

Global Civil Society?

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Unfamiliar words

A new cosmology

All human orders, hunting and gathering societies included, have lived off shared images of the cosmos, world-views that served to plant the feet of their members firmly in space and time. Yet very few have fantasised the linking of the five oceans, six continents and peoples of our little blue planet wrapped in white vapour. Each of these world-views in the strict sense emerged only after the military defeats suffered by Islam, in early modern Europe. They included the forceful global acquisition of territory, resources and subjects in the name of empire; the efforts of Christendom to pick-a-back on imperial ventures for the purpose of bringing spiritual salvation to earth; and the will to unify the world through the totalitarian violence of fascism and Marxism–Leninism. Each of these globalising projects left indelible marks on the lives of the world's peoples, their institutions and ecosystems, but each also failed to accomplish its mission. In our times, against the backdrop of those failures, the image of ourselves as involved in another great human adventure, one carried out on a global scale, is again on the rise. A new world-view, radically different from any that has existed before, has been born and is currently enjoying a growth spurt: it is called global civil society.

These unfamiliar words 'global civil society' – a neologism of the 1990s – are fast becoming fashionable. They were born at the confluence of seven overlapping streams of concern among publicly-minded intellectuals at the end of the 1980s: the revival of the old language of civil society, especially in central–eastern Europe, after the military crushing of the Prague Spring; a heightening appreciation of the revolutionary effects of the new galaxy of satellite/computer-mediated communications (captured in Marshall McLuhan's famous neologism, 'the global village'); the new awareness, stimulated by the peace and ecological movements, of ourselves as members of a fragile and potentially self-destructive world system; the widespread perception that the implosion of Soviet-type communist systems implied a new global political order; the world-wide

growth spurt of neo-liberal economics and market capitalist economies; the disillusionment with the broken and unfulfilled promises of post-colonial states; and the rising concern about the dangerous and misery-producing vacuums opened up by the collapse of empires and states and the outbreak of uncivil wars.¹ Fed by these developments, talk of global civil society has become popular among citizens' campaigners, bankers, diplomats, NGOs and politicians. World Bank documents welcome 'the opportunity to work with civil society'; the Asian Development Bank (ADB) similarly speaks of the need to 'strengthen cooperation with civil society'; and even the World Trade Organisation (WTO) declares its support for dialogue with the world's civil society institutions.² The phrase 'global civil society' becomes protean and promiscuous. It even peppers speeches of prominent figures like UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and Chancellor Schröder, sometimes to the point where the words themselves become as fickle as they are fashionable.

There is today much chatter about global civil society, but too little thinking about it. That is why the phrase 'global civil society' must be used with caution. Like all other vocabularies with a political edge, its meaning is neither self-evident nor automatically free of prejudice. So how can we best think about these words? Current usages are quite confused. There is general agreement that talk of global civil society is a response to rising concerns about the need for a new social and economic and political deal at the global level. And parallels are sometimes observed with the early modern European invention of the distinction between 'government' and 'civil society', which emerged during the period of questioning of the transcendental foundations of order, especially

¹ Among the earliest expressions of these concerns is the theory of a 'world civic culture' in Elise Boulding, *Building a Global Civic Culture. Education for an Interdependent World* (New York, 1988); the idea of 'global civilization' in the working paper by Richard Falk, 'Economic Dimensions of Global Civilization' (Global Civilization Project, Center for International Studies, Princeton University, 1990); the theory of the 'internationalisation' of civil society and the terms 'cosmopolitan civil society' and 'global' or 'transnational' civil society in John Keane, 'The Future of Civil Society', in Tatjana Sikosha, *The Internationalisation of Civil Society* (The Hague, 1989) and *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 135ff.; and Morten Ougaard, 'The Internationalisation of Civil Society' (Center for Udviklingsforskning, Copenhagen, June 1990). Among the first efforts to draw together this early work is Ronnie Lipschutz, 'Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society', *Millennium*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 389–420.

² Each case is cited in Aziz Choudry, 'All this 'civil society' talk takes us nowhere', <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/AZ1201A.html>, p. xxi; cf. the call for 'a new international social covenant between markets, states and civil society', in Gerhard Schröder (ed.), *Progressive Governance for the XXI Century* (München, 2002), p. xxi; 'The United Nations: Partners in Civil Society', www.un.org/partners/civil_society/home.htm; Madeleine Albright, *Focus on the Issues. Strengthening Civil Society and the Rule of Law. Excerpts of Testimony, Speeches and Remarks by US Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright* (Washington, DC, 2000).

of monarchic states claiming authority from God.³ Beyond this elementary consensus, many discrepancies and disagreements are evident. Some writers see in the idea of global civil society a way of analysing the empirical contours of past, present or emergent social relationships at the world level. Others mainly view the concept in pragmatic terms, as a guide to formulating a political strategy; still others view it as a normative ideal. In practice, these different emphases often criss-cross and complement each other. Yet since they can and do also produce divergent types of claims, it is important to distinguish among them and, as far as possible, to avoid mixing them up and producing confusion.⁴

