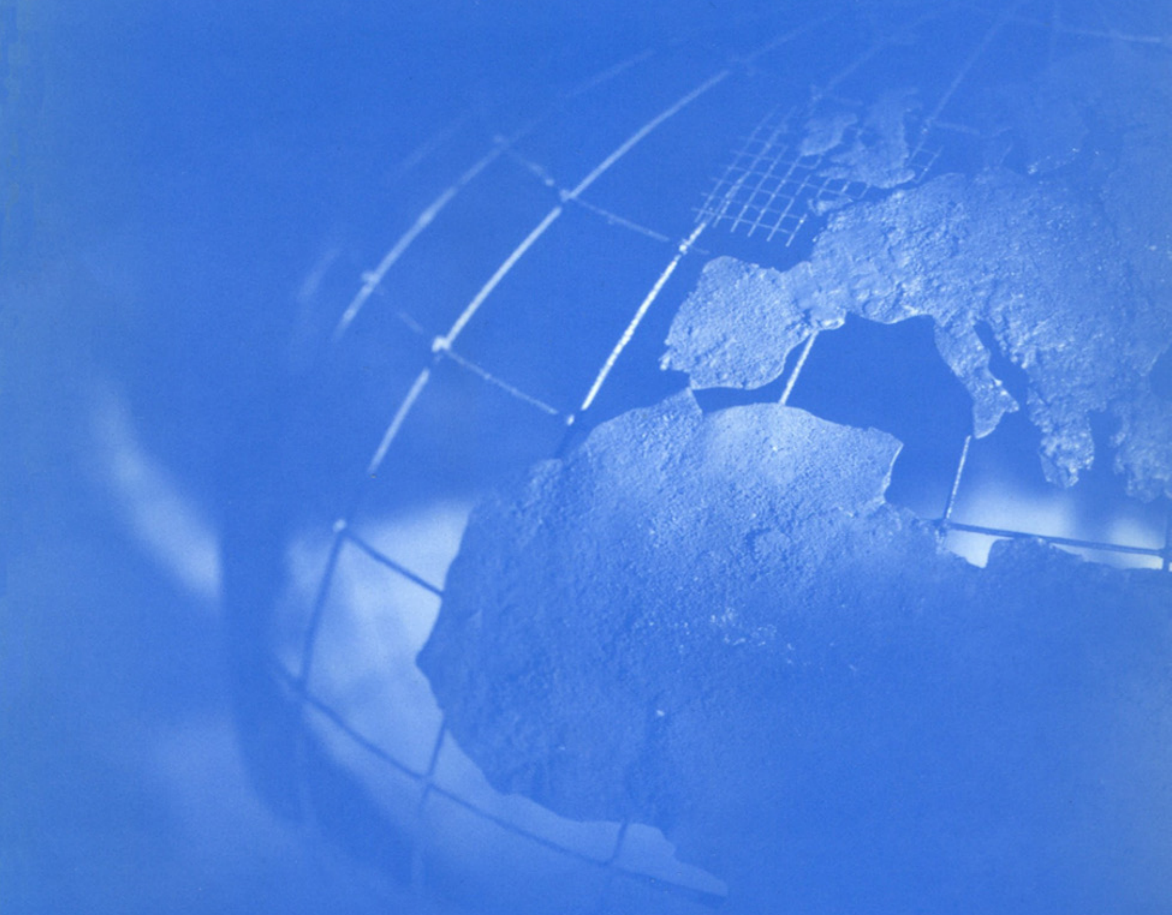
ALEJANDRO COLÁS



INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY

International Civil Society

To Barbara Kräuter and
José Antonio Colás

INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Social Movements in World Politics

