Global Civil Society
Global Civil Society
An Answer to War

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Preface

In a lecture at the London School of Economics in October 1999, Adam Michnik pointed out that everyone claims responsibility for the end of the Cold War:

Whenever I happen to consider that topic – why Communism failed – I know that in Washington, everybody is sure that Communism failed as a result of the American policy – how else?... Whenever I am in the Vatican, it seems perfectly clear that Communism fell as a result of the activities of the Apostolic See and John Paul II, our pope... Whenever I am in Asia, I have no doubts that Communism was lost in Afghanistan. That it was just there where the Soviet Union broke its teeth. And whenever I am in Moscow, it is absolutely obvious to me that Communism was toppled by Russians, the only thing that remains unclear being whether it was by Gorbachev or Yeltsin. And finally, we Poles know and are convinced that it was we who toppled Communism and that the world received freedom from Communism from us, as a gift.

This book has its starting point in the debates and dialogue between the West European peace movement and the East European opposition in the 1980s, in which I was deeply engaged and which has left a lasting imprint on my political understanding. While we in the peace movement did not think that we were responsible for the fall of communism we did feel that we had played a part and that, in the subsequent triumph of neoliberal-
ism, our part was written out of history. The ideas that we developed at that time and the efforts we made to influence the behaviour of governments and international institutions were both about democratization and human rights and about peace and international security. Indeed, we believed that these issues were deeply interconnected since the organization of states for war constituted a profound limitation on democracy. The idea of a ‘transcontinental movement of citizens’, in the words of E. P. Thompson, was the genesis of the notion of global civil society.

Subsequently, I and others tried to put these ideas into practice in the Helsinki Citizens Assembly – a network of groups and individuals, whose aim was to create a pan-European civil society. We found ourselves confronting a very different world. If the Cold War of 1945–89 was actually experienced as a kind of peace, albeit an oppressive peace, then the Orwellian post-Cold War peace is actually experienced as war, not only in the Balkans or Africa but in the urban ghettos of the new global cities. We found that global civil society did not only include human rights and peace groups like us but also new nationalist and fundamentalist groups and, as the 1990s drew to a close, a new radical anti-capitalist movement as well.

Since 1999, I have been able to spend time reading and thinking about these issues and discussing ideas with my colleagues in the Global Civil Society programme. Thus this book is the product both of activism and analysis and I should like to thank all those, who are too numerous to mention, who were involved in the dialogue of the 1980s, the Helsinki Citizens Assembly in the 1990s as well as my colleagues both at Sussex and LSE, from whom I have learned such a lot.

I am especially grateful to David Held, who proposed and promoted the project, to Meghnad Desai, who read the manuscript twice and was always ready to stop everything to help think an argument through, and to Jo Hay for moral and administrative support. I am also grateful to all those who read and commented on all or parts of the manuscript and who discussed the ideas with me, including Nancy Cartwright, Mient Jan Faber, Marlies Glasius, Julian Robinson and Yahia Said. Finally, I want to thank everyone at Polity, including the anonymous readers, who were all unfailingly helpful.

Chapter 3 is based on a lecture I gave at the London School of Economics in October 1999 in a series called The Ideas of 1989/
Earlier versions have been published in *Transnational Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Fall 1999); and in R. Falk, L. E. J. Ruiz and R. B. J. Walker (eds), *Reframing the International: Law, Culture, Politics* (Routledge, 2002).
Abbreviations

ATT AC  Action pour une Taxe Tobin d’Aide aux Citoyens
BJP    Bharatiya Janata Party
CARE   Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere
CBO    community building organization
CSCE   Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
DRC    Democratic Republic of Congo
END    European Nuclear Disarmament
FIDESZ Young Democrats, now Hungarian Civic Party
GRO    grass roots organization
ICC    International Criminal Court
ICRC   International Committee of the Red Cross
ICT    information and communications technology
IMF    International Monetary Fund
INF    intermediate nuclear weapons
INGO   international non-governmental organization
KLA    Kosovo Liberation Army
MSF    Médecins sans Frontières
Nato   North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO    non-governmental organization
NMD    national missile defense
OECD   Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
UNICEF United Nations Children’s Fund
The terms ‘global’ and ‘civil society’ became the new buzzwords of the 1990s. In this book, I want to suggest that the two terms are interconnected and reflect a new reality, however imperfectly understood. The reinvention of ‘civil society’ in the 1970s and 1980s, simultaneously in Latin America and Eastern Europe, had something to do with the global context – the social, political and economic transformations that were taking place in different parts of the world and that came to the surface after 1989. Indeed, although the term ‘civil society’ has a long history and its contemporary meanings draw on that history, the various ways in which it is used, I shall argue, are quite different from in the past.