Analytic-descriptive usages of the term ‘global civil society’ selectively name key institutions, actors and events, examine their complex dynamics and – using theoretical distinctions, empirical research and informed judgements – attempt to draw some conclusions about their origins, current development patterns and (unintended) consequences. Within such analyses – the first and second sections of this book are an example – the concept of global civil society is used to probe either the past or the present, or both past and present simultaneously. The aim of such probes is not to recommend political strategies or to pass normative judgements on the world; they rather seek an explanatory understanding of the world’s complex socio-political realities. The term global civil society also can be used as an aid to *strategic political calculation*. In this second approach, evident in this book’s treatment of global social movements, the term serves as a campaigning criterion – to establish what must be done (or what must be avoided) in order to reach goals, like freedom and justice, whose desirability is more or less presumed. Strategic uses of the term are directly concerned with political questions. They concentrate upon institutional constraints and opportunities as well as the manoeuvres of power groups and movements – upon the (potential) political gains and losses of supporters and opponents that operate from within or outside the structures of global civil society. The normative concerns that inevitably attend such ‘tactical’ approaches are treated as a given; their

³ Compare my ‘Despotism and Democracy: The Origins and Development of the Distinction Between Civil Society and the State 1750–1850’, in John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London and New York, 1988 [reprinted 1998] pp. 35–72 and Adam Seligman, ‘Civil Society as Idea and Ideal’, in Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds.), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, 2002), pp. 13–33. In my view, Seligman’s explanation of the rise of the ideal of a civil society suffers from the same weakness evident in Marxian accounts: their one-sided emphasis upon the growth of market economies and the corresponding search for a new ethical order in which individual interests could be reconciled with the public good.

⁴ The importance of distinguishing among these different usages is analysed in more detail in my introduction to *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* and *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions* (Oxford and Stanford, 1998).

main preoccupation is with the calculation of the *means* of achieving or stabilising a global civil society. Finally – as evidenced by the final section of this book – the term global civil society can be wielded as a *normative ideal*. The ethic or big idea of a global civil society is said to be warranted and plausible and desirable, and on that basis it can be used in two complementary ways: as a *precautionary* concept that serves to issue warnings about the undesirable or unworkable consequences of practical efforts to weaken or abolish the institutions of global civil society, for instance through unilateral military intervention, or the imposition of martial law. Such precautionary usages of the norm are usually reinforced by its *advocacy* function: gentle or strong efforts to explain and highlight the reasons why a global civil society, ethically speaking, is a good thing.

Empirical contours

Given the versatility of the term, which is surely one of the reasons for its rising popularity, it follows that its different usages should not be conflated, as is typically done when the words global civil society are flung about in vague, simplistic or tendentious speech. This is the point at which empirically minded researchers arrive on the scene. They point out that the quest to map and measure the contours of global civil society is essential for clarifying its empirical scope and complexity, its strategic or political capacity and its normative potential. They call upon the facts to speak for themselves. They pursue (what appears to them, anyway) a straightforward empirical approach that supposes (as the American expression has it) that if something in the world walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it is a duck. The approach points to the sketchy data that are available, thanks to the path-breaking contributions of bodies like the Union of International Associations, the *Index on Civil Society* project supported by CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation), a Ford Foundation-funded comparative study of civil society in twenty-two countries and other recent publications. These data-gathering efforts are seen to confirm the widespread impression that, during the twentieth century, the world witnessed a tectonic – perhaps two hundred-fold – increase in the number and variety of civil society organisations operating at the planetary level.⁵ Today, in addition to many hundreds of thousands

⁵ See www.ids.ac.uk; Helmut Anheier *et al.* (eds.) *Global Civil Society 2001* (Oxford, 2001); and the data covering the period 1909–7 presented in the Union of International Associations (ed.), *Yearbook of International Organizations*, 34th edn. (München, 1997–8), vol. 4, p. 559; compare René-Jean Dupuy (ed.), *Manuel sur les organisations internationales* (Dordrecht, 1998); Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In. Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (Cambridge,

of small, medium and large firms doing business across borders – a trend that is dealt with shortly in this book – there are an estimated 5,000 world congresses held annually and some 50,000 non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations operating at the global level. The numbers of these international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have grown rapidly in recent years; helped along by access to money and communications technology, many thousands have come into being since 1985. Nearly 90 per cent of them have been formed since 1970.⁶ While a disproportionate number (over one-third) have their main offices in the European Union and Switzerland, these INGOs now operate in all four corners of the earth, including sub-Saharan Africa, where hundreds of main offices are now based. INGOs employ or use volunteer labour of several millions of people: one study estimates that in Germany, France, Spain, Japan, Brazil, Argentina, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands alone, INGOs employ over 110,000 full-time equivalent workers as well as many more full-time equivalent volunteers.⁷ INGOs currently disburse more money than the United Nations (excluding the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)); more than two-thirds of the European Union's relief aid is currently channelled through them; and in many parts of the world there is a strong trend towards the disbursement of governmental funds – currently totalling \$US 7 billion per annum – more or less exclusively through INGOs.⁸

Empirical perspectives on global civil society have limitations. In spite of a growing body of data, the actual contours of global civil society remain elusive, for understandable reasons. Histories of the globalisation of civil society – studies of the rise of cross-border business, religion and sport, for instance – are in short supply.⁹ Lots of activities within this society, for instance the travel patterns of individuals, the initiatives of grass-roots groups, the loose networks of organisations and the growth

1995); Jessica T. Matthews, 'Power Shift', *Foreign Affairs*, 76: 1 (January–February 1997), pp. 50–66; and the misleadingly titled, country-by-country study by Lester M. Salamon *et al.*, *Global Civil Society. Dimensions of the Non-Profit Sector* (Baltimore, 2001).

⁶ See the country-by-country figures – covering only the numbers of secretariats of not-for-profit NGOs that operate transnationally – in Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, table R19, pp. 283–6; cf. Michael Edwards, 'Herding Cats? Civil Society and Global Governance', *New Economy* (Summer 2002).