Alejandro Colás

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1

Introduction

Non-State Actors in International Relations

The aim of this study is to argue for the relevance of voluntary, non-state, collective social and political agency in international relations. The term 'civil society' is initially adopted to describe that social domain where modern collective political agency takes shape. From this premise, I go on to argue that the social movements operating within civil society have displayed international characteristics from their inception, thus warranting the introduction of the term 'international civil society' as a category capable of explaining the dynamics and consequences of collective social and political agency at an international level. The socio-historical implications of deploying this concept will be considered throughout the book with reference to a number of specific historical and contemporary conjunctures, ranging from the American Revolution to the current experiments in global governance. The aim of such an exercise is to uncover and recover for the study of international relations the practices of transnational solidarity among social movements and to evaluate the relevance of these practices for our understanding of international society. Or, put differently, to examine the mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of modes of social and political organization across state boundaries. Thus I hope it will soon become apparent that this is not a historical study as such, but a historically informed investigation into the sociological category of international civil society. In short, the central purpose of the chapters that follow is to illustrate how the

concept of 'international civil society' can serve, on the one hand, as an analytical tool for the study of international political agency and its impact upon international relations; and, on the other hand, as a normatively charged category, capable of recovering the past history of internationalist political activity and illuminating its future potential.

These broad objectives immediately raise the important question concerning the novelty of the idea of international civil society: in what ways does this category contribute to or depart from existing approaches to International Relations (IR) with similar concerns? This introductory chapter seeks to answer this question explicitly, but the responses provided here will hopefully also be implicit throughout the rest of the study.

The chapter is organized in the following way: a first section considers the problematic of 'transnationalism' as a springboard for a number of IR theories that place non-state actors of civil society at the centre of the international system. Two further sections aim to distinguish my own treatment of the notions of civil society and agency from those prevailing within the discipline, thereby placing the concept of international civil society within the wider debates in IR. One important reason for these differences, I maintain, lies in the Marxist historical-sociological method adopted in this study. The concluding part of the chapter is therefore dedicated to the definition and justification of such an approach.

Non-state actors in International Relations

For over three decades, IR scholars have been contesting the predominance of 'the state' as the central explanatory category within the discipline. In their seminal collection of essays on *Transnational Relations and World Politics*, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye captured the beginnings of this reaction to state-centric IR theory – represented in the work of John Burton, Mansbach et al., James Rosenau and Edward Morse, among others[1] – when they insisted: 'A good deal of intersocietal intercourse with significant political importance takes place without governmental control.... This volume...focuses on these "transnational relations" – contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of governments.'[2] The relevance of such interactions had, it can be argued, already been identified by classical thinkers of

international relations from Kant and Burke through to Marx and Mill. Certainly the notion of transnationalism has been present in twentieth-century IR theory, whether implicitly – as in the writings of Leonard Woolf or David Mitrany – or more explicitly in Raymond Aron's or Arnold Wolfers's discussions of the subject.[3] Yet the transnationalist literature that emerged in the 1970s marked a substantive departure from these previous explorations in at least two respects. First, rather than being a tangential consideration within a broader analytical framework, transnational phenomena represented *the* central theoretical concern for scholars such as Burton, Rosenau or Keohane and Nye. This, of course, did not entail an outright rejection of the study of inter-state relations, but it did assume that transnational relations were worthy of analysis both in their own right and in so far as they significantly affected inter-state relations. As Keohane and Nye summarized it: 'we believe that the simplifications of the state-centric approach divert the attention of scholars and statesmen away from many important current problems and distort the analyses of others. We have suggested a "world politics paradigm" that includes transnational, transgovernmental and interstate interactions in the hope of stimulating new types of theory, research, and approaches to policy.'[4]

Second, and following on from this, despite some important differences in their arguments, the transnationalist literature adopted a similar methodological stance: one thoroughly permeated by the prevalent behaviouralist trend in the social sciences. Briefly stated, such an approach placed great faith in the explanatory potential of data accumulation. The proliferation of transnational interactions, so the argument ran, had increased the complexity of world politics to such an extent that only the systematic collation of data relating to these interactions could bring some semblance of order to our understanding of international relations. This enthusiasm for the possibilities of quantification was, to be sure, tempered by an emphasis on the identification of appropriate 'variables'. As one notable exponent of the transnationalist approach put it: 'Accurate and reliable measurements are of little value unless they measure the proper variable; and, unfortunately, our speculations about changing global structures involve variables that are not readily observed.'[5] Once the 'puzzlement' over variables was solved, however, the ground was cleared for empirical investigation:

