Seven Theses on Global Society*:
A Reading from Local NGOs Transnational Relations in Chiapas, Mexico

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Abstract
The following essay critically reviews the literature on global society through the global, transnational and local lenses, pointing to hitherto neglected forms of analysis such as local accounts of global discourses, as avenues for further research with a view toward articulating an agenda valorizing social actors’ own understandings of globalization. In this paper, I also emphasize the idea that prevailing wisdoms in this literature hold that globalization has expanded the ‘horizon of possibilities’ for collective social action, without paying due attention to the constraints redrawing social action at the local and the transnational scales.

Key-words: Global society, transnational civil networks, globalization, social action, local activism, possibilities and constraints.
SEVEN THESES ON GLOBAL SOCIETY

When protesters first erupted on the scene in Seattle, in late 1999, and caught the attention of the media and an international public audience, the idea of a global society was still considered, by most, a fantasy. But when the episode recurred in locations such as Washington, Prague, Porto Allegre, or Quebec, protesters demanding citizens’ rights to have a say on current economic policies decided in multilateral meetings, the topic of globalization called for renewed reflections and analyses. As of today, theory and empirical research on global society has advanced remarkably, constituting as such a literature corpus stretching the globalization paradigm to non-conventional dimensions. What are the main approaches to global society and what are their prospects for social action at the global level? The following paper critically discusses the present state of research on global society, and organizes the literature corpus while identifying some of the remaining avenues of research which have gone under-examined or simply unexplored.

Although much of the research on global society is relatively recent, the idea of a global society is nothing new. In the discipline of international relations of the Cold War era, the English School most explicitly considered the possibilities for an international society of states. However, while previous ideas on the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture reflected the shared views of a select group of elites engaged in the international community (Bull and Watson 1985), by contrast, current research on global society has ‘popularized’ the concept and pointed to the possible formation of a global social process given new impetus by economic, technological and communicational interconnectedness on a planetary scale. This emergent work argues for the social and cultural dimensions of a globalizing world and questions the established divisions between the domestic and the international. In doing so, these new approaches bring into sharper focus sociological concepts such as ‘civil society’ and the ‘public sphere’, which were long considered of marginal interest to the ‘core’ discipline of international relations.

These concepts have little concerned most mainstream Realist international relations theorists. By and large their preoccupation with the international system as the battlefield for states acts as a convenient diversion from the sociological questions they are inadequately prepared to address. However, such questions do concern Liberals and a wide range of Reflective theorists who are more willing to disentangle the state unit for the purpose of examining transversal social processes in local and world politics. Importantly (and although a variety of attacks on global society may suggest the contrary), few among Liberals, neo-Marxists, neo-Gramscians, Constructivists, or Postmodern theorists have ever argued for the existence of a thick, cohesive, global society ‘out there’. Instead, most approaches point at the emergence of a ‘thin web’ as a way to define global society—a web made up of a variety of concrete social movements and coalitions intersecting on various issues, and a great number of diverse (but not necessarily inter-connected) civil networks operating across international boundaries.

The contenders are in fact correct: There is no such thing as a global society waiting angrily at the corporate gates, or praying hand-in-hand around the Earth for love and justice. The issue is much more complex: On one hand, protests, as seemingly global as they appear, are mobilized by local activists, and only a handful of internationalists make it to the stage. In this regard, the term ‘global society’ may be more of a rhetorical phrase that aims, in the words of Charles Tilly, to present itself, as ‘willing, numerous and united.’ (1993-1994: 7) On the other hand, activists are doing much more than gathering occasionally at high-exposure events or calling press conferences on global society’s agenda. In everyday life, they communicate, exchange, inform, raise funds, collaborate, negotiate and build coalitions among civil actors located in different and distant places, regardless of whether those players agree on a global society idea or not. In sum, and instead of engaging in the debate over global society’s existence or invention, research on the processes, rather than the empirical and definitive outcome, may be more appropriate to undertake, as most studies on the topic predominantly show.
Research on global society forms a considerable corpus of literature, which is oriented in three prevailing directions.1 In those instances where global society is the unit for analysis, several argue for (1) the rise of a community of citizens promoting liberal values (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997), (2) while others point to the emergence of spaces of civil resistance through counter-hegemonic global social processes (Cox 1999), (3) and still other studies raise the critique that the idea of a global civil society is inherently a western, neoliberal project (Yudice 1997). (6 and 5) Other case-studies have moved away from global society theses, and instead disaggregated the level of analysis into more specific, single or conjoined transnational civil networks and coalitions, and situated globalization as a new opportunity structure for civil action beyond state boundaries (Edwards and Gaventa 2001; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Finally, (6) other research further reduces the level of analysis and discusses the tendency of local struggles to be affected (or not) by globalization (Brysk 2000). In line with this localist emphasis, (7) some cultural sociologists argue for hermeneutical understandings of how people imagine globalization to be affecting their social practice (García Canclini 1999; Mato 2001), a perspective I embrace. In the remainder of this essay, I examine each of these analytical standpoints as ‘ideal-types’—in the Weberian sense of an analytic distillate of characteristics not existing in their pure form in the real world—and discuss these seven complementary and sometimes competing understandings of global society. Before doing so, I open the debate with some definitions and reflections on the notion of civil society.

Some Notes On the Notion of Civil Society

A variety of philosophical influences have left their imprint on the thought and theory behind current conceptions on civil society. The idea of civil society was used, in classical political philosophy as a Latin translation of Aristotle’s politike koinonia, to refer to ‘the conditions of living in a civilized’ community sufficiently advanced to have its own legal codes—in Latin, jus civile—above that of individual states’ (Lipshutz 1992: 398). In substance, this foundational concept allowed thinkers to consider a bounded community of individuals beyond the state corresponding to public life—and even of a global community as such. At the same time, however, such thinking also granted an exclusive character of civility (or ‘good behaving’) to such a community, in contrast to ‘outside’ barbarian (or ‘uncivilized’) cultures, which pointed at the normal desirability of such a society over others. In today’s literature on civil society, this inside/outside question remains vivid (as Linklater 1992 emphasizes). From one perspective, the term ‘civil society’ is generally used to refer to advanced industrial societies’ set of cultural, social, economic and ethical arrangements outside the state—but inside its boundaries—(Marden 1997); this idea implies that non-industrial societies are not necessarily civil societies. But from another perspective, multilateral organizations or northern aid agencies in the last decade have begun adopting new policy lines with a view toward the strengthening and consolidation of civil society in developing countries. This emphasis broadens the idea, not very different from Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ argument, that all societies can eventually transform into liberal civil societies.

