**Power and transnational politics**



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The formal political system today faces a new geography of power. Globalization and the new technologies have contributed to the shrinking of state authority and the explosion of a whole series of new actors engaged in governance activities.

The current phase of the world economy is characterized by significant discontinuities with the preceding periods and radically new arrangements. This becomes particularly evident in the impact of globalization on the geography of economic activity and on the organization of political power. There is an incipient unbundling of the exclusive authority over its territory we have long associated with the nation-state.

The most strategic instantiations of this unbundling are probably a) the global city, which operates as a partly de-nationalized zone for economic, political and cultural activities, and b) the Internet as a space for civil society that escapes all conventional jurisdictions and is also incipiently de-nationalized. At a lower order of complexity, the transnational corporation and global markets in finance can also be seen as such instantiations through their cross-border activities and the new semi-private transnational legal regimes which frame these activities.

**The privatizing of public power and the rise of new actors.**

Briefly, the major dynamics leading to these new conditions are the following. Privatization and deregulation --two key features of economic globalization-- have shifted power away from public bureaucracies and onto the world of private corporations and markets. Shrinking state functions linked to social welfare broadly understood have relocated a growing range of responsibilities in this domain onto civil society. The weakening of international public law and the strengthening of market forces in the international system have produced growing inequalities in the socio-economic situation of people worldwide and a diminished will and fewer resources in the formal political system to address these. A growing number of international and non governmental organizations have stepped in. Finally, the enormous growth of the Internet represents an expanding zone where most established jurisdictions (i.e. various state authorities) are neutralized.

In my reading, the impact of globalization on state authority or sovereignty has been significant in creating operational and conceptual openings for other actors and subjects (See Sassen 1997). At the limit this means that the state is no longer the only site for sovereignty and the normativity that comes with it, and further, that the state is no longer the exclusive subject for international law and the only actor in international relations. Other actors, from NGOs and minority populations to supranational organizations, are increasingly emerging as subjects of international law and actors in international relations. The growth of the Internet keeps strengthening the options of non-state actors (both good and bad!).

The ascendance of a large variety of non-state actors in the international arena signals the expansion of an international civil society. This is clearly a contested space, particularly when we consider the logic of the capital market --profitability at all costs-- against that of the human rights regime. But it does represent a space where other actors can gain visibility as individuals and as collective actors, and come out of the invisibility of aggregate membership in a nation-state exclusively represented by the sovereign.

**A de-nationalizing of politics?**

There are two strategic dynamics I am isolating here: a) the formation of conceptual (including rhetorical) and operational openings for actors other than the national state in cross-border political dynamics, particularly the new global corporate actors, NGOs, and those collectivities whose experience of membership has not been subsumed fully under nationhood in its modern conception, e.g. minorities, immigrants, first-nation people, and many feminists. And b) the fact that this dynamic brings with it an incipient de-nationalizing of specific types of power that used to be embedded in the national state and have now been relocated, at least partially to global corporations and markets, NGOs, international organizations and sub-national structures, particularly global cities, and transnational spaces, particularly the Internet.

The large city of today emerges as a strategic site for these new types of operations. It is one of the nexi where the formation of new claims materializes and assumes concrete forms. The loss of power at the national level produces the possibility for new forms of power and politics at the subnational level. The national as container of social process and power is cracked. This cracked casing opens up possibilities for a geography of politics that links subnational spaces. Cities are foremost in this new geography.

One question this engenders is how and whether we are seeing the formation of a new type of transnational politics that localizes in these cities but is part of a transnational network of such localizations. The local is today part of cross-border networks rather than simply the bottom or smallest level in the conventional spatial hierarchies that have dominated formal political systems, i.e. local-national-international. The Internet plays a strategic role in this re-positioning of the local.

There is little doubt that the Internet is an enormously important tool and space for democratic participation at all levels, the strengthening of civil society, and the formation of a whole new world of transnational political and civic projects. notably some of the struggles around the Bosnian-Serb conflict. But it has also become clear over the last few years that the Internet is no longer what it was in the 1970s or 1980s; it has become a contested space with considerable possibilities for segmentation and privatization. We cannot take its democratic potential as a given simply because of its interconnectivity. We cannot take its "seamlessness" as a given simply because of its technical properties. And we cannot take its bandwidth availability as a given simply because of the putative exponential growth in network capacity with each added network.

This is a particular moment in the history of digital networks, one when powerful corporate actors and high performance networks are strengthening the role of private digital space and altering the structure of public digital space. Digital space has emerged not simply as a means for communicating, but as a major new theater for capital accumulation and the operations of global capital. But civil society --in all its various incarnations-- is also an increasingly energetic presence in cyberspace. The greater the diversity of cultures and groups the better for this larger political and civic inhabitation of the Internet, the more effective the resistance to the risk that the corporate world might set the standards. From struggles around human rights, the environment and workers strikes around the world to genuinely trivial pursuits, the Internet has emerged as a powerful medium for non-elites to communicate, support each other's struggles and create the equivalent of insider groups at scales going from the local to the global.

The political and civic potential of these trends is enormous. It offers the possibility for interested citizens to act in concert across the globe. It signals the possibility of a new form of politics: local politics with a difference -- simultaneous action in multiple localities or local action with an awareness of many other localities struggling around similar issues. We are seeing the formation of a whole new world of transnational political and civic projects.

