Transnational civil society

The global activism of the last two decades has to be understood in the context of the evolving relationships between the spheres of politics, economy and society on global issues, resulting from the increasing international integration that has emerged since the 1980s.

At the global level, the sphere of politics is structured by the inter-state system, where national states, international and supranational institutions exercise their power. While at the national level the political relationships between state and citizens have been defined by constitutions, law and democratic processes, at the global level no universally coercive power of law has yet emerged, and no democratic processes of participation, dialogue, deliberation and vote have developed for the world citizens.

The sphere of the economy is structured, at the global level, by the operation of firms and markets, dominated by the search for profits and by a drive to turn into commodities an increasingly wide array of activities previously provided and regulated by states and society, from knowledge to education and health, from public services to global public goods such as water and environmental protection. The resulting privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation have characterised since the 1980s the model of neoliberal globalisation that has asserted the power of markets and large industrial and financial firms over decisions made in the political sphere and over social behaviours. A strong tendency toward homogeneisation has resulted from this.
At the global level, the web of social activities can be characterised as an emerging global civil society, defined as follows: the sphere of cross-border relationships and activities carried out by collective actors — social movements, networks and civil society organisations — that are independent from governments and private firms, operating outside the international reach of states and markets.

Demands that have emerged here vis-à-vis the political and economic spheres can be summarised as follows: a) demands by global civil society for global democracy, human rights, dialogue, and peace to the state system; b) demands by global civil society for global economic justice to the economic system; and c) demands by global civil society for global social justice and environmental sustainability to both systems. Conversely, both the state and the economic systems have put pressure on global civil society to adhere to their own values and norms.

Since the 1980s, a growing networking, activism and social mobilisation has addressed global issues, defended fundamental rights and advocated change in a transnational perspective. The demands and activities of civil society moved beyond their interaction with the national political and economic spheres, and challenged political and economic power across and above national borders, questioning some fundamental aspects of the nature of the inter-state system and of the global economy. The increasing transnational nature, vision, scope and activities of civil society have made it possible to identify a growing field of activism with a distinctly global frame, identity and scale of operation. The autonomy from the territorially bound nature of sovereign states has made it possible for civil society (and, more precisely, for major actors within it) to define itself on the basis of values and identities that transcend national/state loyalties, to act on global issues and to coordinate action across boundaries.

1 A growing literature has addressed the definition of civil society, from its origins in Ferguson, Hegel, Tocqueville, to the critique of Marx, and the modern meaning emerging with Gramsci (Gramsci, 1971; Bobbio, 1976). See (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Falk, 1992; Lipschutz, 1992; Falk, 1999; Anheier et al., 2001; Pianta, 2001, 171; Anheier et al., 2002, 2003; Chandhoke, 2003; Kaldor, 2003). According to the UNRISD definition, «Civil Society is a complex social arena, with individuals and groups organized in various forms of associations and networks in order to express their views and fulfill their interests. They could constitute anything from a global advocacy movement down to a village self-help group.» (UNRISD, 2003, 1).
The view of the emerging global civil society as a sphere of relationships among highly heterogeneous actors leaves the field open for a more focused definition of different types of mobilisations on the global challenges addressed by civil society. In this regard, global social movements can be defined as cross border collective social mobilisations on global issues, based on permanent or occasional organisations, networks and campaigns with a transnational coordination, moving from shared values and identities, challenging and protesting economic or political power, campaigning for change in global issues. They share a global frame of the problems, have a global scope of action and may target supranational or national targets.²

Within global social movement, a key agent is the global networks. Within the global justice movement, a global network can be defined as follows: a global network is a permanent coordination among different civil society organisations (and sometimes individuals, such as experts), located in several countries, based on a shared frame for one specific global issue, developing joint campaigns and social mobilisations against common targets at national or supranational level. Global networks are key actors with a major role in terms of aggregation of social forces, development of common identities, formulation of campaigning strategies, and implementation of political struggles. In the last two decades, cross border networks of civil society organisations have been the most typical actor promoting political and economic change on global issues. Global networks can thus be considered as the backbone of social movements engaged in the political struggle for global justice. Global networks are usually characterised for their advocacy function toward the promotion of normative change in society,³ but

² Della Porta and Diani (della Porta & Diani, 1999) suggest that (national) social movements are defined by four key aspects: informal interaction networks, shared beliefs and solidarity, collective action focusing on conflicts, use of protest. The above definition focuses on global issues and movements as distinct from simply transnational ones. According to Sidney Tarrow (2001, 11), transnational social movements are «socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interactions with power-holders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor».

