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Review essay: Is Civil Society the big idea of the 21st Century?

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In answering the question “is Civil Society the big idea of the 21st Century” one has to look at the context in which the question is framed. We live in what has been called the “Risk Society” – the Chinese have an ideogram which simultaneously means “Disaster” and “Opportunity”- the future of Civil Society as it is currently understood can be viewed in this light. I say this because the world is currently entering (or has entered) a period of risk which it has not faced since the Cold War. The dangers of Climate change, surveillance technology, global terrorism, energy security and the rise of Islam mean the comfortable western concept of secular Civil Society (described as Westoxification by the Iranians) will have to answer its critics if it is to show that it is a valid moral force in World affairs.

However Civil Society has both a domestic and International context and before I look at the International sphere, perhaps it would be opportune to define exactly my understanding of the concept and to see how it relates to the wider picture. For this I will take one definition, which can be applied to both spheres, that of American historian Michael Walzer (given in Nicholas Deakin’s book *‘In search of Civil Society’*) which goes as follows: “The words ‘civil society’ name the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks - formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space”.(Walzer in Deakin, 2001, p.4) It can be seen from this that this definition can be viewed from many

different perspectives, among them, Republican, Marxist, liberal, religious, conservative, communitarian and nationalist. However it is precisely this versatility which captures the broad canvas on which I want to paint. Stanley Katz suggests that “civil society must be thought of as a process and a state of mind – a social process that generates trust and mutual understanding and mediates state and market pressures”. (Katz in Deaken, 2001 p.7) From this it can be seen that civil society is that space between the market and the state, a permeable space which influences, and is influenced by, these other actors in society.

One of the most basic attributes of civil society is the right of association, a basic right in democracies. This means that groups of like-minded people can come together to associate for community, political, charitable, environmental, or religious purposes. Long forbidden in Eastern Bloc countries, the ‘Velvet Revolution’ led to a mushrooming of civil society, liberated from the shackles of totalitarian regimes in the liminal no man’s land. It is precisely in these areas of liminality, such as the transition to Democracy in the East as I have mentioned, the ending of Apartheid in South Africa, and the overthrow of regimes in Latin America and Iran, that civil society finds the freedom to express its dreams, filled with optimism for a New Jerusalem. Later, it can be followed by a backlash from conservative forces, only for it to re-emerge in time, stronger than ever, as democracy takes root.

However civil society in the 21st century has big challenges to face, prime amongst these is the other ‘big thing’ of this century – Global Warming. The effects of this are already beginning to be felt in places like Africa, Bangladesh, and the American Mid-West. Long-term it could result in widespread famine, flooding (as sea-levels rise), enforced migration and landslides (as a result of deforestation). These could place enormous pressures on democracies throughout the world resulting in border closures, civil unrest, loss of civil liberties, and even revolutions. Clearly civil society will have to struggle hard to contend with this phenomenon. While the effects of global warming have yet to fully reveal themselves, what can be said with some certainty is that it will radically alter the civil, economic, and political landscape of world affairs.

However, as in the Chinese ideogram alluded to earlier, potential disaster carries within it the seeds of opportunity. The opportunities are for a greater role than ever

for civil society, with the Non-Government Organisations (NGO's) truly coming to centre stage in reshaping international policy and refocusing priorities. Equally, co-operation among other civil groups will become paramount as societies seek to avoid or deal with the consequences of global warming. An example of civil society turning tragedy into something more positive in present times can be found in the actions of a small group of individuals and NGO's in New York setting up an organisation in 1995 to campaign for an International Criminal Court motivated by the Balkans War. Using the then nascent Internet and much legwork they reached out to the international community and succeeded in raising awareness to the extent that eventually it represented over 1000 NGO's. A 'UN Conference of Plenipotentiary on the establishment of an International Criminal Court' was arranged for June 1998 in Rome, due in some part from pressure from civil society where legislation was agreed upon for such a court. By 2002 enough countries (over 60) had signed the treaty to give it the force of international law and a further step to global justice was achieved.(Pace and Panganiban, 2005, pp.109-124)

Another threat for civil society to overcome is the threat of global terrorism. Using modern technology such as the internet to co-ordinate attacks and turning innocuous every-day things such as cars and 'planes into weapons they have succeeded in fostering a sense of mistrust and fear among strangers and suspicion among nations. Already they are responsible for creating a war in Afghanistan, dragging the U.S. and Britain into a hopeless morass which is costing them billions and embroiling them in a war which they cannot hope to win. Civil liberties have been curtailed in Western democracies, with the U.S., in particular, responsible for human rights abuses in the case of the military detention centre of Guantanamo Bay and in the case of rendition, where suspected terrorists were illegally extradited to the U.S.

