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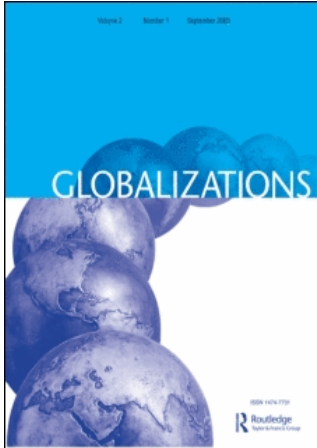
On: 19 June 2007

Access Details: [subscription number 779554921]

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Globalizations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713685353>

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To cite this Article: Chandler, David , 'Deriving Norms from 'Global Space': The Limits of Communicative Approaches to Global Civil Society Theorizing', Globalizations, 4:2, 283 - 298

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/14747730701345283

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14747730701345283>

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FORUM: THEORIZING GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Deriving Norms from ‘Global Space’: The Limits of Communicative Approaches to Global Civil Society Theorizing

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This paper outlines the limits of the conception of ‘global space’ at the centre of attempts to establish the existence of certain communicative norms of ‘global civil society’. It particularly focuses on theoretically asserted claims made for an idealized global public sphere which are the basis upon which theoretical structures of communicative values and global norms are constituted. These, in turn, are used to inform normative critiques, from the standpoint of ‘global civil society’, which challenge present international practices. The concluding sections outline the limitations of this political project, highlighting the problematic, de-socialized, nature of these conceptions of ‘global space’; which, in lacking any mediating framework between the asserted ‘moral autonomy’ of actors in global civil society and the global norms allegedly derived from them, makes communicative global civil society theorizing innately conservative in character.

Este documento describe en forma general, los límites de la concepción del ‘espacio global’ al centro de los intentos para establecer la existencia de ciertas normas de comunicación de la ‘sociedad civil global’. Se enfoca particularmente en opiniones teóricamente acertadas, elaboradas para una esfera global pública idealizada que son la base sobre la cual se constituyen las estructuras teóricas de los valores de comunicación y normas globales. Estas, a su vez, se usan para informar sobre las críticas normativas desde el punto de vista de la ‘sociedad civil global’, que desafían a las normas internacionales actuales. Las secciones conclusivas describen en líneas generales, las limitaciones de este proyecto político destacando la naturaleza problemática y de falta de socialización del ‘espacio global’; el cual careciendo de algún marco mediador entre la

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'autonomía moral' impuesta por actores en la sociedad civil global y las normas globales supuestamente derivadas de aquellas, hace que el método de comunicación al planteamiento teórico de la sociedad civil global, parezca, inherentemente, de carácter conservador.

Introduction

Global civil society approaches tend to be the most normatively orientated of the theoretical frameworks associated with the 'world society' perspectives, increasingly held to be challenging state-based conceptions of 'international society', for so long dominant in the discipline of International Relations (for example, Buzan, 2004, pp. 63–89). In these approaches, the role of communicative interaction between global civil society actors has been central to the argument that an alternative approach to politics is being constituted in the global sphere.¹ The focus on communication between actors, rather than their empirically shared norms and values, has enabled these theorists to forward a much stronger case for the theoretical importance of 'global' society than one traditionally provided within International Relations.² Through the emphasis on the communicative process, these 'global' theorists share strong similarities to earlier sociological approaches to 'world society', which, since the 1970s, have also stressed the role of communication (for example, Burton, 1972; Luhmann, 1995). Where they differ is in their use of communicative approaches to imply a much thicker social conception of 'global civil society' (Leydesdorff, 2000).

It is the thicker nature of their description of 'global civil society' which enables it to have a normative content, lacking in the more analytical 'global' sociological approaches of theorists like Nikolas Luhmann (1995). At the heart of this normative approach is the challenge to traditional interest-based conceptions of state-based politics and a focus on alternative transnational forms of engagement, based on communicative rationality. Mary Kaldor (1999, p. 195) argues that, in this respect, the concept of global or transnational civil society 'is less a descriptive or analytical term and more a political project'. It is a political project in the sense that its advocates seek to assert universal values and global concerns in the international sphere, in a direct political challenge to the particular, or instrumental, interests held to be pursued by states either individually or through international organizations. These universal values are alleged to be established through a communicative, rather than an instrumental, approach; in the global dialogue and global interaction of civil society actors.

This article firstly sets out the normative communicative thesis, detailing the assertion that with theoretical attention to global space there has developed a new set of global norms and new forms of global political agency. The following section then examines the importance of Jürgen Habermas' (1990) conception of non-instrumental communicative action for global civil society approaches seeking to derive a political critique of existing mechanisms of global regulation from the global political interaction of non-state actors. The article concludes by surveying some of the major critiques of these communicative approaches to normative theorizing, drawing the critical conclusion that the appeal of the thesis lies in the regulative norms derived from this analysis, rather than the theoretical or analytical strengths of the research project itself.

