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Civil Society, Democracy and Global Governance

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Outline of the topic

The role of civil society actors in global politics has received much scholarly attention during recent years. There has been a tendency to idealize “civil society” actors as democratic forces. Yet, as Jan Aart Scholte (2002: 299) has pointed out, “we do well to balance enthusiasm for civil society engagement of global governance with due caution” and “demand of civic associations that they not merely assert – but also demonstrate – their democratic credentials.” Nevertheless there is a lack of research on the democratic credentials of civil society actors. Empirical studies of democratic aspects of the interaction between civil society actors and global governance institutions are particularly rare. The proposed workshop aims at taking research on civil society and global governance a step forward through a focus on the democratic qualities and contributions of civil society actors and their interactions with a range of governance institutions above the state. More specifically we aim at gathering researchers analysing different kinds of civil society activism related to various forms of global and regional governance with the aim of analysing and discussing the extent to which such interventions are democratic, seek to build or contribute to democracy (whether at the global, regional, national or sub-national levels) or understand their mandate to be in any way driven by democratic imperatives. Equally, we would hope to attract scholars who consider the problems inherent in such activities. We therefore invite cutting edge, empirically grounded research on various non-governmental organizations, social movements and other forms of non-state interventions interacting with different regional or global governance institutions such as the EU, Mercosur, ASEAN, the World Bank, IMF, WTO or seeking to influence the direction of global governance or global governance regimes (for example human rights regimes or the governance of migration). The focus might, for example, be on problems of representation and accountability as well as the tension between coercive and non-coercive forms of activism. This is a topic that opens up potentially very fruitful

exchange between scholars working within the fields of comparative politics, international relations, international political economy and political theory and we explicitly welcome interdisciplinary approaches.

Relation to existing research

In previous research we can identify three basic positions concerning the democratic credentials of civil society actors which operate beyond the nation-state. First, there has been a tendency, especially in the earlier research on “global civil society” in the 1990s, to portray civil society actors in a romantic way as champions of democracy and other normatively “good” causes. The idea that civil society by definition must be pro-democratic has been strong in conventional civil society theory, and this is to a large extent reflected in the writings on global or transnational civil society too. In empirical case studies there is a very strong bias toward movements and networks campaigning for causes which most people (no doubt including the researchers) consider good (cf. Smith et al. 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Florini 2000), although the problem of representation and the lack of accountability and transparency are sometimes mentioned in such case studies (cf. Edwards and Gaventa 2001).

A second position is represented by those sympathizing with other powerful actors in global governance (such as governments, transnational corporations and multilateral institutions). From this perspective, the legitimacy of transnational civil society actors is questioned, often in a very sweeping and one-sided way (cf. the critical evaluation of NGOs from the perspective of business presented in Doh and Teegen 2003).

More constructive criticism comes from a third position, offering systematic analyses of democratic problems and prospects of civil society actors. During the last decade there has been a tendency to pay more attention to democratic shortcomings of NGOs (Fisher 1997; Hudock 1999) and the concept of “uncivil society” (Kopecky and Mudde 2003; cf. Ahrne 1998; Chambers and Kopstein 2001) has been introduced. To some extent, this debate has also influenced the study of transnational or global civil society actors. For example, Alison Van Rooy (2004) offers a clear and systematic overview of different aspects of transnational civil society actors’ democratic legitimacy (see also Nelson 2002; Collingwood and Logister 2005; Frangonikolopoulos 2005). The workshop will depart from this third position, and engage in empirically grounded analyses of the democratic qualities of different types of civil society actors and their interaction with regional or global governance institutions. At the

same time, we hope to extend the empirical discussion of civil society, democracy and global governance to an analysis of different and emerging governance regimes, including human rights regimes.

In the discussion of democratic credentials of civil society actors, problems of representation and accountability are central. This is one set of democratic problems that could be addressed. Critics of NGOs often point out that their membership might be very limited, perhaps excluding most of the people on whose behalf the NGO claims to speak. The lack of representiveness within transnational activist networks is often described as a division between the “global north” and the “global south.” The lack of representation within transnational civil society groups may reproduce structural inequalities based on class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion etc. (Scholte 1999: 30). Furthermore, the internal democracy of transnational civil society actors is often problematic, as formal mechanisms for representation tend to be lacking. Unlike governments in democratic states, the leadership of many civil society groups is not elected by any constituency, although membership-based organizations may have regular elections of leadership positions. Deficient representation is linked to lacking mechanisms for accountability. Accountability implies that power-wielders are judged in relation to a set of standards and sanctioned, if those holding them accountable decide they have failed to fulfil their responsibilities. NGOs may be accountable to internal as well as external stakeholders (Grant and Keohane 2005; cf. Van Rooy 2004: 73; Fox & Brown 1998) and such accountability mechanisms deserve further exploration.

However, we would also like to encourage participants to go beyond this literature and rethink the concepts of representation and accountability. Margaret Keck (2004: 45) argues that civil society activists in global governance institutions represent “positions rather than populations, ideas rather than constituencies.” This is what she calls “discursive representation.” In a similar argument Jordan and van Tuijl (2000) claim that the terms representation and accountability are not fully applicable to transnational NGOs. A better concept is “political responsibility” (cf. Hudson 2001). Others have identified new “technologies of credibility building” as replacing universalistic mechanisms of representation in global governance (Carlarne and Carlarne 2006). While taking the problems of representation and accountability within transnational civil society actors seriously, we acknowledge the need for conceptual and theoretical innovations that go beyond the conventional framework of a democratic,

territorially based state. In particular we are interested in empirical studies of how these problems are played out in specific settings.

The use of undemocratic methods is another aspect of the potential democratic deficit of civil society actors, on which systematic research is lacking. Recent instances of violent actions at the margins of transnational protests associated with a global justice movement have been condemned as undemocratic behaviour. Moreover, a number of non-violent but still confrontational social movement activities have also been questioned from a democratic perspective. Those adhering to a competitive or representative model of democracy typically consider civil disobedience undemocratic (unless it is targeting an authoritarian regime). But such methods can also be seen as a practice of direct or participatory democracy. From the perspective of deliberative democratic theory, the coercive and confrontational methods of the more radical sections of civil society are also seen as problematic. The tools of arguing and communicative action are central to the deliberative democratic ideal. The activities of social movements, however, are often confrontational and coercive and, hence, do not fit well within a deliberative democratic framework. From a social movement (and activist) perspective, the ideal of deliberative democracy can be criticized on the ground that deliberation does not work in societies characterized by structural inequalities. Direct activism and opposition like street-marches, boycotts, or sit-ins are often necessary to achieve social change (Young 2001; Medearis 2004). This tension between deliberation and coercive activism within civil society is one potential focus of the proposed workshop. The theme resonates with a key debate within contemporary transnational social movements on the merits of non-confrontational, persuasive and cooperative strategies versus confrontational, coercive, and sometimes violent methods. However, there is a lack of empirical research as to how this tension is played out in specific contexts related to global governance institutions and regimes.

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