left by states; the former is seemingly more than welcome to make part of the multilayered neoliberal governance package. Hence, the continual increase in partnerships amongst private, public sector, civic associations, and non-governmental organizations.

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