From Global Space to Global Agency

Crucial to the communicative project of global civil society is the construction of a new global space for politics which is institutionally separate from the political frameworks of both the state and the international, or inter-state, system. The idea of global civil society as a distinct 'space' is central to the theoretical assertions regarding its moral distinctiveness.

To describe this new 'space', often normative theorists use the abstract notion of 'globality', which posits the idea of a non-state, non-territorial space. Jan Aart Scholte (2002, p. 286) argues:

... globality refers to a particular kind of social space—namely, a realm that substantially transcends the confines of territorial place, territorial distance, and territorial borders. Whereas territorial spaces are mapped in terms of longitude, latitude, and altitude, global relations transpire in the world as a single place, as one more or less seamless realm. Globality in this sense has a 'transworld' or 'transborder' quality.

This new 'kind of social space' is alleged to carry within it certain implicit values, values which oppose those of older 'territorial' spaces. For Scholte (2002, p. 288), globalization has not just undermined the power of states but also 'loosened some important cultural and psychological underpinnings of sovereign statehood' with some people giving 'superterritorial values', for example, those of human rights or environmental concerns, a higher priority than the territorial interests of sovereignty. This global space is often seen to be occupied by non-governmental actors interacting independently of government. As Ronnie Lipshutz (1992, p. 393) argues:

What exactly is encompassed by the concept of global civil society? To find it, we have to look for political spaces other than those bounded by the parameters of the nation-state system. The spatial boundaries of global civil society are different, because its autonomy from the constructed boundaries of the state system also allows for the construction of new political spaces.

This separate global space is defined not by geographical or spatial limits but by ideological ones, by adherence to global values rather than the particularisms of place: 'Surrounded by global symbols and global events, current generations think of the planet as home far more than their forbears did ... We no longer live in a territorialist society. Rather, territorial spaces now coexist and interrelate with global spaces' (Scholte, 2002, p. 286).

For the advocates of global civil society, changes in the media have been of central importance in the emergence of global civil society or 'the consciousness of a global community' (Kaldor, 2003, p. 104; see also Shaw, 1996). Analysts assert that whereas the 'imagined community' of nations was created by technological developments, for example, the printing press (Anderson, 1991), new information technology, which can make people aware of events on the other side of the earth at the same time as they actually happen, has radically transformed people's consciousness from the national to the global level. Gearóid Ó Tuathail argues: 'Global space becomes political space. Being there live is everything. The local is instantly global, the distant immediately closes. Place-specific struggles become global televisual experiences' (cited in Kaldor, 2003, p. 104). John Keane (2003, p. 1) similarly describes the creation of globality as a result of a change in consciousness; today, global civil society is 'the image of ourselves' as involved in a political project 'carried out on a global scale':

Of great importance is the fact that these cross-border patterns have the power to stimulate awareness among the world's inhabitants that mutual understanding of different ways of life is a practical necessity, that we are being drawn into the first genuinely bottom-up transnational order, a global civil society, in which millions of people come to realise, in effect, that they are incarnations of world-wide webs of interdependence. (Keane, 2003, p. 17)

The transformation of consciousness is key to the communicative global civil society argument. This is because the creation of a global space is at the same time, explicitly or implicitly, a normative space. As Kaldor (2003, p. 112) states, 'the emergence of a common global consciousness' puts an 'emphasis on human agency'. This is drawn out further by Martin Shaw (2000, pp. 11–12):

By global, we mean not just transformed concepts of time and space but the new social meaning that these have involved. I propose that we understand this as the development of a *common*

consciousness of human society on a world scale. We mean an increasing awareness of the totality of human social relations as the largest constitutive framework of all relations. We mean that society is increasingly constituted primarily by this inclusive framework—rather than by distinct tribes, nations or religious communities although all of these remain in increasingly complex and overlapping ways within global society.

For Shaw, it is the growing complexity of experienced life, under the processes of globalization, which has impacted on human consciousness, undermining ‘particularist’ perspectives:

Fractures in human society . . . appear less determinate . . . Tensions reappear in novel terms, which are increasingly relativized by the greater consciousness of the global human whole . . . there is a powerful new impetus behind those who demonstrate the mutuality of all these human viewpoints. Thus partiality is exposed, and particularist visions are forced to address commonality. (Shaw, 2000, p. 26; see also Sakamoto, 1991; Keane, 2003, pp. 15–16)

Despite the stress on human agency by communicative global civil society theorists, the starting point of a separate ‘global space’ appears to rely as much on the subject-less agency of globalization as that of many mainstream international relations approaches. The mere fact of being global often appears to be a positive and progressive feature. In this way, almost by definitional fiat, global civil society assumes a moral importance through being distinct from the world of states. Paul Ghils (1992, p. 429), for example, argues this makes ‘civil society and its transnational networks of associations . . . the *universum* which competing nations have never succeeded in creating’. Martin Shaw (2000, p. 7) asserts that the ‘idea of the global’ in itself has a ‘positive meaning’. He expands:

The global is the largest and most inclusive spatial framework of social relations—and, interplanetary exploration apart, the maximum possible framework. Its development represents the partial overcoming of the major divisions of the world—cultural as well as territorial. Precisely for these reasons, globality includes both the spatially and non-spatially defined differentiations of the world. (Shaw, 2000, p. 71)

The space or ‘spatial framework’ of the global is held to be a progressive space because it is the most inclusive, a space which is shared by every diverse identity. The discovery of the ‘global’ is hailed by Shaw as marking a revolution in social theorizing, enabling theorists to overcome the ‘methodological nationalism’ of the past (Ibid.; see also Anheier *et al.*, 2001, pp. 17–19; Beck, 2002).

