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## Global Space: Positivism, Progress and the Political—Reply to Kaldor, Dallmayr, Lipschutz, Bergesen and Patomäki

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I am grateful for the range of commentaries which my short article ‘Deriving Norms from “Global Space”’ has elicited. Because there are five responses and my ‘right of reply’ is strictly limited, I will draw out the key points from two commentators, whose responses are indirectly related to my paper, and spare more time engaging with the three more fundamental critiques of my piece.

Ronnie Lipschutz agrees that GCS theorists have idealized their subject matter and illegitimately smuggled their normative desires into their analytical frameworks. However, his indirect response is to argue that the failings of GCS theorists do not mean that global civil society *itself* does not exist; instead we need proper historical research into the development of GCS and its political potential. Lipschutz argues that there is nothing inherently progressive or attractive about non-state social movement politics vis-à-vis state-based politics. Global civic social movement activism has been called into being through the weakness of states to contain or resist ‘the Empire of Global Capitalism’, and its enforcers in the Bush administration, and expresses popular revolt against this power.

Although Lipschutz does not detail the nature of this resistance and revolt, it is quite possible that his argument would fit well with Albert Bergesen’s. For Bergesen, I may be right to argue that more empirical research needs to be done on the identification of global civic actors, however, where I am clearly mistaken is in the idea that the global civic project is ‘inherently conservative in content’. Bergesen suggests that expanding the field of research to non-Western religious movements reveals that they are influential over many societies where traditional left-wing politics has little impact. Why assume then that non-Western global civic actors, especially those mobilizing under the rubric of radical Islam, are a force of conservatism?

My response to Bergesen is to re-pose the question; why assume that the global civic activism of Euro-centric actors is any more progressive than the nihilistic self-obsessed anti-politics of Al-Qaeda? Fazal Devji (2005) makes the point that Al-Qaeda’s post-territorial politics are

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similar to the campaigning practices of Western global civic actors, such as Greenpeace, in that they do not seek representational legitimacy, but make moral or ethical gestures through personal action in the global sphere. The conservatism implicit in this freeing of politics from the constraints of territorial political community lies precisely in the danger that political activity is then freed from any constraints of social mediation. Radical or oppositional ‘politics’ can easily become a way of legitimizing disengagement from society and a retreat into performances of personal identities. It is this lack of desire to engage in debate or dialogue which most distinguishes the unmediated activism of post-territorial political actors from the ‘territorial’ politics of representation, founded on struggles of collective interests (see further, Chandler, 2007).

Fred Dallmayr makes two critiques of my piece. Firstly, that I conflate theorists who are genuinely Habermasian, such as Kaldor, with those who agree with Habermas but have a slightly different emphasis or different formulation, such as himself and Connolly, and others, such as Shaw and Keane, who derive global norms from elsewhere. In fact, this conflation of normative theorizing was the point of my paper. I sought to establish that it makes little difference to the GCS thesis where the theorist subjectively stands between Habermas, Connolly and Keane. The point of my piece was the ‘positivist’ one that whether global norms are stated as being derived from natural law, global space, a Rawlsian thought experiment, Habermasian dialogue, or a drug-induced out-of-body experience makes no difference whatsoever to our understanding of the world which we live in. I concluded that whichever approach is taken, the theorists always end up where they started as the global norms they advocate shape their personal understanding of the ‘global civic sphere’. This, to me, suggested that the desire to discover communicative norms in ‘global civic space’ was little more than the disingenuous universalizing of the particular ethical perspective of the theorist.

