

Unfamiliar words

A new cosmology

All human orders, hunting and gathering societies included, have lived off shared images of the cosmos, world-views that served to plant the feet of their members firmly in space and time. Yet very few have fantasised the linking of the five oceans, six continents and peoples of our little blue planet wrapped in white vapour. Each of these world-views in the strict sense emerged only after the military defeats suffered by Islam, in early modern Europe. They included the forceful global acquisition of territory, resources and subjects in the name of empire; the efforts of Christendom to pick-a-back on imperial ventures for the purpose of bringing spiritual salvation to earth; and the will to unify the world through the totalitarian violence of fascism and Marxism–Leninism. Each of these globalising projects left indelible marks on the lives of the world's peoples, their institutions and ecosystems, but each also failed to accomplish its mission. In our times, against the backdrop of those failures, the image of ourselves as involved in another great human adventure, one carried out on a global scale, is again on the rise. A new world-view, radically different from any that has existed before, has been born and is currently enjoying a growth spurt: it is called global civil society.

These unfamiliar words 'global civil society' – a neologism of the 1990s – are fast becoming fashionable. They were born at the confluence of seven overlapping streams of concern among publicly-minded intellectuals at the end of the 1980s: the revival of the old language of civil society, especially in central-eastern Europe, after the military crushing of the Prague Spring; a heightening appreciation of the revolutionary effects of the new galaxy of satellite/computer-mediated communications (captured in Marshall McLuhan's famous neologism, 'the global village'); the new awareness, stimulated by the peace and ecological movements, of ourselves as members of a fragile and potentially self-destructive world system; the widespread perception that the implosion of Soviet-type communist systems implied a new global political order; the world-wide

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growth spurt of neo-liberal economics and market capitalist economies; the disillusionment with the broken and unfulfilled promises of post-colonial states; and the rising concern about the dangerous and misery-producing vacuums opened up by the collapse of empires and states and the outbreak of uncivil wars.¹ Fed by these developments, talk of global civil society has become popular among citizens' campaigners, bankers, diplomats, NGOs and politicians. World Bank documents welcome 'the opportunity to work with civil society'; the Asian Development Bank (ADB) similarly speaks of the need to 'strengthen cooperation with civil society'; and even the World Trade Organisation (WTO) declares its support for dialogue with the world's civil society institutions.² The phrase 'global civil society' becomes protean and promiscuous. It even peppers speeches of prominent figures like UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and Chancellor Schröder, sometimes to the point where the words themselves become as fickle as they are fashionable.

There is today much chatter about global civil society, but too little thinking about it. That is why the phrase 'global civil society' must be used with caution. Like all other vocabularies with a political edge, its meaning is neither self-evident nor automatically free of prejudice. So how can we best think about these words? Current usages are quite confused. There is general agreement that talk of global civil society is a response to rising concerns about the need for a new social and economic and political deal at the global level. And parallels are sometimes observed with the early modern European invention of the distinction between 'government' and 'civil society', which emerged during the period of questioning of the transcendental foundations of order, especially

¹ Among the earliest expressions of these concerns is the theory of a 'world civic culture' in Elise Boulding, *Building a Global Civic Culture. Education for an Interdependent World* (New York, 1988); the idea of 'global civilization' in the working paper by Richard Falk, 'Economic Dimensions of Global Civilization' (Global Civilization Project, Center for International Studies, Princeton University, 1990); the theory of the 'internationalisation' of civil society and the terms 'cosmopolitan civil society' and 'global' or 'transnational' civil society in John Keane, 'The Future of Civil Society', in Tatjana Sikosha, *The Internationalisation of Civil Society* (The Hague, 1989) and *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 135ff.; and Morten Ougaard, 'The Internationalisation of Civil Society' (Center for Udviklingsforskning, Copenhagen, June 1990). Among the first efforts to draw together this early work is Ronnie Lipschutz, 'Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society', *Millennium*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 389–420.