John Keane (2003, pp. 8–9) gives a clear view of the vastness of this global civil society ‘space’:

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 . . . It includes charities, think-tanks, prominent intellectuals . . . campaigning and lobby groups, citizens’ protests . . . small and large corporate firms, independent media, Internet groups and websites, employers’ federations, trade 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.

For Keane, the actual membership of global civil society appears to be literally every non-government group or association. But what is the point of this apparently inexhaustible list? He explains:

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. (Keane, 2003, p.9; emphasis added)

The point of the list is that these groups and associations have organized themselves in such a way that they are not part of government structures. In fact they are 'self-directing'; they are independent of and external to government. So far there is little that is earth-shattering in the observation that spheres of economic and social life exist outside the formal institutions and structures of government. What is unusual is that these non-government groups and associations are held to be part of a normative political project. The political nature of this is highlighted in two ways.

Firstly, by the otherwise senseless addition of the word 'deliberately'. This implies that the social and economic activities described are forms of conscious political action, i.e., deliberately chosen forms of organization and implicit rejections of the sphere of government. The mere existence of social and economic non-government activity is held to be, in and of itself, a form of politics. Here we have a complete inversion of the political or the extension of the political to social and economic everyday life, which is held to have a new political importance.

The second, and key, highlighting feature of the political nature of the everyday existence of individuals, households, firms and voluntary associations is the use of the small word 'space'. The word 'space' links these actors together so that 'these institutions and actors constitute a vast, interconnected and multi-layered non-governmental space'. Rather than just activities taking place outside formal institutions of government, these activities are 'interconnected' through taking place in one vast 'space'.

Thus global 'space' has been transformed into global agency and acquires political qualities. For Ken Booth (1991, p. 542), the 'space' outside the state system is described by analogy: 'The [metaphor for the] international system which is now developing . . . is of an egg-box containing the shells of sovereignty; but alongside it a global community omelette is cooking.' What was once just a figurative 'space' now becomes a conscious political and moral collective, a 'community'.

Keane (2003, p. 9) attempts to give analytical coherence to the argument that a 'political' space is created. This is done negatively. The global civil society 'space' is not, as some critics allege, 'used as a residual or dustbin category that describes everything and nothing . . . all those parts of life that are *not* the state'. Keane (2003, p. 10, emphasis added) argues that the normative ideal of global civil society, '*when carefully defined*, is not some simple-minded alter ego of the "the State" . . . The truth is that in a descriptive sense global civil society is only one special set of "non-state" institutions'.

Keane would exclude, for example, hunting and gathering societies and tribal orders, insofar as they have survived under modern conditions, as well as mafias and mafia-dominated structures which rely on kinship bonds. Mary Kaldor defines global civil society differently to Keane, as she generally excludes market-orientated actors; however, this makes surprisingly

little theoretical difference. She also argues that the concept of global civil society ‘space’ has theoretical depth and is not merely an ad hoc descriptive list of non-government actors:

Civil society thus consists of groups, individuals and institutions which are independent of the state and of state boundaries, but which are, at the same time, preoccupied with public affairs . . . Defined in this way, civil society does not encompass all groups or associations independent of the state. It does not include groups which advocate violence. It does not include self-organised groups and associations which campaign for exclusivist communitarian concepts. Nor does it include self-interested private associations like those of criminals or capitalists. A bank or a corporation is only part of civil society to the extent that it views itself, as many do, as a public organisation with a responsibility to society that takes precedence over profit-making. (Kaldor, 1999, p. 210)

Membership of global civil society, according to Kaldor, is dependent on moral outlook rather than any political, sociological or economic categorization. This lack of categorization gives global civil society its flexible quality. It is very much in the eye of the beholder. The political space and political agency of global civil society are mental constructs rather than being derived from actually existing social interaction on a global plane. When it comes to concretizing this mental abstraction, normative theorists have more difficulties. For Keane (2003, p. 10), global civil society ‘is also a form of *society*’. It is a ‘form’ of society, albeit a ‘paradoxical’ one:

It refers to a vast, sprawling non-governmental constellation of many institutionalised structures, associations and networks within which individual and group actors are interrelated and functionally interdependent. As a society of societies, it is ‘bigger’ and ‘weightier’ than any individual actor or organisation or combined sum of its thousands of constituent parts—most of whom, paradoxically, neither ‘know’ each other nor have any chance of ever meeting each other face-to-face. (Ibid., p. 11)