⁷ See the figures drawn from The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-Profit Sector Project (1999), originally published as Salamon *et al.*, *Global Civil Society*, summarised in Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, table, R24, p. 302.

⁸ OECD, *Geographical Distribution of Financial Aid to Developing Countries* (Paris, 1997); compare Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, table R19, pp. 283–6.

⁹ But on these topics see, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914* (New York, 1989); Jack Beeching, *An Open Path. Christian Missionaries 1515–1914* (London, 1979); Joseph Maguire, *Global Sport. Identities, Societies, Civilizations* (Oxford, 1999); and Lincoln Allison, 'Sport and Civil Society', *Political Studies*, 46 (1998), pp. 709–6.

of public opinion across borders, are informally structured, and for that reason do not register (easily) as 'data'. Much of the data that is available is also highly imperfect.¹⁰ It presents a picture of the actually existing global civil society that is no more than a torn-edged daguerrotype. Very little reliable empirical data from the past has survived intact, or was collected in the first place – which is not surprising, considering that the concept of global civil society itself had not even been invented. This present-day bias is compounded inadvertently by other forms of bias, for instance in favour of the clusters of northern hemisphere INGOs, whose visibility is greatest because they tend to be based there; data from elsewhere, for instance that related to protests in defence of aboriginal rights or civil liberties or ecological complexity, either go unnoticed or unnoted.

Much potentially usable data on global civil society is distorted by a form of conceptual nationalism. The fact is that most systems of national accounting provide few detailed statistics on either INGOs or social movements or the economic contributions and activities of corporations with a global reach. That is why, sadly, global statistical agencies usually rely on empirical data supplied on a country-by-country basis by individual governments and nationally based organisations. Only a few organisations, for instance some agencies within the United Nations, are experienced collectors of standardised data about global *flows* of people, goods, information and services.¹¹ Even then, despite stringent efforts to collect, process and disseminate statistics on a standardised basis, huge gaps remain. Statistics on the landscapes of global poverty well exemplify these problems of coverage, comparability and reliability: about one-third of the countries of the world have either no data or inadequate data on the incidence of poverty and malnourishment, and around one-half are similarly lacking information on rates of literacy among youth.¹² Researchers also disagree about which criteria – book translations, diasporas, links among global cities, the spread of the English language, telephone traffic, geographic locations of websites, the mobility patterns of corporate nomads – are the most pertinent for picturing the complex interdependencies of the emerging global society. In-depth, qualitative accounts of global summits, forums and other eye-catching events – like the global campaign against landmines and public protests against the G7 powers – are also rare. And – despite catchy titles that imply more than

¹⁰ Some of the empirical problems are discussed in Helmut Anheier, 'Measuring Global Civil Society', in Anheier *et al.* (eds.), *Global Civil Society*, pp. 221–30.

¹¹ See the report of the OECD Development Cooperation Directorate, *Partnerships in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century* (Paris, 2001).

¹² See the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2000: Human Rights and Human Development* (New York, 2000); www.undp.org/hdr2000/english/book/back1.pdf.

they deliver¹³ – studies of the intimate details of everyday life, especially research that concentrates on the socialising and civilising effects at the global level of matters like food consumption and television news-watching, are either non-existent or confined to comparative national surveys that neglect cross-border trends.

These empirical and technical barriers to mapping and measuring global civil society are compounded by a basic epistemological difficulty. Simply put, its actors are not mute, empirical bits and bytes of data. Linked to territories but not restricted to territory, caught up in a vast variety of overlapping and interlocking institutions and webs of group affiliations, these actors talk, think, interpret, question, negotiate, comply, innovate, resist. Their recalcitrance in the face of classification is a basic feature of global civil society, which is never a fixed entity, but always a temporary assembly, subject to reshuffling and reassembly. Static measures, like the numbers of INGOs registered within a country, fail to capture many of its qualities. Dynamism is a chronic feature of global civil society: not the dynamism of the restless sea (a naturalistic simile suggested by Victor Pérez-Díaz¹⁴), but a form of self-reflexive dynamism marked by innovation, conflict, compromise, consensus, as well as rising awareness of the syncretic architecture, the contingencies and dilemmas of global civil society itself. Beck's terse formulation is correct: the emergent global civil society is not only marked by 'non-integration' and 'multiplicity without unity', but its actors treat it as 'perceived or reflexive'.¹⁵ At each moment, the threads of this civil society are deliberately spun, dropped, taken up again, altered, displaced by others, interwoven with others, then deliberately re-spun, again and again. In this way, global civil society enables its participants – athletes, campaigners, musicians, religious believers, managers, aid-workers, teleworkers, medics, scientists, journalists, academics – not only to regard this society as *theirs* but also to see through global civil society by calling it (more impersonally) *this* world or *that* world. For this reason alone, those who speak of global civil society should not lose sight of its elusive, *idealtypisch* quality. The concept of global civil society has what Wittgenstein called 'blurred edges'. This does *not* mean – *pace* Anheier and others – that the term is uniquely imprecise or 'fuzzy' because of its youth.¹⁶ Those who speak

¹³ An example is Ronald Inglehart, 'Globalization and Postmodern Values', *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2000), pp. 215–28

¹⁴ Victor M. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society. The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1993), p. 62; compare my remarks on the self-reflexivity of actually existing civil societies in *Civil Society: Old Images* pp. 49 ff.

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 10.