Much of this problem has been caused by a culture clash between the Christian West and the Islamic East. Islam, with its religious base to societies there, sees the West as secular and lacking in moral values and rejects the Western view of civil society as another form of cultural and economic imperialism. '...Islamists' according to Lechner in *Religion in Global Civil Society* 'delegitimate any activities that does not serve the Islamic cause and therefore aim to eliminate civil society properly speaking. Whereas the global religious Left seeks to reform world order through civil society,

the Islamist global religious Right seeks to transform world order by eradicating it.’ (Lechner, 2006, p.128). Not all in Islam subscribe to this view and to say Islamists seek to ‘eliminate’ civil society is an overstatement, rather they seek to eliminate civil society as it is understood here in the West. Clearly civil society here needs to take a long, hard look at itself and find an answer for its Islamic critics. One possible avenue is for the two great religions of Christianity and Islam to formally agree at a World Council a list of common beliefs to which all believers can subscribe, thus narrowing the growing divide between two beliefs with common roots in Abraham. Equally, in the economic sphere, the negative effects of neo-liberal economics and globalisation on the Arab (and wider) world need to be mitigated, if the policies are not to be radically altered, while the assumptions of superiority implicit in Western civil society need to be tempered if it is to gain credence among followers of Islam in the 21st Century.

However Jubilee 2000 proved that religion can have a positive part to play in civil society. Because of a Christian initiative begun in London in 1996 much of Third World debt was cancelled for the Millennium. As Lechner says “...Christian groups played a large part in the antidebt campaign. They mobilised a previously disjointed network and set a clear policy agenda. They helped to achieve leverage with public officials and international organizations. Religious involvement was necessary to the success achieved by the Jubilee campaign.” (Lechner, 2006, p.129) The fact that a disparate grouping ranging from the Dali Lama to evangelical preacher Jessie Helms could put in a concerted effort into debt relief with some success, shows that religion is not always divisive but can play a large part in bringing the human family together for a common goal. Therefore it is more than a hope that some form of *détente* can be reached in the ‘Cold War’ between the West and Islam. Future world events are likely to dictate this.

We have seen how modern technology is forging new connections in the world civil society in the case of the campaign for an International Criminal Court but this same technology is a two edged sword. Now more than ever civil society groups can have their communications monitored, and this has become a reality with the advent of the terrorist threat. In addition China regularly monitors its citizen for signs of dissent while Iran recently announced it was to monitor the Internet for ‘lies’ about the state

emanating from dissident groups. (RTE Radio 1, 15/11/09) Powell in his book ‘The politics of civil society states “Under new legislation passed in the Duma with a majority of 357 in favour and only 20 against on 10 January 2006, a new state monitoring agency Rosegiztratsia, will engage in political surveillance of Russia’s NGOs and close down any it considers subversive. These draconian laws suggest that Russian civil society is once again under threat.” (Powell, 2007, p.206) Nevertheless the democratizing power of technology means that street protests can be organized in a matter of minutes *via* text messages on mobile phones while events in Burma are reported, not by newswire (as there is a news embargo) but by bloggers on the World Wide Web. Another factor in the rise of global civil society is the advent of television. Television makes the global, local, and in real time. Gearoid O Tuathail expands on this “Global space becomes political space. Being there live is everything. The local is instantly global, the distance immediately closes. Place-specific struggles become global televisual experience.” (O Tuathail in Chandler, 2004, p.115)

This shrinking of time and space has, for the most part, increased our connectedness, resulting in, for example, famine or catastrophe relief contributions from all parts of the globe, as in the case of Ethiopia or the Far-Eastern tsunami. This connectedness has also manifested itself in a whole new form of social networking because of the Internet with the advent of Facebook, Bebo, and Twitter networking sites. With people connecting with others at the far side of the world within seconds, it truly has become a global community! As Keane says “While most others have not (yet) thought over the matter, or don’t much care, or are too cynical or self-preoccupied to open their eyes and ears, the aggregate numbers of those who are globally aware are weighty enough to spread awareness that global civil society exists; that it is a force to be reckoned with... (Keane in Chandler, 2004, p.117)

