In the present age of globalization, social representations and institutions are not shaped in isolated social spaces, but through transnational processes with the intense participation of both "global" and "local" agents. In this paper I discuss the practices of the Inter-American Development Bank, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other "global agents" in promoting specific representations of ideas of "civil society" in Latin America, as well as the ways in which they are appropriated by certain "local" agents. The cases show how representations of ideas of “civil society” and “third sector” are often conflated, what is revealing of the association of the incorporation of this vocabulary to reforms promoted from neoliberal perspectives. Among other measures, these reforms promote the shrinking of state apparatus and the decrease of state social expenditures, which clearly tell us they are not “simply” economic reforms, but at the same time social and political. This paper particularly draws from experiences in Argentina and Venezuela.

"Civil Society" Organizations, Global Agents and the Transnational Social Making of Representations

A worldwide wave of processes for the (re)organization of the so called "civil societies" has taken place since the struggles of Solidarity and other Eastern European movements in

Beyond national and regional specificities, two significant commonalities have been shared by all these movements. The first of these commonalities is the very use of the expression "civil society;" which is in itself a significant issue because, as we know, this expression is not a "natural element," but a specific socially produced symbolic representation that has emerged from specific social experiences. Nevertheless, this expression is being used as if it were a universal feature of human societies.

The impressive current worldwide diffusion of the expression "civil society" should at least stimulate our analytical curiosity. In this regard, the second commonality becomes particularly significant: the participation of certain kinds of organizations in almost all these processes. As we will see immediately, these common organizations have been the multilateral banks, some bilateral cooperation agencies, and some international foundations and non-governmental organizations. Because of the worldwide (or at least continental) scope of their action, I name these agents "global agents."

My argument is that these “global agents” play significant roles in promoting their own representations of ideas of civil society at a worldwide scale. Although these representations are diversely appropriated in different social contexts, they have anyway been particularly influential in those contexts, because they have usually been accompanied by funding for development projects, and/or to “strengthen of civil society.”
Several prominent global agents hold programs “strengthening civil societies” in Latin America. Among others, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the World Bank (WB), the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), other U.N. agencies, the Unites States Agency for International Development (USAID), other "Northern" governments' bilateral agencies, large private foundations, and non-governmental organizations. We also have to include in the list certain agents of “hybrid” nature, which budgets are in part endowed by their national governments or the mainstream political parties. For example, the National Democratic Institute and the National Republican Institute, from the United States, as well as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation from Germany. (see for example: Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Daubon 1995, Inter-American Development Bank 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Kay Michele 1995; National Democratic Institute 1995; Partners of the Americas 1995; Quigley 1995; Rabotnikof 2001; Samuels 1995, Waterman 2001, Zghal, Abdelkader et Ahmed ladh Ouederni 1997)

Many of these global agents support local and country level programs for what they consider the strengthening of "civil society." They also sponsor or directly organize transnational meetings that have been instrumental for the initiation of new and the development of already existent transnational networks. These networks usually involve both global and diverse kinds of domestic agents. Some of these networks and meetings involve organizations from all over the world, others are more regionally focused. These meetings and networks are informed by, and contribute to, the advancement of certain specific representations of the idea of "civil society." They are social spaces for the production, co-production, or appropriation of specific social representations of the idea of “civil society.”
Depending on the cases through these meetings the idea of civil society is associated to other significant political ideas, particularly to those of “citizenship,” “the third sector,” “social participation,” “democracy,” and “civic education.”

In order to make these meetings and networks possible, specific agents take the initiative, and fund the participation of those other agents that do not have economic means to participate. Interestingly, those who take the initiative, assure the funding, and directly or vicariously organize the meetings and resulting networks are “global agents,” and those who are invited, and get funding to assist, usually are organizations from so called “Third World” countries. Interviews made to participant and organizing individuals have allowed me to learn that through these means, global agents are who set the agendas of these meetings, and establish the system of inclusions and exclusions. As a consequence of this, the representations of the idea of civil society from which the meetings and networks are built are those of these “global agents.” This does not necessarily imply that their representations will necessarily influence the agendas of the whole, but as we will see through a few examples they come to play crucial roles.

