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INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The existence of a civil society is not a new theme; however, we can still wonder if today one can speak about an international or global civil society.

Is there really an international civil society or a western civil society which is centred upon such different social, economic, political and cultural realities?

According to some, international civil society may have emerged in 1992, soon after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe; other people, especially those who lay stress on disputing the world economic model, believe that international civil society was clearly born in 1999.

International civil society may have evolved from the new nongovernmental organisations which developed pretty much all over the world particularly during the last decades of the 20th century.

The concept of civil society is often employed as a global or homogenous category. If international civil society does not exist yet, some of its practices have nowadays gone beyond the stage of embryonic formula.

1. Introduction

The issue of an *international*, world or even global civil society is very much discussed nowadays. Our societies, be they post-communist, post-industrial, post-materialistic or postmodern, would be subject to the dictates of economic *global players*, in a world increasingly reduced to the size of a village by the new technologies and means of communication. The answer to the globalised market, to the international

community might be an international civil society "understood as an environment in which a set of global rules and a global business management framework are established. This idea is doubled by the undermining of the concept of sovereignty, the idea that the State is more and more subject to global rules that its own citizens can influence, at least in principle" (Kaldor, 2003, p. 194).

2. Problem Statement

It is necessary that the issue of the existence of an international or global civil society should be brought up if we rely on the social practices of this concept in the media and in much of the contemporary citizen action.

Today, causes, risks and ideals would be bound neither to a territory, nor to a people in particular. In the 1930's, the precursors of a political ecology in France (Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau) produced a statement that has become famous: "Think globally, act locally". If the slogan has gone beyond the limits of environmental activism, no one doubts that action, and reflection for that matter, are expected to become as global as they are local today. Minimalist views of the civil society in Anglo-Saxon literature enable that transition from a reflection on civil society at the national level to one at the international level. Civil society includes all activities which involve a deliberate attempt – outside the state and market and in an organised manner – to take part in drafting public policies, norms and / or deeper social structures; the issue of the existence of an international civil society is only raised in terms of the capacity for influence and access to a world arena, which is also inferred. Thus, a global civil society includes civic activities that: 1) approach international issues; 2) involve transnational communications; 3) have a world organisational structure; 4) work based on a premise of supraterritorial solidarity.

3. Research Questions

The existence of a genuine international civil society raises at least two interrogations that touch upon its definition proper. On the one hand, what content and what coherence may be given to this international civil society which, just like local or national civil societies, appears diverse, fills everything, is less consistent, and what can its multiple components have in common? On the other hand, the notion of civil society, its semantic evolution and social practices seem connected mainly by the socio-historical trajectory of political, economic and social modernity typical of the western world. Could we then speak about a truly international civil society or about a western civil society founded upon very different social, economic, political and cultural realities?

4. Purpose of the Study

The existence of a civil society is not a new theme; however, we can still wonder if today one can speak about an international or global civil society. That is exactly what we intend to show: if there is really an international civil society or a western civil society which is centred upon such different social, economic, political and cultural realities. International civil society may have evolved from the new

nongovernmental organisations which developed pretty much all over the world particularly during the last decades of the 20th century.

5.   Research Methods

Methodologically, although this is an interdisciplinary social analysis of the researched topic, we shall mainly use the tools of social philosophy. We may consider *international civil society* as an *ideal*, hence we shall formulate a plausible model for its proper functioning. Or we may treat it as an already existing *social reality,* in full emergence. Therefore, we shall try to identify its main characteristics and functions. From a normative standpoint, we aim to evaluate not only the assumption of existence, but also that of the current opportunity and legitimacy of an international civil society.

In order to achieve that, we shall *analyse semantically* various concepts that gravitate within the semantic constellation of the term (international) civil society. We shall trace *the genealogy of ideas* that legitimate the global expansion of civil society (the idea of "global village", for instance). We shall use such questions as "are there non-Western civil societies?". We shall test the assumption that the civil society, which can be extrapolated, relies on Western values, by appealing to alternative social theories, as well as the opposed hypotheses regarding the emergence and evolution of civil society and the possibility of its global expansion: a) the hypothesis of prescriptive universalism; b) the hypothesis of Western exceptionalism.

