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Global Civil Society: The dialectics of concept and reality

Abstract
This paper maps out the potential of a Gramscian conceptualisation of global civil society for understanding global resistance to neoliberal globalization and contemporary global governance. Firstly, the principal features of contention between contemporary representations of global civil society in studies of global resistance are examined. A predominant focus on perpetuating the division between normative and empirical conceptualisations is reoriented towards a Gramscian conceptualisation which, it is argued, affirms the emancipative potential of global civil society in global resistance. Initiating a dialogue between concept and reality (Cox, 1999)—also referred to as the ‘dialectical nexus’ (Gramsci, 1971)—offers alternative possibilities for the substantive analysis of global civil society in relation to global resistance. This moves Gramscian civil society towards a conceptual grounding which deals with the formation, negotiation and re-negotiation of transversal hegemony and recovers, and emphasises, the role of human agency within the global political economy.

Keywords: global civil society, resistance, global governance, dialectics, World Social Forum

“A common error in historico-political analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural… The dialectical nexus between the two categories of movement, and therefore of research, is hard to establish precisely”

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 178)

Global civil society purportedly plays a significant role in mounting challenges to neoliberal economic globalization and global governance through a variety of movements, strategies and formats such as represented through the Zapatistas, the World Social Forum, the global justice movement, the Arab spring uprisings, the Spanish indignados, or North American occupy movements. Indeed, since the 1990s global civil society has been “characterized as an emerging agent and sphere of a nascent world politics” that encompasses a “medley of boundary-eclipsing actors—social movements, interest groups, indigenous peoples, cultural groups and global citizens” (Pasha and Blaney, 1998, p. 418). The term has persisted despite recognition that “it is a confusion to claim that global civil society is necessarily a site and source of resistance to globalisation” (Robinson, 2003, p. 169). Indeed, while “‘progressive’ forces look to civil society as a site for mounting challenges to globalisation, it is important to remember that a strengthened global civil society is itself a goal of neoliberal forces” (Ibid.). Nonetheless, global civil society is mapped, measured and theorised under what might be loosely termed ‘global resistance’. Research on the constituents of global resistance focuses on civil society (e.g. Edwards, 2009; Scholte, 2011), global social movements (O’Brien, Goetz, Scholte, and Williams, 2000), new social movements (Melucci, 1980), transnational activism (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Tarrow, 2005), global advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), global citizen action (Edwards and Gavanta, 2001), the third sector (Taylor, 2012), global activism (Reitan, 2007), multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2005), the postmodern prince (Gill, 2000), international civil society (Colás, 2002), transnational civil society (Richter, Berking and Müller-Schmid, 2006) or global civil society broadly construed.
This paper aims to provide an initial response to this burgeoning research through situating ‘global resistance’ within a Gramscian conceptualisation of global civil society in the field of Global Political Economy (GPE). This approach acknowledges criticisms of Gramscian approaches for their limited development of tools with which to comprehend radical social movements (Day, 2005); for giving inadequate attention to counter-hegemony (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2005; Morton, 2003; Peet, 2007); and failing to “develop the full implications of Gramsci’s concern with civil society and its role in constituting power and hegemony” (Jessop and Sum, 2006, p. 161). It also engages with at least some of the many challenges of using ‘global civil society’ that question whether ‘global’ civil society can be meaningfully internationalised (Germain and Kenny, 1998), legitimised and democratised (Brown, 2000), normatively constructed (Chandler, 2004, 2007, 2009), made analytically meaningful (Cerny, 2006) or sufficiently disassociated from hyperbole and inflated rhetoric (Cumbers, Routledge and Nativel, 2008). An alternative Gramscian approach, it is argued, highlights the emancipative potential of global civil society—in terms of the “realistic development of imagined alternatives” (Gill, 2012, p. 253) that has an impact on “the construction of present and future history” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 179)—and more clearly underlines the significance of the dialectics of concept and reality in understanding movement and change.

Before a Gramscian conceptualisation of global civil society is proposed in further detail, the nature of contemporary theorising on global civil society is assessed below. If “the forms and structures that define contemporary society are not immediately available for empirical analysis” (Hardt and Weeks, 2000, p. 4), a further strategy for understanding global civil society is to be found in examining its representations or interpretations. While empirical research on global civil society responds to increased pressure for more accessible data, such research is “unlikely to add very much to our existing knowledge without a more sustained interrogation of the theoretical assumptions that inform the procedures of empirical enquiry in this context” (cf. Walker, 2005, p. 140). In what follows, representations of global civil society in challenging neoliberal economic globalization and global governance are examined. They constitute the foundation upon which a new Gramscian conceptualisation of global civil society, based on the dialectics of concept and reality, is subsequently developed in this paper.