As a first example, I would like to comment briefly about the case of one significant transnational meeting held outside Latin America. It is the case of the meeting named "Civitas@Prague.1995: Strengthening Citizenship and Civic Education. East and West," which was held in Prague in 1995, with the participation of more than 400 participants from 52 countries. As a product of this gathering, a transnational network of activists of civic education was created. Civitas was conceived by seven U.S. based organizations, and received the support of the United States Information Agency (USIA), and the U.S. Department of Education (Civitas 1995: 2).
This meeting mainly oriented to facilitate the encounter between representatives of Eastern European organizations, and other representatives mainly from the U.S. and Western Europe, also included the participation of two Latin American NGOs --one of them the Argentine “civic association” Conciencia.

With regard to my former remarks about the roles play by these kinds of meetings and networks it may be significant to consider a suggestive interpretation of the Civitas meeting in Prague offered by the Deputy Director of USIA. He said: '[Civitas] was one of those events where a collection of people realizes that it has become a community ... The declaration signed by representatives of fifty-two countries called upon governments and international organizations "to make civic education a higher priority on the international agenda," and pledged the participants to create and maintain a worldwide network that will work toward this end.' (Civitas 1995:1).

Interestingly, a new Civitas encounter was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1996. This new meeting was conceived at a Pan-American level. Conciencia, the Argentine civic association that participated in the meeting at Prague, and which, since then, is also represented at the Civitas' International Committee, played a key role in the organization of this new event, which was named the Pan-American Civitas. This new Civitas meeting, like the former, had the support of USIA. USIA's officers contacted whoever they considered to be potential participants from every involved country, and also took charge of their expenses. Other global agents also participated in the meeting, among others: UNESCO, USAID, NDI, IADB, OAS, and the European Commission. The meeting was attended by representatives of NGOs from almost every Latin American country (except
A good number of U.S. based NGOs also participated in the meeting, as well as representatives of NGOs from three Eastern European countries, four African countries, two Asian countries, Turkey and Canada. Some of the deputies in charge of education in three Latin American countries, Jamaica, and the United States were also represented at the meeting, as well as, professors of about twenty academic institutions from Latin America and the U.S. This meeting was attended by six representatives from Venezuela, one of them a member of the School of Neighbors. I will further discuss the cases of both Conciencia and the School of Neighbors in the following pages.

But beforehand, it is worth mentioning the case of the "Conference on Strengthening Civil Society" held in Washington D.C. in September of 1994, which was convened by the Inter American Development Bank. This meeting was oriented to address the issue of strengthening civil society in connection to the ongoing neo-liberal oriented economic reforms, and the associated shrinking of the state in Latin America. Some of the participants were representatives of the UNDP, USAID, OAS. There were also representatives of governments and “civic organizations” from Latin America. The Summary Report of this Conference significantly states that: "Although the strengthening of civil society is a fundamentally domestic process set against widely differing and specific circumstances, it needs to be supported by the international community" (Inter-American Development Bank, 1994: 3).

The Report also makes explicit the connection between the Bank’s economic concerns and its new interest in "strengthening civil society": "There is a close relationship between modernization and reform of the State and the strengthening of civil society ... " (Inter-
American Development Bank, 1994b: 4-5). This is not the opportunity to discuss in detail the activities of the Bank’s Civil Society Unit, but its creation as well as the activities it has organized since then show a close association of the use of the idea of civil society to the idea of modernization of the state, as well as a conflation between the ideas of civil society and third sector.

The case is that this 1994 Conference had meaningful consequences for the promotion of the idea of civil society in Latin America. On the one hand, it was an important step for launching specific programs on the matter (see Inter-American Development Bank 1996). On the other, it seems to have had a great impact in the consciousness and practices of significant agents in Latin America, as we will see with regard to the case of the already named Argentine organization, Conciencia.

**About the transnational experiences of some Latin American civic organizations**

It seems useful to complement the former narration about global meetings with the views of some representatives of domestic organizations from Latin America who have participated in those meetings and/or in other similar experiences and related networks. What follows is based on interviews I have made to representatives of four organizations --two from Argentina, and two from Venezuela.