Keane (2003, p. 12) also argues that global civil society is a society with its own dynamics, rules and norms: ‘[global civil society] actors are enmeshed within codes of unwritten and written rules . . . [which] obliges them to refrain from certain actions, as well as to observe certain norms, for instance those that define what counts as civility. Similarly for Lipschutz (1992, p. 398), the actors networking in global civil society ‘are all united, more or less, by common norms or codes of behaviour that have emerged in reaction to the legal and other socially constructed fictions of the nation-state system’. These norms and values, which are shared by actors of global civil society, but not by state actors, are alleged to have communicative, non-exclusivist, universalist ethics at their heart. Daniel Deudney calls this ‘earth nationalism’ and Alberto Melucci, ‘the planetarization of international relations’ (Cited in Lipschutz, 1992, p. 399; see further Deudney, 1993; Melucci, 1989). For Keane (2003, p. 12), the key defining norm is that of civility, ‘respect for others expressed as politeness towards and acceptance of strangers’.

For radicals Hardt and Negri, the shared norms of the ‘virtual’ global civic space are shaped by a desire to be rid of the particularistic values used to oppress, exclude and divide the ‘multitude’, the universal people united in struggle against domination:

The virtuality of world space constitutes the first determination of the movements of the multitude . . . [which] must achieve a global citizenship. The multitude’s resistance to bondage—the struggle against the slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity, and a people, and thus the desertion from sovereignty and the limits it places on subjectivity—is entirely positive. (Hardt and Negri, 2001, pp. 361–362)

William Connolly (2001, p. 352) argues that: ‘A positive ethos of network diversity transfigures diverse, contestable existential faiths into practices of reciprocal forbearance, presumptive generosity and possible connection’. These values, derived from global civic interaction, pose a direct challenge to those still restricted to the norms of state-based projects: ‘Such an ethos,

then, does set limits to the tolerable. It above all limits the legitimate reach of national narcissists who insist that the state cannot be healthy unless the faith or ethnicity they embrace occupies the authoritative centre' (Connolly, 2001, p. 352). Similarly, for Kaldor (1999, p. 195), it is non-exclusivist values which lie at the heart of global civil society, constituting it as a normative political project:

in the post-Cold War period, the fundamental political cleavage, which could define the way in which we view contemporary society and the way in which we address a whole range of problems, is likely to be less the traditional left/right divide but rather the division between those who stand for internationalist, Europeanist, democratic values, including human rights, and those who remain wedded to national or exclusivist thinking. The terms 'civil society' or 'civic values' have become forms of political shorthand that characterise the first group.

Keane (2003, p. 196) argues that global civil society has a central role to play in the construction of 'a new theory of ethics beyond borders'. It can do this because the definition of global civil society is a negative one. Not merely anti-state and in opposition to territorially bound politics, but also against the ideological foundationalism alleged to be behind this perspective. Global civil society is therefore 'a condition of the possibility of multiple moralities—in other words, as a universe of freedom from a singular Universal Ethic' (Keane, 2003, p. 196).

The Communicative Realm

The normative project is based on building and extending the separate space of autonomy from the political sphere, winning back ground claimed by the amorality and instrumental rationality of both the state and the market. The unifying factor here is not the politics of the actors but their morality, which, as Kaldor (1999, p. 200) notes, highlights 'the idea of civil society as an independent ethical realm'. Where analysis of 'actually existing' global civil society is often forced to engage with the empirical inequalities and power relations of real international society, the normative communicative project understands global civil society as a space of political purity (see e.g. Chandler, 2005). This, as we have seen above, is because the defining principles of global civil society are derived from universal norms rather than real life actors. Keane (2003, pp. 7–8), for example, argues that, for him, global civil society has an 'elusive, idealtypisch quality': 'the concept of global civil society is infinitely "purer" and much more abstract than the form and content of actually existing global civil society'. Connolly (2001, p. 354) states that 'the *probability* that such a global ethos will advance is not high ... Such a vision, nonetheless ... speaks both to an urgent world *need* and an emergent *possibility*'. Kaldor (2003, p.46) similarly highlights that her starting assumptions are distanced from the objects and practices of any currently 'real' or 'actually existing civil society':

This definition of civil society ... presupposes that the moral autonomy of individuals does not imply selfish behaviour and it encompasses the potential for human beings to develop institutions that express universally agreed norms based on actual discursive practice ... 'Real' civil society or 'actually existing' civil society is a realm bombarded by images and influences, perpetually 'colonized' both by political salesmanship and consumerist pressures ... the space for deliberation and discussion is constantly subject to invasion.