Global Civil Society: Representations and Interpretations

Activist representations

The enduring vision of a “community of human beings” (Glasius, Kaldor and Anheier, 2005, p.31) in global resistance is reflected cogently in contemporary conceptual formulations of global civil society that are linked to the publication since 2001 of the Global Civil Society Yearbooks. The yearbooks categorise a range of positions occupied by global civil society in relation to an understanding of globalization which underlines the spread of global capitalism, global interconnectedness and a “growing global consciousness” (Anheier et al., 2001, p. 7). These positions are occupied by supporters of globalization such as transnational business and their allies, rejectionists, reformists, and alternatives who wish to opt-out altogether. While an operational definition of global civil society is offered in earlier editions of the yearbooks, a more used normative definition emerges to assert that “civil society is about managing difference and accommodating diversity and conflict through public debate, non-violent struggle, and advocacy” (Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius, 2004, p. 2). Normative and descriptive representations of global civil society are affirmed to together “describe a
political project i.e. a goal, and at the same time an actually existing reality, which may not measure up to that goal” (Kaldor, 2003, p. 11).

The yearbooks have been instrumental in influencing wider perceptions and beliefs about global civil society and inter alia the “global spread of fields of contestation” (Kaldor, 2003, p.10). They support further work on an “activist version” of global civil society as an emancipatory realm within a global public sphere where individuals can potentially engage in negotiating a social contract with spheres of authority (Kaldor, 2003, 2005, 2007). This representation of global civil society identifies it as a realm of civility, openness, inclusiveness, communication, conflict resolution, and political activism (Dryzek, 2012). It is a representation of a ‘new’ civil society that has shed its earlier identification with capitalism and the bourgeoisie to assert an autonomous and emancipative role (Kaldor, 2007). The exclusion of markets or constitutional orders from the definition of civil society is deemed to have a certain “political utility” (Kaldor, 2005b, p. 44) to explain, and enable, the role of civil society in challenging dominant state and capitalist structures. Thus, a recently reinvigorated civil society in Egypt and Tunisia has been suggested to complete the 1989 revolutions so that, for example, “the Egyptians are reclaiming the values of the Solidarnosc and the Civil Forum from the neoliberals who usurped them” (Kaldor, 2011).

The transnational influence and leverage exerted by civil society during the post-Cold War period has been termed the first of three complex and overlapping stages in the growth of the global civil society idea (Falk, 2005). Early successes are emphasised in related literature such as the campaign to clear landmines, the subsequent Ottawa Convention, campaigns against the OECD-sponsored Multilateral Agreement on Investment and the creation of the International Criminal Court. Later stages in its development are linked to the emergence of the alter-globalization and global justice movements, commonly seen to reach their maturation through a series of alter-globalization demonstrations and annual World Social Fora. These stages mark the gradual emergence of a global public sphere from which global civil society engages in public debate, non-violent struggle and advocacy (Kaldor et al., 2004).

The ‘open space’ of the World Social Forum (WSF) marks a further stage in the creation of a deliberative public sphere for “convergence and synthesis” between movements of civil society combined under the slogan of “another world is possible” 2 As a globally diffuse space, and in agreement with its Charter of Principles, the forum aims to facilitate networking, interlinking and discussion among anti-neoliberal groups:

“Increasingly the power of the Social Forum lies in its global diffusion as a process for the creation of non-deliberative political spaces where a wide range of movements converge and where the only requirement is their shared opposition to neoliberalism.”