² Each case is cited in Aziz Choudry, 'All this 'civil society' talk takes us nowhere', <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/AZ1201A.html>, p. xxi; cf. the call for 'a new international social covenant between markets, states and civil society', in Gerhard Schröder (ed.), *Progressive Governance for the XXI Century* (München, 2002), p. xxi; 'The United Nations: Partners in Civil Society', www.un.org/partners/civil.society/home.htm; Madeleine Albright, *Focus on the Issues. Strengthening Civil Society and the Rule of Law. Excerpts of Testimony, Speeches and Remarks by US Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright* (Washington, DC, 2000).

of monarchic states claiming authority from God.³ Beyond this elementary consensus, many discrepancies and disagreements are evident. Some writers see in the idea of global civil society a way of analysing the empirical contours of past, present or emergent social relationships at the world level. Others mainly view the concept in pragmatic terms, as a guide to formulating a political strategy; still others view it as a normative ideal. In practice, these different emphases often criss-cross and complement each other. Yet since they can and do also produce divergent types of claims, it is important to distinguish among them and, as far as possible, to avoid mixing them up and producing confusion.⁴

Analytic-descriptive usages of the term 'global civil society' selectively name key institutions, actors and events, examine their complex dynamics and – using theoretical distinctions, empirical research and informed judgements – attempt to draw some conclusions about their origins, current development patterns and (unintended) consequences. Within such analyses – the first and second sections of this book are an example – the concept of global civil society is used to probe either the past or the present, or both past and present simultaneously. The aim of such probes is not to recommend political strategies or to pass normative judgements on the world; they rather seek an explanatory understanding of the world's complex socio-political realities. The term global civil society also can be used as an aid to *strategic political calculation*. In this second approach, evident in this book's treatment of global social movements, the term serves as a campaigning criterion – to establish what must be done (or what must be avoided) in order to reach goals, like freedom and justice, whose desirability is more or less presumed. Strategic uses of the term are directly concerned with political questions. They concentrate upon institutional constraints and opportunities as well as the manoeuvres of power groups and movements – upon the (potential) political gains and losses of supporters and opponents that operate from within or outside the structures of global civil society. The normative concerns that inevitably attend such 'tactical' approaches are treated as a given; their

³ Compare my 'Despotism and Democracy: The Origins and Development of the Distinction Between Civil Society and the State 1750–1850', in John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London and New York, 1988 [reprinted 1998] pp. 35–72 and Adam Seligman, 'Civil Society as Idea and Ideal', in Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds.), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, 2002), pp. 13–33. In my view, Seligman's explanation of the rise of the ideal of a civil society suffers from the same weakness evident in Marxian accounts: their one-sided emphasis upon the growth of market economies and the corresponding search for a new ethical order in which individual interests could be reconciled with the public good.

⁴ The importance of distinguishing among these different usages is analysed in more detail in my introduction to *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* and *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions* (Oxford and Stanford, 1998).

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main preoccupation is with the calculation of the *means* of achieving or stabilising a global civil society. Finally – as evidenced by the final section of this book – the term global civil society can be wielded as a *normative ideal*. The ethic or big idea of a global civil society is said to be warranted and plausible and desirable, and on that basis it can be used in two complementary ways: as a *precautionary* concept that serves to issue warnings about the undesirable or unworkable consequences of practical efforts to weaken or abolish the institutions of global civil society, for instance through unilateral military intervention, or the imposition of martial law. Such precautionary usages of the norm are usually reinforced by its *advocacy* function: gentle or strong efforts to explain and highlight the reasons why a global civil society, ethically speaking, is a good thing.

