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Making Sense of Global Civil Society

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This article purports to explain why the concept of global civil society recently has attracted so much interest within academic and political discourse. Given the ambiguity and apparent incoherence of this concept, its centrality within contemporary International Relations and political theory is puzzling. The article argues that once we pay attention to the function of the concept of domestic civil society within different historical contexts, we are better able to understand the logic governing the usage of global civil society as well. Much like its domestic antecedents, theories of global civil society provide answers to the question of how to govern effectively, in this case by constituting the global realm as a sphere of governmental activity, as well as by justifying the exercise of authority within this emergent sphere. The article concludes by discussing the ethical implications of the concept of global civil society, disputing its emancipatory potential.

KEY WORDS ♦ authority ♦ global civil society ♦ globalization ♦ governmentality ♦ legitimacy

In times of confusion, our will to understand the world blends naturally with our desire to feel at home within it. In such times, we sometimes struggle so hard to make sense of the world that we forget that the senses we make change this world in unexpected ways. And as a result, we frequently end up falling prey to the very same alienating forces we so dearly want to escape. This, I shall contend, is the case in our present world, in which some authors have suggested that the concept of *global civil society* will satisfy those needs for knowledge and belonging, while being largely oblivious to its rhetorical effects and philosophical implications. To these authors, a global civil society simply is necessary, if our most cherished liberal democratic values are going to stand a chance against the threats posed by power politics and war (Lipschutz, 1992; Kaldor, 1998, 2003), or by global concentrations of

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wealth and power (Falk, 1993; Walzer, 1995b). Yet despite the fact that there is no clear definition of the term 'global civil society', these scholars are convinced that such a global civil society nevertheless does exist in a sufficiently robust way to make further empirical analysis and ethical deliberation meaningful (Köhler, 1998; Anheier et al., 2001; Keane, 2001, 2003; Glasius and Kaldor, 2003).

This has resulted in a situation in which no one seems to know exactly *what* global civil society is, only *that* it is. This concern with global civil society looks even more puzzling given the apparent mismatch between the statist associations of the concept and its central role in globalist rhetoric. Given the prehistory of this concept, it seems hard to make coherent sense of global civil society without invoking some kind of centralized governmental authority from which it supposedly is distinct. It could therefore be argued that the concept of global civil society is disqualified from the kind of vocabulary we need in order to make sense of the transition into the new and stateless world envisioned by globalists. But the adherents of global civil society have largely been immune to such objections. The fact remains that the concept of global civil society is still widely understood to be a potent vehicle of change *away* from the present system of nation states, as well as descriptive of the new social reality that ultimately will replace that system (Held, 1995: 267–83; Scholte, 2000: 277–80). But *why* does such an ambiguous and apparently incoherent concept occupy such a central place in contemporary academic and political discourse?

1.

This is the question I would like to engage in this article. As I shall argue, given the prehistory of the concept of global civil society, none of the ambiguity and incoherence is that puzzling. What initially looks like an incoherent blend of statist and globalist connotations will make more sense once we pay attention to the changing historical contexts in which different notions of civil society have been articulated. I would therefore like to suggest that the concept of global civil society should be understood in terms of its *rhetorical function* rather than primarily in terms of its theoretical meaning within academic International Relations and political theory (Skinner, 2002: 103–27). Rather than asking what the concept of global civil society might mean and what kind of institutions and practices it might refer to, we should ask what is *done* by means of it — what kind of world is constituted, and what kind of beliefs, institutions and practices can be justified, through the usage of this concept? Here my basic contention is quite simple. Theories of global civil society perform similar functions in the world polity as did theories of *domestic* civil society within distinct national

polities. Such theories provided answers to the perennial question of how to govern effectively. As such, theories of civil society represent a governmentality, if by that term we mean clusters of answers to such questions (Dean, 1999: 16–29). In our particular case, theories of a global civil society take the proper scope of government to be global in character. Their primary function is to constitute the global as a political space, and their secondary function is to turn that global space into a governable realm by justifying the exercise of authority within it. This double-barrelled hypothesis deserves some elaboration.

First, while similar suggestions about the constitutive function of the concept of global civil society have been made by Amoore and Langley (2004) and Drainville (1998, 2004), these scholars have not noticed the essential historical continuity between the different governmentalities of global civil society and domestic civil society. I shall therefore emphasize this historical continuity, by arguing that the transition from the domestic to the global sphere represents a wholesale transformation of the art of government — *that of its eventual globalization*. This implies that the art of government now for the first time hypothetically can be exercised on a planetary scale, *and that questions of governance now can be formulated (and answered) as if the world were one polity lacking a common government*. In this important transition, the concept of global civil society functions very much like a conveyor belt. It introduces a discontinuity between the past and the present which it then purports to bridge. It then takes us on a ride from the past into the future by linking cosy connotations from the past experience of statehood — such as civility — with rosy expectations for the future, focused on the emancipating potentials of globalization (compare Hutchings, 2005). In the meantime, we are encouraged to believe that the less commendable practices of statecraft eventually have been left behind.