> we should recall that the conceptual task of disaggregating the relevant global structures so that their component parts are exposed – and thus measurable – is far more difficult than performing the empirical task of

> recording observations. Indeed, once these component parts are conceptually identified, it ought not to take much creativity to formulate operational measures for them that can be applied to their interaction across time and in the context of comparable cases.[6]

Transnationalism was subjected to a range of forceful criticisms in the aftermath of its rise to theoretical prominence in the 1970s. Some of these objections will be addressed in greater detail below. At this point, however, it is necessary to pause briefly on the role of collective social and political activity within the transnationalist framework. For one of the seemingly novel phenomena that spurred on the transnationalist agenda was the organization of social and political movements across national boundaries. Again, the way in which the different authors associated to this approach dealt with such phenomena varied considerably. None the less it is possible to identify four basic assumptions which undergirded the transnationalist treatment of social movements.

The first of these concerned the relatively recent arrival of non-governmental organizations to the international political arena. With a few notable exceptions, the classical transnationalist authors rarely extended their investigation of non-state actors beyond the twentieth century, claiming that it was the quantitative explosion of non-governmental organizations during this century that most merited the attention of IR students. The transnationalist discussions of social movements tended to link the rise of such actors with the extension of international organizations and the intensification of global economic relations after World War II. Furthermore, transnational social and political activity was explicitly portrayed as a 'pluralization' of actors in world politics encouraged by US ascendancy in the international system. As Keohane and Nye candidly admitted: 'from a transnational perspective the United States is by far the preponderant society in the world... [this] has its origins in American patterns of social organization and the American "style" as well as in the size and modernity of its economy.'[7]

Second, although most advocates of transnationalism were at pains to emphasize that they were not heralding the demise of the state, they did claim that non-state actors could under specific circumstances be as important, if not more, than the nation-state when explaining international relations. Hence, transnationalists granted different forms of collective social and political agency distinct ontological status in international relations. This in turn led to a third assumption closely associated to Keohane and Nye's understanding of interdependence, namely that there existed no necessary hierarchy among the

plethora of actors in world politics. State and non-state actors vied for influence in the international system, sometimes in unison, other times in competition. The upshot of such activity, however, was indeterminate in so far as no one expression of power - military, economic, ideological, political – associated with these different agents could be said to predominate over the other. From this perspective the traditional, state-centric approach to international relations, with its emphasis on geopolitics and military might, was being superseded by a much more complex web of powers and interests including transnational organizations such as revolutionary groups, labour movements, or indeed the Ford Foundation and the Catholic Church. The latter deployed mechanisms of international influence and organization, the impact of which simply could not be ascertained through the use of old analytical categories such as 'national interest' or 'foreign intervention'. Instead IR scholars had to accept that the plurality of forces in world politics had created an interdependent world where structures of international interaction were constantly being rearranged:

> We find ourselves in a world that reminds us more of the extensive and curious chessboard in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* than the more conventional versions of that ancient game. The players are not always what they seem, and the terrain of the chessboards may suddenly change from garden to shop to castle. Thus in contemporary world politics not all players on important chessboards are states, and the varying terrains of the chessboards constrain behaviour. Some are more suited to the use of force, others almost unsuited for it. Different chessboards favor different states.[8]

Last, and by no means least important, all theorists of transnationalism acknowledged, with different degrees of qualification, that theirs was a normative project imbued with the liberal-pluralist values prevalent in US academe at the time. The transnationalist emphasis on competition among a multiplicity of actors in world politics, their belief that the outcome of such contests was not predetermined and that therefore global interdependence was creating a world where the centres of power were increasingly diffuse, all echoed the pluralist theories of democracy applied to the domestic setting by writers such as Robert Dahl or David Easton.[9] From this perspective, the existence of multiple transnational actors was in itself a positive feature of world politics in so far as it ostensibly made the monopoly of power less likely. More interestingly perhaps, in a language reminiscent of their 'utopian' and functionalist forebears in IR, many of the

transnationalist theorists attached a privileged role to transnational social and political movements in the promotion of international co-operation, inter-cultural understanding and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

This brief overview of the early transnationalist literature will have hopefully provided some sense of how non-state actors, and social and political movements in particular, were originally incorporated into mainstream IR theory during the 1970s. Much of the later investigation into social movements within IR owes a great deal to this pioneering work. Yet, at the same time, the transnationalist literature displayed a number of analytical and normative shortcomings that require closer critical scrutiny.