Empirical contours

Given the versatility of the term, which is surely one of the reasons for its rising popularity, it follows that its different usages should not be conflated, as is typically done when the words global civil society are flung about in vague, simplistic or tendentious speech. This is the point at which empirically minded researchers arrive on the scene. They point out that the quest to map and measure the contours of global civil society is essential for clarifying its empirical scope and complexity, its strategic or political capacity and its normative potential. They call upon the facts to speak for themselves. They pursue (what appears to them, anyway) a straightforward empirical approach that supposes (as the American expression has it) that if something in the world walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it is a duck. The approach points to the sketchy data that are available, thanks to the path-breaking contributions of bodies like the Union of International Associations, the *Index on Civil Society* project supported by CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation), a Ford Foundation-funded comparative study of civil society in twenty-two countries and other recent publications. These data-gathering efforts are seen to confirm the widespread impression that, during the twentieth century, the world witnessed a tectonic – perhaps two hundred-fold – increase in the number and variety of civil society organisations operating at the planetary level.⁵ Today, in addition to many hundreds of thousands

⁵ See www.ids.ac.uk; Helmut Anheier *et al.* (eds.) *Global Civil Society 2001* (Oxford, 2001); and the data covering the period 1909–7 presented in the Union of International Associations (ed.), *Yearbook of International Organizations*, 34th edn. (München, 1997–8), vol. 4, p. 559; compare René-Jean Dupuy (ed.), *Manuel sur les organisations internationales* (Dordrecht, 1998); Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In. Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (Cambridge,

of small, medium and large firms doing business across borders – a trend that is dealt with shortly in this book – there are an estimated 5,000 world congresses held annually and some 50,000 non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations operating at the global level. The numbers of these international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have grown rapidly in recent years; helped along by access to money and communications technology, many thousands have come into being since 1985. Nearly 90 per cent of them have been formed since 1970.⁶ While a disproportionate number (over one-third) have their main offices in the European Union and Switzerland, these INGOs now operate in all four corners of the earth, including sub-Saharan Africa, where hundreds of main offices are now based. INGOs employ or use volunteer labour of several millions of people: one study estimates that in Germany, France, Spain, Japan, Brazil, Argentina, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands alone, INGOs employ over 110,000 full-time equivalent workers as well as many more full-time equivalent volunteers.⁷ INGOs currently disburse more money than the United Nations (excluding the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)); more than two-thirds of the European Union's relief aid is currently channelled through them; and in many parts of the world there is a strong trend towards the disbursement of governmental funds – currently totalling \$US 7 billion per annum – more or less exclusively through INGOs.⁸

Empirical perspectives on global civil society have limitations. In spite of a growing body of data, the actual contours of global civil society remain elusive, for understandable reasons. Histories of the globalisation of civil society – studies of the rise of cross-border business, religion and sport, for instance – are in short supply.⁹ Lots of activities within this society, for instance the travel patterns of individuals, the initiatives of grass-roots groups, the loose networks of organisations and the growth

1995); Jessica T. Matthews, 'Power Shift', *Foreign Affairs*, 76: 1 (January–February 1997), pp. 50–66; and the misleadingly titled, country-by-country study by Lester M. Salamon *et al.*, *Global Civil Society. Dimensions of the Non-Profit Sector* (Baltimore, 2001).

⁶ See the country-by-country figures – covering only the numbers of secretariats of not-for-profit NGOs that operate transnationally – in Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, table R19, pp. 283–6; cf. Michael Edwards, 'Herding Cats? Civil Society and Global Governance', *New Economy* (Summer 2002).

⁷ See the figures drawn from The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-Profit Sector Project (1999), originally published as Salamon *et al.*, *Global Civil Society*, summarised in Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, table, R24, p. 302.

⁸ OECD, *Geographical Distribution of Financial Aid to Developing Countries* (Paris, 1997); compare Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, table R19, pp. 283–6.

⁹ But on these topics see, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914* (New York, 1989); Jack Beeching, *An Open Path. Christian Missionaries 1515–1914* (London, 1979); Joseph Maguire, *Global Sport. Identities, Societies, Civilizations* (Oxford, 1999); and Lincoln Allison, 'Sport and Civil Society', *Political Studies*, 46 (1998), pp. 709–6.