Second, while others (Lipschutz, 2005) have emphasized the regulatory potentials of global civil society, they have failed to make sense of the justificatory function performed by *theories* of global civil society. To my mind, theories of global civil society can be interpreted as responses to the problem of governance without government in International Relations (Rosenau and Czempel 1992). What makes the concept of global civil society attractive in this context is the fact that it can be used to justify institutions of global governance (compare Zürn, 2000). In this context, the concept of a global civil society might provide a shorthand response to the problem of democratic legitimacy (compare Risse, 2006). But as Hurd (1999) has argued, legitimacy implies some kind of prior authority, and all such authority in turn ultimately depends on the possibility of justification. It is thus possible to argue that *the concept of global civil society can be used to justify the exercise of governmental authority within an emergent world*

polity to the extent that it provides a substitute for a truly transnational demos. The concept of global civil society thus furnishes the conceptual raw material out of which accounts of input legitimacy then can be tailored to fit more specific institutional requirements. If this is true, this would also imply that the legitimacy of the institutions of global governance might derive from successful acts of rhetoric and the creation of founding myths like this, rather than being based 'exclusively on the sober power of reason and good arguments' (Steffek, 2003: 271).

Whether this is the case in practice is an empirical question beyond the scope of the present article. Yet as I intend to show, the seed values of such legitimization are already present in the dialectic twisting of the separation between the domestic and the international spheres that theories of global civil society bring about. While the concept of global civil society supposedly refers to a world in which this distinction has ceased to make sense, it is also posited as the very means for pushing the world towards this end. Hence, the concept of global civil society is expressive of, as well as instrumental to, the constitution of itself. There is a *prophetic* dimension to this concept, since most definitions assume a global realm to be both the outcome and the target of governmental activity. To put it more bluntly, global civil society seems to have been studied into existence by scholars who self-consciously have blended analytical and normative concerns in order to justify *their* particular vision of a global community.

Now the above claims have some disturbing ethical implications. Global civil society is frequently defined as a locus of resistance against global concentrations of wealth and power, as well as an alternative to the practices of power politics between or within states. Yet if global civil society indeed is a correlate of an emergent global governmentality, its emancipating potentials might be illusory. Following this line of reasoning, when people are using the concept of global civil society in order to justify their resistance to what appears to be illegitimate power and unbridled global capitalism, they are in fact contributing to the reproduction of a social reality very different from that actually described by that concept. According to the logic of governmentality, the belief in the social reality of global civil society and its relative autonomy from governments and markets is a necessary condition for the smooth functioning of both. Thus, the real hopes of resistance and emancipation might reside somewhere else, outside global civil society and its institutions and practices.

In pursuing this argument, I shall proceed in four steps. First, I shall provide an overview of existing conceptions of civil society, and the separation between governmental authority and society they invariably entail. I shall also describe some consequences of this separation for the way the international realm has been understood within theories of civil society.

Second, I shall argue that the main function of these theories has been to demarcate society from governmental authority within, while rendering the former a target of the latter. Third, I shall suggest that the concept of a *global* civil society ought to be seen as a re-articulation of this modern governmentality, now constituting the global realm as a target of governmental authority. Fourth, I shall conclude with some remarks about the emancipatory potential of global civil society.

2.

While the concept of global civil society may seem both highly ambiguous and hotly contested today, such ambiguity and contestation are possible only against the backdrop of fairly stable boundaries, distinguishing global civil society from what it is *not*. While few would doubt that global civil society is something different from domestic civil society, the two share some important characteristics in common, including that of being separate from centralized governmental authority. From its early occurrences within International Relations theory, it is evident that the concept of global civil society was first introduced as an alternative to statist theories of global political order, purporting to explain changes away from that order (Gill, 1991: 311; Turner, 1998). Thus, according to Lipschutz (1992: 392–3), in order to find global civil society, ‘we have to look for political spaces other than those bounded by the parameters of the nation-state system’. We will then learn that ‘[t]he spatial boundaries of global civil society are different, because its autonomy from the constructed boundaries of the state system allows for the construction of new political spaces’. Similarly, as Walzer has remarked (1995b: 3), ‘[c]ivil society is usually thought to be contained within the framework of the state . . . There is today an international civil society, the very existence of which raises questions about the usefulness of the state.’ To Turner (1998: 40), global civil society is notable for ‘its distinctiveness from the assumed characteristics of the traditional state system’. Finally, it has become self-evident that ‘the term global civil society refers to *non-governmental* structures and activities’ (Keane, 2003: 8).

There is an underlying agreement that global civil society is distinct from the *loci* of governmental authority within as well as above polities. While its precise relationship to political power and authority seems to be up for grabs in the above accounts, they simultaneously assume that global civil society *can* and *ought* to be firmly demarcated from both domestic and international political authority. So how did this distinction emerge within social and political thought, and how was it finally projected onto the global realm? In order to answer those questions, we must briefly consider the history of the concept of domestic civil society. Before doing this, it is important to note

that the concept of civil society was introduced within the conceptual framework of the territorial state by means of the very same distinction that a *global* civil society now purports to transcend, however. Simply put, the concept of civil society seems to have evolved in tandem with the state and the state system, however much contemporary writers like to place it in opposition to them. This deserves some elaboration.