The first of these relates to the overall descriptive nature of the transnationalist agenda. For all their boldness in announcing a shift from a state-centric toward a 'world politics' paradigm, students of transnationalism remained surprisingly coy about the explanatory power of this new category. As Michael Clarke has astutely observed, 'In itself [transnationalism] certainly does not constitute a theory; it is rather a term which recognizes a phenomenon, or perhaps a trend in world politics, a phenomenon from which other concepts flow.'[10] With very few exceptions, the authors investigating transnationalism seemed content with identifying non-state agents and describing their intercourse with other actors in world politics. The task at hand was not so much to consider how these interactions might help to *explain* world politics, but simply to recognize their existence and register their impact upon inter-state relations. The closest transnationalism came to acquiring explanatory status was in the conclusions to the volume edited by Keohane and Nye. Here, the two editors surveyed the uses which their colleagues' 'findings' could be put to when studying international relations, US foreign policy and international organizations, respectively. Yet, again, the prospect of a paradigm shift giving rise to an improved explanation of international relations failed to go beyond a hesitant and promissory declaration of good intent premised on the descriptive shallowness of state-centrism:

> Transnational actors sometimes prevail over governments. These 'losses' by governments can often be attributed to the rising costs of unilateral governmental action in the face of transnational relations. For a state-centric theory this is represented as the 'environment'. But it is theoretically inadequate to use exogenous variables of the environment to account for outcomes in the interaction of various actors in the world politics. State-centric theories are not very good at explaining such outcomes because they do not describe the patterns of coalitions

> between different types of actors described in the essays [of this volume]. We hope that our 'world politics paradigm' will help to redirect attention toward the substances of international politics.[11]

One important reason for the limited explanatory power of transnationalism is that it lacks any theory of agency. For transnationalists, the 'actors' in world politics become so simply by virtue of their pursuit of self-professed goals. There is no attempt in the transnationalist literature to distinguish between different types of agency, nor to situate the latter in an adequate historical and sociological context. Thus, any form of organization that operates on a non-governmental basis across inter-state borders automatically qualifies as a transnational actor. Why such an organization emerged in the first place, or what motives may lie behind its activities, are not relevant issues for the fundamentally *descriptive* approach endorsed by transnationalists. However, if our aim is to *explain* international relations, it seems imperative to identify and distinguish between different modes of transnational collective agency. This is essential not only for the purposes of creating some explanatory hierarchy of agencies, where actions adopted by some organizations become more relevant than others, but also so as to provide a sense of direction to these actions. As I shall try to indicate below, and more extensively in chapter 3, these questions have been the mainstay of sociological theory for almost two centuries. In recent years, they have finally found their way into IR theory, thus providing a long overdue corrective to the explanatory paucity of transnationalism.

The transnationalist failure in adequately explaining collective agency uncovers a third important limitation of this approach, namely the absence of any clear notion of society. Characteristically, the bulk of transnationalist literature assumes that the actors in 'world politics' operate within a neutral and pre-existing international space they interchangeably term the 'international system', 'world society' or 'international society'. Yet, clearly, the historical and structural characteristics of the existing international system are in many important respects unique. Specifically, once modern international society is understood to be a by-product of the advent and development of capitalism, the structural features of this society and the nature of the agents that act within it become associated with particular interests and specific power relations. For example, in the transnationalist account, multinational corporations (MNCs) are simply identified as another private actor in world politics, this time confined to the private sphere of 'economics'. But the kind of agency that informs the workings of an MNC is plainly different to that which motivates,