This bodes well for civil society becoming the “big idea” for this century with issues becoming transnational rather than local. A case in point is the Landless Peoples Movement (LPM) in South Africa which, to further its cause, has allied itself to similar groups in Brazil and Palestine and “by holding mass demonstrations during the 2001 UN Conference on Racism or the 2002 Earth Summit, has ‘globalised’ itself, and in the process has caught the attention of the media and the wider world.” (James, 2004, p.150) This new kind of affiliation, coming from the grass-roots and making

world-wide connections, motivated by a sense of social justice, and challenging the vested interests of its respective countries, is a sign of the power of global civil society. The motto of the *sans terre* group could be 'In Unity there is Strength' if that aphorism was not already requisitioned and is an example of how civil society can coalesce to form a new kind of global movement. A different example is the anti-globalization movement which relies primarily on the Internet to co-ordinate its protests. The difference between the two is that the *sans terre* groups have only one agenda while the anti-globalization movement is comprised of many organizations with differing agendas but united through a common goal, rather like the way Al-Qaida has formed loose affiliations with other terrorist groups with differing aims. The comparison between the two may be invidious, however, as one is motivated by a love of democracy while the other is motivated by a hatred of it.

Another challenge for civil society in the 21st Century is the threat to energy security. Global oil reserves are running out and are, for the most part, located in politically sensitive parts of the world. The recent war in Iraq would appear now to have been more about ensuring oil security for the West than about weapons of mass destruction. While alternative forms of energy e.g. nuclear, wind and wave power, will make a difference to energy needs in the future, U.S. and E.U. dependency on foreign oil make them extremely vulnerable to shortage. The 1973 oil embargo showed how effective oil is as a political tool and the Western world could be thrown into chaos should there be an escalation, for instance, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a resultant Arab backlash. The positive side to this is that the political significance of many Arab countries will diminish as the dependency on oil in the West is reduced. Another consequence is that Global Warming will slow down as the transfer is made to cleaner 'green' energy. Civil society can expect to benefit from the change from oil-based economies to 'green' economies, with an increased appreciation of the precariousness of our tenure on planet earth leading to a more holistic and eco-friendly world. This will, I predict, result in a mushrooming of organizations concerned with alternative living and 'green' issues as the human race face into a century which will decide whether we survive as the dominant species on this planet or not.

I have illustrated some of the challenges to be faced by civil society in the 21st century which will decide whether it will emerge as the ‘big idea’ of the period or not. The signs are hopeful but as Chou-en-lai replied when asked about the effects of the French Revolution – *It’s too early to tell yet!* Democracy, the ‘big idea’ of the late 20th century, has yet to come to full flower, even in societies where it has existed for hundreds of years. Its progress will determine the future development of civil society in national terms. Contingent upon this is the development of global civil society. Astronomical discoveries, which show ours to be a very small planet indeed when compared to the vastness of space, have entered the popular consciousness, and have created a new solidarity amongst ordinary people of this planet. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the urge for space exploration in the future will give an added impetus to global civil society. Whatever, global civil society is now a factor which cannot be ignored in international governance, economy, and association. It is not too strong a statement to say that our future depends upon it.

PostScript: Since this essay was first written (in 2010), anti-austerity riots in Europe, particularly Greece, and the ‘Arab Spring’ revolt stretching from Tunisia to Bahrain which has resulted in civil war in Syria have sent shockwaves throughout the world. Both can be seen as civil society mobilizing itself in a more militant fashion than peaceful protest as a consequence of the coercive and often violent suppression of dissent by governments. To return to China for inspiration, when the Chinese want to wish ill on another they condemn them subtly by saying – ‘May you live in interesting times.’ We are the cursed generation, living the era of interesting times, few of us are untouched by its ripples. However from the decay of despair and destruction spring the fruits of the future. The seeds of the future of the world for the next fifty if not a hundred years are being sown even as I write! Interesting times indeed – will their fruits be sweet or bitter?

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