Another zone of ambiguity derives from Tocqueville’s definition of civil society as the realm of autonomous and voluntary associations, fostering patterns of civility in democracies; this argument was recently renewed in Robert Putnam’s work on the importance of social capital (e.g. a dense network of civil associations), in democratic politics.2 Liberals have essentially defined civil society independently from the state—although the state is ultimately in charge of guaranteeing its autonomy—as a ‘space of uncoerced human association and relational networks,’ filled by business, cultural, religious, and social non-governmental organizations (Walzer 1997: 8). This is part of the definition used by multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, influential aid agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID 1998),3 as well as conservative theorists, on the welcome rise of a service-provider third sector replacing the state’s key functions.

Another classic reference is made with regard to Antonio Gramsci who defined civil society as part of a superstructural sphere, which, by definition, excludes the market while remaining conceptually
distinct from the state, which constitutes political society. Gramsci’s move in placing civil society outside the state and the market is a departure from classical Marxism, which places civil society in the structural sphere. Current theorizing which pits Gramsci against Jürgen Habermas defines civil society as an amorphous space of social interaction, including the spheres of intimacy (family) and voluntary associations (e.g. grassroots, labor, religious, academic and non-governmental organizations), as well as social movements and forms of public communication (Cohen and Arato 1992/2000: 8). (Evidently, liberals do not agree with leaving even bowling associations or entrepreneurial groups outside the realm of civil society.) But more importantly, civil society is a sphere of action that is independent of the state. Emphasizing civil society’s capacity to act as a counterweight to the state, liberals stress associational density in arguing for the ‘positive effects of civil society on governance’ (Foley and Edwards 1996).

Gramscian or Foucauldian readings do not necessarily support this general idea that civil society is to be conceptualized outside the state. Gramsci in particular saw civil society both as the space for consolidation and normalization of domination, and the sphere of resistance where alternative principles to domination could potentially be built for counter-hegemonic purposes in a ‘war of position’ for cultural hegemony. Michel Foucault’s work traces the genealogy of modern, disciplined societies through the constitution of normalized sexuality, the changing characterization of ‘madness’, and refinements in punishments and prisons. Foucault demonstrates that the emergence of discourses on civil society are concomitant with modernity’s emphasis on rights and the state’s attempt to ‘normalize’ society in a regulated sphere by legitimating its capacity to impose sanctions. In this view, norms promoted by civil society only constitute the visible support of a new system of subordination; more pervasive and less visible social disciplines and microtechnologies combine (Cohen and Arato 1992/2000: 396) to ‘normalize’ behavior. In the end, and although a general convention may prevail in current literature on civil society as a sphere outside the state, one can still question the extent to which civil societies and the now celebrated global society are analytically independent from states in world politics or even possibly subversive there. Is an emerging global society opening up an emancipatory space for social actors or is it expanding, at the level of global governance, a set of norms regulating and constraining modern societies within liberal frameworks? Why is it that Washington-based international agencies such as the Inter-American Bank, the World Bank or foreign-aid agencies (e.g. the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and the Netherlands’ Novib) are so eager to ‘strengthen’ and ‘consolidate’ civil societies in developing countries, and show a similar interest in supporting transnational networks and global social mobilizations? These questions set the general terms for the ensuing critical discussion of the extant research on global society and transnational civil networks.

I. The Global: Global Civil Society Theses

Approaches that point to the emergence of a global civil society have been grouped under the rubric of ‘globalist theses’. That is, global society is said to be emerging as a result of citizens’ increased participation in organizing beyond state boundaries resulting from a) shared values that extend beyond the goals of specific movements or b) converging resistances to corporate and elite-led economic globalization. According to other critical perspectives reviewed thereafter, these two contending approaches share, to a certain degree, an over-stated optimism about social actors’ increased participation in a global world and the possibilities for change as a result of such improved action.

*Thesis 1: Globalization improves citizens’ agency and fosters the creation of a values-sharing global community*

Most accounts of the rise of a global society rearticulate a philosophical and political liberal view that both emphasizes an individual’s ‘right to have rights’ in a democratic society and expresses confidence in the potential universality of modern values such as liberty, equality, and pluralism together with core, inviolable human standards. These accounts generally conceive of global civil society as a thin sphere of
participative citizens acting transnationally for expanded democratic world politics, and adhere to Tocquevillian views on voluntary associations and democratic life. The emergence of world-wide civil networks may thus show that associationism is globalizing, eventually forming a global civil society of active citizens re-mapping world politics toward cosmopolitanism (Cohen and Rai 2000; Lipshutz 1992), and possibly furthering cross-cultural understandings by ‘injecting values and moral pressure into the global market place’ (Edwards and Gaventa 2001: 19; see also McIntyre-Mills 2000).

Liberally oriented scholars define a global civil society as a universal project for social justice, gender and economic equity, and citizens’ inclusion and participation in governance (Edwards and Gaventa 2001: 25), and regard global social movements and transnational civil networks as important means to achieving these goals. Hence importantly, such conceptions of global civil society tend to point to the promising possibilities for social action in a global world, where it could induct progressive change within the global system. For instance, some research (such as Jelin 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 1993; Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997) has looked at changes in global norms, institutions, or regimes as a result of social actors’ transnational mobilizations for citizenship rights ultimately granted by the state, whether human, gender, ethnic or environmental. Such research has pointed at social actors’ increased global capacity to bypass and act back on states; this falls in line with liberal preferences for minimal states—essentially granting legal frameworks and legitimate norms enforcement capacities. In the absence of identifiable formal outcomes as legal or procedural changes, this research trend has furthermore shown the incidences of globalization on the social actors themselves by looking at how vulnerable or victimized actors have succeeded in reaching their goals, or in experiencing empowering episodes through which they have gained skills and inspired further action. In the end, one may somehow be reminded of the ‘invisible hand’ parable, as the idea of the creation of a global society for the common good crystallizes.