In the world of states, states are sovereign by virtue of being situated in an international context devoid of centralized authority, and this international context is devoid of overarching authority precisely by virtue of the reciprocal recognition of sovereignty among its constituent states. The international sphere is therefore profoundly *uncivil* in the sense that its constituent practices are the moral negation of those associated with domestic civil society (compare Walker, 1993). As Rousseau (1915: 304) formulated the resulting dilemma:

Between man and man we live in the condition of the civil state, subjected to laws; between people and people, we enjoy natural liberty . . . Living at the same time in the social order and in the state of nature, we suffer from the inconveniences of both without finding security in either.

While most modern authors in the natural law tradition made some such distinction between inside and outside, only some of them made that distinction coincide with that between the civil and the uncivil, however (Tuck, 1999). Thus, from the viewpoint of the international state of nature, the concept of civil society appears to be but *one* way of describing a social totality confined within the boundaries of a state, but which nevertheless is clearly distinct from sovereign authority proper. As Jeffrey Alexander (1997: 123) has argued, '[w]e must continue . . . to discuss civil society as a community roughly isomorphic with the nation'. And true; this rough isomorphism has long been taken for granted. The concept of civil society is thus normally treated as being coextensive with the concept of domestic political community, and therefore also as distinct from the international state of nature. Following this logic, it appears as if a certain lack of civility without is a condition of civility within, and vice versa. So rather than being squarely opposed, civility and uncivility are fused together and turned into two sides of the same coin by the modern concept of sovereignty. As Agamben (1998: 35) has described this predicament, '[s]overeignty thus presents itself as an incorporation of the state of nature in society . . . The state of nature is therefore not truly external to *nomos* but contains its virtuality.'

A similar logic seems to have been at work already when the concept of civil society was introduced in Western political thought. If we are to believe an excellent study by Dominique Colas, this logic was introduced in Leonardo Bruni's Latin translation of Aristotle's *Politika* (1438), which

quickly came to replace Moerbeke's translation as the standard in Europe. In this translation, the term *koinonia politikè* is for the first time translated as *societas civilis*, denoting a voluntary political association undertaken for a common purpose (Colas, 1997: 29). This notion of a *societas civilis* is not only historically prior to the modern concept of the state, but it also, true to the ideals of Renaissance civic humanism, implied the absence of precisely the kind of abstract and centralized authority which we later have come to associate with the modern state (Skinner, 1989). In fact, the concept of *societas civilis* was part of a political vocabulary that was inherently opposed to the early modern practices of power politics within as well as between the then predominant political units, that is, city-states (Viroli, 1992).

Whenever the concept of civil society has been recycled since then, a similar logic of separation has been set in motion. When the concept of civil society resurfaced in a recognizably modern shape during the early Enlightenment, it was then cast in opposition to illegitimate political authority, and regarded as the means to a civilizing process that ultimately would put an end to the exercise of such authority in the name of the members of that civil society (Ferguson, 1995: 7–29). Later, and as a well-known reversal of this view, the notion of civil society was defined as being fundamentally subordinate to, yet categorically distinct from, the concept of the state. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel defined civil society as the embodiment of particular interests. Yet since these interests frequently oppose each other, civil society fulfills a mediating function in the name of the state and the universality of its institutions (Hegel, 1991: 220–1). This view was then again reversed by the young Marx, who argued that civil society is both logically and historically prior to structures of authority such as the state. According to him, the state ultimately derives from civil society and thus inevitably reflects the constellation of forces and interests within it (Marx, 1970: 8, 41, 65).

The civilizing process postulated by the early theorists of civil society was not expected to stop at the boundaries of individual nations and domestic political communities, however. From Raynal and Ferguson to Tocqueville and Paine, we find an expectation that this civilizing process would eventually reach into the entire system of states, in Europe as well as elsewhere. This would hopefully bring civility to the intercourse between states, and hence moderate the more malign effects of the international state of nature. The civilizing process would eventually turn the violent system of states into a civilized and peaceful society of states, nations or even peoples, with little discrimination initially being made between Europeans and non-Europeans (compare Pagden, 2003; Keene, 2002).

These internationalist proposals stigmatized domestic despotism as the source of barbarism and backwardness, and then went on to articulate the

conditions of civilization for the rest of the world. Thus, according to Raynal, to the extent that the civilizing process would put an end to despotism within communities, this would also gradually take us beyond the state of nature prevailing in a system of states, and into a society of civilized peoples. As he (1783: 133) argued, 'in republican governments, where authority resides with the people, and where public interest takes precedence in its dealings with other states, it is of no use to cast aside a peace treaty by means of any kind of deception'. Or, as Ferguson explained, '[t]he law of nature, with respect to nations, is the same as it is with respect to individuals: it gives to the collective body a right to preserve themselves' (1995: 183). But in the course of the civilizing process, they gradually 'adopt customs which they make the foundation of rules, or of laws, to be observed, or alleged, in all their mutual transactions' (1995: 184). According to Paine, absolutist governments 'are in the same condition as we conceive of savage and uncivilized life . . . like so many individuals in a state of nature' (1971: 283). And, finally, as Tocqueville noted, 'I think one can accept as a general and constant rule that among civilized nations warlike passions become rarer and less active as social conditions get nearer to equality' (1994: 646).