Kaldor's definitional starting point, the 'moral autonomy' of those engaged in a discursive sphere, where non-instrumental 'good-tempered' conversation takes place, is explicitly based on a normative desire rather than empirical grounding. It is important to emphasize that, for the communicative theorists of global civil society, the subject at the centre of the theoretical

study, i.e., what is ‘defined’ as global civil society, is a set of varying ‘ideal’ normatively derived characteristics, rather than anything solely derived from the ‘real’ or ‘actually existing’ object of study. In case the detailed norms imposed upon the ideal-type seem arbitrarily plucked out of the air, Keane explains the purpose of the normative project:

The implication is clear: global civil society is not just any old collection of ways of life that have nothing in common but their non-identification with governing institutions. *Factually speaking*, this society encourages compromise and mutual respect. (Keane, 2003, p. 14, emphasis added)

The norms of compromise and mutual respect are ‘factually’ ascribed to the ideal of global civil society which is understood as a realm of discussion and debate where injustice and unfreedom are excluded through definitional fiat. ‘Factually speaking’, the ideal-type abstraction of global civil society very much resembles Habermas’ framework for transcending instrumental politics through dialogue and discourse ethics, which has been increasingly taken up by critical theorists in the International Relations field (see e.g. Diez and Steans, 2005). Habermas argues that civil society:

comprises those non-governmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations, organisations, and movements . . . more or less spontaneously emergent . . . that institutionalises problem-solving discourses of general interest . . . These ‘discursive designs’ have an egalitarian, open form of organisation that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallise and to which they lend continuity and permanence. (cited in Kaldor, 2003, pp. 21–22)

Following Habermas’ views on communicative action, global civil society theorists posit that a new type of progressive and radical politics has emerged:

by a deliberative procedure which is realized through the reality of public discord and debate that is experienced in civil society. Civil society is a way of countering what Habermas calls the ‘colonisation’ of the ‘life-world’ both by capitalism and by communism . . . a form of enlightenment, in which individuals can ‘live in truth’ (Havel) or, in other words, act according to reasoned morality and not the dictates of the totalitarian state. (cited in Kaldor, 2003, p. 27)

Global civil society is understood as an arena for the creation of regimes of tolerance, civility and pluralism and its advocates assume that activism within civil society will promote these values globally. Mary Kaldor (2003, p. 8) argues that what is important about the concept of global civil society is the fact that:

at a transnational level [there] is the existence of a global public sphere—a global space where *non-instrumental communication* can take place, inhabited by transnational advocacy networks like Greenpeace or Amnesty International, global social movements . . . international media . . . [and] new global ‘civic religions’ like human rights and environmentalism.

For many global civil society analysts, the concept captures an ideal space in which values and norms emerge through negotiation and dialogue, rather than through the reproduction of power relationships by the formal political process. At the heart is the idea that this is a new type of politics without instrumentality and competing interests. Mary Kaldor (2003, p. 45) asserts that the importance of global civil society lies in the fact that what takes place ‘is not just [political] bargaining but the existence of a public conversation, a “good-tempered” conversation. It involves reason and sentiment and not just the conflict of interests and passions’.

In this reading, the importance of global civic activism, of the myriad of social, economic and political exchanges in the non-government sphere, is not in the politics which they espouse or their particular (and particularist) causes. Their importance is, as Keane notes, established by

the fact that activism in the global space becomes more than the sum of 'good causes' put together or their collective weight at lobbies of World Trade Organization summits or those of other international institutions (as analysts of 'actually existing' global civil society would argue). As Keane (2003, pp. 61–62) asserts:

These movements are marked by a cross-border mentality . . . Their participants . . . do not see their concerns as confined within a strictly bounded community or locality . . . For them the world is one world. So they nurture their identities and publicise their concerns in 'translocalities', as if they were global citizens.

The activities of the disparate groups, individuals and associations collectively shape and create global civil society as a 'space' and as a normative political project. In fact, as a 'project of projects' (Walzer, cited in Keane, 2003, p. 19). This normative 'project of projects', which contains within it everything associated with non-territorially bounded, non-government normative aspirations, is world politics in the fullest sense of 'a *worldly* politics that cultivates the need for transnational mobility of viewpoint and action in support of justice and freedom for all of the earth's inhabitants' (Keane, 2003, p. 139).

Keane (2003, pp. 201–202) argues that global civil society is both a 'space' which celebrates plurality and difference and an 'ethical idea that is universally applicable'. In his view, 'the *universalisable* Ethic of global civil society' is derived from an idealized interpretation of 'actually existing global civil society':

Global civil society is . . . to be interpreted as an implied logical and institutional precondition of the survival and flourishing of a genuine plurality of different ideals and forms of life. The precondition is anchored within the actually existing global civil society, whose functioning relies upon the more or less unuttered inference that it is a space of many ideals and ways of life, and that civil society for that reason is a good thing. It is as if global civil society requires each of its participants or potential members to sign a contract: to acknowledge and to respect the principle of global civil society as a universal ethical principle that guarantees respect for their moral differences. (Keane, 2003, p. 202)

The framework of communicative dialogue is then the gel that allegedly secures the reproduction of the pluralist values of the global civil society project and which posits the existence of a space for morally guided, non-instrumental dialogue outside the sphere of government and formally institutionalized political processes.