Thesis 2: Globalization aggravates inequalities and triggers solidarities toward a global counter-movement

Contrary to the preceding view on negotiation and progressive change within the global system, neo-Gramscian, World-System and neo-Marxist theorists point to the possibilities for structural change through strategic convergences of anti-systemic movements. The focus on global civil society has also shifted from the centrality of rights in the constitution of an empowering global citizenship, to social actors’ resistance to neoliberalism as a disempowering ideology. Here, global society tends to be defined as a thick process and project of converging coalitions, standing against the prevailing world order; while the preceding liberal-oriented approach conceives of civil society as a lighter associative figure made up of not necessarily interconnected movements and networks, negotiating spaces and growing within global politics.

World-System theorists have suggested that the everyday interests of social actors differ according to their location in the world economy, which is reflected in the great variety of social movements operating locally and globally, and as a result, a ‘great world family’ (Wallerstein 1990b) has not yet come about, drawing a common anti-systemic strategy for challenging the structural determinants of inequalities. However, ‘trans-zonal’ cooperation across anti-systemic movements (from the center, periphery and semi-periphery) would render possible the constitution of a global society capable of transforming the capitalist world-economy. Marxists have essentially argued that global social movements form a systemic counter-balancing force; ‘globalization from below’ led by popular and middle-class actors responding to a corporate-led globalization, and opening possibilities for alternative world politics driven by ethics over profits (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000; Falk 1993; Houtart 2001; Waterman 1998). Actually, Marxist interest in a global civil society is not that congruent with classic Marxism’s analytical distance from civil society as a bourgeois concept, developed for easing otherwise crude clashes between powerless and power-holding classes. It is, therefore, interesting to notice that this distance has decreased in the latest
refinements of Marxism (see Baker 1998), and that the long held wisdom on proletariat international solidarity has been more recently substituted for multiple class and identity-based struggles’ worldwide convergence against ‘globalization from above.’

For their part neo-Gramscians have, argued two slightly different points: while leading scholars have pointed to the promises for articulating diverse resistances into a counter-hegemonic global consciousness which translates into a social force (Cox 1999; Gill 1995), a cautious reading of Gramsci may suggest other interpretations. The arguments on the ideological basis of hegemony and the reproduction of the system through cultural subjugation of civil society espousing as her powerholders’ values and interests, bring to light the fact that the pressures are high to bring social elements to re integrate cultural subordination. For instance, the opening of powerholding institutions to civil society participation may be seen as inducements to accommodation within the prevailing structure, which transforms contentious social movements from anti-systemic to systemic (particularly on U.S. engagement with civil actors in unstable regimes, see Robinson 1996; on civil society aligning with multilateral organizations’ conceptions, see Mato 1998, 2002). In this latter sense, it is interesting to note that in most social mobilizations around multilateral organizations’ meetings or political leaders summits, protesters claim their non-conformity with neoliberalism; they also voice their demands for inclusion and participation in ongoing negotiations or economic-policy decisions. Thus, and through Gramscian lenses, it is delicate to take ‘anti-globalization’ protests as symptoms of a counter-hegemonic social process; it may be more appropriate, instead, to treat them analytically as systemic episodes of contentious actors who are essentially asking for inclusion. Such an argument is in some ways close to Wallerstein’s (1990a) disenchchantment with ‘anti-systemic movements’, which are ceding the ‘ideological battleground’ to system’s proponents when only asking for inclusion.

Similarly, global social movements mobilizing for the expansion of citizens’ rights may be analyzed as systemic movements softening hegemonic dominance, by providing leftovers to social actors who may otherwise grow more radical. In this line of reflection, further research on the emergence of a globalizing counter-culture should explicitly articulate alternative interpretations and representations challenging prevailing hegemonic neoliberal frameworks; and show, more convincingly, that a counter-hegemonic moment is growing. Counter-hegemony may be thought of as a war of position located in the cultural grounds of civil society, whose intentions are to gain interpretive power in civil society for transforming the relationship of social domination (Touraine 1984); conquering power over the state becomes a secondary question, depending on the fulfillment of the first. Reinterpreting Gramsci, Bleiker (2000: 174) has similarly proposed to see social change as possible ‘when a worldview hostile to the prevalent social order has come to be accepted as legitimate and moral by most of the population.’

(Counter-) Thesis 3: Global society is a gendered and ‘cultured’ political project