¹⁶ Anheier, 'Measuring Global Civil Society', p. 224.

like that unfortunately bring discredit to the term which, like all concepts in the human sciences, is an ill-fitting term clumsily in search of an intelligent object that is always a subject on the run, striding unevenly in many different directions. Anheier is correct: '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.' But the converse of Anheier's rule must also be borne in mind: the conceptual theory of global civil society is infinitely 'purer' and much more abstract than the form and content of actually existing global civil society.

An ideal-type

So the principle is clear – theories without observations are bland, observations without theories are blind – even if the task of clarifying what we mean when we speak of a global civil society is difficult. For purposes of descriptive interpretation, or so this book argues, it is best to use the concept carefully as an ideal-type – as an intentionally produced mental construct or 'cognitive type'¹⁷ that is very useful for heuristic and expository purposes, for naming and clarifying the myriad of elements of a complex social reality, even though it cannot be found in such 'pure' form anywhere within the social world itself. When the term global civil society is used in this way, as an ideal-type, it properly refers to *a dynamic non-governmental system of interconnected socio-economic institutions that straddle the whole earth, and that have complex effects that are felt in its four corners. Global civil society is neither a static object nor a fait accompli. It is an unfinished project that consists of sometimes thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks, pyramids and hub-and-spoke clusters of socio-economic institutions and actors who organise themselves across borders, with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together in new ways. These non-governmental institutions and actors tend to pluralise power and to problematise violence; consequently, their peaceful or 'civil' effects are felt everywhere, here and there, far and wide, to and from local areas, through wider regions, to the planetary level itself.*

We need to look carefully at the elements of this rather abstract definition. Considered together, *five* tightly coupled features of this global civil society mark it off as historically distinctive. To begin with, the term global civil society refers to *non-governmental* structures and activities. 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 – from Gandhi,

¹⁷ Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus. Essays on Language and Cognition* (London, 2000).

Bill Gates, Primo Levi and Martin Luther King to Bono and Aung San Suu Kyi, Bishop Ximenes Belo, Naomi Klein and al-Waleed bin Talal. It includes charities, think-tanks, prominent intellectuals (like Tu Wei-ming and Abdolkarim Soroush), campaigning and lobby groups, citizens' protests responsible for 'clusters of performances',¹⁸ small and large corporate firms, independent media, Internet groups and websites, employers' federations, trades 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, dressed in crimson robes, keeping the mind mindful. 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.

Sometimes those who use and defend the term global civil society – the World Passport initiative, for instance¹⁹ – think of it in no other way than as a synonym for an unbounded space of non-governmental institutions and actors. This rather monistic understanding has the advantage of highlighting one of its principal qualities – that it is neither an appendage nor a puppet of governmental power. Yet the price that is paid for this limited definition is high: it enables the critics of the vision of global civil society to accuse their opponents of careless blindness. These critics insist, with some justification, that the term global civil society is too often used as a residual or dustbin category that describes everything and nothing. The term is used to refer to all those parts of life that are *not* the state; it seems that it is a synonym for everything that exists outside of and beyond the reach of the territorial state and other institutions of governance – that it

¹⁸ Charles Tilly, 'From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements', in Marco Giugni *et al.* (eds.), *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis and London, 1999), p. 263.

¹⁹ www.worldservice.org/docpass.html: 'The World Passport is . . . a meaningful symbol and sometimes powerful tool for the implementation of the fundamental human right of freedom of travel. By its very existence, it challenges the exclusive assumption of sovereignty of the nation-state system.'

includes not only businesses and not-for-profit organisations and initiatives, but ‘mafias, extremist networks of various kinds, and terrorists’.²⁰ The picture presented by the critics is overdrawn, even inaccurate, for global civil society, when carefully defined, is not a simple-minded *alter ego* of ‘the state’. The truth is that in a descriptive sense global civil society is only *one* special set of ‘non-state’ institutions. Hunting and gathering societies and tribal orders, insofar as they have survived under modern conditions, comprise ‘non-state’ institutions, but it would be wrong to describe them as ‘civil society’ orders. The same point applies to mafias and mafia-dominated structures, which have *destructive* effects upon civil society institutions precisely because *mafiosi* rely upon kinship bonds, blood imagery, violence and intrigue to *dissolve* the boundaries between the governmental and civilian domains.²¹ The same point can be put in another way: global civil society is indeed an extra-governmental space, but it is much more than that. It is defined by other qualities that beg us to see it with different eyes . . .

To say that global civil society is not merely a non-governmental phenomenon, for instance, is to confirm – this is its second feature – that it is also a form of *society*. Global civil society is a dynamic ensemble of more or less tightly interlinked *social* processes.²² The quest to unlock its secrets cannot be pursued through the biological or mechanical sciences, for this emergent social order is neither an organism nor a mechanism. It is not a thing that grows according to the blind logic of dividing cells, untouched by human judgement and human will, by recursive reflection and self-generated learning; global civil society is also not a piece of machinery which can be assembled and re-assembled according to human design. The processes and methods through which it is produced and reproduced are unique.

So what does it mean then to speak of global civil *society*? The word ‘society’ is one of those household concepts that help us economise on lengthy and pedantic explanations – by hiding away or setting aside their complicated (sometimes self-contradictory) genealogy. The concept of society certainly has a complicated history, with two distinct and tensely related connotations. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

²⁰ Barry Buzan, ‘An English School Perspective on Global Civil Society’, unpublished paper (Centre for the Study of Democracy, 17 January 2002), p. 1; cf. p. 3: ‘In descriptive mode, civil society = non-state, and therefore includes mafias, pornography merchants, terrorists and a host of other dark side entities as well as the nicer side of civil society represented by humanitarian, animal welfare and humanitarian organizations.’