These transformative expectations were famously taken up by Kant and turned into a prophecy of a coming world which would be governed by the rules of cosmopolitan right. The spread of these rules would ultimately transcend national boundaries, and reconcile cultural differences between peoples (Bartelson, 1995). Thus, in Kant, peace between states is portrayed as the outcome of a civilizing process that eventually might lead to the formation of cosmopolitan law, so what allegedly happened *within* distinct societies inevitably would happen to the relations *between* them as well:

While the purposeless state of savagery did hold up the development of all the natural capacities of human beings, it nonetheless finally forced them, through the evils in which it involved them, to leave this state and enter into a civil constitution in which all their dormant capacities could be developed. The same applies to the barbarous freedom of established states. (Kant, 1991: 49)

Eventually Hegel poured cold water on these hopes by reducing the existence of civil society to an expression of the ethical universality of the sovereign state. Peace thus came to presuppose a positive agreement between states rather than a degree of civilization, an agreement which 'would always be dependent on particular sovereign wills, and would therefore continue to be tainted with contingency' (Hegel, 1991: 368). From this point of view, any remaining internationalist expectations are but expressions of particularity within a system of sovereign states, devoid of overarching authority and inclusive principles of political community

(compare Jøeger, 2002). So while early liberals rarely doubted the desirability of this project, they were also largely blind to its problems, since the very same practices they wished to abolish, such as power politics and imperial expansion, also constituted the prime obstacle to the successful implementation of the desired reforms. By starting out from considerations about the internal political structure of early modern states, most of them provided what Waltz (1959) would have classified as second-image explanations of the deplorable uncivility of international life.

This changing and problematic relationship between political authority and civil society is echoed by many contemporaries as well, yet most of them have forgotten about the early internationalist dimension of civil society. When the concept of civil society was dusted off and put to active use within the social sciences again, this was in order to describe the conditions of economic and democratic development prevailing in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. As Putnam famously argued, a well-developed civil society may well be a necessary condition of both economic growth and democracy (Putnam, 1994). In this particular context, the concept of civil society provided a new way to make sense of the relationship between governmental authority and community in post-communist societies (Gellner, 1998: 1–12; Gray, 1993; Calhoun, 1994).

While these theorists disagree sharply about what kind of relations exist or ought to exist between civil society and the state, they agree that civil society ought to be distinguished from the state. Thus, to Walzer (1995a: 113), civil society is ‘the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks . . . that fills this space’. Similarly, to Taylor (1995: 208), civil society exists ‘where there are free associations that are not under the tutelage of state power [and] where society as a whole can structure itself and coordinate its actions through such free associations’. To Cohen and Arato (1992: ix), civil society is primarily an antidote to unbridled market forces, but yet only a ‘model distinguishing civil society from both state and economy has a chance both to underwrite the dramatic oppositional role of this concept.’ Finally, to Gellner (1998: 5), civil society is ‘that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state’. If we are to believe these accounts, the concept civil society is indispensable to modern political thought. Likewise, within International Relations theory, it seems difficult to make sense of many of the actual practices of modern statehood in the absence of a social sphere from which the state is marked off, and this irrespective of whether we like this demarcation or not (compare Rosenberg, 1994). Consequently, the concept of civil society has invited a constant contestation and ideologization of its meaning in political thought ever since its introduction (Pasquino, 1991).

3.

Yet the aforementioned observations say very little of *why* this distinction between civil society and governmental authority once did emerge, and *how* it has functioned within political discourse. Therefore, in this section, I shall move on to different explanatory accounts of the distinction between governmental authority and civil society. There are three main explanations available in the literature. First, Koselleck (1988) has described the origin of the distinction between civil society and the state in terms of a growing opposition to the absolutist state and its political practices among Enlightenment thinkers. As a result, an apolitical social sphere gradually emerged beside the absolutist state, in which its subjects could define and develop rules of moral intercourse independent from those laws dictated by absolutist authority. According to Koselleck, it was this quest for moral autonomy that produced the eventual separation between state and civil society. Second, according to Keane (1988), the distinction between civil society and the state must be seen against the backdrop of an overall historical trend towards modernization within our political vocabulary. Emphasizing the utopian and revolutionary expectations that animated this change, he argues that this distinction must be understood as a response to the problems of modernization faced by Western societies. Third, according to Foucault (1981, 1991) among others, the separation between civil society and state is contingent upon the rise of a new kind of governmentality. These authors regard the concept of civil society as derivative of an underlying change in the art of government, rather than as referring to a given domain of subjects and objects (Mitchell, 1991; Rose and Miller, 1992). Civil society is thus described as a correlate to the practices of government once made possible by the rise of political economy. Since this article is more concerned with the rhetorical functions of concepts of civil society rather than with the historical conditions of their emergence, I will focus on the latter kind of explanation.