These developments in the transnational networks that connect cities and in the digital space of the Internet bring with them a series of new interactions between what has been constituted as the private and the public, the domestic and the international. The public can now operate through the private and the private through the public (Aman, Jr. 1998). For instance, markets are taking over many of the functions that used to be in public bureaucracies and so are NGOs. On the other hand, market forces and corporations can now influence public agendas to a much larger extent than was the case twenty years ago (powerful corporations always did influence public policy, but what we are seeing today is on another scale). Similarly, NGOs have grown in number and in influence. The large international organizations such as the World Bank now are expected to consult with (the well-established) NGOs and large western funders now often prefer to fund NGOs in Africa to do development and public work rather than governments.

**Some Notes on NGOs.**

NGOs have been around for a long time. What is different today? It is their diversity, breadth of coverage, and, perhaps most interestingly, that they are forming transnational networks among each other--indeed many NGOs today are transnational networks.

Further, the larger context within which NGOs are operating has changed significantly: there is today a whole discourse about NGOs which has exploded onto the scene and has given the notion of NGOs (often more so than the actual NGOs) much greater visibility. Further, there is today a massive interest by Western governments in NGOs and the large western private funders are putting enormous resources into some NGOs. In fact, some NGOs function as subcontractors to governments: for instance, the U.S. Wildlife Fund gets over half of its budget from USAID, to do work that a government could do. Finally, many governments are now "mandated" to consult with NGOs, and so are the World Bank and the IMF.

One issue that has emerged forcefully in recent years is that of NGO influence on states. In his research, Peter Uven has found that it is only a small minority of mostly the very large western NGOs that lobby states. Some of the lobbying has a global circuit: to get back to one's state a NGO may go through various organizations in different countries, e.g. influence international organizations so that these put pressure on the home state of an NGO. Further, we also see innovative strategies for influencing governments that go beyond western style lobbying. For instance, one large Indian NGO delegated part of its staff to the Indian government and tried to change the government position on specific issues from the inside. Finally, we are also seeing joint venturing with state agencies, which is another way of shaping a government's agenda on specific issues. These cases also represent the increasingly ambiguous distinction private/public discussed above.

The evidence does show that NGOs can effect power redistribution even though they do so slowly and often at micro scales: e.g. micro-credit extended to women has done more to empower them than government legislation and Bureaus of Women's Affairs. More generally, today NGOs often directly engage questions of democracy, empowerment and redistribution in a way that they did not in the past.

There is an emergent hyper-critique of NGOs today, focused particularly on the large western NGOs that are well financed, operate globally and have basically technocratic organizational standards. according to James Ron, they are basically depoliticizing the motivations and objectives of NGO activists and, more broadly, depoliticizing international political movements. The large, well-funded NGOs have developed multiple standards that they implement in their work and expect compliance with on the part of workers and beneficiary communities all over the world --and embedded in specific cultures. They have the effect of westernizing what they get engaged with; they do so through the implementation of organizational standards and codes across borders and through imposition on people who may have a very different experience or perspective on an event or notion of politics. This leads to the formation of an elite stratum of NGOs that become the favorites of large Western funders and set the standards for other NGOs if they are to be funded. They then emerge as the "good NGOs."

Further this world of NGOs is seen as a part of the West's hegemonic project: by instituting standards and aiming at strengthening western style liberal democracy they have the effect of making places safe for western-style capitalism. These elite NGOs often by-pass national governments in developing countries arguing that they want to institute standards and western style democracy in places where the national and local governments are not oriented this way. James Ron finds this to be especially the case in Africa. At the same time, Peter Uven notes that many NGOs act the western, neutral role while dealing with funders --mostly from the west-- but when that phase is over and they have the funds they re-enter their society and can turn out to be very political.

A lot of NGOs may have started in opposition to the state, but have become mutually constitutive with it (Lipschutz 1996). Today they wind up augmenting the capacities of states, providing the equivalent of welfare services, generally subcontracting "state work." This is not always bad. On the contrary, as the case of ISO-14000 (the environmental protection series of standards in the International Standards Organization) illustrates. In the US, it deploys more inspectors going from factory to factory checking on compliance with standards than the EPA (the government's Environmental Protection Agency). But one question is whether there is capture of national environmental agendas by specific interests, notably corporate interests embedded in the state. By acting as enforcer of national law, ISO does not function as a critic, potentially in opposition to the state, but merely as an entity augmenting the inspection capacities of the state (Lipschutz 1996).

In sum, some of the depoliticization of NGOs evident in the above series of examples is emblematic of a broader pattern of depoliticization of power generally as discussed in the first part of this paper, e.g. the privatization of public bureaucracy functions and relocation of these functions onto the world of corporate agendas.

But some of these developments may also be pointing to new forms of the political, forms which are not embedded in state forms or privatized forms. The distributed power made possible by the Internet and the types of NGOs that can benefit from this do represent, it seems to me a new world of the political. Securing distributed power, its reproduction, its diversification, its growth and multiplication will mean we need to invent new forms. There are crucial examples of this inventing that will be discussed in its conference, notably open-source operating systems and "insurgent technologies." This line of thinking does also raise a question about the need to find new ways of naming what it is that we are describing when we speak today of the world of NGOs, with their enormous diversity, resources and relations to the formal political apparatus. In this regard, the concept of Post-governmental Organizations is an intriguing one, which I hope we will be discussing at this meeting. It is clear that simply saying NGOs has become inadequate because we are grouping many different political projects, some related to existing power and others in opposition to it.