The Venezuelan organization *Escuela de Vecinos (School of Neighbors)* is a small civic organization that has developed a very important work in strengthening civil society at a national level. The School’s leadership concedes special importance to what they name "international relations" and the "internationalization of the School." Several of its leaders regularly travel abroad to link the School internationally, learning about other countries’ experiences, and presenting its experience to foreign audiences. The U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) has recently financed a School’s project to strengthen "citizen participation" in electoral processes at a national level. In connection with this project,
the NDI has also made possible for some School's representatives to teach courses and participate in related experiences in other Latin American countries. More recently, it has also sponsored the "III International Meeting: Civil Society and Electoral Reform" held in Caracas in November of 1996, which was organized by the School with the support of a couple of Venezuelan governmental agencies. The School's experience with the NDI is not unique, for example a representative of the School has also participated in the already mentioned Pan-American Civitas meeting held in Buenos Aires.

Elías Santana, a founder of the School and one of its leaders, explained to me that:

'Since the beginning of this decade we decided to contact [people] with [similar] experiences in other countries as well as to organize our experience in order to share it abroad. In fact, we name the year 1996 as the "Year of the Internationalization of the School." In only 18 months we have been represented in 16 countries by 12 different individuals. [...] During our two most recent assemblies each "traveler" has told her/his experience abroad and formulated recommendations based upon it.' [my translation, D.M.].

In this sense, Mr. Santana stressed these exchanges abroad have particularly motivated and enriched their own experience. In particular through sharing transnational meetings with comparable organizations from various Latin American countries.

When I asked Andrés Cova, also one of the School's leaders, if he considered that his ideas about civil society had been affected by his international exchanges, he answered:

"Of course. We have the very fact of speaking of "civil society," for a start. We
did not talk of civil society before the '90s. The expression civil society is in Venezuela an idiom of the '90s. ... Before 1990, or 1991, we did not speak of civil society, we did only speak of non-governmental." [my translation, D.M.]

Significantly, the majority of the international exchanges in which Mr. Cova and his colleagues have participated have been organized or at least supported by some significant global agents --i.e, the United States Agency for Development, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

Andrés Cova's assessment about the incorporation of the term "civil society" in Venezuelan public vocabulary becomes even more significant when considered in connection with the case of Centro al Servicio de la Acción Popular (CESAP). CESAP has employed the expression "popular" in its very name since the 1970s, and has since then framed its practice in relation to the word "pueblo" (used in its context to name mainly the economically poor strata of society). Interestingly, CESAP has begun to use the expressions "gente" (the generic expression to name people from any economic strata) and "civil society" since about the 1990s. Importantly, the former remark is not mine but of at that time CESAP's president, Mr. Janssens, who also suggests that this change may be related primarily to the incorporation of the term in the Venezuelan context, and secondly to CESAP's exchanges with other countries' organizations --particularly Latin American organizations. He also emphasized their exchange with church related donor agencies from Europe and the Inter-American Foundation from the United States.

Conciencia, the already mentioned Argentine civic association that has organized the Pan-
American Civitas meeting, has been strongly connected to similar organizations in Latin America, and, as the formerly mentioned organizations, has also received funding from the USAID, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

During a round of interviews I made to several leaders of Conciencia, Mrs. Marie Luise Martín de Gorleri, one of the Board members, emphasized the significance of the roles play by some international sponsors in stimulating the formation of networks around certain issues.

I also interviewed Mrs. María Rosa de Martini, at that time Conciencia's Vicepresident, and former president, and who has participated in both the Civitas@Prague.95 meeting and the 1994 IADB meeting on Strengthening Civil Society. When I requested Mrs. De Martini her opinion regarding the significance of the roles played by global agents and the meetings and networks they sponsor in promoting the idea of "civil society," she immediately said: "Of course," and continued saying:

[Before, we talked in terms of] voluntary associations, I think that it was the United Nations who begun naming them non-governmental organizations [...] in my memory some 15 or 20 years ago [...]; civil society: there was a conference organized by the Inter-American Development Bank held in Washington in 1994 [...] that was very important [...]. [We still talked in terms of] non-governmental organizations, and when I came back [from that conference], I remember very clearly, that we were here in a meeting of our organization's board, and I said to my colleagues: Well, the new key idea is the strengthening of civil society." [my translation, interview of 09/16/97]
In Mrs. De Martini experience the expression "civil society" was a new name and idea with which she got in contact in the mentioned conference organized by the Inter-American Development Bank in 1994. Most probably, she and her colleagues, as most contemporary leaders of these organizations in Latin America, were not familiar with theoretical bibliography on this idea, nor with the usage the Latin American left made of it in the 1960s, and early 1970s. Nevertheless, the fact is that her perception on the matter is very significant, because of the important influence that her organization has had both in Argentine, and, through networks, in Latin America. As she explained to me, the importance of this "new" expression is that it has allowed related organizations to visualize what since then they have begun to name "the sector" (this means “the Third Sector”) in its vast largeness. This, in turn, allows them building alliances and formulating politics in ways that were not conceivable before.