(Conway, 2005, p. 427)

Drawn together by a combined opposition to neoliberalism and support for another possible world the success of the forums, confirmed through high attendance figures, evokes a spectre of an “emancipatory” global civil society that is opposed to “liberal” global civil society (Santos, 2006). From an initial attendance of approximately 20,000 at the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, numbers in attendance rose to an estimated 155,000 at the 2005 forum which was also held in Porto Alegre (WSF, 2006). The success of the forums is also described in terms of “strengthening the infrastructure of global civil society, building shared identities and visions, common policy platforms and networks for action” (Pianta, Shiva and Zola, 2004, p. 4).
The World Social Forum strategy of ‘convergence through open space’ has recently been reaffirmed through proposals for a ‘new universality’ which is “opposed to Western modernism and its current dominant expression, neoliberalism” (Caruso, 2010). This is to be implemented through further enhancing thematic convergence among forum participants and convening ‘an assembly of assemblies’ on the final day of the WSF with the aim of “generating opportunities for exchange and collaboration that could constitute both the elaboration and the implementation of a new universality” (Caruso, 2010b). Proposals for a ‘new universality’ can be compared to assessments of the forum that highlight the capacity of global civil society to challenge dominant political theories and social science disciplines and “scientific knowledge as sole producer of social and political rationality” (Santos, 2007; Anheier et al., 2001; Shaw, 2003). This capacity is seen to derive from its explicit normative agenda, “common consciousness of human society on a world scale”, and ability to undertake purposive action (Shaw, 2003).

**Governance representations**

While the above representations and interpretations of global civil society largely assert its ‘activist’ role in contesting globalization, further studies appear to be more concerned to situate global civil society, or its constituents, in relation to the policies and structures of contemporary global governance. The position of civil society, for example, is located within a new theory of the emerging world polity or ‘cosmocracy’ (Keane, 2002, 2003, 2005). Cosmocracy occupies a mid-way point between a sovereign state system and world government and comprises an overlapping and interlocking conglomeration of sub-state, state and supra-state institutions and multi-dimensional processes (Ibid.). The global reach and influence of global civil society is integrated into the new international structure of “cosmocracy” so that it is deemed to have a “constitutional agenda” therein to enable more effective and democratically accountable government, rule of law and social relations. This agenda is carried out largely through identifying the gaps in the “clumsy” structures of international institutions (Ibid.) where the monolithic culture, neoliberal ideology and institutional guidelines permit—is highlighted (O’Brien et al., 2000).

There have also been more deliberate attempts to promote the role of global civil society in Contesting Global Governance through focusing on the contributions of ‘global social movements’ in “complex multilateralism” (O’Brien et al., 2000). This collaborative work offers a rich contextual study of the interactions between global social movements and international organizations and leads to sobering conclusions concerning the capacity of civil society to impact on policy agendas (Helleiner, 2001). Nonetheless, the authors end their study on an optimistic note through suggesting that social forces are a determining factor in the nature of international order and organization. These conclusions dissent with the evidence of conflicting objectives, institutional co-option and neoliberal ideological dominance presented in the study. Instead, the capacity of civil society to exploit or manipulate the more ‘clumsy’ structures of international institutions (to draw on Keane’s terms)—where the monolithic culture, neoliberal ideology and institutional guidelines permit—is highlighted (O’Brien et al., 2000).

Similar authorial methodologies are expressed through further studies on the limitations and contributions of civil society as a force for democracy in global governance (Scholte, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2011). These studies are primarily concerned with affirming the positive effects of civil societal engagement with international institutions and with exploring avenues for reducing accountability gaps in contemporary global governance through civil society. In common with the activist representations of global civil society discussed above, Habermasian theories of a political space or ‘public sphere’ where “citizens congregate to deliberate on the actual and prospective circumstances of their collective life” are drawn upon
(Scholte, 2011, p. 33). Drawing on this work, a project entitled ‘Rebuilding Global Democracy’ (RGD), receiving its core funding from the Ford Foundation, was launched in 2008. Workshops were held by conveners of the RGD group on the theme of ‘rebuilding global democracy’ at the 2009 World Social Forum in Belém, Brazilian Amazonia, and at the 2011 World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal.

Responses to global civil society representations

Responses to these global civil society representations vary from a study which aims to bring together “hopeful and critical voices” on its “contested futures” (Baker and Chandler, 2005) and contrasting global governmentality approaches that express concern with “the shaping of compliant subjects by dominant discourses, especially liberalism, such that society can be rendered governable” (Dryzek, 2012, p. 108; Jaeger, 2007; Amoore and Langley, 2004, 2005).