6.   Findings

6.1.   Are there non-Western civil societies?

Despite the worldwide success of the notion of civil society among citizens and the media, a debate remains still open, regarding the pertinence of appealing to this concept in the analysis of non-Western socio-political realities. The development of the concept of civil society seems connected to the Western world both through the particular trajectory of its political, economic and social modernity and through the history of political and philosophical reflections of the so-called Western world. Under the cover of the idea of an international civil society, don't we witness a new avatar of world westernisation? Speaking about the civil society requires considering beforehand a debate on the Western or universal nature of the civil society, at least as an ideal (like democracy, the constitutional state or the market) that is accessible to everyone. Two positions stand out in the issue of the existence of genuine civil societies outside the particular context that witnessed the emergence of this notion: 1) that of a *prescriptive universalism* and 2) that of *Western exceptionalism*.

The first position is embraced mainly by Anglophone researchers [Diamond, Bratton, Harbeson, among others] to whom civil society is an essential element of the proper functioning of a democratic system. There is no democracy without civil society, anywhere (universalist aspect). Applied to non-Western socio-political realities, civil society becomes, at the same time, an active element of the democratisation process and a sign of the degree of advancement of this process. Not only does civil society emerge and then strengthen in the course of democratisation, but this is also desirable

(prescriptive aspect), for democracy is the political regime that most favour the economic and social development in an underdeveloped country.

This prescriptive universalism is disputed by the position of *Western exceptionalism* adopted by researchers mainly from francophone politology [Haubert, Chabal and Daloz, Bayart]. To them, the pertinence of the notion of civil society inheriting various currents of Western political philosophy remains rather uncertain in the socio-cultural contexts of the South. Three criteria would be discriminating in the existence of a civil society: "differentiation of private social spaces from political space; individualisation of social relations which also lends a primary value to civic engagement; horizontality of relations within the society which makes associative logic preferable to community structure, hence it marginalises particularistic identifications, favouring the statal-national identification" (Badie, 1992, p. 116). Therefore, it seems that these essential characteristics are not to be encountered, particularly in Africa and that happens despite the adoption of models of statal-national political development.

If prescriptive universalism is to be described at least as an extremely ideologically oriented naïve version, the position of Western exceptionalism seems at least radical and, again, Western-centred. But a middle way between prescriptive universalism and Western universalism is possible. One has first to rid of the spontaneistic view on the emergence of non-Western civil societies of the 1980's and 1990's. The statal reflux of the 1980's was often doubled by the emancipation of associational sectors without, nevertheless, giving time for the state and political dimension to develop so fast. Then, it is a matter of accepting the socio-historical differences of trajectory which influence the emergence of an autonomous space inherent to civic activity, a space that is sufficiently liberated from the constraints of community bonds and, at the same time, independent from those of public power. It is no wonder that European civil society is not to be encountered south of the Sahara; still, is the African citizen, under these circumstances, really incapable of inventing his own civil society and elaborate his own historicity for this imported concept? One has to admit that, beyond the debates started by political sciences on the existence of non-Western civil societies, this notion bears some meaning nowadays, creates social bonds and integrates into the repertory of actions and strategies of the thousands of social actors just about everywhere on this planet.

6.2. An international civil society?

The birth date of an international civil society is, according to some observers, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. To others, who focus on disputing the world economic model, it emerged with the 1999 Seattle WTO protests. Others indicate the 1997 Ottawa Treaty signed by 25 countries, which, under the pressure of more than 300 NGOs, outlawed anti-personnel mines. The internationalisation of civil society rests mainly upon two associative poles, sometimes closer, sometimes farther apart, but each driven by particulars factors. On the one hand, international civil society would deem it fit to incarnate in the new NGOs that have developed almost everywhere in the world, particularly during the last decade of the 20th century. On the other hand, we also witness such an international civil society appear with the citizens' mobilisations that are more or less structured, focused on a global denunciation of the global economic order.

International civil society takes shape first due to the worldwide proliferation of a particular associative type, the NGOs. At the same time, in France, the International Solidarity Organisations are commonly referred to. This growth of associations in the four corners of the planet has some remarkable characteristics.