When I asked about the incorporation of the term "civil society" to Ms. Silvia Uranga, current Conciencia's president, she said:

"We often do projects with foreign foundations. Through this, one begins to know certain expressions, which become kind of familiar keywords, or, ... you see, one begins to name things in a different form. I tell you, when we begun to speak of civil society nobody understood about what we were talking. By that time, when we sent our message to our affiliates in the rest of the country they often argued about it. But the good thing is that the term has demonstrated that the sector is important. That is, the term has helped us [...] to define something that already existed." [my translation, interview of 09/16/97].
With regard to the experience of Conciencia of Buenos Aires with its sister organizations in the rest of the country, it is interesting to consider the ideas of Julia de Soria, at the time of the interview the director of Conciencia of the city of Córdoba. She said: “We began to name ourselves as civil society the first time that we were in a training workshop. Because this also depends on organisms that do training, they put labels to voluntary work. It was at the beginning of the coming of the democracy. When our country began to be related to foreign organizations, then we began there to receive this new name. Now, with more strength than ever, since four or five years ago, when in our country was created the Forum of the Social Sector [...]” [interview made by the Maria Cristina Dalmagro (2000:4), on 12/17/99, Italics are from the author; my translation, D.M.].

In these declarations it is interesting to note not only “how” the idea of civil society was adopted, but also the passage from the idea of “voluntary work.” As more recently the association of the idea of “civil society” to the idea of “Third Sector.”

And when I asked Ms. Uranga about the importance she attributed to her experiences abroad. She told me:

"One acquires capacitation, personal knowledge ..., personal ties ..., and also a common language that it is very important in this globalized world ..., and, well, it also generates a commitment." [my translation, interview of 09/16/97]

Finally, let us briefly discuss aspects of the interviews I made to members of Poder Ciudadano (Citizen Power), which is another important civic organization from Argentine. As the other
organizations reviewed in this paper, *Poder Ciudadano* also receives funding from several global agents and participates in several networks, among others the *Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy* which receives support from USAID. It is significative that when I requested the opinion of Ms. Varsky, a project coordinator at *Poder Ciudadano*, about this paper’s hypothesis in regards to the significance of global agents in spreading the idea of civil society and other related ideas, she immediately answered: "Clearly," and put the mentioned Network as a significant example.

Mr. Roberto Saba, Executive Director of *Poder Ciudadano* at that time, answered my question saying: "Yes, I share your hypothesis," to which he added that he knew the cases of several individuals who currently held salient positions in the field of civil society in Argentina and who, at the begining of the 1990s, were asking him what civil society meant. Certainly, there were also some specialists who knew and used the expression from well before. He told me this anecdote to illustrate how recently this wording had been acquired and was used significantly in Argentine sociopolitical life, and then pointed out the following:

"It was by the mid eighties when the ideas of civil society and citizenship begun to come from anywhere. Then, they became mixed with another concept that was also imported, that of third sector, or independent sector. Notably a confusion also developed that lead to take third sector and civil society as the same thing. Similarly, current initiatives to elaborate legislation favoring the development of the third sector also come from abroad." [my translation, interview of 09/18/97]

When I asked Mr. Saba about how financial links between Latin American civic organizations and global agents affect the spread of the ideas of civil society and related others he said:
"The issue of financing is very important. Most of these organizations have not been able to self-financing their activities, they receive foreign support. There is much foreign influence in the origin of these organizations. It is a positive influence, I am not of those who believes in the idea of a conspiracy. I believe that there are happy coincidences. I believe that there have been convergences of interests. For example, it has been fortunate that in a certain moment the interests of the Argentine group of people who created Poder Ciudadano have coincided with the objectives of the agenda of the United States Agency for International Development. As a result of such a coincidence of interests a project of citizenship control of corruption has happily been possible. [...] It is not that we [Latin American civic organizations] change our agendas in order to obtain foreign support. What we often have to do is altering our agendas' order of priority, the order of priority of our projects. [...] It is not that we sell our souls to the devil, but that we have to change the order of priorities." [my translation, interview of 09/18/97].