A forum on ‘theorizing global civil society’ in Globalizations expands on the dichotomy between hopeful and critical voices and centres on the argument that the normative nature of theorising presents an insurmountable obstacle to empirical detail since a normative theory of global civil society “cannot be empirically measured and disputed, proved or disproved” (Chandler, 2007, p. 291; Chandler, 2009). In a critique of the ‘global ideology’, within which ‘global’ civil society occupies a large role, claims towards global resistance are described as the reactionary and individualised product of ‘hollow hegemony’ or the weakening of national politics. In a period of ‘hollow hegemony’ it is argued that we should not be deceived by attempts to “use the international sphere for standing and a sense of political purpose” (Chandler, 2009, p. 49). Such attempts incongruously invert the political to denote conscious political action in global spaces of everyday life outside the formal institutions and structures of government: “The normative project seeks to transform the political not by engaging with politics but by bypassing the political sphere” (Chandler, 2007, p. 295). The resulting space is abstract and “de-socialized” rather than based on “actual or concrete social interaction on a global plane” (Chandler, 2009, p. 115). Equipped with a lack of clear political programmes, this representation of ‘global’ civil society establishes normative representations within a vacuous global ideology. Importantly, as discussed below, it also reinforces a problematic normative/empirical distinction in conceptualisations of global civil society. This distinction, nonetheless, was also present in the study of Contesting Global Governance (O’Brien et al., 2000) where the empirical evidence—or empirical realities of resistance—fails to correspond with the philosophical promise that the conclusions indicate (cf. Helleiner, 2001). Similarly, the ‘constitutional agenda’ of global civil society is only carried out through the more “clumsy” structures of cosmocracy (Keane, 2002, 2003, 2005).

A contrasting body of literature on global governmentality maps out a compliant global civil society in relation to discursive governance. Global civil society is proposed as a site of government—”a place where the global political economy is shaped, regulated or deregulated, disciplined or sustained”—and dominant representations of global civil society are considered to enable neoliberal conceptions of global governance to flourish (Amoore and Langley, 2005, p. 147). Global civil society is, nonetheless, contradictory and ambiguous as it “simultaneously holds out the potential for resistance, while it closes down, excludes, controls and disciplines” (Amoore and Langley, 2004, p. 100). It is, therefore, a form of “government from a distance” prescribed by global governance while also having the capacity to “open itself to challenge and contradiction” (Ibid.). In seeking to interrogate conceptualisations of global resistance and to “reopen areas of the GCS debate that… have been prematurely closed down” (Amoore and Langley, 2004, p. 90) these studies, even while failing to affirm the emancipative potential of global civil society in global resistance, open
toward further critique of articulations of resistance and the tendency to treat resistance and “power and global order” as “analytically separate” (Coleman and Tucker, 2011, p. 400).

Towards a Gramscian Conceptualisation of Global Civil Society

The above representations and interpretations of global civil society give an indication of the increasingly dichotomous and problematic nature of normative and empirically based conceptualisations and present difficulties in terms of locating agency in global resistance. Extrapolations towards ‘global’ civil society and ‘global’ resistance undoubtedly pressurise accessibility towards explanations of immediate lived experiences and straightforward conceptualisation (cf. Jameson, 1990). To date, much Gramscian work on hegemony has given insight into the workings of a transnational capitalist class in engendering and sustaining specific historical configurations and hegemonic blocs (e.g. Cox 1983, 2002; Gill, 1999, 2008; der Pijl, 1998) but has given little attention to locating and understanding global civil society as a sphere of hegemony in relation to global resistance (cf. Augelli and Murphy, 1988, pp. 129-130). Far more potential can be found in studies evoking the complex and continual modes of social relation engaged in by situated social forces involved in their own making in relation to the global political economy (Drainville, 2004, 2012; Thompson, 1963). Further attention can also be given to the making of global civil society which, rather than condemning us to the binaries and traditions of political imagination, emphasises the developing, provisional and approximate, nature of conceptualisation (cf. Thompson, 1978, p. 242; Walker, 2010). Indicating the dialectical relations between these avenues entails openness towards the boundaries of “theoretical and practical activity” which can be seen to provide “a basis for the subsequent development of an historical, dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change” (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 34-35).