According to the theory of governmentality, from the 18th century onwards, political economy gradually replaces *raison d'état* as the preferred science and technique of intervention in order to cope with problems pertaining to its corollary datum, population. This is the formative moment of civil society as a sphere of activity, wholly distinct from, yet existing in complex interdependence with, the state. Whereas statistics and the science of police had been premised on the virtual identity between the state and the body politic as a whole, the new political economy both created a disjunction between state and society, and hence made it possible to define the latter as a *target* of governmental tactics. Within European polities, this marks an important change from reason of state to liberal and proto-

democratic forms of governance. Thus, civil society, far from being a domain either preceding the emergence of the state or being fabricated by it, is to be interpreted as the correlate of the practices of government made possible by political economy, the category of society itself being conducive to the exercise of power rather than being somehow its 'natural' counterpoise. The concept of civil society is thus emerging simultaneously with these practices of government, as is the corollary state concept. The rest of the story becomes a matter of liberal ideology, in which the state is portrayed as something constantly threatening to colonize civil society or at least being stuck in opposition to it (Burchell, 1991).

The creation of civil society as an autonomous sphere was one of the major achievements of the liberal art of government. Rather than being a natural domain for spontaneous interaction and exchange between free agents — as classical liberal rhetoric would have it — civil society is the outcome of a peculiar technique of government that proceeds by autonomization of individual subjects as well as of society as a whole (Iverson, 1993). The idea of civil society hence presupposes 'a specification of the objects of government in such a way that the regulations they need are, in a sense, self-indicated and limited to the end of securing the conditions for an optimal, but natural and self-regulating functioning' (Burchell, 1991: 127). The ensuing reification of civil society into a natural kind seems to be a necessary condition for its smooth functioning. If not perceived as a given reality by its inhabitants, neither the former nor the latter would have been susceptible to governmental tactics. Simply put, effective government presupposes a domain of given objects and subjects. The concept of civil society delineates such a domain and thereby makes it accessible to strategic intervention. Civil society is the end of governmental activity, yet its being perceived as a natural kind is an important means of achieving this end (Burchell, 1991).

Theories of governmentality help explain why the concept of civil society emerged in separation from governmental authority. This kind of explanation is highly relevant given my present concern, since it explains the emergence of the concept of civil society in terms of its function within political practice. Theories of governmentality focus on the role of the concept of civil society in creating and sustaining a distinct governmentality, by providing a new set of answers to the perennial question of how to govern effectively. Yet there is a limit to its applicability that must be overcome if it is to be useful in the global context. While these theories explain how and why the separation between governmental authority and civil society emerged within political theory and practice, they do so assuming that this development takes place within *distinct* polities. They further assume that these polities are distinct from the international outside, and the less civilized modes of intercourse prevailing there. Given this a

priori limitation of its scope, it seems as if the theory of governmentality would be of little relevance in a globalized world which effectively has become *one* polity. But to my mind, the emergence of global civil society is a correlate of a new governmentality that effectively *transcends* this separation. It is to this question we now must turn.

4.

Pleas for the transformation of the state system normally leave the separation between the domestic and the international spheres in place — transforming the system of states is something different from transcending this system altogether (compare Buzan, 2004: 77–86). Those who argue in favor of transforming the international system normally assume that states will remain its basic components. Nor do they want to abolish international anarchy, only to moderate its more undesirable consequences (Goldmann, 1994: 1–17). In their attempts to solve this problem, internationalists have had to account for the gradual *transition* from an international state of nature to an international state of civility. Yet such proposals for gradual reform of the international system frequently lapse into a pragmatic paradox which can never be fully resolved within the framework of internationalist thought itself. In order to get off the ground, their arguments presuppose a separation between the domestic and the international spheres and a corresponding distinction between the civil and the uncivil. The desired end result is that the international realm becomes very much like the domestic realm, thus simultaneously nullifying the very same separation that motivated internationalist reform in the first place. Hence internationalism has always been prey to claims of its futility and perversity.

Today this problem has found an unexpected solution — some people believe that such a transition has taken place *spontaneously*, as a consequence of globalization, however defined (compare Rosenberg, 2005: 11–25). And as I have argued elsewhere (Bartelson, 2000), globalization might indeed be interpreted as a way of *transcending* rather than merely transforming the states system — to the true believers in the forces of globalization, the distinction between the domestic and international spheres has already lost its power to organize political reality and make it intelligible.

In this section I shall discuss this latter possibility in theoretical terms. As I shall argue, theories of global civil society promise to deliver civility by actually transcending the separation between the domestic and the international spheres, global civil society being turned into a target of governmental activity in the process. This is frequently done by an appeal to a hypothetical global community of which global civil society supposedly is expressive. Yet the realization of this global community is possible only

through the institutions of a global civil society. Global civil society is both the medium and the outcome of the desired transcendence of the state system. As Köhler (1998: 233) has remarked, ‘as long as the state continues to be the only site of political authority in international relations, it is impossible for a transnational public sphere — in which a global politics would have to be embedded — to emerge’.