What is new about the concept of civil society since 1989 is globalization. Civil society is no longer confined to the borders of the territorial state. There was always a common core of meaning in the civil society literature, which still has relevance. Civil society was associated with a rule-governed society based largely on the consent of individual citizens rather than coercion. Different definitions of civil society have reflected the different ways in which consent was generated, manufactured, nurtured or purchased, the different rights and obligations that formed the basis of consent, and the different interpretations of this process. However, the fact that civil society was territorially bound meant that it was always contrasted with coercive rule-governed societies and with societies that lacked rules. In particular, as I shall argue, civil
society within the territorial boundaries of the state was circumscribed by war.

This is what has changed. The end of the Cold War and growing global interconnectedness have undermined the territorial distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ societies, between the ‘democratic’ West and the ‘non-democratic’ East and South, and have called into question the traditional centralized war-making state. And these developments, in turn, have opened up new possibilities for political emancipation as well as new risks and greater insecurity. Whether we are talking about isolated dissidents in repressive regimes, landless labourers in Central America or Asia, global campaigns against land mines or third world debt, or even religious fundamentalists and fanatic nationalists, what has changed are the opportunities for linking up with other like-minded groups in different parts of the world, and for addressing demands not just to the state but to global institutions and other states. On the one hand, global civil society is in the process of helping to constitute and being constituted by a global system of rules, underpinned by overlapping inter-governmental, governmental and global authorities. In other words, a new form of politics, which we call civil society, is both an outcome and an agent of global interconnectedness. And on the other hand, new forms of violence, which restrict, suppress and assault civil society, also spill over borders so that it is no longer possible to contain war or lawlessness territorially.

In the aftermath of the revolutions of 1989, the term ‘civil society’ was taken up in widely different circles and circumstances. Yet there is no agreed definition of the term. Indeed, its ambiguity is one of its attractions. The fact that neoliberalists, Islamicists, or post-Marxists use the same language provides a common platform through which ideas, projects and policy proposals can be worked out. The debate about its meaning is part of what it is about. As John Keane suggests, the global spread of the term and the discussion about what it betokens is, in itself, a signal of an emerging global civil society.

This global discussion has involved the resurrection of a body of civil society literature. The search for classic texts has provided what might be called a legitimizing narrative, which has had the advantage of conferring respectability on the term but has also often weakened our understanding of the novel aspects of the
rediscovery of the term. By clothing the concept in historical garb, it is possible that the past has imposed a kind of straitjacket which obscures or even confines the more radical contemporary implications. Comaroff and Comaroff talk about the ‘archaeology’ of civil society ‘usually told, layer upon layer, as a chronological epic of ideas and authors’ starting with an ‘origin story’ in the late 1700s. They argue that the term has become a ‘neo-modern myth: consider the extent to which a diverse body of works – some of them analytic, some pragmatic and prescriptive, some purely philosophical – have begun to tell about the genesis and genealogy of the concept, even as they argue over its interpretation, its telos, its theoretical and socio-moral virtues’.  

The ‘neo-modern myth’ does obscure the implications of the break with territorially bound civil society. On the other hand, agreement about the history of the concept is part of what provides a common basis for a global conversation. The civil society literature is so diverse that it allows for selectivity; the choice of texts to be studied can be used to justify one interpretation rather than another. While the debate about earlier literature can reify particular meanings that are no longer applicable, it can also serve as a way of investigating the idea, exploring the answers to questions which were faced in earlier periods as well as today, finding out what questions were different and how they were distinguished from the present situation.

This is a book then about a political idea. It is an idea that expresses a real phenomenon, even if the boundaries of the phenomenon vary according to different definitions, and even if the shape and direction of the phenomenon are constantly changing. The investigation of these different definitions, the study of past debates as well as the actions and arguments of the present, are a way of directly influencing the phenomenon, of contributing to a changing reality, if possible for the better.

This book is subtitled an ‘answer to war’. This is because the concept of civil society has always been linked to the notion of minimizing violence in social relations, to the public use of reason as a way of managing human affairs in place of submission based on fear and insecurity, or ideology and superstition. The word ‘answer’ does not imply that global civil society is some sort of magic formula – a solution or alternative to war. Rather it is a way of addressing the problem of war, of debating, arguing about, discussing and pressing for possible solutions or alternatives.