Critiques of the Communicative Thesis

The normative focus avoids the empirical difficulties of substantiating the existence and influence of an 'actually existing' global civil society; however, its specific attraction is in the freedom it provides the individual theorist. For this reason, most of the critics of Habermas' framework have not criticized the lack of social engagement between actors but, on the contrary, have asserted that Habermas has set the level of communicative engagement required at too high and restrictive a level. Fred Dallmayr (2001, p. 343) makes the point that Habermas, in drawing up the procedural rules, 'also installs himself in a way as the arbiter . . . of communicative interaction'. Habermas' normative critics have sought to keep the essential ethical framework but to make the rules of communicative interaction more open and inclusive (see e.g. Dallmayr, 2001; Connolly, 1995, 2001; Benhabib, 1992; Shapcott, 2001; Young, 1990; Coole, 1996).

The concept provides a blank slate because once the emphasis shifts from an empirical to a normative one, the thesis cannot be empirically measured and disputed, proved or disproved. Some global civil society advocates argue that they reject empirical measurement on the

grounds that global civil society is growing so fast that the concept lags behind its 'subject on the run, striding unevenly in many different directions' (Keane, 2003, p. 8). Others argue that the term is necessarily imprecise and 'fuzzy' because of its youth and therefore: '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 (Anheier, 2001, p. 224).

Helmut Anheier argues that: 'Defining global civil society as a socio-sphere goes beyond the notions of network or infrastructure. As Kaldor [2003] and Shaw [2000] suggest, global civil society includes aspects of civility and value dispositions' (Anheier, 2001, p. 226). This somewhat underestimates the problem, as all the numbers and measures in the world cannot capture what, he notes, is an 'essentially normative concept'. Global civil society as an ideal 'communicative space' cannot be measured by either an analysis of networks and structures or through qualitative surveys of 'civility and value dispositions'.

The normative rather than empirical focus enables communicative theorists to implicitly, rather than explicitly, link their analysis to claims about developments in the international sphere. This enables them to side-step the widely articulated critique that their abstract schema ignores power relations. It is not difficult to find commentators asserting that the normative division between the realm of governmental instrumentality and the non-governmental communicative realm is also a literal one, for example, Cincinnati law professor Gordon Christenson argues in *Human Rights Quarterly* (1997, pp. 731–732): 'The international society of nation-states operates in the public sphere of balance of power and interests, explained by international relations theory. World civil society operates within the voluntary sphere of cultural values and shared well-being in a dimension beyond political boundaries and dominion.'

However, for leading global civil society theorists, especially commentators like John Keane and Mary Kaldor, the normative and empirical distinction is made but then never particularly clearly or consistently articulated, leaving them less open to similar criticism (see Hutchings, 2005). Neera Chandhoke argues that although there may be some heuristic value in making the distinction between the sphere of state instrumentalism and global civic communicative association:

What *is* problematic is the assumption that appears to underlie theorising in this mode, namely, that these domains of collective existence do not influence each other, or that they do not affect each other, or indeed that they do not constitute in the sense of shaping each other . . . To put it plainly, the separation of collective human existence into mutually exclusive spheres of thought and action elides the way in which each of these domains is constructed by power, which spilling over arbitrary boundaries underpins the whole. (Chandhoke, 2002, p.35; see also Chandhoke, 2001)

Chandhoke argues that those who assert that global civil society operates in a distinct social space, either separate from the state (Taylor, 1991, p. 171; Honneth, 1993, p. 19; White, 1994, p. 379) or as an independent 'third realm' differentiated from both the state and market (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 18), falsely provide 'a picture of global civil society that seems to be supremely uncontaminated by either the power of states or that of markets (Chandhoke, 2002, p. 36).

The critique that global civil society does not constitute a separate and 'pure' space from power inequalities is one that clarifies that the normative concept should not be confused with 'actually existing' global civil society. However, while drawing attention to the issue of power is central to the critique of those international relations theorists who posit the existence of actually existing global civil society it is not adequate as a critique of global civil society as a communicative project. Normative commentators can accept the empirical critique and would suggest that the reality should then be challenged to meet the normative communicative demands.

There are two other critiques, engaging with the communicative project itself, which have more potency. The first also emphasizes the importance of power relations, but is focused on the utopian nature of communicative theorizing rather than on existing relations of power per se. This critique strikes at the heart of the legitimacy of this type of critical theorizing by suggesting that there are no indications of immanent possibilities for power relations to be overcome in this manner. Here the focus is on the claims made on behalf of the Habermasian communicative community. Stephen Hopgood (2000, p. 9) highlights that the operation of communicative ethics depends on a number of strict conditions which demonstrate the highly abstract nature of normative theorizing (see further Habermas, 1990). Andrew Linklater (1998, p. 92) lays out the procedures Habermas defines as 'essential to authentic dialogue':

These include the convention that no person or moral position can be excluded from dialogue in advance, and the realisation that authentic dialogue requires a particular moral psychology. True dialogue . . . only exists when human beings accept that there is no a priori certainty about who will learn from whom and when all are willing to engage in a process of reciprocal critique as a result. Cooperation in dialogue requires that agents are prepared to question their own truth claims . . . What guides participants is a commitment to be moved simply by the force of the better argument.