³ As in the national context, network activists work on the assumption that their action can make a difference, that the context in which they live can be modified by the political struggles brought forward by especially sensitive actors. In this vein, transnational relations are considered as an area of struggle in which different actors compete for a number of differing aims ultimately concerning the acceptance and implementation of their normative vision of social reality (Risse-Kappen, 1995).
they may also carry out alternative practices that are largely separated from the spheres of global politics and the global economy. «When they succeed, advocacy networks are among the most important sources of new ideas, norms, and identities in the international system» (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, X).

The contemporary challenges

In the emergence of global civil society democracy is a crucial element. The concepts and practices of democracy have assumed their more advanced formulation in the constitutions, laws and practices of democratic states, where equal citizens elect and control a sovereign, legitimate and accountable government, and participate to democratic processes, both deliberative and decisional, through a rich variety of social and political mechanisms, including political parties, trade unions and civil society organisations, the media and public opinion, etc.

At the global level very few traces of democracy resembling the national dynamics can be found. The inter-state system is made of unequal states whose external relations do not follow the democratic principles that may be present within them. Powerful states make decisions that affect the lives of citizens in other countries. Individuals have no status as citizens of the world, and their fundamental human rights are only now starting to be recognised as worth protecting beyond the boundaries of sovereign states. Supranational institutions and the United Nations system are designed as inter-state organisations, with narrow missions and limited resources. A state-based political system remains an unsatisfactory framework for addressing global issues and providing global public goods. Global politics is still largely the domain of inter-state relations, and in spite of the large production of international rules, treaties and agreements on a growing spectrum of global issues, the ability of the system to effectively address them has remained modest. In many cases, there is a lack of supranational institutions with a clear mandate to address specific problems; in other cases agreed upon rules and treaties are made ineffective by the failure to comply and act by states.

In this, the political participation of the public is very limited indeed. Both in cases where decisions taken in a given country have border-crossing consequences, and in those where decisions taken at the international level have correspondingly international effects, most often the grassroots political agent, who bears the consequences, does not have significant power to register his or her ‘trans-border consent’ (or, indeed, dissent).
Assuming she or he has the power to register her or his consent at the domestic level (which is rarely the case), she or he nevertheless does not have a voice at all in the domestic decisions of other countries and has little voice in international fora, even when they are public. In public international organisations, the only political voice available to him or her is through the double representation offered by national parliaments, which (if entitled) subsequently elect international representatives with differing effective powers. Should one come from a poor country, in fact, he or she can expect to have an especially weak voice in the intergovernmental organisations. Using these observations as a starting point, one can argue that current international affairs are characterised by a high degree of exclusion and disenfranchisement, in which no effective space for inter- and trans-cultural dialogue is provided (Marchetti, 2005).

The rise of global social movements in the past two decades needs to be interpreted largely in the light of the global democratic deficit. The question of democracy in the global system can be examined from several perspectives. From the perspective of political theory, a growing gap can be identified between the socio-economic reality, that is transnational in its operation and effects, and the political system, which is still fundamentally anchored to a state-centred model. Increasingly, decisions taken in one country affect people in other countries who do not have the possibility to express their voice because of their subaltern status as non-fellow, ergo disenfranchised, citizens. Production, investment, finance, trade, the environment, migration, health, and security are key examples of how the link between actions and consequences extends across borders. And yet those who bear the effects of decisions taken abroad are not typically entitled to have a political voice in the process (Falk, 1995; Held, 1995; McGrew, 1997; Archibugi et al., 1998; Bello, 2002; Stiglitz, 2002, 18-22; Cutler, 2003; Monbiot, 2003).

From the perspective of international political theory, the dichotomy of political exclusion vs. political engagement highlights a crucial element of political incompleteness in the current political arrangements at the international level. In order to respond to the democratic deficit characterising the current political system, global networks represents central actors for ending the resulting unjust exclusion of a vast portion of the world population from transnational decision-making processes.

Global social movements can thus provide an important contribution to democratising the global system, but the reflection on the practical forms this may take, and on the ways glob-
al civil society may be part of this process, has just begun. For instance, it has yet to be debated whether global civil society should have a voice of protest, a voice of advice, a vote or a veto on decisions of global powers on global issues. A key question is how states and supranational institutions could formally recognise the role of civil society on global issues, granting its organisations the right to have a voice (outside or inside the rooms of power?) on global issues, as members, for example, of the delegations of national representatives to UN bodies, regional organizations (such as the EU) and international conferences; some very initial steps in this direction have already been taken in the case of the UN. One century ago the same route was taken by the labor unions when they obtained formal recognition for the representation of workers from governments and employers.

**Dialogue as a form of alternative politics**

Among the action pursued by transnational civil society, the function of dialogue across-borders is fundamental (Dallmayr, 2001, 2003). In this final section, I want to point out two cases in which the dialogical function of civil society actors is particularly relevant. The first case is that of dialogue in ethno-political conflicts. The second regards the mission of the World Public Forum as a place for trans-border dialogue can be developed.