Dallmayr’s more fundamental point involves a crude counter-positioning of normative and positivist approaches—so as to methodologically reflect a political struggle between advocating progress and defending the status quo. In Dallmayr’s view, my position is a, not so refreshing, throwback to the pre-Kuhnian era, where ‘hard-nosed empiricists [were] uncontaminated by normative or interpretive considerations’. ‘[W]hy should the critical challenge—as Chandler claims—exhibit an “innately conservative character”? Is it not the empiricist who is wedded to the status quo?’ Apparently, I must either admit to condoning murder, rape, aggressive war, crimes against humanity and torture or I must recant and join the side of normative theorizing in a challenge to the status quo. Not so. My point is that normative claims about ‘emerging’ or ‘immanent’ global norms divined by liberal professors do nothing to challenge the status quo. We do not challenge the status quo by stressing our ‘radical’ credentials as thinkers of alternative worlds but only by engaging in the hard work of understanding and engaging with the world we live in and the subjectivities through which it is reflected.

Heikki Patomäki correctly highlights that Habermasian approaches to global civil society lose the political context in which Habermas writes on civil society, delinking the process from that of government and becoming ‘escapist’, resembling anarchist or utopian socialist thinking. For Patomäki, this escapism is an ‘unintended’ consequence of these theorists’ (and activists’) failure to distinguish the difference between the domestic political sphere—institutionally underpinned by sovereign power—and the international sphere which lacks any such framework. He argues that this problem could be overcome ‘in practice’ by establishing sovereignty—political power—at the global level through ‘representative institutions of global democracy’. This is formally correct, as are his points against Humean empiricism, but evades the challenge I make.

Patomäki appears reluctant to engage directly with normative GCS theorizing because he wants to have his cake and eat it: to defend critical theorizing while distancing himself from any defence of the critical theorists of GCS. He asserts that they are correct with regard to their methodological approach, merely misunderstanding their object of study. I disagree and would suggest that there is an intimate link between GCS theorists' claims and their view of themselves as critical theorists. This is a problem with critical theorizing itself, which tends to emphasize the theorist's subjectivity over and above the object of study (prioritizing alternative futures over 'problem solving'). Critical theorists engage in a highly subjective, 'escapist' form of academic engagement with the world, one which rejects any subordination to the problems thrown up by the 'discipline of the real' (Badiou, 2004, pp. 237–238) and appears to mirror the 'escapism' of GCS activists who emphasize their personal subjectivity over and above collective frameworks of representational politics.

Mary Kaldor resolutely defends global civil society on the grounds that 'better decisions are likely to be taken if they are based on public debate than if they are not'. For her, GCS 'is the medium through which individuals negotiate and struggle for a social contract with the centres of political and economic authority' and it is apparently a 'mystery' that anyone should find it 'idealistic' or 'utopian' to suggest that this struggle today transcends the borders of nation states. Most of all, Mary finds it astonishing that I should claim that there is no 'literal' global civil space, where the global public has these discussions and negotiations, particularly as I live and work in London 'which is surely a centre of global civil space' where a mass of religious and ethnic groups, NGOs, governments, lobbyists and campaigners 'all participate in a global debate' which crosses national boundaries.

I leave my 'ivory tower' every once in a while and I am annoyed to have missed the 'global debate'. Mary does not say what everyone was debating about, what ideas came out of it, if a record was kept, or if the debate had any consequences, so I am still none the wiser. To my mind, she repeatedly uses the concept of 'public/global/ethical *debate*' in an intellectually dishonest way. My dictionary (Wiki) defines 'debate' as a formal form of argument in which parties attempt to persuade an audience of their position and there are rules enabling people to discuss and decide on differences. I agree that public debate inside or across national boundaries would be a good thing, but without coming over all 'positivist' I still maintain that there is no debate in 'global space'. Debate is a purposive human activity, websites do not talk to themselves, or personal blogs, just as diaries which we keep under our beds do not communicate with each other. Ironically, those who pretend that there is a global communicative debate in global space tend to present themselves as elite interpreters of it, as 'keepers of the truth', in the same way as Kings or Popes used to have a direct ear to the voice of God. If there was a GCS with shared norms I suspect we would notice its emergence and its effects and not need professors of global political ethics to enlighten us about it.

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