Final Remarks

The examples formerly offered illustrate about the role of transnational networks constituted by domestic and global agents in increasing the legitimacy of certain social representations of the idea of “civil society”

There is a possible matter of misinterpretation, which I consider necessary to address: the existence and significance of these networks and global agents cannot be interpreted in terms of
simplistic assumptions of domination or imperialism. My findings discussed here, as well as in former publications, show that the transnational production of social representations, are complex social processes, and usually involve experiences of learning, co-production, appropriation, adaptation, re-elaboration, negotiations and other dynamic ways of interaction between social agents in heterogeneous contexts (Mato 1995, 1996, 2001a, 2001b)

There is, however, an important issue about "global agents" that I want to stress. This is that, contrary to certain assumptions that have come to constitute a basic common sense for not a few people, "global agents" are not "de-territorialized," neither do they represent universal interests. Whether they are governmental or non-governmental, some of these global agents are "domestic" in regard to certain societies (mostly to the U.S., Canada, Japan, or Western European countries), and therefore, their representations and associated agendas and practices are dependent upon conflicts and negotiations mainly---but not only---related to those societies. For instance, these agents' agendas and budgets are tied to public opinion, and government instances and bureaucracies. Other global agents are multilateral banks in which decision-making relies on the representatives of just a few countries. They and the officers they have hired have great influence in defining the institutional representations and agendas. In any case, their institutional representations and agendas inform their practices and particularly their actions regarding what they name “the strengthening of civil societies.”

In the cases of other global agents, like the U.N. system and other international organizations, the representations that inform their practices result from more complex systems of conflicts and negotiations, which --depending on the cases-- are generally more related to diverse domestic contexts, as well as to transnational networks of experts, and therefore on their epistemic and theoretical shared believes. The importance of this fact has been recognized by some global organizations’ officers, not only in some personal interviews that I have made to them, but even in
their published writings (i.e.: Carrol 1992:153; Moseley-Williams, 1994: 55). Still, we cannot ignore that some global agents are foreign government agencies like USAID, and its Canadian and Western European countries equivalents, whose missions and restrictions are politically established by the respective governments. Moreover, the influence of these countries' governments go beyond the direct activities of their own state agencies, because some of them also grant funds that make an important part of the budgets of some transnational non-governmental organizations. These funds can only be disbursed for certain purposes, and the organization must observe certain rules and restrictions posed by these governments. Similarly, many transnational NGOs have now become just subcontractors of USAID and the World Bank. Thus, the projects of these NGOs are to a good extent predefined by these bilateral cooperation or multilateral banking agents, not by the subcontracted NGOs, and even less by "local" agents. Although the rhetoric of global agents often stress that the views of "local" agents are taken into account in the design of the project, the strong limitations of this "participation" have been recognized even in World Bank documents (e.g., Clark 1991, Salmen and Eaves 1991, Tendler 1982). As a consequence, these projects are informed by certain global agents' representations and do reinforce certain social representations in local communities.

Generalizations in this regard are not possible, each global agent must be considered a potential case study, and conflicts within each organization must also be taken into account. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the cases discussed in this paper clearly speak about the importance of certain global agents in the transnational production of ideas of “civil society.”

Notes

(1) I use the expression "global agents" to name those agents that develop their practices at a worldwide scale, or at least at a continental scale --which contrast with the cases of both "domestic agents," which develop their practices at a single country level, and of "local agents," which develop their practices mainly at local level. When it is not relevant to
underline the difference between "domestic" and "local" agents, I use the expression "local agents" to name the range of agents that develop their practices from local to nationwide level. Although local and domestic agents increasingly engage transnationally in working relationships with both global and foreign local and domestic agents this is not their main purpose. Given that involvement one cannot think of “local” and “global” agents as separate entities, therefore, these names have to be seen only as part of an analytical vocabulary. I have discussed a typology of both global and local, domestic and non-domestic agents in a former article (Mato 1997), and have more deeply discussed the relationship between “the global” and “the local” in other articles (Mato 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001a, 2001b)

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