**Ethno-political conflicts**

The dynamics of recent ethno-political conflicts are characterised by high intensity intra-border ethnic tensions, strong international appeal to human rights protection, and a strategic use of multi-layered communication. Within this context, civil society actors have played an increasingly crucial role in conflict situations, for their distinct structure and values allow for incisive action in all the three phases of conflicts (pre, during, post).

A twofold role of civil society actors exists in relation to human rights violation, both beneficial and detrimental. 1) Some civil society actors have played a major role in reducing HR violations due to their structure and values. In doing so, they have contributed to conflict prevention, amelioration, and resolution, independently from and at times more effectively than governmental actors. And yet, an enhanced complementarity with governments would improve their performance. 2) Other civil society
actors, through their functions have exacerbated conflicts and contributed to human rights abuses. This has occurred as an intentional result of their mandate and vision, as well as the indirect result of their actions.

The term ‘civil society’ encompasses a wide variety of actors, ranging from local to international, independent and quasi-governmental (Quangos). Social movements, networks, and organisations are all part of civil society, broadly intended as independent from state structures, though they play different roles within it. These civil actors are often present in conflict areas well before their escalation and the ensuing attention of governments, whose priorities are shaped also diplomatic politics, national interests, and the absence of bottom-up approaches. From raising public awareness and organising mobilisation (both domestic and international), to facilitating dialogue between the parties or providing material support for civilians, civil society organisations have become central players in conflicts around the world.

The underlying missions and objectives of civil society actors are widely diverse. Some may either contribute actively or set the conditions for human rights abuses and the ensuing emergence of violent ethno-political conflict. At times, the services, information and lobbying of civil society actors contributes to inflexibility and intransigence amongst governmental players. Yet others, provide a significant contribution to the protection of human rights and inter-communal dialogue. Indeed at times, due to their different structure and values, civil society actors have had a more consistent and thus effective impact on human rights than governmental actions. In cases of ‘frozen’ conflicts where the end of direct violence has not led to the accomplishment of a peace settlement, civil society actors, in view of their non-state nature have also proven more effective in facilitating dialogue in conflicts marred by fundamental debates over sovereignty. State and inter-state actors have tended to view the concept of territorial integrity as sacrosanct, at times triggering the mistrust of minority communities, who, in view of past human rights abuses seek additional collective guarantees over and above individual rights.

The civil society functions are many. Particularly important here are its function of stimulating dialogue and people-to-people contacts. This helps in providing crucial information on the counter-part and raises awareness of each own subjective position.
Similarly to the World Social Forum (WSF), the World Public Forum (WPF) can play a crucial role in fostering an intercultural dialogue at the transnational level. While civil society can play an important role in facilitating dialogue intra-border, it can also play a role in the transborder dialogue. At the international level, the lack of institutional channels in which the voice of the less powerful can be heard make even more evident the necessity of creating such a dialogical space.

Other fora provide space for other kind of perspectives. The WSF, for instance, gives voice to multiple claims about the injustices of the current neo-liberal economic system. The World Economic Forum (WEF), conversely, aims to offer a common space for improving the coordination at the world level within a fully capitalistic framework. Within this context, the WPF aims to fill a gap, in that it provides a space where the cultural claims can be voiced against a certain world tendency toward homogenization. Despite the fact that actors of these diverse fora are all part of civil society, in the WPF actors are distinct. Due to its focus on culture and identity, the WPF is more inclined to invite scholars, intellectuals, media operators, religious figures than other fora.

Controversial as it may be, the notion of civilization has to be intended here as the recipient of the cultural lebenswelt of each social community. This is, by definition, porous and always mutating, but it represents a crucial element for individual flourishing. The public domain has particular significance for the quality of life of individuals, insofar as society for the most part shapes individuals’ moral and personal identity in a process in which personal choice is combined with personal discovery. In more existential terms, culture can be seen as what remains when all the rest is lost. So much so that without a lebenswelt in which to affirm their identity, individuals’ lives would be fragmented and disoriented; their choices would be unconscious and most unlikely to be conducive to satisfaction (Frost, 2001). At the same time, a critical perspective is crucial, and having at one’s disposal several contexts of choice in addition to the context original to one is even more beneficial to the possibility of free choice (Sommer, 2004), for identity is not a zero-sum game (UNDP, 2004, 2). This hermeneutic-normative reasoning applies both to individual and state (and sub-state) identity, the two being highly determining factors for an integrated individual well-being. In this sense, the societal cultural environments are intended
instrumentally as providers of contexts of meaning for choice-making, and thus an essential pre-requisite for individual autonomy (Kymlicka, 1995).

Assuming the importance of the dialogical relationship for the development of both individuals and civilisations, the aims of the WPF remain crucial in a period where the cultural-political conflicts are on the increase and where no institutional space for a respectful and fair dialogue is provided.

References

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