Hopgood (2000, p. 10) argues that a critique of this abstract schema for its complete lack of relationship to the world as it is now and for the fact that its starting assumption of other-regarding equality proceeds by denying the existence of the very problems it purports to solve, would be 'obvious and utterly facile, and easy to make'. The communicative community alleged to be the basis of global civil society values and its democratizing potential is so far removed from any existing reality that it initially appears strange that Habermas' work is so central to these projects. Hopgood (2000, p. 10) suggests that the lack of attention to real relations and the focus on communicative rationality is necessary to 'ground' the moral claims which Linklater and others seek to make and insightfully notes that the moral claims would appear to come first and the framework of justification second.

The second critique is related less to power relations and more to the implicit relationship between the normative project and 'actually existing' global civil society. It suggests that the idealized view of global civil society relies on claims about the communicative interaction of global civic actors which have little connection to reality. As Keane (2003, p. 11) states, quoted above, global civil society is 'paradoxical' in that most of its members 'neither "know" each other nor have any chance of ever meeting each other face-to-face'. Similarly, Connolly (2001, p. 352) has to go through some contortions to substantiate his claim that 'network pluralism sustains a *thick* political culture', as he adds by way of parenthesis:

but this is a thickness in which the centre devolves into multiple lines of connection across numerous dimensions of difference . . . such as ethnicity, religion, language, gender practice and sexuality. These lines of flow slice through the centre as diverse constituencies connect to one another, pulling it from concentric pluralism toward a network pattern of multidimensional connections.

The line between a complete lack of social or political inter-connection and having a 'thick political culture' seems to be thinner than a cigarette paper. It is increasingly important to cut through the academic verbiage to appreciate the fictional nature of the communicative project. The lack of a real shared space and shared values—which were the source of the Habermasian ideal—would indicate that the implicit link between the normative ideal and potential international transformation is a forced and illegitimate one.

Völker Heins (2000) notes that the analogy of Ken Booth's (1991, p. 542) of the 'empty shells' of sovereignty and the 'omelette' of the global community, cited earlier, is based on two unfounded assumptions: firstly, that there is a convergence of worldviews among global civic actors; and secondly, the existence of a 'globalizing civil society de-coupled from the imperatives and constraints of state sovereignty' (Heins, 2000, p. 38). If there is no social engagement linking diverse groups across a global political space of global civil society then the communicative project of global civil society falls down in so far as it implicitly derives its norms from a developing and observable 'actually existing' global civil society.

The strength of the normative thesis is that it intimates a relationship to reality without openly relying on it for its validity. The lack of relationship between the theory and the reality then allows the theorists to impose their own set of views or set of normative demands. The importance of the concept of global civil society for normative theorists is that it provides a blank slate on which any normative schema can be written. The fact that the normative theorists derive their definitions of global civil society from their own norms and aspirations explains why the descriptive part of the normative project varies widely (as noted above, Keane, for example, includes the private sector, while Kaldor does not). The empirical information, such as the campaign descriptions, the lists of NGOs, or the values surveys, which purport to describe the all-inclusive 'project of projects', are merely a backdrop to the normative claims, which have already been ascribed from the outset.

In the case of communicative approaches to global civil society it is worthwhile restating the obvious fact that there is no literal 'global space' where arguments are freely exchanged on a non-instrumentalist basis. There is no literal 'global civil society' with its norms and values and rules and regulations. There are disparate non-governmental spheres of activity but the inter-connections and the shared pluralist norms exist only in the subjective projections of the beholder. Keane (2003, p. 142) notes that actually existing global civil society is, of course, 'marked by the absence of widely held "common values"'. As Heins (2000, p. 38) empirically details, there is no evidence of a 'structural convergence of the worldviews, addresses and ultimate goals of activists who keep crossing borders without however merging into a globalized civil society'.

The irony is that if a global civil society really existed, if there was a real communicative discussion by real actors, then normative theorists would not be able to impose their assertions of common norms and values. The fictional character of the global communicative space is essential for the normative appeal of the concept. As has already been highlighted, normative theorists can define the parameters of global civil society very differently; what they all agree on is that their definitions lead to the establishment of a set of normative values which can be supported by their theoretical analysis. In a circular methodology, normative values are the starting point rather than derived from any empirical study (Hopgood, 2000; see also Chandler, 2005). This is why any empirical analysis is usually a secondary concern in normative works; the focus tends to be on the values held to stem from the global civic 'space'. These values are, in fact, both start and end point of the communicative framework of discourse ethics, which operates independently of the existence or non-existence of global civic actors.

Constituting Norms without Political Subjects

At first sight it may appear that the circular argument of the normative global civil society theorists is one that is easily dismissed. It is suggested here, however, that the success of the Habermasian normative vision of communicative moral engagement has little to do with the

explanatory strength of the theoretical argument. Global civil society is not defined by what links actors together, but by an imputed ethical perspective which seeks to go beyond the political sphere of instrumental self-interest. This ethical perspective constitutes the normative project and also explains the appeal of this radical desire to overcome the perceived limitations of the political sphere.