What strikes, first of all, is the ampleness and rapidity of the phenomenon noted throughout the 1980's and the 1990's. The 1980's, declared the "decade of NGOs", were mainly the years of Western NGOs. According to OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) statistics, the NGOs that appeared in Western countries numbered around 1,600 in 1980. Almost ten years later, there were more than 4,500. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the internationalisation phenomenon expanded. No region in the world was overlooked by this phenomenon. Nepal, for instance, had 220 NGOs in 1990. Three years later, the number increased to 1,200. In 1997, an international survey would inventory more than one million in India, 210,000 in Brazil, 17,500 in Egypt or 15,000 in Thailand (Salamon et al., 1999). Such growth in so short a time is surprising. Undoubtedly, it is dependent upon the new political opportunities provided by periods of democratic transition (such as that of the 1970's in southern Europe, that of the 1980's in Latin America and that of the 1990's in Central or Eastern Europe or Sub-Saharan Africa in particular), but it also relates to a juridical definition of the associative object that varied from country to country (Doucin, 2000). In addition, the associative crowd gives us no information about the efficiency of these organisations often called upon to fulfil new functions, which are important to local economic development, to the learning of democracy or to the supply of social services at the expense of or in the subordination of public power.

In those countries which experienced the adventure of democratisation in the last quarter of the 20th century, the first days of transition witnessed the increase of associative practices of all types: political parties, trade unions, mutual aid associations and particularly NGOs, and we should also keep in mind the proliferation of media institutions. This diversity is perceived as a virtue of democratic regimes in the face of the monolithism of old States-Parties. Through their mere existence, NGOs are therefore guarantors of democratisation and development indices of this process; some African, Latin-American and Eastern-European countries may provide many such examples. Thus, in 20 years, post-communist Romania got an associative sector of over 62,000 NGOs, 68% of them on a voluntary basis. As opposed to the institutional actors in the cooperation on development, NGOs have a greater capacity to reach the poorest and work in remote areas; favour local participation and help implementing projects of direct collaboration with beneficiary target groups; function at low costs; innovate, experiment, adjust gracefully to a changeable reality; strengthen local institutions and organisations as well as the power of marginal groups.

At first, the success of NGOs was built on the denunciation of not only economic, but also social, cultural and environmental inefficiency of major development projects. Thus, these NGOs did not only grow but got to comfortably insinuate themselves into the very bosom of international institutional structures and claimed to be intermediary agents of management and of the path to development aid. When the United Nations Economic and Social Council was created after World War II, NGOs had 45 head offices there. Today, there are more than 2,000.

The NGO participation in the international arena is not only through partnerships with development agencies. These associations also intervene as players that lobby international organisations

or as sounding boards (depending on the mouthpiece) at high-level meetings. Their visibility in the media increased throughout international high-level conferences and meetings held in the 1990's. More often than not, they intend to be the representatives of the voiceless, of the poor, of those left behind by growth and globalisation. The proliferation of these NGOs after the Cold War would be parallel to the emergence of the global issue on the agenda of an "international community".

Along with the consolidation of transnational NGOs, the emergence of NGOs outside the Western world favoured the development of a worldwide associative network, giving rise to what was called the "global associational revolution" (Salamon et al., 1999).

This internationalisation of the NGO associational formula and networking of these new structures in North/South development projects does not mean, however, that the North/South relations of forces within these networks have disappeared. International civil society often implies asymmetric interactions between players with unequal financial, human or technological resources.