A critical reading of both liberal and radical globalist theses, embedded for instance in Postcolonialist, Feminist, Postmodern or Poststructuralist perspectives, would question the idea of a global civil society through a number of arguments. Generally speaking, it would rather use the notion of a global society than a global civil society, and also question modernist wisdoms on an emancipatory global society, unnecessarily civil. For instance, Postcolonialism would bring attention to the idea that the society that is arguably globalizing is conceptualized as a civil society under western definitions, and ask if such a global society is thinkable from Third World identities and cultural perspectives. Paraphrasing Stuart Hall (1997) and inspired by Albert Paolini (1999), a Postcolonialist question may ask: What would a global society be that is constructed through things which are different rather than things which are the same? Such a reading would furthermore eventually denounce the imperialistic idea of a global civil society as a western cultural project furthering the hegemonic statute of liberal conceptions on the underexamined complementary of market economies, democratic policies, and civil society. Feminist readings would specify further that prevailing ideas over ‘global citizens’ are defined in terms of hegemonic masculine
standards of the public life, and constitute ‘marketized versions of global citizenship’, persistently omitting gender and race (Tickner 2001). Postmodernists would concur with these objections, and point to the idea that liberals and radicals are granting too much agency to social global actors, or that the grand narrative of global society omits accounting for the proliferation of particular struggles based on exclusive identities or local parochialisms (Marden 1997). Furthermore, the global society unit would be argued unnecessarily coherent, where one could see a more blurred global picture of ‘transversal’ social struggles swarming between the local, the national and the international (Bleiker 2000). Finally, a poststructuralist reading may point at the discursive dominance of the idea of an emancipative global society as a vicious mechanism maintaining social actors’ alienation, with the belief that they can act for change, while they only act for reaccommodating in the global structure, internalizing further its constraints as fictive possibilities. Re-examining the concept of ‘governmentality’ used by Foucault for referring to how conduct is conduced, a critical reading of global civil society would furthermore question the extent to which civil society perfectly accommodates and provides political legitimacy to neoliberalism (see for instance Lipshutz 2002; Yudice 1997). To this extent, global civil society’s political role can be claimed to consist of stabilizing perturbations generated by processes of transformations of economic globalization, a view that is likely to be shared by most critical objectors to globalist theses.

II. The Transnational: Globalization is Triggering Transnational Social Action

A second framework for research on global society has disentangled the global unit-of-analysis for examining transnational social processes — as, according to Keohane and Nye (1972), processes outflowing national boundaries between actors of which at least one is non-governmental. As shown in the following, most research in this line shares the liberal orientations of cosmopolitan globalists as well as their emancipatory wisdoms on the possibilities for social action in the current era. However, this line of research has operationalized further the concept of global civil society, as it has predominantly tackled questions of the strategic and identity dimensions of transnational organizing on precise issues such as women, indigenous, human rights, environmental politics, child labor and so forth, and aims at identifying outcomes of transnational civil networks’ action. As reviewed in the following two sections, these approaches have also predominantly explored constructivist frameworks for emphasizing the possibilities for culture and norms institutional changes in national and world politics, as a result of the increased activity of civil networks mobilizing transnationally for such change. From the other side, they also have tended to argue that globalization constituted a new opportunity structure triggering social action to operate beyond states’ boundaries, while also bringing new resources for sustaining such action.

Thesis 4: Transnational civil networks are inducing norms changes in world and domestic politics

One of the most cited comprehensive study of transnational civil networks is Keck and Sikkink (1998), *Activists Beyond Borders*, in which the authors explore the formation of social mobilizations on selected issues beyond national boundaries as a new possibility for activists to act back on their states and induct policies institutional and procedural change, and have become significant actors on the world political stage. An important conceptual distinction brought by the authors on social movements, coalitions and networks has usefully contributed to research on the theme of social action in world politics, as the degree of identity cohesion, shared values and strategic goals appears lower in networks than it is in social movements, while coalitions only constitute a moment of action in social movements strategies for building transnational-wide alliances, and networks are thus conceptualized as a background loose configurations activated in a transnational campaign momentum. Keck and Sikkink also operationalize further the concept of transnational civil networks as ‘forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange’, operating beyond national boundaries and motivated primarily by ‘shared principled ideas or values’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 8 and 30). These networks mainly involve non-governmental international and domestic organizations as
central actors, along with local social movements, foundations, the media, churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, and intellectuals, parts of regional and international intergovernmental organizations, and parts of the executive and/or parliamentary branches of governments (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 89). Various works on transnational civil networks, that have either preceded or pursued Keck and Sikkink’s emphasis on norms and ideas changes in domestic and international politics include Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco (1997) which have both argued for the rise of a global civil society and more specifically examined transnational networks as its core vectors, Fox and Brown (1998) and O’Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams (2000), which have respectively studied local and global social movements impacts in influencing multilateral organizations policies, Florini (2000) in seeing states policies changes on issues such as nuclear proliferation, landmines or dams under the action of civil society actors operating transnationally, and Martha’s Finnemore single or collaborative work on international norms setting ‘standards for the appropriate behavior of states’ (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1999: 253).

**Thesis 5: Globalization is a new opportunity structure for social action**

While aiming at showing that transnational civil networks matter in world politics, research has also emphasized the general conditions under which transnational mobilizations arise, and renew the validity of both Resource-mobilization and Policy process approaches, while also attempting at reconciling with New social movements perspectives prioritizing identity over strategic aspects of social action. They have generally aimed at refining these social movements theories which have been elaborated in domestic frameworks, by discussing their heuristic capabilities in global perspectives.

Until recently, identity and strategy approaches to social movements elaborated their frameworks in quasi-independence from each other. The New social movements approach argued essentially for a renewed culturalist and sociological analysis of the meaning of collective action on a plurality of identity-oriented issues, as suggested by the work of Alberto Melucci and Alain Touraine. On their side, Resource-mobilization and Policy-process theorists such as Sydney Tarrow, Charles Tilly or Mayer Zald, were more interested in the structural conditions under which social contention was likely to arise, how social actors were able to mobilize resources for successful mobilization, and with what political effects. In today’s most recent North-American publications on social movements theories in the global era, these two perspectives have been more happily reconciled, as shown in the works of Cohen and Arato (1992); Guidry, Kennedy and Zald (2000), or Morris and Mueller (1992), among others. This in part reflects the fact that culture and identity issues are increasingly part of the research agenda in International Relations, but also that social movements theorists have started considering the ideational, symbolic, cultural or identity dimensions of social movements resources and goals, because political, economic and organizational skills were not sufficient variables for understanding a variety of social mobilizations primarily labeling themselves in identity or symbolic terms. Thus, these scholars have expanded the notion of resources to include non-material dimensions, and have argued that globalization is fostering social movements resource-mobilization capacity by magnifying action at distance and catalyzing the re-emergence and construction of collective identities providing ‘frames of action’ operating at transnational scales of action (see particularly Guidry, Kennedy and Zald 2000, or Morris and Mueller 1992).