²¹ Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Oxford 2001), chapter 5.

²² On the sociological concept of ‘society’, see Claus Offe, ‘Is There, or Can There Be, a “European Society”?’ in John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives* (London, 2004), forthcoming.

especially in the Atlantic region, the term came to be used as a signifier of a whole totality of interrelated processes and events, stretching from (and including) households to governmental institutions. This understanding of 'society' as a whole way of life, as a 'social organism, a holistic system of social relations, the social formation' (Lenin), can be thought of as a depoliticised, less normative version of the much older, early modern idea of a Civill Society, which referred to a well-governed, legally ordered whole way of life. Both usages of 'society' differ from a second, originally medieval meaning of the term: society as a particular fellowship or partnership of equals. St Augustine's description of the Church as the true 'society of the Father and the Son', identical neither with the City of Man nor with the City of God, pointed in this direction. 'Society' means sociable interaction at a distance from government and law. Vocational fellowships and commercial partnerships, the Dutch *matshappeij*, the German *Gesellschaft*, the English 'Societie of Saynt George' (1548) and the Anti-Slavery Society, or today's Society of Authors or the Society of Black Lawyers, all fall in this category. So do eighteenth-century references to the style-setting circles of the upper class, *le Monde*, or what the Germans called 'Die Sozietät', the same group described in Byron's *Don Juan*: 'Society is now one polished horde, Formed of two mighty tribes, the Bores and the Bored.'

We can say that global civil *society* means something quite different from these older usages, to which it is nevertheless genealogically related. 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. Global civil society is a highly complex ensemble of differently sized, overlapping forms of structured social action; like a Tolstoy novel, it is a vast scenario in which hundreds of thousands and millions of individual and group adventures unfold, sometimes harmoniously through cooperation and compromise, and sometimes conflictually. The key point is that General Motors plus Amnesty International plus the Ruckus Society plus DAWN (Development Alternatives With Women for a New Era) does not equal global civil society. Its social dynamics are more intricate, more dynamic, and more interesting than that.

Like all societies in the strict sense, it has a marked life or momentum or power of its own. Its institutions and rules have a definite durability, in that at least some of them can and do persist through long cycles of

time. Global civil society, as we shall see in the coming pages, has much older roots. Most non-European civilisations have made contributions to it, and the effects upon our own times of early modern European developments – the ground-breaking pacifist tradition²³ and the growth spurt of globalisation during the half-century before the First World War – are easily observed. The institutions of present-day global civil society, like those of any functioning society, both predate the living and outlive the life-span of this society's individual members, every one of whom is shaped and carried along in life by the social customs and *traditions* of this global society. In various ways, the social actors of global civil society are both constrained and empowered by this society. These actors are enmeshed within codes of unwritten and written rules that both enable and restrict their action-in-the-world; they understand that many things are possible, but that not everything goes, that some things are desirable, and that some things are not possible, or that they are forbidden. Within global civil society – which is only one particular form of society – social actors' involvement in institutions obliges them to refrain from certain actions, as well as to observe certain *norms*, for instance those that define what counts as civility.

Civility – respect for others expressed as politeness towards and acceptance of strangers – is a third quality of this global society. Different civilisations entertain different notions of civility – they each make civil persons, as John Ruskin said – but because our world is comprised of intermingling civilisations that are not in any sense self-contained or 'pure',²⁴ global civil society is a space inhabited by various overlapping norms of *non-violent* politeness covering matters of indirection, self-restraint and face-saving. This society is a complex and multi-dimensional space of non-violence, even if it is not an irenic paradise on earth. On the outskirts of global civil society, and within its nooks and crannies, dastardly things go on, certainly. It provides convenient hideouts for gangsters, war criminals, arms traders and terrorists.²⁵ It contains pockets of *incivility* – geographic areas that coexist uneasily with 'safe' and highly 'civil' zones, dangerous areas like the Strasbourg district of Neuhof, with its crumbling buildings, walls splattered with graffiti and streets littered with car wrecks; the Los Angeles suburb of South Central, considered

²³ A good discussion of the long-term impact of the world's first peace movement, which appeared during the 1790s, as a reaction against the French wars, is Martin Ceadl, *The Origins of War Prevention. The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford, 1996).

²⁴ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of Our Last Thousand Years* (London, 1995), chapter 1 and *Civilizations* (London, 2000).

²⁵ See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, 2000).

by many a 'no-go area' whose night streets are owned by black, Latino and Asian gangs; and whole cities like Ahmadabad in Gujarat, where in early 2002 many hundreds of people, mainly Muslims, were killed and wounded by semi-planned rioting, sabotage and ethnic cleansing, helped by local police with blind eyes. The spaces of freedom within global civil society also enable individuals and groups to network, in the form of criminal gangs that run world-wide industries. An example is the sale and sex trafficking of young girls and boys – an industry that is now contested by both governments (as in the 1996 Stockholm declaration of 122 countries against all forms of child sexual exploitation) and social campaign networks, like Plan International and End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking. These social initiatives specialise in repairing the torn fabric of global civil society. They organise against harmful prejudices (for instance, the belief that sleeping with a child can give protection against, or even cure HIV infection). They press political authorities to engage in legal and policing reforms which serve to restrict access to predator groups like tourists, businessmen and soldiers on overseas duty. These initiatives also dig away at the root causes of child prostitution: the enforced sale of children by families suffering pauperisation and the orphaning of children by the upheavals caused by war and the AIDS epidemic.²⁶