Other observations can also be made on the homogeneity of this international civil society. Let us first emphasise the importance of national, even regional, juridical contexts, providing a varied framework to associational practices (some countries have preserved a juridical context dating from the early 20th century, others had to adopt, sometimes under international pressure, a more adequate juridical framework). The term NGO can cover, from one country to another, from one corner of the world to another, the most diverse associational practices. Thus, until 2000, the phrase NGO designated in Romania any associational practice that did not emerge from the will of public authorities. In Belgium, NGOs are first and foremost non-profit associations, operating in the cooperation for development; they are financed mainly by the ministry in charge of this matter. There they are referred to, as in the former Congolese colony, as developing NGOs. The term "NGO" is more universal than the associational practice mentioned. Finally, professionalization strategies centred on some of these new NGOs today are not to be ignored. These strategies, developed by the major Western cooperation agencies, are not without consequences on the new "emergent" civil societies. The NGOs taking part in these "consolidation" policies experience an effect of equalisation which makes them virtually interchangeable because they adopt identical working methods, organisational structures and development projects. Today, nothing resembles a Budapest-based professionalised NGO more than a professionalised NGO in Lima or Djakarta. This is not done without raising an issue of identity and local binding vis-à-vis the populations which benefit from their activity. This strategy of consolidation also manifests through a selective logic of choosing clients vis-à-vis NGOs by hirers. This mechanism strengthens the financial dependence of this small fraction of the NGO sector which aims to represent the new emergent civil societies. Ultimately, these strategies consolidate the separation between professionalised NGOs that are inserted in transnational networks and the rest which are marginalised and have to manage with their own resources. Feeding on this associational thrivingness and especially on international NGOs' work to build planetary stakes (debt of developing countries, environment protection, human rights compliance…), a second partial pole, which is not entirely assimilated with the first, would also represent this international civil society. It is made up of more or less formalised movements, "groups", associations sharing the same denunciation of harmful social, environmental and economic effects of economic globalisation.

We are experiencing, within the international society, a period of momentary alliance between the major NGOs and the alter-globalisation movement, for instance. This alliance camouflages the danger to

see NGOs "dethroned in the order of virtue and resistance by the new social movements and let themselves be absorbed inside the orbit of radicalisation that is not theirs" (Pech & Padis, 2003, p. 89). The alliance seems paradigmatic: on the one hand, militants and "alter" movements need major NGOs and their financial and logistic means; on the other hand, international NGOs seek to keep on their toes vis-à-vis the important causes of the moment, so they need the mobilisation capacity of "alter" movements. Hence, a tacit non-aggression pact is being defined, aiming to make one believe in a civil solidary society and demultiply its influence.

The professionalization of the most powerful post-third world NGOs also entailed the appearance of a tension between a principle of action and one of participation. The first principle is polarised by the concern to do and consequently involves pragmatism, professionalization and credibility in relation to partners. But the NGOs remain dependent on voluntary donations and, hence, on some kind of popularity among the public opinion. These NGOs are, in the end, subject to the same weakness as the enterprises they defy sometimes in the context of a democracy of opinion. Global civil society players may also lose their legitimacy within the national or international public spaces where their errors are pointed out.

Factors that favour an international civil society

These two poles of the alleged international civil society profit from favourable factors. The first has to do with a political context that takes shape at the end of a cold war. The end of the ideological conflict that divided the world into two camps after World War II might have favoured the emergence of a global vision of risks – a vision already supported by several international NGOs – and the need for a durable development (leading, at the same time, to the creation of the concept of 'global public goods'). The collapse of the communist block also widened the scope of international NGOs led by humanitarian NGOs.

Beyond the consequences of the end of the bipolar model on the international scene, one sometimes witnesses, within international spaces, the criticism of the State, whether developer or providence. Sometimes this State is too intrusively judged, some other times the loss of the political element and the State inability to assume the role of counter-power of globalised economic power are criticised. As previously emphasised, the periods of democratic transition in Latin America, Eastern Europe and even certain countries in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa initially resulted in covering the right of association, which led to the belief in the awakening of a genuine civil society in some countries. Another key factor has to do with the growth of means of communication and information dissemination, a growth that favours the internationalisation of movements, reducing the cost of collective mobilisation. A number of causes would not be known and supported without these new means of communication. However, we shall agree that, no matter how efficient and multiplying the effects of these new communication instruments are, access to them is still unequal from one country to another (with the North being privileged as compared to the South) and within the same (developed or not) society. These tools may therefore aim to strengthen the richest mobilisation capacities and may distort the representativity of international civil society.

Obstacles to an international civil society

The international civil society conceptualisation suffers first and foremost from certain simplifications. The concept of civil society is most often used as a global and homogeneous category. Still, it refers to a plurality of players and local or national situations. Transnational mobilisations frequently appear as a lever for the action that keeps unfolding in the national or local space. The expansion of action beyond borders aims to grant access to additional resources. More often than not, at the local level, world civil society is an inconstant reality, connected to some too heteroclite actors. Civil society presupposes an agreement between the different components of this movement (NGO, unions…). However, the alter-globalisation nebulosity seems much too heterogeneous to authorise this agreement. The field of international solidarity organisations (or NGOs) is highly differentiated itself (between humanitarian, environment, human rights, fight against poverty…). In addition, access to the international civil society or carrying on inside it may also derive from technological and economic factors that favour certain players and disadvantage others. Leadership there is most frequently Western, even among those who, from rallies to forums, from papers to articles, from conferences to manifestations, denounce the harmful actions of a world westernisation on the path of economic and cultural globalisation.