More specifically, such research lines on transnational civil networks have brought an important new concept for analyzing the prospects for political change in the global era, the notion of a transnational public sphere, which is in part coined by the argument about globalization as a new opportunity structure triggering social action to operate beyond national boundaries. In social movements theories, the POS refers to the structural conditions under which organized social mobilizations tend to arise (Tarrow 1998), and has been more specifically studied as a political system’s degree of vulnerability and receptivity to social mobilizations. Under globalization, states are said to be increasingly permeable to international and transnational influences and inducements, because of specific conditionalities
required by multilateral organizations and industrial countries’ aid programs in exchange for assistance, of corporate agents’ role in pressing for norms and regulations favoring their activities, or increased exposure to foreign actors’ scrutiny of media and information technologies. On the other side, non-state actors are said to have an increased capacity to play a role in domestic and world politics because of greater resources brought by faster and cheaper communication technologies and transportation, and of governments’ increased vulnerability to pressures coming from the ‘international community’ of which they are part through their participation in a vast array of institutions and regimes. Scholars such as Edwards and Gaventa (2001) have coined this process in the idea of an emerging framework for ‘global governance’ and wider ‘public disclosure and accountability’ to citizens concerns, mainly referring to ‘the rules, norms, and institutions that govern public and private behavior across national boundaries’ (Edwards and Gaventa 2001: 3), prevalingly defined by states and inter-states agencies, but increasingly involving corporate and civil actors. Others such as Guidry, Kennedy and Zald (2000) have preferred exploring a less normatively charged notion by pointing to the idea of a transnational public sphere under emergence, defined as a: ‘space in which both residents of distinct places (...) and members of transnational entities (...) elaborate discourses and practices whose consumption moves beyond national boundaries.’ (Guidry, Kennedy and Zald 2000: 6). A global public sphere would have been essentially invested until now by established international actors such as states, multilateral institutions and firms; however, transnational social actors are increasingly becoming part of the “world stage”, by introducing new issues and concerns for consideration. The work of Cohen and Arato (1992) on ‘deliberative’ and ‘communicative’ ethics for analyzing social movements, and of Guidry, Kennedy and Zald (2000) over the transnational public sphere as a real and conceptual place for local/national collective action to be transmitted across the globe, count among these.

This literature on transnational civil networks has made fundamental contributions to the theorizing of social movements and civil society actors in the global era, and provided a rich set of case studies and conceptual tools showing the importance of studying social actors in world politics. There is, however, one main shortcoming of most of this research: in emphasizing civil actors’ increasing opportunities for action and in identifying positive outcomes, it has tended to prioritize agency and has not paid as much attention to structure and procedural constraints. Globalization has mainly been examined as an opportunity structure, to the deficit of analyzing it as a source and a framework of constraints for social action. Little research has for instance convincingly showed the linkages between globalization, economic disruptions or impoverishment, and transnational social mobilizations. In fact, most research has stayed on the sunnier side of successful civil networks’ campaigning for principled values goals on which most reasonable observer would agree without much hesitation, such as the desirability of democracy, minimum standards for the respect for human rights, equity, or environmental quality norms. An interesting research question on economic globalization and grievances remains practically unaddressed in this literature. Furthermore, most previously cited research in the transnational civil networks line has importantly re-emphasized the role of ideas and values for understanding social dynamics in the global era; it has however, brought under less scrutiny the political dimensions of ideas, and has not necessarily questioned the extent to which conceptions that are becoming transnational over civil society, democracy, governance, the role of the state, and so forth, are certain liberal conceptions prevailing over others, and granted legitimacy by a set of international institutions. Which conceptions and who is granting them legitimacy? Is there any problem with having transnational civil society actors such as Civicus or Amnesty International promoting similar conceptions of democracy and civil society to those of the World Bank or the USAID? Are international funding agencies and northern NGOs sponsoring developing countries’ civil organizations campaigns engaging in a horizontal, egalitarian relationship and are there any processes of influence identifiable there? The literature addressed in the preceding section does not offer sufficient conceptual tools for addressing these potential questions of power dynamics and agenda negotiations between the different constituents of the civil networks under study.
Nevertheless, the preceding does not mean that there does not exist a more specific set of literature that addresses these questions. There is a growing research interest (such as Grugel 1999; Ottaway and Carothers 1999 or Tussie 1997) in assessing multilateral organizations, northern foundations and aid agencies’ willingness to engage with civil society organizations in developing countries, particularly in developmental studies and in what has come to be called research on the ‘Third Sector’. But most of these studies have concluded to the welcomed and inoffensive convergence of interests between northern sponsors and developing countries organizations, while a few dissenting voices have not ceased questioning the autonomy and cooptation of local southern actors, and their eventual alignment with sponsors’ interests and agendas (Hulme and Edwards 1997). Neo-Gramscian scholars such as William Robinson (1996) have also brilliantly examined U.S. aid programs’ recent record in promoting democracy in transition regimes, such as in the Philippines, Haiti, Nicaragua and Chile. Robinson questioned the extent to which such programs reflected U.S./transnational elites interests in the ‘consolidation of political systems that function through consensual mechanisms of social control’, and providing better guarantees on socio-political stability than does direct coercion (Robinson 1996: 37). In this, the promotion of ‘low-intensity’ versions of democracy worldwide, through U.S. aid programs, funding agencies and sponsored NGOs, may be placed in a framework emphasizing power as the ‘capacity to persuade’, and re-defining democracy promotion as part of a wider process of the exercise of hegemony. These insights offer important elements for the analysis of civil society transnational social processes, and bring back power as persuasion into consideration, while aiming at drawing the global political scenery in which civil networks may be increasingly operating by virtue of their important linkages with northern sponsoring foundations and domestic or foreign government aid programs.