To some authors, global civil society seems to be the vehicle of its own gradual globalization. Overcoming the dysfunctions generated by economic globalization ‘will require the creation of a vibrant civil society inspired by a strong spirit of solidarity at the community level and . . . at the transnational or global level’, this being so since it ‘seems that very little can be accomplished towards fundamental change through the state system as it now exists’ (Cox, 1999: 27). When more emphasis is placed on the global character of this society, the concept refers to a sphere that *necessarily* must exist beyond the domestic and the international spheres. Indeed, the very notions of globalization and globality seem to undermine the very possibility of making such spatial distinctions in the first place (Robertson, 1992; Luke, 1993; Scholte, 1996; Urry, 1999; Shaw, 2003). Within this view, global civil society is no longer restricted by any boundaries when the most salient issues within it, its mode of organization, as well as the means for dealing with these issues *all* are *supraterritorial* in character (Scholte, 2000: 277–8). As Köhler has remarked on this possibility, the world would then gradually be ‘developing as a single whole thanks to the social activity and the deliberate political will of a population sharing common values and interests’ (1998: 231).

A global civil society is thus truly global if and only if it refers ‘to politically framed and circumscribed social relations that stretch across and underneath state boundaries and other governmental forms’ (Keane, 2003: 17). As such, it is ‘a transnational domain in which people form relationships and develops elements of identity outside their role as a citizen of a particular state’ (Wapner, 2000: 261). In this boundless society, ‘there is no clear line separating the “national” from the “global”; the two dimensions . . . constantly intersect and co-define each other’ (Keane, 2003: 24). Simply put, ‘the concept posits the existence of a social sphere . . . above and beyond national, regional, or local societies’ (Anheier et al., 2001: 3).

Interestingly, these notions of global civil society retain the familiar contrast between society and governmental authority that have been so indispensable to theories of domestic civil society all the way from the Renaissance to the present. But if the distinction between sovereign state and the international system is as irrelevant as these authors believe, why then still insist that global civil society nevertheless has to be distinct from governmental authority? This insistence is strange, especially since other

studies of governance suggest that this distinction gradually has *lost* its organizing power inside modern polities. As Donzelot (1991) and Ewald (1991) have argued, during the 20th century, the activities of government themselves begin to acquire a complexity and extension similar to that formerly attributed to the activities of civil society, thus rendering these spheres functionally indistinct. According to this argument, civil society and the state have become virtually indistinguishable, and this precisely thanks to the emergence of new governmental practices transcending this divide.

This gives rise to a puzzle. What distinguishes the concept of global civil society from that of domestic civil society is that the former supposedly transcends the very boundaries that keep the latter in place. But the separation between the domestic and the international spheres is logically intertwined with the distinction between governmental authority and civil society. Indeed, they were once drawn within one and the same governmentality, marking the transition from early-modern statehood to the modern state. If we further accept that both these distinctions have been crucial to the modern system of states, then the concept of global civil society gives rise to a further theoretical puzzle. If most accounts of global civil society assume this society to be distinct from governmental authority, *where* does this governmental authority then reside? Here theories of global civil society are silent. This suggests a tension between our standard definitions of the global and the social, since in order to make any theoretical sense out of the governmental authority from which global civil society supposedly is separate, we would have to posit the existence of a world polity within which this governmental authority makes its presence felt. If global civil society is to be distinct from governmental authority in a world in which the separation between the domestic and the international spheres does not matter anymore, then *both* global civil society and governmental authority can only be fully intelligible as parts of a larger social whole.

Keane (2001: 36) has argued that global civil society ‘flourishes in the absence of a global state or world empire’. But the literature on global civil society is remarkably silent not only when it comes to the locus of global government, but also about its scope. It says little about the specific governmental functions fulfilled by the different institutions and practices of global civil society. It is statements like the above coupled with the ensuing silence that have led me to believe that theories of global civil society ought to be understood as responses to the problem of governance without government, rather than as accurate explanations of what is going on within an emergent world polity.

Now similar suspicions have led other people to deny the existence of a global civil society, since the ‘only place where anything resembling “global” civil society is to be found is in the interrelations of those countries where

civil society is already established at a local level' (Brown, 2001: 22). Thus, however we choose to define it, the concept of global civil society seems to be contaminated with enough statist baggage (Walker, 1994; Baker, 2002: 937–41) to make it unsuitable for descriptive or explanatory purposes. This implies that we would be better off *not* using the term 'global civil society' for these purposes, since the uncritical use of this term is likely to contaminate our theories with undesirable semantic content, leading to a net loss of coherence (Bartelson, 2003). From this point of view, it could be concluded that we simply should replace the concept of global civil society with that of a world society, or any other less incoherent concept (compare Meyer et al., 1997). Indeed, authors like Luhmann (1989) and Shaw (2000) have heroically taken on the task of describing the stratification and differentiation of a world society in which states and the state system are but components, and this without replaying familiar ideological scripts which cast society and its members as possibly oppressed by and therefore also potentially opposed to any illegitimate governmental authority.