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of public opinion across borders, are informally structured, and for that reason do not register (easily) as 'data'. Much of the data that is available is also highly imperfect.¹⁰ It presents a picture of the actually existing global civil society that is no more than a torn-edged daguerrotype. Very little reliable empirical data from the past has survived intact, or was collected in the first place – which is not surprising, considering that the concept of global civil society itself had not even been invented. This present-day bias is compounded inadvertently by other forms of bias, for instance in favour of the clusters of northern hemisphere INGOs, whose visibility is greatest because they tend to be based there; data from elsewhere, for instance that related to protests in defence of aboriginal rights or civil liberties or ecological complexity, either go unnoticed or unnoted.

Much potentially usable data on global civil society is distorted by a form of conceptual nationalism. The fact is that most systems of national accounting provide few detailed statistics on either INGOs or social movements or the economic contributions and activities of corporations with a global reach. That is why, sadly, global statistical agencies usually rely on empirical data supplied on a country-by-country basis by individual governments and nationally based organisations. Only a few organisations, for instance some agencies within the United Nations, are experienced collectors of standardised data about global *flows* of people, goods, information and services.¹¹ Even then, despite stringent efforts to collect, process and disseminate statistics on a standardised basis, huge gaps remain. Statistics on the landscapes of global poverty well exemplify these problems of coverage, comparability and reliability: about one-third of the countries of the world have either no data or inadequate data on the incidence of poverty and malnourishment, and around one-half are similarly lacking information on rates of literacy among youth.¹² Researchers also disagree about which criteria – book translations, diasporas, links among global cities, the spread of the English language, telephone traffic, geographic locations of websites, the mobility patterns of corporate nomads – are the most pertinent for picturing the complex interdependencies of the emerging global society. In-depth, qualitative accounts of global summits, forums and other eye-catching events – like the global campaign against landmines and public protests against the G7 powers – are also rare. And – despite catchy titles that imply more than

¹⁰ Some of the empirical problems are discussed in Helmut Anheier, 'Measuring Global Civil Society', in Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, pp. 221–30.

¹¹ See the report of the OECD Development Cooperation Directorate, *Partnerships in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century* (Paris, 2001).

¹² See the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2000: Human Rights and Human Development* (New York, 2000); www.undp.org/hdr2000/english/book/back1.pdf.

they deliver¹³ – studies of the intimate details of everyday life, especially research that concentrates on the socialising and civilising effects at the global level of matters like food consumption and television news-watching, are either non-existent or confined to comparative national surveys that neglect cross-border trends.

These empirical and technical barriers to mapping and measuring global civil society are compounded by a basic epistemological difficulty. Simply put, its actors are not mute, empirical bits and bytes of data. Linked to territories but not restricted to territory, caught up in a vast variety of overlapping and interlocking institutions and webs of group affiliations, these actors talk, think, interpret, question, negotiate, comply, innovate, resist. Their recalcitrance in the face of classification is a basic feature of global civil society, which is never a fixed entity, but always a temporary assembly, subject to reshuffling and reassembly. Static measures, like the numbers of INGOs registered within a country, fail to capture many of its qualities. Dynamism is a chronic feature of global civil society: not the dynamism of the restless sea (a naturalistic simile suggested by Victor Pérez-Díaz¹⁴), but a form of self-reflexive dynamism marked by innovation, conflict, compromise, consensus, as well as rising awareness of the syncretic architecture, the contingencies and dilemmas of global civil society itself. Beck's terse formulation is correct: the emergent global civil society is not only marked by 'non-integration' and 'multiplicity without unity', but its actors treat it as 'perceived or reflexive'.¹⁵ At each moment, the threads of this civil society are deliberately spun, dropped, taken up again, altered, displaced by others, interwoven with others, then deliberately re-spun, again and again. In this way, global civil society enables its participants – athletes, campaigners, musicians, religious believers, managers, aid-workers, teleworkers, medics, scientists, journalists, academics – not only to regard this society as *theirs* but also to see through global civil society by calling it (more impersonally) *this* world or *that* world. For this reason alone, those who speak of global civil society should not lose sight of its elusive, *idealtypisch* quality. The concept of global civil society has what Wittgenstein called 'blurred edges'. This does *not* mean – *pace* Anheier and others – that the term is uniquely imprecise or 'fuzzy' because of its youth.¹⁶ Those who speak

¹³ An example is Ronald Inglehart, 'Globalization and Postmodern Values', *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2000), pp. 215–28.