In the wider schema of things, such initiatives provide the reminder – analysed in the third section of the book – that global civil society is marked by a strong and overriding tendency to both marginalise or avoid the use of violence and to take pleasure in violence. Its actors do not especially like mortars or tanks or nuclear weapons. They have an allergic – sometimes disgusted – reaction to images of gunmen firing rockets, or to supersonic fighter planes, or to tanks crashing mercilessly into people or buildings. The actors of global civil society, in their own and varied ways, admire the peaceful. Some do so after witnessing or suffering violence. Others believe that the peaceful right to have rights is fundamental to all human beings. Still others are disgusted by violence because of their belief in a peaceful and loving God, or their attempts to live the principle of Karma. All of them more or less observe the rule that non-violent respect for others overrides any considerations of their national identity or skin colour or religion or sex, or that murder and other forms of violence against others is undesirable, and should be minimised, or strictly prohibited. Thanks to such shared norms, the participants within this society are prone to exercise physical restraint, to mix non-violently with

²⁶ See www.ecpat.net/eng/index.asp; and Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago and London, 2001).

others, ‘foreigners’ and ‘strangers’ included. Normatively speaking, the killing rituals of hunting and gathering orders, or tribal violence, or mafia thuggery tend to have no place within this society. Its extra-governmental institutions and forms of action are marked by a proclivity towards non-violence and respect for the principles of compromise, mutual respect, even power-sharing among different ways of life. 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. There is (to speak literally and metaphorically) plenty of room within its walls for people who believe in God, as well as for religious people for whom the idea of a creator God is anathema, as well as for people who feel only diffuse respect for the sacred, as well as for people who believe in nothing else except themselves. Insofar as these various actors have a more or less deep sensitivity towards violence and violence-prone institutions, they enable global civil society to be ‘civil’ in a double sense: it consists of non-governmental (or ‘civilian’) institutions that tend to have non-violent (or ‘civil’) effects.

Precisely because global civil society harbours many ways of life it means many different things to those who live their lives within its structures. This is its fourth quality: it contains both strong traces of *pluralism* – and *strong conflict potential*. Within its economic domains – as the second section of the book explains – this society sustains the livelihoods of many hundreds of millions of people. It is a dynamic source of technological innovation, capital investment, production, distribution and consumption stretched across vast distances. It is home to businesses of all shapes and sizes, ranging from the self-employed importer of goods produced on the other side of earth to retail companies like Sears Roebuck, whose annual sales of commodities produced in more than a hundred countries are comparable to the total annual income of the 100 million citizens of one state alone, Bangla Desh. None of this economic activity could take place unless the institutions of global civil society performed other, non-economic functions: like that of providing social ‘homes’ or ‘nests’ within which individuals and groups fashion and re-fashion their identities, familiarise and make sense of each other, find meanings in life, get their bearings through activities that cross borders, which are seen as bridges rather than as places where wars start or trouble begins.

The cross-border links and activities also help to draw boundaries between themselves and governmental power, for instance by pressuring and bouncing off territorial states and their sub-units, as well as regional and supranational government bodies. To speak (as some do) of a ‘world order’ or ‘one world’ or ‘a global community’ is misleading: the world is in

fact sub-divided in two basic ways by the emergent global society. First, its civilian institutions place limits upon government. They guarantee power-sharing by ensuring that cross-border contests with governmental power become commonplace. Global civil society serves as a brake or potential check upon various forms of government, and especially absolutist political rule. *All* governmental institutions, from local councils through territorial states and regional and supranational institutions like the United Nations and the WTO, are now feeling the pinching effects of this civil society. Meanwhile – secondly – scuffles and skirmishes over the distribution of socio-economic power also regularly take place *within* global civil society itself. These contests typically become visible through media coverage, which attracts witnesses to both local and world-wide disputes concerning who gets what, when and how. In this way, global civil society functions as a monitoring and signalling platform, from which both local matters – mimicking the ‘butterfly effect’ that has been held responsible for fluctuations in whole weather patterns – can assume global importance, and global-level problems (like nuclear weapons, terrorism, the environment) are named, defined and problematised. A sense of ‘the world’ and ‘humanity’ as complex and vulnerable totalities consequently strengthens. Global civil society – contrary to its communitarian interpreters – does not resemble a ‘global community’.²⁷ For its participants, rather, this society nurtures a culture of self-awareness about the hybridity and complexity of the world.

The heterogeneity of global civil society works against enforced unity. It throws into question presumptions about spontaneous sympathy and automatic consensus.²⁸ It heaps doubt upon claims (famously associated with Seneca) that all human beings are ‘social animals’,²⁹ or that they stand firm upon some bedrock of essential ‘humanity’. This complex society is not a space wherein people naturally touch and feel good about the world. Certainly that happens. Dressed in the clothing of honest pilgrims, young people take time off, travel the world, odd-job, sleep rough, sleep around, wonder and marvel at the complexity and beauty of the world, just like a satisfied botanist observing and contemplating the extraordinary complexity of plant life. Others meanwhile dedicate their lives to charitable or volunteer work by putting their minds and hearts to work with others. They speak of compassion, and practise it. Yet despite all this, the world of global civil society can be tough, calculating

²⁷ Amitai Etzioni, Implications of the American Anti-Terrorism Coalition for Global Architectures, *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1 (July 2002), 9–30.

²⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption. Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (London, 1999), chapter 13.