The normative project of global civil society seeks to de-emphasize the importance of the formal political sphere in favour of an asserted framework of universal norms and values, held to be derived from global communicative reasoning. This is achieved through deriving universal moral norms from the 'plurality' and individual moral autonomy of global civic actors, freed from the political sphere of self-interest and held to be operating in a new 'global space'. These universal norms are derived from the abstract individual, the 'unencumbered self' freed from any social, economic or political context, in very similar terms to those used by John Rawls in establishing a normative framework in his *Theory of Justice* (1999). Whereas Rawls' framework was advocated as a philosopher's 'thought experiment', global civil society theorists assert that theirs is derived from a political commitment to the norms and values held to be in the process of emerging from global civil society.

The normative project seeks to transform the political not by engaging with politics but by bypassing the political sphere. The 'unencumbered self' of Rawls or Habermas is posited as entirely autonomous, not just removed from preconceived self-interests but also removed from any collective framework which could mediate between the interests of the individual and those of society as a whole (see Sandel, 1998). Rather than constructing shared norms through reasoned argument and consensus-building in the political process, these norms are ideally imposed from outside this process.

The demand for idealized norms has driven the discussion of communicative theorizing in the 'global' sphere. This explains why many critics have focused on making the procedural rules less restrictive (see Dallmayr, 2001; Connolly, 1995, 2001; Benhabib, 1992; Shapcott, 2001; Young, 1990; Coole). Whether this communicative interchange then goes under the rubric of 'thick conversation', 'thick dialogue', 'network pluralism', or some other concept, the ethical goals of the academic theorist remain preserved (Dallmayr, 2001, p. 346; Connolly, 2001). However, this has tended to reinforce the abstract nature of these communicative schemas, presenting global civic interaction as more and more radical and transgressive with every theoretical extension which weakens the required communicative substance required of global civic 'society'.

The lack of any mediating framework between the asserted 'moral autonomy' of actors in global civil society and the global norms allegedly derived from them makes communicative global civil society theorizing innately conservative in character, eternally caught between the abstract, pre-social, 'autonomous' individual and the abstract universal norms which form both sides of the fixed communicative equation, regardless of how radically this is interpreted. Instead of mediating the relationship between the individual and the community through a political process, the political 'end points' are given in the various normative rules expounded upon as the theoretical basis of the communicative dialogue.

Richard Falk's (1995, p. 3) imperative sums up the regulatory assertion behind the language of autonomy: 'global civil society must be both respectful of and celebratory toward cultural diversity, and mindful of human solidarity and planetary unity in the struggles against cruelty, violence, exploitation, and environmental decay'. In reality, it is these normative rules, held to be derived from communicative ethics, which are asserted against the existing state of world affairs, rather than the 'voices' of the excluded. When normative 'global' theorists assert that the growth of

global civil society can ‘act as a check or constraint on the power of the state’ (Kaldor, 1999, p. 200), or provide a ‘regulative ideal’ (Connolly, 2001, p. 354), it appears that they actually mean the values or norms they advocate for should act as a constraint on political power. It is the restrictive norms which are important, not the power of the civic actors per se.

Conclusion

It is now clear why these advocates of the communicative ethics of ‘global space’ worry little about the problem of agency. Their focus is the normative regulatory framework which global civil society is held to both reflect and to establish. As Falk (1995, p. 46) asserts, ‘humane governance is the principal project of emergent global civil society’; for Andrew Linklater (1998, p. 212), using similar language, ‘its function is to promote the goal of the universal communication community’. The details of agency are really neither here nor there: ‘Whether or not ecofeminism or some as yet unimagined coalition of societal and spiritual energies is the agency of transformation, the outcome must be a democratic and benevolent form of geogovernance’ (Falk, 1995, p. 45). Whatever the agency, the ideal outcome is already established; it is the one that meets the normative theorist’s starting definition of global civil society.

The ‘civilized’, pluralist, liberal ethic of global civil society, derived from communicative interactions in ‘global space’, is both start and end point of a circular argument. It was the implied ethics of actors located in global space that made the ideal concept of global civil society more than a ‘residual or dustbin category’ (Keane, 2003, p. 9). Then, tautologically, the constitution of this de-territorialized and interest-free ‘space’ or ‘society’ was held to reveal a communicative global ethic of pluralism. International civil society NGOs may be disingenuous when they argue that they advocate on behalf of the environment or those without a ‘voice’, but even these claims pale against the hubris of the liberal academics who claim to speak on behalf of ‘global civil society’ as a whole when they reconstruct their own normative positions from their academic investigations of ‘global space’.

Notes

- 1 The paper highlights the work in this area of explicit global civil society theorists, such as Mary Kaldor and John Keane, but also draws upon a variety of post-territorial theorists, ranging from liberal theorists, such as Martin Shaw, to post-structuralist thinkers, such as William Connolly. Although all these authors have different focuses in their work, they nevertheless converge in their derivation of certain ethical norms from the communicative interaction of the global public sphere.
- 2 This point is made by Buzan (2004, p. 69) with regard to Martin Shaw, but it applies more generally to the theorists considered here.

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