¹⁴ Victor M. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society. The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1993), p. 62; compare my remarks on the self-reflexivity of actually existing civil societies in *Civil Society: Old Images* pp. 49 ff.

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 10.

¹⁶ Anheier, 'Measuring Global Civil Society', p. 224.

like that unfortunately bring discredit to the term which, like all concepts in the human sciences, is an ill-fitting term clumsily in search of an intelligent object that is always a subject on the run, striding unevenly in many different directions. Anheier is correct: 'Any measurement of global civil society will be simpler and less perfect than the richness, variety, and complexity of the concept it tries to measure.' But the converse of Anheier's rule must also be borne in mind: the conceptual theory of global civil society is infinitely 'purer' and much more abstract than the form and content of actually existing global civil society.

An ideal-type

So the principle is clear – theories without observations are bland, observations without theories are blind – even if the task of clarifying what we mean when we speak of a global civil society is difficult. For purposes of descriptive interpretation, or so this book argues, it is best to use the concept carefully as an ideal-type – as an intentionally produced mental construct or 'cognitive type'¹⁷ that is very useful for heuristic and expository purposes, for naming and clarifying the myriad of elements of a complex social reality, even though it cannot be found in such 'pure' form anywhere within the social world itself. When the term global civil society is used in this way, as an ideal-type, it properly refers to *a dynamic non-governmental system of interconnected socio-economic institutions that straddle the whole earth, and that have complex effects that are felt in its four corners. Global civil society is neither a static object nor a fait accompli. It is an unfinished project that consists of sometimes thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks, pyramids and hub-and-spoke clusters of socio-economic institutions and actors who organise themselves across borders, with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together in new ways. These non-governmental institutions and actors tend to pluralise power and to problematise violence; consequently, their peaceful or 'civil' effects are felt everywhere, here and there, far and wide, to and from local areas, through wider regions, to the planetary level itself.*

We need to look carefully at the elements of this rather abstract definition. Considered together, *five* tightly coupled features of this global civil society mark it off as historically distinctive. To begin with, the term global civil society refers to *non-governmental* structures and activities. It comprises individuals, households, profit-seeking businesses, not-for-profit non-governmental organisations, coalitions, social movements and linguistic communities and cultural identities. It feeds upon the work of media celebrities and past or present public personalities – from Gandhi,

¹⁷ Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus. Essays on Language and Cognition* (London, 2000).

Bill Gates, Primo Levi and Martin Luther King to Bono and Aung San Suu Kyi, Bishop Ximenes Belo, Naomi Klein and al-Waleed bin Talal. It includes charities, think-tanks, prominent intellectuals (like Tu Wei-ming and Abdolkarim Soroush), campaigning and lobby groups, citizens' protests responsible for 'clusters of performances',¹⁸ small and large corporate firms, independent media, Internet groups and websites, employers' federations, trades unions, international commissions, parallel summits and sporting organisations. It comprises bodies like Amnesty International, Sony, Falun Gong, Christian Aid, al Jazeera, the Catholic Relief Services, the Indigenous Peoples Bio-Diversity Network, FIFA, Transparency International, Sufi networks like Qadiriyya and Naqshabandiyya, the International Red Cross, the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, the Ford Foundation, Shack/Slum Dwellers International, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, News Corporation International, OpenDemocracy.net, and unnamed circles of Buddhist monks, dressed in crimson robes, keeping the mind mindful. Considered together, these institutions and actors constitute a vast, interconnected and multi-layered non-governmental space that comprises many hundreds of thousands of more-or-less self-directing ways of life. All of these forms of life have at least one thing in common: across vast geographic distances and despite barriers of time, they deliberately organise themselves and conduct their cross-border social activities, business and politics outside the boundaries of governmental structures.