Yet it is abundantly clear that the concept of global civil society is very much alive within contemporary political and academic discourse, and this is possibly *because* of rather than despite its very ambiguity and incoherence. How are we then to make sense of the concept of global civil society? As I stated in the first section, I think that the emergence and spread of the concept of global civil society is best explained with reference to its function within academic and political discourse. So rather than simply banishing this concept from our theoretical vocabulary, I would like to suggest that the projection of the separation between governmental authority and society onto the global realm has something important to say to us about the constitution of the global realm as an object of inquiry and intervention. Thus, I believe that the concept of global civil society performs analogous functions in the world polity as the concept of civil society once did within distinct national polities in 18th-century Europe. Furthermore, there are things that can be done by means of the concept of global civil society that cannot be done with otherwise semantically equivalent conceptions of world society. Not only does the concept of global civil society constitute the global as a governable domain, but since global civil society supposedly transcends national boundaries, it also represents the possibility of a more inclusive political community beyond that of individual nation states. As such, global civil society can hypothetically bestow a degree of legitimacy on those supranational and non-governmental institutions that govern in its name. Whether this indeed is the case in practice is an empirical question which is beyond the scope of the present article, so in what remains of this section, I will remain content to outline the theoretical implications of the above claims.

First, when it comes to the constitutive function of the concept of global civil society, it is important to remember that this concept first gained currency within the globalization debate a decade ago, well before it had been given much ideological content. In this debate, it was common to assert that the old world of nations and states was about to be replaced by *flows*, and that these '[f]lows are decentering, despatializing, and dematerializing forces, and they work alongside and against the geopolitical codes of spatial sovereignty . . . there are new universals and new particulars being created by the networks of accelerated transnational exchange as fresh identities, unities and values emerge from sharing access to the same symbols, markets, and commodities' (Luke, 1993: 240; compare Lash and Urry, 1994: 6–15; Castells, 1991). In order to be intelligible, these processes have to take place *somewhere*, in some socio-political space of their own. So the processes of globalization, however conceived, had to be theorized as taking place within a more encompassing realm than those of domestic societies supposedly being transcended by flows and networks, or than that provided by traditional statist accounts of international society. For logical reasons alone, that realm had to be something more than the sum total of those domestic societies, or the totality of transactions taking place between them. The global realm was constituted as a social fact the very moment somebody asked the simple but unavoidable question *where* the social and political processes of globalization take place. Answering such questions in a theoretically coherent fashion implied positing a social reality ontologically elevated over and above the world of domestic societies. To my mind, the emergence and appeal of the concept of global civil society can partly be explained in these terms, since it provided and still provides one among several responses to the conceptual problems that arise as we accept the existence of a global realm as a social fact. It then furnishes us with a basic social ontology of this brave new world, along with the elements of an explanation of how we got there from the good old world of states. But this is only half of the story.

Second, when it comes to the justificatory function of the concept of global civil society, the above analysis has led me to suspect that theories of global civil society are not to be understood primarily as theories *about* global governance at all, but rather as theories that help to justify a distinct set of practices and institutions of global governance, both firmly centered on non-governmental agents of a specific breed. The question *which* institutions and practices are justified is less important in the present context. What is more important is that the concept of global civil society seems to justify the presence of global authority irrespective of its locus, thus indirectly invalidating assumptions of international anarchy (Hurd, 1999: 401–5). Thus, what matters is the very relocation and dispersion of political authority

that is implied by theories of global civil society, not the actual outcome of such relocation and dispersion. Without attempting to deliver any detailed account of how this works in practice, two things should be plain to anyone who has bothered to consult the constantly expanding literature on the institutional make-up of global civil society. On the one hand, it is obvious that the paradigmatic actor in this global civil society is the non-governmental international organization (Colas, 2002: 1–63). It is equally obvious that the ways in which this kind of actor is distinguished from other actors in world politics are disqualifying some organizations which fulfill the formal requirements but which lack the essential moral attributes (Corry, 2004). On the other hand, it is also obvious that however contested the normative foundations of global civil society appear to be (Keane, 2003: 175–204), the ethically unifying element in global civil society seems to be all the good causes propagated by those organizations and their members (compare Amoores and Langley, 2004: 96; Cox, 1999: 10; Chandhoke, 2002).

The tendency to absorb good causes implies that opposing global civil society on political grounds is difficult, and risks stigmatizing the prospective opponent. Global civil society looks very much like any other *democratic* political community, characterized by its willingness and ability to assimilate all possible non-myopic standpoints, all good causes, and all decent people into one seemingly cohesive *demos*. And thanks to the counterpoise logic of the concept, being *against* global civil society can be construed as being in favor of everything uncivil and nasty on the entire planet, at least by default. Thus, at first glance, the concept of global civil society seems correlated to an art of government distinct from that once associated with the emergence of domestic civil society, insofar as the concept of global civil society authorizes organizations and social forces which are *opposed* to neo-liberal institutions of global governance. On closer inspection, however, this tolerance of divergent opinion is possible only against the backdrop of an underlying agreement to disagree, the interlocutors in effect being interpellated by the very same global governmentality they set out to contest, global civil society being but the arena where this contestation can be safely played out.

5.

This brings us to the normative implications of the idea of a global civil society. As we have seen above, most accounts of global civil society imply that this concept is meaningful only in the absence of a firm distinction between the domestic and the international, or that this concept takes on analytical and normative significance only by transcending this distinction.

Yet if this is indeed the case, this would amount to a wholesale reconfiguration of the relationship between civility and uncivility. If we are to believe accounts of global civil society, the line separating the civil from the uncivil no longer coincides with the line separating the domestic from the international. Instead, we are led to believe that the state of nature now prevails outside the democratic political community constituted by global civil society.