Partly, understanding movement and change involves the study of the “fundamental data” related to the continual oscillation of economic, social and military relations of force (Gramsci, 1971, p. 185). Studies of the fundamental data through a “concrete analysis of the relations of force”, however, are not an end in themselves but “acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particular practical activity, or initiative of will” (Ibid.). It might be that isolating the ‘initiative of will’ is considered a straightforward task of distinguishing between organic and conjunctural movements. Organic movements are composed of wide social groupings which, reflecting their long lasting historical significance, give rise to “socio-historical criticism” (Ibid.). More immediate conjunctural movements are incessant and persistent in emphasising that the necessary conditions already exist to accomplish “certain historical tasks” (Ibid.). However, understanding movement and change entails much greater complexity because “the dialectical nexus between the two categories of movement, and therefore of research, is hard to establish precisely” and a “common error in historico-political analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural” (Ibid., p. 178). It is here that the ‘dialectical nexus’ relates not only to categories of movement but also to categories of research. Thus, Gramsci refers to the overestimation of ‘mechanical causes’ in relation to organic movements, and the exaggeration of the ‘voluntarist’ and individual element in relation to conjunctural movements (Ibid.).

Voluntarist and mechanical explanations of global resistance distance global civil society from the terrain of the global political economy and further towards the marginalities of disciplinary embrace. In its application to the World Social Forum attention to the dialectical nexus concentrates assessment towards the possibilities that arise when it is considered that global civil society, as a central sphere of hegemony in the global political economy, makes
itself as much as it is made (cf. Thompson, 1963, p. 213). The first *Global Civil Society Yearbook* gives some indication of a range of positions adopted by global civil society in relation to globalization but the communicative, Habermasian-influenced, nature of further theorising means that “capitalism has virtually disappeared as an object of critique” (PATOMäKI, 2007). This makes it necessary, some time after consideration of the “elusive paradise” of civil society, to reaffirm that civil society is not free from the “determinations (and possibilities) of a global capitalist political economy” (PASHA and BLaney, 1998, p. 427). The World Social Forum, therefore, as a recent study shows, is shaped and motivated by global economic inequalities (TEIVAINEN, 2012). Further studies drawing from observations at the 2007 WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, give further insight into the political economy of the forum as a terrain of contestation where inequalities of forum access, sponsorship, water and food were fought over (WORTH and BUCKLEY 2009, 2011; POMMEROLLE and SIMéANT, 2012).

In its form, the forum represents a confluence of charter-based principles or “movement of ideas” (WSF, 2002) and concrete movements of global civil society. However, the ‘theoretical and practical activity’ of the forum has been tightly circumscribed through adherence to the above-mentioned ‘strategy of convergence’. Correspondingly, the strategy has historically aligned movements towards two main positions which support the forum either as an open space or organised movement.6 This serves to uphold a predominantly voluntarist view of global civil society and fails to consider that emancipative potential, or greater political and theoretical clarity, is not located in greater accumulations of knowledge on global civil society that overinterpret “the rich empirical material encompassed by this concept” (WALKER, 2010, p. 204 n.20; MUNCK, 2012). Re-orienting the focus to the ‘dialectics of presence’ (DRAINVILLE, 2004, 2012) highlights the complex modes of social relation that variegated movements of global civil society engage in towards the global political economy through their participation in the forum process and aims to locate the “particularisms of place” within global resistance (CHANDLER, 2007, p. 285).