say, an international trade union organization. Furthermore, in so far as both these forms of collective agency are part of 'world politics', they tend to represent opposing interests and generally interact along a hierarchical axis. All this does not mean that both MNCs and international labour organizations are not equally relevant for our understanding of international relations. On the contrary, it is to suggest that, in order fully to appreciate the nature and import of their role in international relations, it is necessary to investigate their historical provenance and the interests that motivate their actions. One way of achieving this is by reference to the structures and agencies engendered by capitalism. But this, unfortunately, is something that eludes transnationalist theories. Because most of the transnationalist literature is oblivious to the broad concerns of sociological theory, it has been unable to develop any analysis of social relations – be they capitalist or otherwise – beyond that of describing the selective interaction among specific transnational actors.

There is a last facet of transnationalism worth criticizing in this context, this time relating to the state. One facile objection often levied against transnationalist theories is that they overemphasize the relevance of non-state actors in detriment to that of the state. Indeed, one notorious critic of transnationalism ascribed its failings to a particular 'American illusion': 'The curious delusion about the imminent demise of the nation-state has affected Americans throughout their history. ... No matter that the assumption of American politicians and "analysts" about the demise of the nation-state has been proved wrong time and again.'[12] Aside from misrepresenting the transnationalist agenda, criticisms of this nature impoverish the debates over transnationalism by reducing the disputes to an either/or outcome: that is, either states are the most important actors in the international system or transnational actors are. Yet, as I shall argue in the rest of the book, a more fruitful and arguably more accurate approach to the question involves concentrating on the interaction, as opposed to the contrast, between state and non-state actors, or more precisely between state and civil society. Theorists of transnationalism rarely announced 'the demise of the nation-state' but rather sought to highlight the role of social forces outside the immediate control of the state. In their more sophisticated expressions (for example, the work of Keohane and Nye) the transnationalist literature aimed to gauge the impact of transnational activity upon the inter-state system, and not to set one class of actors against the other. Unfortunately, such investigations into the dialectic between state and civil society were pitched at the ahistorical, positivist level geared toward calculating the 'sensitivity' or 'vulnerability' of states vis-à-vis the activities of non-state actors.

The approach adopted below, however, seeks to probe the interaction among state and non-state actors from a historical-sociological perspective, emphasizing the mutual construction of these entities through time. Such a focus upon the historical relations among the agents of state and civil society, I argue, manages to transcend the crude dichotomy between state and non-state actors without thereby obscuring their distinct existence and internal dynamic.[13]

Classical transnationalism, then, is flawed on five major counts: it is essentially descriptive; it has no clear notion of agency; it has no comprehensive theory of society; it fails to consider the interrelationship between state and society; and, consequently, it cannot account for the hierarchies and structures in world politics. The sections below will try to illustrate how these shortcomings can be corrected without thereby foregoing some of the important insights into international relations provided by the transnationalist literature. Indeed, the rest of this book can be read as a contribution toward a historical and sociological understanding of transnational relations. In so doing, subsequent chapters will place considerable emphasis on two concepts which in the past decade have been widely discussed among IR theorists: civil society and agency. While the discussion of these two broad categories allows us to go some way in redressing the sociological paucity of classical transnationalism, significant problems still remain with the prevailing understanding of agency and civil society in IR. It is to these questions, and how my own usage of the categories differs from the existing ones, that I now turn.

Civil society and International Relations theory

The idea of 'civil society' has been all-pervasive in the social sciences over the past two decades. Partly a response to the role of collective agency in toppling dictatorial regimes, partly a reflection of the retreat from the language of class or revolution among the left, the portmanteau concept of civil society has been invoked in a wide range of contexts, generally with reference to that arena of our social and political lives that stands outside the control of the state. The limitations of such an approach to civil society will be dealt with at greater length in chapter 2. Here the aim is to outline the ways in which IR theorists have incorporated this category into our discipline, and to identify the analytical and normative shortcomings of such usages.