Simultaneously, theories of global civil society imply that it is not possible to frame the uncivil by means of spatial metaphors. This, in turn, implies that the uncivilized state of nature itself has become the rule of human life on a global scale, whereas civility has become an exceptional condition to be attained only by subscribing to the ideals of global civil society, however defined. If we are to take this implication seriously, barbarism rules everywhere else, from boardroom to street, and in a way that eventually will disrupt the logic of civilization so nicely sketched by Rousseau and his followers. Thus, like every other modern conception of community, global civil society ultimately draws its identity from what is morally alien to it, by constituting that foreign element as a negative reflection of itself. Global civil society is based on its own logic of exclusion, which it neatly conceals by a constant appeal to its democratic inclusiveness.

Now if the concept of global civil society is best understood as a correlate to an emergent global governmentality, and if theories of global civil society serve to justify the exercise of authority by certain institutions within this global realm, then we are obliged to question the emancipatory potential of this concept. Global civil society — in the sense this concept appears in contemporary academic and political discourse — seems to promise a degree of empowerment and freedom among agents otherwise caught between states and markets. Much like the moral autonomy once so hotly desired by the early opponents of absolutism, membership in global civil society promises emancipation from what otherwise would be the untamed forces of global capitalism, as well as from the structural violence generated by these forces on a planetary scale. Also, and although this promise is more subdued in the literature, theories of global civil society promise to deliver an antidote to some forms of organized violence between as well as within states (Kaldor, 2003). If we are to believe its proponents, the rise of global civil society would represent a clear advancement beyond primitive power politics, and into a state of increased civility within as well as between societies. Theories of global civil society here play out a contrast between power politics and civility in much the same way as early-modern theories of domestic civil society gained credence by first opposing despotism, and then replacing Reason of State with *laissez-faire* liberalism as the ecologically dominant mode of governance. The rhetoric of global civil society thus

revives old internationalist hopes — Marxist and liberal alike — for reform of the world capitalist system and the anarchical system of states into something more just and peaceful.

There is nothing wrong with these noble aspirations. Yet I doubt that the denial that power politics and war remain important features of global life does more than occlude important questions about the political and its relationship to violence. Theories of global civil society purport to be theories about the conditions of peaceful cooperation rather than violent conflict. Yet this focus implies that power politics will cease to exist the day the state system finally is transcended and replaced by a global civil society. To my mind, this comes close to forgetting why power politics exist in the first place, that is, as a response to the tragic condition of all political life (compare Lebow, 2003). Theories of global civil society are largely oblivious to the existence of this predicament and its consequences. Instead they distract interest from the present reconfiguration of uncivility, as well as from the violence undertaken in the name of civility. As a result, they are blind to the fact that the gradual civilization of the international realm has coincided in time with a return of organized violence inside domestic societies, conveniently subsumed under the label ‘terrorism’. Simply put, being expressions of the will to govern, theories of global civil society are part of the problem rather than of the solution.

When it comes to the emancipating potentials of global civil society, I strongly suspect that the kind of freedom promised by theories of global civil society is very much akin to the kind of freedom propagated by late-modern control society in general, and by existing modes of governance in particular. This is the freedom of movement that has arrived quite naturally as a consequence of the undoing of territorial institutions and practices. Yet the resulting mobility has then become subjected to the demands for control that derive from the *same* global flows which effected this emancipation, and which global civil society now promises to tame. Sometimes, however, this taming seems to be nothing but a way of turning civility itself into a commodity. If this indeed is the case, then the kind of freedom promoted by global civil society becomes the freedom to shop around for a clean conscience on what has become a global market of good causes. And this is an offer which is hard to refuse. Rather than being a rosier replacement, it seems as if global civil society is a continuation of power politics with other, biopolitical means.

Against this background, I would like to conclude that there is nothing particularly puzzling about the ambiguous and *prima facie* incoherent concept of global civil society, and its centrality within contemporary political discourse. When seen in its proper historical context, and in relation to its domestic antecedents, theories of global civil society are a continuation

of a long series of answers to questions of how to govern effectively, with or without the consent of the governed. We have been able to notice that despite the otherwise sharp discontinuities between the domestic and global forms of civil society, the basic function of the concept of civil society has remained largely the same across those contexts. It has been and still is a matter of defining the scope of the governable by distinguishing it from governmental authority proper, as well as from the uncivil outside beyond its limits. Thus constituted, it can become both the target of governmental authority and its ultimate source.

What has changed since the days of Leonardo Bruni is the *scope* of possible governance. We have seen how these governmental concerns have been condensed in the concept of civil society all the way from its emergence within Renaissance city-states to contemporary efforts to exercise political control over the more undesirable consequences of globalization. As a consequence, the art of government has itself become globalized, purporting to assimilate a multiplicity of forces within one singular social space in order to render them governable. What started as an answer to the question of how to best govern a city-state in the blissful absence of centralized authority has now, for better or worse, become a question that literally concerns the entire planet. What kinds of answers this question will receive is still for us to decide.

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