²⁹ Seneca, *De Beneficiis* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1935), book 7, section 1.

and rough n tumble. It looks and feels expansive and polyarchic, full of horizontal push and pull, vertical conflict and compromise. Take a stroll through the heart of Riyadh, a city of astonishing contrasts between ancient social customs and ultra-modern norms: women shrouded in black *abayas* shop at Harvey Nichols inside a Norman Foster building, their eyes fully covered; the street corner McDonald's close five times a day for prayers; men crowd into mosques surrounded by giant neon signs advertising Sony. Global civil society – to use a term of psychoanalysis – is richly conflicted. That fact helps many participants within this society to know and to understand that it is neither self-reproducing nor spontaneously self-regulating. They are more or less reflexively aware of its *contingency*. They sense that its dynamic structures and rules and various identities – even supposedly ‘ascriptive’ primary groups like kinship ties – are not somehow naturally given, for all time; they see that they are subject to strenuous negotiation and modification, through complex processes – parallel summits, blockades, media events, for instance – whose consequences are often better understood after the fact, with hindsight. This shared sense of contingency defies presumptions about the ‘natural sociability of humans’.³⁰ It also feeds social conflict, thus ensuring that global civil society stands precariously between the boundaries of orderly equilibrium and disorder at the edge of chaos.

The volume of this worldly self-awareness of the complexity of the world, should not be exaggerated. It is hard to estimate its extent, but probably only 5 per cent of the world's population has an acute awareness of the tightening interdependence of the world, its ecosystems, institutions and peoples. Perhaps another 25 per cent are moderately or dimly aware of this interdependence.³¹ While most others have not (yet) thought over the matter, or don't much care, or are too cynical or self-preoccupied to open their eyes and ears, the aggregate numbers of those who are globally aware are weighty enough to spread awareness that global civil society exists; that it is a force to be reckoned with; that it both operates within, and resembles, a patchwork quilt of power relations. Global civil

³⁰ Buzan, ‘An English School Perspective’, p. 3.

³¹ Data generated by recent World Values Surveys suggests that ‘almost one-fifth of the baby boomers born after World War II see themselves as cosmopolitan citizens of the globe, identifying with their continent or the world as a whole, but this is true of only one in ten of the group brought up in the interwar years, and of even fewer of the prewar generation’; see Pippa Norris, ‘Global Governance and Cosmopolitan Citizens’, in Joseph S. Nye and John D. Donahue (eds.), *Governance in a Globalizing World* (Cambridge, MA and Washington, DC, 2000), p. 175. From a global civil society perspective, the concept of ‘cosmopolitan citizens’ is unfortunate, if only because awareness of the *interdependence* of the world is both more subtle and different than positive ‘identification’ with one's own ‘continent’ or ‘the world’.

society is most definitely riddled with power relations.³² Its social groups and organisations and movements lobby states, bargain with international organisations, pressure and bounce off other non-state bodies, invest in new forms of production, champion different ways of life and engage in charitable direct action in distant local communities, for instance through ‘capacity-building’ programmes that supply jobs, clean running water, sporting facilities, hospitals and schools. In these various ways, the members of global civil society help to conserve or to alter the power relations embedded in the chains of interaction linking the local, regional and planetary orders. Their cross-border links and networks help to define and redefine who gets what, when, and how in the world. 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, whose complexity is riddled with opportunity, as well as danger.

To say this is to note – this fifth point is obvious, but most crucial – that global civil society is *global*. To speak of a *global* civil society is to refer to politically framed and circumscribed social relations that stretch across and underneath state boundaries and other governmental forms. This ‘macro-society’ or ‘society of interlocking societies’ consists of a myriad of social interactions stretched across vast geographic distances. Global civil society is the most complex society in the history of the human species. It comprises a multitude of different parts, which are connected in a multitude of different ways. These diverse components interact both serially and in parallel, and they produce effects that are often both simultaneous and sequential. These effects, while normally generated by local interactions and events, have emergent properties that tend to be global. We are not exactly speaking here of a ‘vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth’ (Wordsworth³³) – global civil society is neither a new form of empire nor encompassing of the whole earth³⁴ – but it certainly is a special form of *unbounded* society marked by constant feedback among its many components.

³² On the concept of power and its wide variety of forms, see my *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* (London and New York, 1999).

³³ From William Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems* (2nd edn., London, 1800).

³⁴ Compare the claim that there is a spreading new form of empire – a ‘global society of control’ – ruled by global capital in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2000), esp. pp. 325–50.

Global civil society can be likened – to draw for a moment upon ecological similes – to a vast, dynamic biosphere. It comprises a bewildering variety of interacting habitats and species: INGOs, voluntary groups, businesses, civic initiatives, social movements, protest organisations, whole nations, ethnic and linguistic clusters, pyramids and networks. To compare this society with a vast biosphere that stretches to every corner of the earth is to underscore both the great complexity of its linkages and (as we shall see) its vulnerability to internal and external interference. Just as nearly every part of the Earth, from the highest mountains to the deepest seas, supports life, so too global civil society is now found on virtually every part of the earth's surface. To be sure, everywhere it is tissue-thin – just like the natural biosphere, which resembles a paper wrapping that covers a sphere the size of a football – and its fringes, where ice and permafrost predominate, are virtually inhospitable. In the interior of the Antarctic, only restricted populations of bacteria and insects are to be found; and even on its coasts there are very few living inhabitants, among which are a handful of flowering plant species, as well as seals, whales, penguins and other birds. Global civil society is similarly subject to geographic limits: whole zones of the earth, parts of contemporary Afghanistan, Burma, Chechenya and Sierra Leone for instance, are 'no-go areas' for civil society actors and institutions, which can survive only by going underground, living in microniches, like the tens of millions of little invertebrates that run the biosphere.³⁵

But in those areas of the earth where it does exist, global civil society comprises many biomes – whole areas (like North America and the European Union and parts of the Muslim world) characterised by specific animals and plants and climatic conditions. Each biome in turn comprises large numbers of living ecosystems made up of clusters of organisms living within a non-living physical environment of rocks, soil and climate. These ecosystems of global civil society – cities, business corridors and regions for instance – are interconnected. And they are more or less intricately balanced, through continuous flows and recycling of efforts among (as it were) populations of individuals of the same species, which thrive within communities (such as smaller cities) that are themselves embedded within non-living geographic contexts.