III. The Local: Understanding globalization from social actors’ perspectives

A third perspective embedded in social anthropology examines globalization and transnationalism from the standpoint of local social actors changing practices, representations and identities projection. As reviewed in the following, some have pursued the opportunity structure hypothesis, showing for instance in the indigenous movements’ case in the Americas the extent to which ‘tribal villages’ are becoming part of the ‘global village’, local actors re-shaping their struggle under transnationalized identity politics for projecting their grievances into foreign publics’ attention (Brysk, 2000). Yet, others such as Mato (2001) are stretching further the step toward the renewal of grand theory, examining globalization from the perspective of social representations’ production, and proposing to consider that globalization is transforming how people understand the world, and re-orient their action along transnational lines.

Brysk (2000) is a compelling social anthropological analysis of the impacts of globalization on indigenous groups in the Americas, and the rise of a transnational indigenous movement in current world politics. Although Brysk does not explicitly claim it, her research is consistent with grievances theories, which score economic deprivation under neo-liberal reforms in developing countries as a major source for renewed collective social action on behalf of specifically vulnerabilized groups such as peasants, women, indigenous, and racial or religious minorities (see for instance Eckstein 1989/2001). On one side, she characterizes the rise of indigenous mobilizations transnationally articulated as an outcome of globalization on a powerless, ‘vulnerable, local and radically different population’, which mobilizes in response to the deterioration of its conditions of life. On the other side, she mainly emphasizes, in line with the framework previously addressed on ‘globalization as an opportunity structure’, the new avenues for solutions offered by transnational action to indigenous groups, toward empowerment and greater agency: ‘International penetration introduced new problems — but transnational contact sometimes offered new avenues for the solution of both domestic and global grievances.’ (Brysk 2000: 62) The theoretical framework she uses to demonstrate this falls in line with transnational civil networks theories; however, she brings further the analysis by contemplating local groups and organizations in their own grievances and strategies, as they interact with sympathetic foreign actors, allies and publics, and are
converging on a continental scale in a wider identity-oriented movement. Such an approach prioritizing the local for understanding the global, relying on ethnographic and life narratives methods, and privileging marginalized or vulnerable actors’ voices for understanding current social changes, is close to feminist scholarship standpoints’ theories, and more generally to the methods used for research on women’s mobilizations in Latin America and other developing regions (see for instance Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998).

**Thesis 6: Globalization inducts changes in collective representations and social practices**

The work of a group of Latin Americanists political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists George Yudice, Daniel Mato and Nestor García Canclini on social action in the global era, stands as a singular perspective on the theme in contention with the prevailing preceding complacent wisdoms on the possibilities for emancipation and social actors’ empowerment through globalization of action. These works, blending ethnographic methods, sociological conversational analysis, artistic and popular culture productions’ analysis, are powerful starting points allowing the conceptualization of globalization from social actors’ perspectives, in their everyday life representations and practices.

García Canclini (1999) has particularly argued for a cultural sociology of globalization through narrative vignettes exploring migrant people’s multiplying identities and loyalties in the global era, as well as processes of cultural hybridation through an analysis of entertainment industries’ production in Northern as in Latin America, or contemporary American and Latino art pieces representing melted boundaries, moving frontiers, and symbols syncretism. In a collective monograph on *Culture and Social transformations in times of globalization* published by the Latin American Council on Social Sciences (in Mato 2001), Daniel Mato invites further reflections in undertaking sociological and ethnographical studies on how representations on ideas such as ‘identity’, ‘culture’, ‘civil society’ and ‘citizenship’ are socially produced, and play a role in transforming social actors and orienting their practice. Mato suggests analyzing how global actors’ — such as the World Bank, the IADB, USAID, private foundations and international NGOs — are promoting their own set of social representations and practice orientations in their interaction with sponsored local actors, through the diffusion of ideas on the mentioned prevailing concepts in North-South cooperation. Mato and García Canclini both argue for an understanding of global civil society as an ‘imagined community’, whose contours can be drawn through inquiries on how global and local social actors are ‘seeing the world’, ‘interpreting their experience’ and ‘orienting their practice’. Such an invitation opens an important agenda in the current research on global civil society, such as comparing the diversity of representations of ideas on civil society across the range of actors part of transnational civil networks, or inquiring about local actors changing conceptions under increased interaction with foreign or global actors on a variety of mobilization issues, and analyzing processes of convergence and divergences among local to global actors’ discourses.

**Thesis 7: Globalization re-orient civil societies toward liberal market democracies**

An additional thesis related to research on globalization, culture and social changes formulates an interesting additional challenge to most preceding conjunctures proposed through this review, and provides support to the cautions formulated until now on the promises of globalizing civil society. Close to Mato and García Canclini research program, Yudice (1997) pins down the question of neo-liberal politics and economics’ coincidences with the renewal of optimistic ideas on civil societies worldwide. Similarly to Robinson (1996) who made the case more particularly regarding U.S. democracy promotion and civil society consolidation programs through aid policies, Yudice points to the argument of civil societies as *stabilizers* and *legitimacy-providers*, looking at current Latin American cases undergoing economic and political reforms. In this, the development of civil society in developing countries is desirable because of socio-political instability risks in times of reforms, and also because the development of a strong non-governmental private and civil sector allows governments to withdraw further from
service-providing activities that can be taken care of by firms or even less-costly, by NGOs. The argument is close to Marc Robinson and Gordon White’s (1997) work on the NGO sector as service-providing in times of neo-liberal reforms and under and ‘New Policy Agenda’ of northern aid policies promoting markets, low-intensity democracy and civil society. In this line, ‘the function of the State is to manage and not to eliminate civil society forces and then contain ‘ingovernability’ as demands for more democracy’ indicates Yudice (1997: 19). In this, a global civil society represents a framework for better governance in world politics, and stabilization possibilities in a system that would otherwise be more contentiously challenged.

