Global civil society –
beyond the “good” and the “bad”

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What is global civil society? And what is the meaning of global civil society? A few years ago, there was a debate on whether a global civil society existed or not. Today, few people doubt the existence of a global political space, and research on “global civil society” has emerged as a sub-field of study in the broader context of globalisation theory and research. The London School of Economics has published the Global Civil Society Yearbook since 2001, and quite a few books and articles have engaged theoretically as well as empirically with the subject. There are, however, a number of different and conflicting perspectives on what global civil society is, and what role, or which roles, it plays in world politics. Further, whether you look at public or academic debates, you will most certainly find that the concept has quite strong normative connotations.

Let us just provide two contrasting contemporary images. First, when googling on “global civil society” and “Egypt,” we found the following text, published on a number of websites on 3 February 2011:

EGYPT: Global civil society condemns abuses, calls for democratic reform and election

A Joint Statement by global civil society actors, 1 February, 2011

We, civil society organizations from across the world, strongly urge all governments, as well as regional and international organizations, to clearly and unequivocally denounce the ongoing violent crackdown against the public protests and demands for democratic reform and government accountability that have been occurring across Egypt since the 25th of January.
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Second, at about the same time, we saw an article in *Southern Africa* (Södra Afrika), a magazine published by the Africa Groups of Sweden, one of Sweden’s most important solidarity movement organisations, with the title “Civil society is evil.” It was written by a South African human rights activist, who argued that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are part of the neo-colonial, socio-political process in Africa.

Contrasting perceptions of the “good” versus the “bad” global civil society have also been present in academic debates. On the one hand, the more celebratory works link global civil society to global democratisation. According to this perspective, the emerging global civil society represents a forceful and promising response to the “democratic deficit,” which is one of the most problematic aspects of the globalisation process. Global civil society is here conceived as grassroots self-organisation of transnational social spaces. Civic actors are seen as potential carriers of democratic learning processes, widening the meaning and practice of democracy beyond the nation state; they further initiate public debates – through which marginalised issues and social groups are made visible globally – and function as guardians of human rights in relation to states and other powerful organisations, such as transnational corporations.

There is indeed evidence to support such an argument; the recent revolutions in Northern Africa being the most obvious at the moment. You may object that these are *national* mobilisations, but I think that those who have argued that the crucial role of transnational political communication via the Internet, for the speed and intensity with which these protests have diffused, do have an important point.

On the other hand, there is in academic debates also a critique of the growing importance of civil society actors globally, often coming from the perspective of the global South. It is argued that global civil society actors are instruments in a neo-colonial exercise of power over countries and peoples in the global South. The most striking examples put forth are related to the aid industry, where NGOs channel private or government funding, which arrives with particular conditions that impose certain Western values, or serves certain Northern economic or political interests. There is indeed substantial support also for such a view, considering that
institutions such as the World Bank, aid agencies, “development NGOs,” and private foundations use “civil society” as part of a reformulation of North/South power relations in the context of development aid.

A way to get beyond these rather polarised academic and public debates is to conceptualise global civil society in analytical terms as a political space, in which a diversity of political experiences, action strategies, identities, values and norms are articulated and contested; a space of struggle and conflict over the values, norms and rules that govern global social space(s) – and ultimately over the control of material resources and institutions. Whether global civil society means increasing democratisation or colonisation then becomes empirical questions, to which the answers largely depend on the context.

In this volume, we provide a rich range of analyses of social movements and various forms of civil associations in the context of contemporary globalisation. The key focus is on relations of power and influence within global civil society, and vis-à-vis states and international institutions. Of particularly importance is, of course, the global North/South divide, but also other power hierarchies stand out.

In her article, Jackie Smith describes the ongoing process whereby civil society actors across the world engage on global arenas to share experiences and formulate global norms, as well as developing the means for transnational collaboration. Thereby, she argues, transnational activism has influenced the governance of international institutions, pushing norms and policies towards greater protection of, for example, human rights. This global exchange has also influenced local level politics. The articles of three thematic sections of the volume address how social movements, trade unions, and diasporic communities, respectively, find political leverage by using transnational networks for support, enabling them to exert increased pressure on governments and corporations. The authors also show how transnational connections within civil society channel experiences and political influence, sometimes transforming relations of power in respective countries.

However, the unequal access to power and resources between different social organisations make local organisations – engaged in struggles in dire
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need for outside support – highly dependent on the priorities of more resourceful counterparts. This dilemma is particularly addressed in the article by Clifford Bob, where he explores what local organisations receive support – political or economic – and by whom. And just as important, he asks, who is not supported – and why?

A significant topic in the volume concerns the relations between global civil society and large multilateral institutions such as the UN. These shifting relations display the tensions between on the one hand neo-liberal celebrations of the role of civil society, such as for example in World Bank documents, and on the other hand more radical expressions of civil society activism. Both Jackie Smith and James Paul describe how the intense exchange between civil society organizations and the UN, culminating in the 1990s in the various global UN conferences, today has drastically diminished. The UN has closed various doors for NGO participation, while many social movements, in turn, prefer more autonomous spaces, such as the World Social Forums.

Another issue is the role of civil society within the “aid industry”; international development cooperation. Tony Tujuan describes how civil society organisations engaged in this sphere struggle to promote human rights and the concerns for the people targeted in the programs. Dealing with the highly unequal relationship between donors and developing countries, and with the conditionalities tied to the aid, civil society organisations strive to address, and even counter, this imbalance. As shown in the articles by Karin Fällman and Lisa Sjöblom, there are unequal relations of power also between civil society organisations involved in development cooperation, for example within the context of the Paris Declaration. These differences are found between international NGOs and national organisations, or between urban, professionalised NGOs and small, community-based organisations. Although the “stronger” counterparts can offer means to voice and influence, the imbalance in power affects who sets the term for cooperation.

Of outmost importance, of course, is how states, international institutions, and market actors affect the space on which civil society organisations can act. The present dominance of Western liberal and neoliberal modes of governance has created a specific kind of framework for civil
society. In her article, Jude Howell describes how this framework changed with the War on Terror, which sometimes drastically limits the operational space and autonomy of civil society organisations. Furthermore, Howell argues, the scene will be affected by the rise of China, as one of the BRICS countries; Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. China particularly, she holds, has different conceptions of the role of civil society, and is unlikely to support the presence of outspoken and independent social organisations. The emerging influence of the BRICS is also addressed by the articles in one thematic section in the volume, providing empiric examples of the changing scenery.

Importantly, however, the rise of the BRICS also implies an interesting challenge to present Western dominance in the relations between states as well as between civil society organisations. In Brazil, India and South Africa, there is a vibrant multitude of actors within civil society, that already voice criticism against the agenda-setting of the Global North. If these continue to gain force while protecting their independence, global civil society may in the future look quite different from today.

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