In essence, 'civil society' has been deployed within IR in three basic ways. First, there are those authors such as Ronnie Lipschutz, M. J. Peterson or Martin Shaw[14] that resort to the concept in order to retrieve much of the classical transnationalist concerns with non-state actors and what they perceive as a new stage in global interdependence, usually presented under the rubric of 'globalization'. These authors generally consider this renewed activity among transnational actors in world politics as a possible source of progressive politics, and in this sense they express a continuity in the tradition of liberal internationalism under a different guise. For both these reasons, I have labelled them the 'new transnationalists'.

A second cluster of authors shares much of the empirical diagnosis of the new transnationalists, acknowledging a qualitative shift in the nature of world politics, but displaying considerable scepticism as to whether such changes bear the promise of new transnational social and political coalitions. Scholars like R. B. J. Walker and, outside our own discipline, Michael Hardt[15] can be seen to represent this view of the overlap between civil society and international relations. Because most of their critical energies are directed against the 'modernist' readings of international civil society, these scholars can be said to defend a post-modernist approach to the issue.

Last, there are those IR theorists that fall under the category of 'neo-Gramscians' or the 'Italian school' who have applied Antonio Gramsci's conception of civil society to the domain of international relations. According to this school, civil society is associated with the capitalist market and the contest between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces that arise from this 'private' sphere of social relations. In so far as the neo-Gramscians apply a Marxian understanding of civil society, their analysis of global or international civil society is closest to that employed in this book.

All three contributions to the question of civil society and international relations have enriched our understanding of the phenomena arising out of this juxtaposition. Each approach emphasizes different aspects of civil society (social movements, market relations, its relation with the state) which lend support to the arguments in favour of taking this concept seriously within IR. Yet, despite these significant advances in bringing civil society into the domain of the international, reservations must still be raised as to the way this manoeuvre has been effected. In other words, while being entirely sympathetic to the *ends* pursued when incorporating civil society into our discipline, I would like to raise some objections as to the *means* employed to do so.

The main targets of critique are what I have termed the new transnationalists. The work of Martin Shaw and Ronnie Lipschutz has

been at the forefront of the debates on civil society and world politics. Through their contributions to the 1992 special issue of the journal *Millennium* – dedicated to exploring the terrain 'beyond international society' – these authors provided the first sustained discussions of civil society and international relations (or their derivations, global civil society and international civil society). These themes have been followed up with monographs that apply such concepts to specific issues of world politics like the environment or the impact of the media on humanitarian crises.[16]

The first major fault of these approaches lies in their adoption of an ahistorical and socially disembedded understanding of civil society. Much like their transnationalist forerunners, international or global civil society on this account is identified as a space populated by transnational forces such as international non-governmental organizations and pressure groups that float autonomously within this sphere. Thus, for example, Lipschutz considers global civil society to be represented by 'political spaces other than those bounded by the parameters of the nation-state system',[17] while Shaw suggests that a global civil society 'can be seen at work in a variety of developments: the attempts by global ecological movements to make the state system respond to demands for global environmental management, the attempts by pressure groups to ensure that human rights and democracy are judged by a global standard and the demands, fuelled by media coverage, to make respect for human needs and human rights effective principles in international conflicts.'[18] There is, again, little attempt in these writings to situate the purported agents of civil society within a historical and sociological context capable of identifying the origins of such organizations and the interests they seek to further. The currency of the term 'civil society' is therefore devalued by referring rather blandly to any transnational phenomena beyond the strict domain of inter-state politics. Global or international civil society simply replaces the old-fashioned term 'transnational activity' in its descriptive account of world politics.