Sometimes those who use and defend the term global civil society – the World Passport initiative, for instance¹⁹ – think of it in no other way than as a synonym for an unbounded space of non-governmental institutions and actors. This rather monistic understanding has the advantage of highlighting one of its principal qualities – that it is neither an appendage nor a puppet of governmental power. Yet the price that is paid for this limited definition is high: it enables the critics of the vision of global civil society to accuse their opponents of careless blindness. These critics insist, with some justification, that the term global civil society is too often used as a residual or dustbin category that describes everything and nothing. The term is used to refer to all those parts of life that are *not* the state; it seems that it is a synonym for everything that exists outside of and beyond the reach of the territorial state and other institutions of governance – that it

¹⁸ Charles Tilly, 'From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements', in Marco Giugni *et al.* (eds.), *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis and London, 1999), p. 263.

¹⁹ www.worldservice.org/docpass.html: 'The World Passport is... a meaningful symbol and sometimes powerful tool for the implementation of the fundamental human right of freedom of travel. By its very existence, it challenges the exclusive assumption of sovereignty of the nation-state system.'

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includes not only businesses and not-for-profit organisations and initiatives, but ‘mafias, extremist networks of various kinds, and terrorists’.²⁰ The picture presented by the critics is overdrawn, even inaccurate, for global civil society, when carefully defined, is not a simple-minded *alter ego* of ‘the state’. The truth is that in a descriptive sense global civil society is only *one* special set of ‘non-state’ institutions. Hunting and gathering societies and tribal orders, insofar as they have survived under modern conditions, comprise ‘non-state’ institutions, but it would be wrong to describe them as ‘civil society’ orders. The same point applies to mafias and mafia-dominated structures, which have *destructive* effects upon civil society institutions precisely because *mafiosi* rely upon kinship bonds, blood imagery, violence and intrigue to *dissolve* the boundaries between the governmental and civilian domains.²¹ The same point can be put in another way: global civil society is indeed an extra-governmental space, but it is much more than that. It is defined by other qualities that beg us to see it with different eyes...

To say that global civil society is not merely a non-governmental phenomenon, for instance, is to confirm – this is its second feature – that it is also a form of *society*. Global civil society is a dynamic ensemble of more or less tightly interlinked *social* processes.²² The quest to unlock its secrets cannot be pursued through the biological or mechanical sciences, for this emergent social order is neither an organism nor a mechanism. It is not a thing that grows according to the blind logic of dividing cells, untouched by human judgement and human will, by recursive reflection and self-generated learning; global civil society is also not a piece of machinery which can be assembled and re-assembled according to human design. The processes and methods through which it is produced and reproduced are unique.

So what does it mean then to speak of global civil *society*? The word ‘society’ is one of those household concepts that help us economise on lengthy and pedantic explanations – by hiding away or setting aside their complicated (sometimes self-contradictory) genealogy. The concept of society certainly has a complicated history, with two distinct and tensely related connotations. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

²⁰ Barry Buzan, ‘An English School Perspective on Global Civil Society’, unpublished paper (Centre for the Study of Democracy, 17 January 2002), p. 1; cf. p. 3: ‘In descriptive mode, civil society = non-state, and therefore includes mafias, pornography merchants, terrorists and a host of other dark side entities as well as the nicer side of civil society represented by humanitarian, animal welfare and humanitarian organizations.’

²¹ Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Oxford 2001), chapter 5.

²² On the sociological concept of ‘society’, see Claus Offe, ‘Is There, or Can There Be, a “European Society”?’ in John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives* (London, 2004), forthcoming.