The dialectics of presence, itself a mode of social relation, constitutes the WSF as a situated, political, site of struggle both in, and in relation to, the global political economy. This mode of social relation is engaged in and beyond the site of the forum through variegated assemblages that fail to align to spontaneous or reactionary explanations of global resistance but are grounded in social and political context and produced through the continual oscillation between relations of force. However, this does not preclude the formation and existence of simultaneous and alternative modes of social relation and, for example, civic-consensual modes of social relation can be considered to dislocate the creativity of social spaces of global resistance. In the context of the 2008 geopolitical and economic disruption, dissatisfaction with the WSF strategy of convergence led to the organization of a ‘Strategy Debate’ by the WSF International Council. The outcome of the debate largely reaffirms the strategy of convergence which may be seen to be indicative of civic-consensual modes of relation towards the global political economy. This suggests movement towards functional-procedural specificity and tactical resolutions over situated creativity. Nevertheless, the ‘Guiding principles for holding a WSF event’ (WSF, 2008) which were drawn up consequent to the debate did little to prevent the breakdown in organizational capacity at the Dakar WSF in 2011 (e.g. GEORGE, 2011). Further affirmation of the strategy of convergence gives credence to processes of *trasformismo* at the site of the forum whereby divergent ideologies from the progressive right (represented broadly through the open space position) and traditional left (represented broadly through the movement position) conform towards civic-consensual modes of social relation in and towards the global political economy. This manifests as an inward-looking emphasis on the convergence of similar, often dominant, ideologies between eligible groups and movements of civil society at the forum at the expense of an outward-oriented strategy to creatively engage in a dialectics of presence or alternative modes of social relation towards the wider global political economy.
In this context, the abstract nature of the ‘new universality’ further consolidates the strategy of convergence and risks the possibility that “cosmopolitan reveries may actually stunt rather than stimulate political thinking about what might be born in the world economy” (Drainville, 2004, p. 6). Such “unintended escapism” from the really existing world may problematically move the strategy of the forum further from negotiating the divergences between movements and their positionality in relation to the global economy (cf. Patomäki, 2007; Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004). This is reinforced through lack of attention to the “political articulations” among movements of global civil society as it continues to be represented as a depoliticised sphere of autonomous action at the site of the forum (Teivainen, 2012). A ‘re-politicised’ global civil society, however, is not accomplished solely through ‘adding in politics’—or drawing attention to the embedded nature of global civil society in the global political economy—but through elucidating the dialectical nexus. Partly, the notion of ‘positionality’, through which modes of social relation are located, enables recognition of the contextual, embedded, and fluctuating position of men and women in the global economy as key factors in informing resistance practices (Marchand, 2003). This moves beyond attributing a ‘constitutional agenda’ to global civil society within the constricted framework of cosmocracy (Keane, 2003) and therein a mysterious ability to redraw global social relations and contribute to a ‘new’ kind of global polity. Importantly, it seeks to evoke categories of research so that the ethical and political realities of resistance are considered in dialectical relation to conceptual innovation.

Studies on the historico-political accumulation of meanings that are constituent of global civil society may potentially intervene in the dialectical nexus to give form and voice to the people that constitute global civil society (Chase-Dunn, 2011; Chase-Dunn and Gills, 2005; Drainville, 2004, 2012; Gills and Gray, 2012; Thompson, 1963). The precedents of alter-globalization movements can be traced through historical parallels and contrasts that are neither spontaneous nor new and much can be learned from “the various strategic and tactical insights that incorporating history affords” (Broad and Heckscher, 2003, p. 726). These strategic and tactical insights disrupt decontextualized and non-historicised interpretations of global civil society that denote to it a “magical explanatory” quality (Buttigieg, 1995). The concept, therefore, does not translate axiomatically to alter-globalization making it insufficient “to craft a concept of civil society that is intellectually and politically relevant to the context at hand” (Scholte, 2004, p. 213). While the contested terrain and material inequalities of the Nairobi WSF were referred to above, a panel at the forum led by the Committee on Civil Society Research was also a site of contestation over the meaning of global civil society. The purpose of the panel, entitled ‘Global civil society: More or less democracy?’ was to discuss historical and social perspectives on civil society within the context of contemporary globalisation (Committee on Civil Society, 2007). Discussion confirmed the ‘ambiguities’ of global civil society as speakers used the concept in differing ways. The lacuna in critical interrogation of the concept was also clear and one audience member noted the failure of the speakers to address ‘democracy’. Moreover, the distancing of the concept from the terrain whereupon it was discussed was notable and reinforced through distinctions between panellists, invited speakers, and audience members.

In attending to the full diversity of meaning and movements of global civil society, the intention is not to attain coherence, or parody its lack of coherence, but rather to understand global resistance in a similar manner to the following description of neoliberalism as a “cluster of negotiated settlements, a collection of hesitant, partial and contradictory arrangements” (Drainville, 2004, p. 120). Global civil society, thus conceptualised, potentially evades the abundance of metaphors for resistance that lack tangibility and recognition of the failures and challenges of global resistance while also giving expression to
the possibilities of global imagination. It also gives shape to the dialectical nexus through which global civil society constitutes itself and is constituted, thus giving further insight into:

“history as process, as open-ended and indeterminate eventuation… in which categories are defined in particular contexts but are continually undergoing historical re-definition, and whose structure is not pre-given but protean, continually changing in form and in articulation”

(Thompson, 1978, pp. 275-276)