Mato (1998 and 2002) elaborates a similar framework, building on the concepts of the microphysics of power and domination as cultural hegemony, for analyzing Latin American civil societies’ transnational transformation in the global era. He offers conceptual tools to help analyze the ‘increasing political currency of the idea of civil society’ in local and world politics, as an illustration of the importance of transnational relations held between local and global agents. Importantly, he dismisses conspiracy theories and misled readings on global agents imposing their representations; however global agents are neither neutral nor representing universal interests, and they are based in specific societies, and characterized by particular institutional purposes in which certain governments may have a particular voice. If from one side Mato argues for getting a fuller picture of power configurations in which transnational social processes are embedded, he also explicitly indicates that comprehensive research of the microphysics of transnational reorganization of civil societies contemplates an inquiry on the mechanisms of adoption, adaptation, co-production, appropriation, conflict and active resistance, to ideas articulating certain social representations circulating between global and local actors. Such a research program is a huge and important task: it is nothing less than a critical inquiry on civil society as a neo-liberal ideational construct, and a lubricant for the disciplinary reorganization of the world along market democracies.

Conclusion: Operationalizing the globalization of social action into further research

The preceding literature review tracked seven distinct theoretical trends thinking about global society, from the global, the transnational, and the local perspectives. Given the current blossoming of the literature on this theme, many more theses or trends could have been added to this review. I did not however pretend it to be such an exhaustive exercise, and have opted instead for offering an analytical typology for further research. Also and as most works contemplated in this review show, these three levels of analysis do not stand in complete isolation from one to the other; they operate more as standpoints from which to start the analysis of a complex set of transversal processes compressing the distance between the local and the global. Overall, these different approaches are converging in a widely shared project showing that social action is becoming transnational, and that it is transforming the ways and means by which social actors understand and experience the world. This recalled, the analytical task of assessing the impacts of such changes for most social sciences disciplines is still wide open to a number of possible research agendas.

I also attempted to show through this review that the attacks on the concept of global civil society as a vague, useless or high-flown theoretical notion, are unfounded. Scholars working on global civil society are using quite precise terms for pinning down the concept of global civil society; however, these features may vary from one approach to the other, and most research has abandoned the idea of wanting to undress global society for detailed medical examination, for discussing more concretely the existence of important social transnational processes indicating a general pattern of globality. This is fair enough. The preceding text also deliberately stayed within a theoretical discussion, without necessarily operationalizing further each approach research agenda. Based on the critical frameworks exposed in theses 3, 6 and 7, where I situate my own theoretical standpoint, I will suggest a few avenues here.
The first two theses on globalization as either a process fostering the constitution of values-sharing global citizen community, or the convergence of local resistances toward a wide counter-movement, can be translated into an inquiry about activists from distinct places discourses on engaging with foreign allies and interlocutors, in significant contexts where such discourses may occupy a particular importance, such as in anti-globalization meetings. A typology of these discourses through the identification of key-terms as they are defined by actors, and ‘repertorization’ of protests action, may help organize the analysis, and set a framework for replicability. The higher the number of cases contemplated, the more exhaustive the analysis in tracking down patterns and drawing a general picture identifying regularities, convergences, diversities and divergences. But even a single-case study on one anti-globalization meeting may offer a good basis for further comparative and large number of cases inquiries.

On an operational basis, a Gramscian research program on global society as a counter-hegemonic force would suggest undertaking content analysis and (archival or interviews) discourse analysis of activists, citizens not necessarily organizing, as well as public opinion leaders, medias and political elites’ views on global social action, in order to identify discourses for change and status quo discourses, and evaluate if the former are overwhelming the latter and if they constitute as such a shared global ‘worldview’ among challengers. A cross-countries comparative study would be the most indicative in here.

Transnational civil networks’ theses on norms change in world politics, and globalization as a new opportunity structure for social action have already been supported by a number of case-studies on issues campaigned for by transnational civil networks. However the power differentiation between the different constituents of such networks and the dynamics of adaptation, adoption, co-production, appropriation, conflict and resistance occurring in many points of the networks where social interaction exists (as Mato 2001 suggests), are far from being exhaustively studied. Similarly, the argument on norms changes in world politics still fails to contemplate the question over the type of norms that are likely to be granted legitimacy and consideration, where do they come from, and which are those that are omitted in the conversations with multilateral organizations and foundations. Such questions would require extensive fieldwork interviews with most members of selected successful and unsuccessful transnational civil networks, and even a genealogical or historical analysis of the emergence of prevalent norms advocated by global social actors in world politics. Robinson’s (1996) framework on democracy promotion could be usefully applied here to the notion of civil society promoted through U.S based foundations, government aid programs and NGOs, while examining democracy promotion and civil society consolidation as ways to ‘relieve pressure from subordinate groups for more fundamental political, social and economic change’ (Robinson 1996: 6). Such a critical analysis would provide the missing background in most of transnational civil networks theories, by placing social networks in political relational and global context.

Finally, most of the literature discussed here omitted one important question: while arguing for the idea that globalization has transformed the way social actors engage in mobilizations and understand their possibilities and constraints for action, most research contemplated in this review has selected cases of transnational civil networks which are mobilizing for international or global issues often going beyond their own states’ jurisdiction, which offer most likely cases where globalization and social action could be more explicitly singled out. However, in doing this, this research did not convincingly show or even ask if the globalization or transnationalization of social action affected all, most or only some actors from local to global politics. Is the globalization of social action a phenomenon reserved to a few activists who can afford to go global? What about Third World countries’ activists? Are activists located in the most remote places also becoming global? How is globalization affecting local social action? How are activists mobilizing for local issues understanding their possibilities of action in a globalizing world? Is transnationalism making any difference for them and how? In International Relations at least, understanding globalization from Third World’s perspectives is not very much part of the established research agenda. Nevertheless, a more complete theory on social action in the global era would have to
contemplate these issues, not only theoretically, but also empirically, by tracking cases in peripheral and remote locations where activists are eventually engaging transnationally, and understanding these changes if any in a historical, case-specific and contextual perspective, in order to better understand how globalization is transforming, empowering and constraining social action in the current era. Many cases of developing countries regions or localities experiencing a current or recent greater exposure to transnational activism may be analyzed; even one single-case analysis could helpfully set a precedent for further replicable research.