We may wonder whether, in the context of globalisation, the globalised civil society is divided into a national view and a cosmopolite view. The distance is sometimes significant between several major, very old NGOs of Western origin (i.e. Anglo-Saxon, except the humanitarian field), which represent global civil society and develop strategies ranging from confrontation to integration, and the plethora of local NGOs scattered in the four corners of the planet, which only have very local goals and extremely shallow demands. In the South, several factors concur to restrict the range of action of civil society organisations to their local area. Many of the new organisations are created based on their own funds, which contributes to limiting their ambitions. The luckiest (or the most servile) get foreign aid which allows them to assume the role of local relays of an institution or an international non-governmental organisation. They are, at the same time, supported by local social views founded on infra-political solidarities (clan, ethnic group). In order to restore an eventual balance in the North-South representativeness of international civil society, local NGOs from developing countries should made their voices heard on international arenas. This ideal is all the more difficult to achieve because a change in the strategy of NGOs, particularly most powerful transnational NGOs, seems to have occurred in the last 15 years, as proved by the development of certain issues such as fair trade, elimination of genetically modified organisms or protection of common goods. Rather reforming than radical, these NGOs do not fundamentally challenge the world economic order, but make new criticisms that question the responsibility of players on the market. As very well stated, "NGOs have merely improved their experience in terms of media bustle and have exploited all resources resulted from an explosive encounter: that between democracy of opinion and a capitalism where brand image is more than ever a strategic value" (Pech & Padis, 2003, p. 69). Thus, if some part of the world civil society works to formulate the bases of possibilities of another world, some other part of it (perhaps more powerful financially and more involved in international public spaces) deals, indirectly, with strengthening the disputed globalised capitalist economy. From this point of view, international civil society weighs less as a counter-power than as an indirect support for the capitalist power. The new criticism of capitalism does not question the system, but rather its externalities.

Assuming that international civil society is on its way to coming into existence, it should cope with a triple challenge. First, that of *representativity*. What do these organisations of the international civil society represent? On whose behalf do they speak? What is their mandate?

The second challenge is that of *legitimacy*. In the name of what, in the name of which principles do these associations express themselves? A debate arises here between the highly rooted local associations and the great non-governmental organisations which formulate global notions and solutions. This debate is doubled by another, which relates legitimacy issues to those of representativity and confronts the associations with technical or professional legitimacy with those that lead an important collective mobilisation that is more entrenched socially.

Finally, international civil society should also prove its *pertinence*. In other words, international civil society should gradually cope with the challenge of *efficiency* and *responsibility*. Is this plethora of international associations and disparate mobilisations of any use?

7. Conclusion

The establishment of a genuine international society that should be both homogeneous and coherent in terms of political claim and action and, at the same time, balanced and diversified in terms of the geographical, cultural, social and economic origin of its actors seems still faraway. Should one conclude that international civil society is no more than an ideological discourse?

Local and international NGOs, alter-globalisation movements, mere consumers buying biologically, equitably or ethically, hackers willing to free the Internet from commercial monopolies – all these seem to contribute, voluntarily or not, to building, at the quotidian level, a civil society whose financial and industrial groups and whose political leaders they take more and more into account. If articulating the representations, claims and mobilisation of these actors is so problematic as to weaken political capacities and relate certain discourses to forms of self-creating prediction, nothing indicates however that we should dismiss the idea altogether. If international civil society does not yet exist, some of its practices have nowadays gone beyond the embryonic stage. It is important that experts in social sciences should objectively analyse this international civil society as evolving in two ways: first, integration into the world order via the institutionalisation of certain actors of this "international civil society" as partners of international financial institutions, governments and multinational enterprises; second, the most exigent and maybe less integrating way, of a (utopian) elaboration of an autonomous global public space.

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