Biospheric similes are helpful in picturing the cross-border contours of global civil society, but they should not be overextended, if only because this society is not simply a *naturally occurring* phenomenon. Although it is embedded within a terrestrial biosphere – it is the first-ever planetary

³⁵ See Edward O. Wilson, 'The Little Things that Run the World', in Edward O. Wilson, *In Search of Nature* (Washington, DC, 1996), pp. 141–5.

order to understand itself as precarious, as *naturally* embedded – global civil society is *socially produced*. Its intricate social linkages stretched across vast distances are puzzling, indeed so difficult to grasp that new metaphors are urgently needed to help us to picture and understand them. Perhaps (to take an example) it is better to liken this society to the tens and hundreds of thousands of ‘nested systems within nested systems’ described in certain versions of complexity theory.³⁶ Certainly, this global society is both integrated and de-centred. It draws upon and is sustained by many different actually existing societies, whose members regularly interact and/or feel the effects of others’ actions across political boundaries. These effects are not due to proximity alone; they are felt at great distances, usually by social actors who have no direct contact with one another, and who are otherwise fated to remain ‘strangers’ to one another.

The complexity and interdependence of the linkages is staggering, and striking as well is their combined effect, which is to ‘socialise’ actors in ways that ‘thicken’ or increase the density of social interactions across political borders. Consider one example: the luxuriant variety of languages spoken within global civil society. While today’s 6,000 languages are rapidly disappearing, one by one, on average every two weeks, many of them still spawn pidgins (rudimentary languages concocted to facilitate communication among speakers of mutually unintelligible tongues) that sometimes mutate into Creoles (pidgins that have matured into the first language of a community). Meanwhile, global efforts to revive dying or dead languages, such as Ainu in Japan and Romansch in Switzerland, are underway. Strong resistance to extinction is also evident in the fact that the remaining top twenty languages that are today spoken by over 95 per cent of the world’s population are deeply resilient; they are highly complex clusters of intermingling sub-languages and dialect families. None of them is ‘pure’ – 99 per cent of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are of foreign descent – and all of them are split into sub-varieties that are constantly subject to further hybridisation.³⁷ Or consider one other example: the rapidly increasing mobility of people across borders in recent decades, especially into and out of rich countries (nearly 90 million people enter Britain annually, for instance). The trend has many faces: it includes the influx of visitors, working migrants and their households, refugees and asylum seekers, all of whom have made many so-called ‘national’ societies both much more heterogeneous and other-regarding. Cultural minorities are no longer easily assimilated, partly because of the

³⁶ The vast literature includes David Bohm and F. David Peat, *Science, Order, and Creativity* (London, 2000) and John Briggs and F. David Peat, *Turbulent Mirror* (New York, 1990).

³⁷ John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel. A Natural History of Language* (London, 2002).

speed and volume of migration, but also because of their socially diverse origins and the ease with which they remain in contact with their society of origin. Many countries consequently contain whole categories of people who can be described as ‘denizens’ (Tomas Hammar), people who are foreign citizens enjoying permanent legal resident status, or as ‘margizens’, long-term immigrants who lack secure residence status: illegal workers, unauthorised family entrants, asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers who have not (yet) been deported, and temporary workers who are in fact permanently integrated into the workforce.³⁸

Old habits

Defined in this way, as a vast, interconnected and multi-layered non-governmental space that comprises many hundreds of thousands of self-directing institutions and ways of life that generate global effects, the ideal-type concept of global civil society invites us to improve our understanding of the emerging planetary order. It calls on us to think more deeply about it, in the hope that we can strengthen our collective powers of guiding and transforming it. This clearly requires sharpening up our courage to confront the unknown and to imagine different futures.³⁹ And it most definitely obliges us to abandon some worn-out certainties and outdated prejudices. Let us dwell for a moment on what the new understanding of global civil society obliges us to give up.

The words ‘global civil society’ may be said to resemble signs that fix our thoughts on winding pathways that stretch not only in front of us, but also behind us. To utter the words ‘global civil society’, for instance, is to sup with the dead, with an early modern world in which, among the educated classes of Europe, ‘world civil society’ meant something quite different than what it means, or ought to mean, today. Just how different our times are can be seen by revisiting this older, exhausted meaning of ‘world civil society’.

Consider the works of two influential authors of the eighteenth century: Emmerich de Vattel’s *Le droit des gens* (1758) and Immanuel Kant’s *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784) and *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795).⁴⁰ These books stand at the end phase of a long

³⁸ Stephen Castles and Alistair Davidson, *Citizenship and Migration. Globalization and the Politics of Belonging* (Basingstoke, 2000).

³⁹ A stimulating example of such rethinking that is guided by the idea of a global civil society is Michael Edwards, *Future Positive. International Co-Operation in the 21st Century* (London, 2000).

⁴⁰ Emmerich de Vattel, *Le droit des gens, ou principes de la loi naturelle, appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des nations et des souverains* (London, 1758); Immanuel Kant, *Idee*