It should be noted that Martin Shaw somewhat modified his usage of global civil society in a later contribution to *Millennium*. In the 1994 special issue of this journal dedicated to 'Social movements and world politics', Shaw recognized that the crucial interaction between states and civil society yielded a dynamic process where non-state actors simultaneously undermine and reinforce the international system: 'The emergence of global civil society can be seen both as a response to the globalization of state power and a source of pressure for it . . . [it] in fact corresponds to the contradictory process of the globalization of state power, and the messy aggregation of global and national state

power which comprises the contemporary interstate system.'[19] Similarly M. J. Peterson's contribution to the debates on international civil society underlined the need states and civil societies have for their mutual survival.[20] Such qualifications went some way toward charging the prevalent interpretation of global or international civil society with some explanatory power. Yet they still remained silent on the origins and development of the forms of collective agency which operated within this space and, more importantly, continued to ignore the hierarchies and interests which conditioned their interactions, both among the non-state actors themselves and in the latter's interactions with the states-system. In short, the new transnationalists failed to draw out the full theoretical and historical implications of using the term 'civil society', preferring instead to employ it as a generic category useful in updating the catalogue of transnational activity in world politics for the 1990s.

A second set of commentators on civil society and international relations have proved to be more mindful of the concept's lineage and the historical and political baggage it has accumulated. Arguing that the term 'civil society' is inextricably tied to modern conceptions of the social and the political, such approaches focus on the limitations inherent in using modernist discourses under post-modern conditions. R. B. J. Walker has defended this view most ardently within our own discipline. In a recent assessment of the different invocations of civil society within IR, Walker recognizes the value of bringing this concept into the discipline, if only because it unearths the aporias buried within modernist 'meta-narratives':

> The current popularity of claims about a global civil society can thus be read as a partial response to the dearth of ways of speaking coherently about forms of politics that transgress the bounds of the sovereign state. As such, it is sometimes quite illuminating. Nevertheless, as an attempt to extend to the global context a concept that is so historically rooted in the historical experiences of states... it is a concept that also expresses distinct limits to our ability to reimagine the political under contemporary conditions.[21]

In a similar vein, although coming from a different problematic, Michael Hardt suggests that we replace 'civil society' with 'postcivil society' as a more adequate tool of analysis for societies which have 'recently experienced a passage from a disciplinary society to a society of control'.[22] Here again, the sources of this shift in modes of dominance are explicitly associated with global transformations: 'Mobility, speed and flexibility are the qualities that characterize this separate plane of rule.'[23]

What emerges from these post-modern explorations of global civil society therefore is an uneasy recognition of the relevance for world politics of those social movements operating within civil society, qualified by a strong scepticism toward the modernist foundations of their outlook and action. In other words, scholars like Walker and Hardt appear to concur with the new transnationalists on the relevance of non-state actors in international relations, but argue simultaneously that labelling this phenomenon global or international civil society simply reinforces the historical association of civil society to the bounded politics of the sovereign state.

The post-modern musings on the overlap between civil society and international relations have the merit of clearly identifying the historical roots of this conjunction. Walker's commentary on the global civil society literature corrects the latter's historical myopia not only by hinting at the predecessors to contemporary transnational social movements but, more importantly, by associating the advent of civil society to a distinct historical epoch, namely capitalist modernity. This in turn opens up the possibility of anchoring our analysis of collective social and political agency at the international level upon a specific understanding of society, that is, one characterized by the structures of the capitalist market. Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, the post-modern approaches to global civil society are allied on this point with the neo-Gramscian writings we shall be exploring in a moment, and indeed with the definition of international civil society adopted in the rest of this study (to be expounded further in chapter 2). The real difference between the post-modernist and the modernist treatment of international civil society lies in the contemporary validity accorded to this category. While, for the post-modernists, international civil society and its cognates are at best a relic of the past and at worst modernist constructs which in Walker's words 'simply affirm the limits of their ambition', the view defended in this study (and therefore falling squarely into the modernist camp) is that international civil society is the term that best captures the dynamics of collective agency obtaining internationally today. Far from experiencing a shift toward modes of domination and contestation that transcend capitalist modernity, the present international conjuncture is characterized precisely by the affirmation of modern claims to state sovereignty, democracy, citizenship rights and civil liberties and by the deployment of modern forms of agency through political parties, trade unions and other comparable organizations. As long as these modes of social and political engagement remain the predominant sources of resistance across the world, reference to civil society and its international ramifications would appear to be the most adequate