Conclusions

This discussion does not presume to capture the full emancipative capacity of global civil society but, rather, through engaging with contemporary representations and interpretations in the sphere of global resistance it aims to indicate its conceptual shortcomings as it is currently conceived, and give some indication of its emancipative potential from a Gramscian perspective. Not only does a Gramscian conceptualization of global civil society attend to conceptual history but it reminds that practices of definition and usage, and modes of knowledge production, have an effect on how global civil society is inscribed into the world. Critical scholars have expressed scepticism with the “making” of global civil society to serve varied normative ends but have not fully considered the conceptual potential of global civil society as a primary political realm to give insight into how counter-hegemonic knowledge is produced. In mapping the practices of global civil society in relation to global resistance and in translating these practices into conclusions the author has a formative role. This is not to suggest, however, that an emancipative global civil society can be simply “studied into existence by scholars who self-consciously… [blend]… analytical and normative concerns in order to justify their particular version of a global community” (Bartelson, 2006, pp. 373-4). Rather, “ideas and material conditions are always bound together, mutually influencing one another, and not reducible one to the other” (Cox, 1983, p. 132). As we have seen above, activist and governance representations of global civil society, while adhering to the task of theoretically or instrumentally remapping world politics or global governance, largely fail in the historico-political task of positioning movements in relation to the global political economy. A Gramscian conceptualisation of global civil society locates responsibility not only with the voices of theorists of global civil society but also with its practitioners. If the meaning of actors in global civil society cannot be “treated as mere facts in the positivist sense of the term”, nor can those involved in its interpretation be simply extracted from normative concerns (Patomäki, 2007, p. 316). In other words, the analytical and normative aspirations of theorists, activists, policy-makers, politicians and other actors to justify their particular version of a (global) community or (global) political architecture are constitutive of representations and interpretations of global civil society. The question is not as the terms of contemporary discussions would have it—that the normative ideal of global civil society is located so far from the potential of international transformation that the link is “forced and illegitimate” (Chandler, 2007, p. 293)—but rather that there is far more dialectical complexity between concept and reality. Concepts, therefore, are not conceived apart from, in the case of the World Social Forum for example, activities carried out in its name. Nor is this the whole point because the emancipative nature of global civil society to facilitate “the contrast between thought and action [which] cannot but be the expression of profounder contrasts of a social historical order” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 327) is not immediately accessible. In accounts of ‘global resistance’ the novelty and innovation of new forms of social movements, tactics and strategies call for a rethinking of hegemony and, more broadly, theoretical and disciplinary boundaries. This does not, however, suggest that the longer debate on conceptions of the world and our choices in relation to them has been surpassed. This is clearly a continuing underlying feature of debate on critical activist and governance
representations of global civil society wherein questions concerning the choices we make between various conceptions of the world persist. Drawing on Gramsci, we continue to ask:

“How is this choice made? Is it merely an intellectual event or is it something more complex? And is it not frequently the case that there is a contradiction between one’s intellectual choice and one’s mode of conduct? Which therefore would be the real conception of the world: that logically affirmed as an intellectual choice? Or that which emerges from the real activity of each man, which is implicit in his mode of action?”

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 326)

In answering these questions in relation to global civil society the dialectic between concept and reality demands attention to the collective role of people in changing society and contributing to the construction of present and future history. Drawing attention to how knowledge is produced in relation to global civil society starts a process of moving towards ‘transversal hegemony’ and indicates a continual process of negotiation and renegotiation on emancipative principles while also illustrating the significance of positionality and, therein, modes of social relation towards the global political economy. In contrast to more recent expressions of ‘hollow hegemony’ as the weakening of politics at the national level (Chandler, 2009), ‘transversal hegemony’ aims to renegotiate the position of global civil society as agency in the global political economy.

References


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1 See, for example, Glasius (2005), Warkentin and Mingst (2000), Price (1998).

2 For discussions on Jürgen Habermas in relation to the World Social Forum see work by Smith, Karides, Becker *et al.* (2008); della Porta (2005).

In Dakar a group of Building Global Democracy (BGD) conveners participated in WSF workshops on ‘How to Build Global Democracy? For further details on the BDG group see: http://www.buildingglobaldemocracy.org/

Note, for example, the terms of the debate on global civil society and contributions by Chandler, Kaldor, Patomäki, Dallmayr, Lipschutz and Bergesen in Globalizations, 4(2), 2007.

For more on the open space/social movements positions see, for example, Grzybowski (2006), Wallerstein (2004), Keraghel and Sen (2004), Patomäki and Teivainen (2004).

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