For the sake of concluding this overview of the literature on global civil society, I must add that there is a great and creative task in moving beyond theoretical speculations for engaging with practice and outlining the validity, usefulness and heuristic capacity of existing theoretical frameworks, as well as refining and relaying them with new facts and interpretations grounded in empirical research. Global society has by now a great conceptual existence. What about it in the everyday life practice of people in various parts of the world?

End Notes:

1 In international relations, the “global” and the “transnational” are held as two distinct levels-of-analysis. Generally, scholars refer to the term “transnational” for interactions between actors located in distinct national spaces, of which one is a least a non-governmental actor (Keohane and Nye 1972). In the case of research on social movements and civil society in the global era, transnationalism also refers to the idea of “social action [going] beyond state borders” (Guidry, Kennedy and Zald 2000). On globalization and at the global level —of analysis, conceptual consensus is more difficult to reach, both in this discipline and in other fields of the social sciences. Although many purists may not agree in considering cultural, sociological or political dimensions to globalization (as more than just a process of increased economic and financial integration on the world scale), renowned sociologists such as Giddens (2000) have defined globalization as “action at distance”, while Ulrich Beck (2000) refers to the intensification of reciprocal dependencies on a planetary scale, and Roland Robertson (1990) proposed the now famous phrase of “the world as a single place”.

2 Critically assessing the work of Putnam and discussing main approaches on civil society in the modern liberal worldview, see Foley and Edwards (1996 and 1998).

3 According to USAID: “‘civil society’ is the term that best describes the nongovernmental, not-for-profit, independent nature of the organizations that allow for (…) broad citizen participation.” While the term “non-governmental organizations” tended to be in use from 1945 until recently, USAID used in 1998 the term of “civil society organizations” (CSOs), which, interestingly, is currently the expression increasingly adopted among activists and the international aid community. USAID sees CSOs’ roles as advocacy groups helping to “give people a voice in the process of formulating public policies” (USAID 1998: 15). The Agency defines CSOs as made of human rights groups, professional associations, religious institutions, pro-democracy groups, environmental activist organizations, media organizations, and think tanks.

4 For Bobbio (1988), Gramsci introduces a major innovation on Marxism analysis on civil society, by considering civil society as part of the superstructural sphere, but distinct from political society, which corresponds to the State. Gramsci defines civil society as the following: “What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural ‘levels’: the one that can be called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or ‘the State’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises through-out society, and on the other hand to that of ‘direct domination’ or rule exercised through the State and the juridical government.” (Bobbio 1988: 82, citing Gramsci’s Selections from the Prison Notebooks). This notion of a civil society distinct from the State is not all that clear in Gramsci work, Bobbio noting for instance that in some other passages, civil
society is considered as another aspect of the State or as the “hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group which did not have its own apparatus”. Hegemony in here meaning essentially cultural leadership, which is further explained in another selection on defining civil society as: “the political and cultural hegemony which a social group exercises over the whole of society, as the ethical content of the State” (Bobbio 1988: 84, citing Gramsci’s Pasato e Presente). This notion of civil society as reproducing hegemony will be developed further in the critique section of Neo-gramscians’ conceptions of global social movements as counter-hegemonic.

This notion of civil society outside the state is not that antagonistic to liberals’ wisdoms, although their conclusions widely differ (from one side, civil society as a counterweight to the state, and the other, as a “school” for governance). Some theorists preoccupied by the political variable have argued that both definitions are omitting the importance of political association, which freedom in Tocqueville’s view allowed to avoid “either despotism of parties nor the arbitrary rule of a prince” (Foley and Edwards 1996: 44, have made this point by proposing to consider that “political association is in practice the mother of civil association”). This objection is valid in theory but more delicate in practice: international aid and multilateral organizations support in theory political pluralism and autonomy from the state, but are generally not prone to overtly fund political associations, avoiding then to be perceived as interfering on domestic affairs.

Assessing transnational social movements’ political impacts shows to be a difficult task, for reasons involving the reluctance of contemporary social scientists in claiming causalities where it shows more appropriate to identify correlations or relationships of influence. Although Keck and Sikkink (1998: 201) have offered a useful typology for understanding transnational social networks’ political impacts (ranging from “discursive commitments” to actual policy change), more interpretive-oriented research has stressed the idea that social mobilization processes needed to be studied before addressing the question of their political outcomes. In this line, see for instance David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford’s (1992) piece on “collective action frames” and the construction of legitimate meanings through social action; or Cynthia Cockburn’s (2000) study on women from distinct nationalities sharing and learning from their respective war experiences.

According to Gunder Frank and Fuentes (1990), anti-systemic movements are social movements struggling against or challenging the system, or one of its aspects. Here the idea of system refers to the capitalist world-economy as a totality, and the location of social actors within one of the three zones (center, periphery, semi-periphery).

Various authors have observed that Marx was never particularly keen to the idea of civil society, which he placed in the structural sphere. Fowley and Edwards (1998: 9) citing Marx’s “On the Jewish Question”: civil society is essentially the arena where the human being “acts as a private individual, regards other men as means, degrades himself into a means and become a plaything of alien powers.” Bobbio’s (1988: 92) reading of Gramsci indicates that the conquest of hegemony precedes the conquest of power.

Quoting a 1995 paper from David Ronfeld at the Rand Corporation, Yudice (1997: 18) outlines the following: “civil society is a space in which contradictions are reconciled and the deformations generated by the market are eased” (my translation). In this conservative perspective, civil society opposing neoliberalism through global mobilizations is benefiting market society, precisely because the “excesses of the market” are corrected, and the system is further stabilized and legitimized. Therefore, global civil society ends up promoting the interests of capital.

Michael Lipsky (1968), Resource-Mobilization founding theorists in the late 60’s, suggests that an extensive analysis of the POS would consider the degree of openness or closure of the State, the stability or divisions of elite alignments, the presence or absence of elite allies, and the state's capacity and propensity for repression.
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