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Civil society at the turn of the millenium: prospects for an alternative world order¹

ROBERT W. COX

Abstract. The meaning of ‘civil society’ has evolved considerably since its use in the context of the 18th century European Enlightenment. Then it signified the realm of private interests, in practice the realm of the bourgeoisie, distinct from the state. While one current of thought retains that meaning and its implications, others view civil society rather as the emancipatory activity of social forces distinct from both state and capital. Antonio Gramsci’s thought embraced both meanings: civil society was the ground that sustained the hegemony of the bourgeoisie but also that on which an emancipatory counterhegemony could be constructed. Is civil society today in the latter sense, a surrogate for revolution that seems a remote possibility towards the attainment of an alternative social and world order? It is useful to test this proposition by examining the potential for civil society in different parts of the world.

Eric Hobsbawm has written that ‘[t]he world at the end of the Short Twentieth Century [1914–1991] is in a state of social breakdown rather than revolutionary crisis . . .’² The conclusion is hard to avoid. ‘Real socialism’ has collapsed; the anti-imperialist struggle in the former colonial world has resolved itself into a series of new states seeking a *modus vivendi* in subordination to global capitalism; the Left in Europe is searching uncertainly for an alternative to neoliberal globalization while in the main adapting to it; even the Islamic revolution in Iran is hesitatingly moving towards an adjustment to dominant world economic forces. There is much violence—in the Balkans, central Africa, Algeria, and Ulster—but none of it could be called revolutionary in the sense of promising a transformation of society. Global finance has lurched from the Mexican peso crisis in the 1980s to the Asian crisis in the 1990s, leaving a marginalized Africa almost unnoticed; but while finance dominates and constrains all governments’ policies, there is no concerted means of global financial management.

If world politics is in such a condition of turbulent stasis, with little hope of calm but no prospect of fundamental change, the polarization of rich people and poor people is becoming increasingly accentuated throughout the world. There is also evidence that people have become disenchanted with existing forms of politics. In

¹ The original version of this article was a paper presented to the Conference on Gramsci, Modernity, and the Twentieth Century, convened by the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Rome, in Cagliari, 15–18 April 1997. In revising it, I am most grateful for comments by Yoshikazu Sakamoto, James Mittelman, Masaharu Takashima, Michael Schechter, Timothy Sinclair, Michael Cox and two anonymous readers for the *Review of International Studies*. I am especially indebted to Yoshikazu Sakamoto for directing my attention to the question of civil society in our times. I, of course, alone bear responsibility for the text as it appears here.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1994) p. 459.

these circumstances, many activists and theorists have looked to civil society as the source from which alternative, more equitable forms of society might arise. Is civil society in the late 20th century the surrogate for a revolution that seems unlikely to happen? There is a debate on the Left about this and that is the question behind the revival of interest in civil society.

The concept of civil society has a long history in European and American thought. From that source, it has been exported around the world. In order to explore the transformatory potential of civil society in our time, it is useful to consult some of that history. Antonio Gramsci, drawing upon that tradition, constructed a view of civil society particularly pertinent to the present debate; and he did so at a time when revolutionary transformation still seemed a possibility. I propose to examine the changing meanings of the term 'civil society' over the years, placing these meanings in their historical and contemporary contexts, and then to reflect upon Gramsci's thought as an approach to understanding society and politics that took form in the specific historical context of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s but still has fruitful applicability in the changed world-wide context of the late twentieth century.

Gramsci was not concerned as an abstract theorist with building a system of political analysis that would stand the test of time. He was concerned with changing his world. Any development of his thinking should keep that goal to the fore and should thus both arise from reflection on the condition of the world as it is, and serve as a guide to action designed to change the world so as to improve the lot of humanity in social equity.

Civil society, in Gramsci's thinking, is the realm in which the existing social order is grounded; and it can also be the realm in which a new social order can be founded. His concern with civil society was, first, to understand the strength of the *status quo*, and then to devise a strategy for its transformation. The emancipatory potential of civil society was the object of his thinking. In the *Prison Notebooks*³, civil society is an elastic concept, having different connotations in different passages. Often civil society appears as a function of the state as in the frequently quoted equation: 'State=political society+civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (PN, p. 263). Gramsci honed much of his thought against the philosophy of Benedetto Croce. Croce saw the state, following Hegel, in idealistic terms as the embodiment of ethics.⁴ Gramsci, in an historical materialist perspective, understood ethics as emanating from the social and cultural practices that enable historically conditioned human communities to cope with their environment. Croce's ethical state, for Gramsci, becomes ethical through the instrumentality of civil society. There is a dialectic inherent in civil society. In one aspect, the educational and ideological agencies that are sustained ultimately by the state's coercive apparatus shape morals and culture. Yet in another aspect civil society appears to have autonomy and to be more fundamental than the state, indeed to be the basis upon which a state can be founded. Civil society is both shaper and

³ References in the text to the *Prison Notebooks* are taken from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), subsequently referred to as PN.

⁴ See, e.g., Benedetto Croce, *Politics and Morals* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945) pp. 22–32, where he described the state as 'the incarnation of the human ethos'.

shaped, an agent of stabilization and reproduction, and a potential agent of transformation.

There is little point in trying to establish a fixed definition of Gramsci's concepts from exegesis of his text. That would negate Gramsci's way of thinking. He thought historically and dialectically, that is to say, his concepts are derived from his perceptions of reality and they serve not only to seize the momentary essence of a changing reality but also to become intellectual tools for fomenting change. Certain basic guidelines are essential in order to discern what Fernand Braudel later called the limits of the possible, the starting point from which strategic planning for social transformation has to begin. The first of these is to know accurately the prevailing relations of social forces. These have material, organizational, and ideological components, together constituting the configuration of an historic bloc.

Yet Gramsci was less concerned with the historic bloc as a stable entity than he was with historical mutations and transformations, and with the emancipatory potential for human agency in history. The concept of civil society in this emancipatory sense designates the combination of forces upon which the support for a new state and a new order can be built. These forces operate in a political and social space, a terrain occupied by different conflicting forces as historical change proceeds—a terrain which is narrowed when there is a close identity between people and their political and social institutions (in Gramsci's terms, when hegemony prevails) but which is widened when this identity is weak.

Any fixed definition of the content of the concept 'civil society' would just freeze a particular moment in history and privilege the relations of social forces then prevailing. Rather than look for clearer definitions, we should try to understand the historical variations that have altered the meanings of the concept in the ongoing dialectic of concept and reality. We should not stop with the world of the 1930s which Gramsci knew but carry on the process into the late 20th century. To continue and develop Gramsci's way of thinking is more true to his purpose than to mummify his text.

The changing meanings of 'civil society'

Writing in the last decade of the 20th century, we must recognize that the European tradition of political thought will now be seen as that of a particular civilization coexisting with others. It can no longer make an uncontested claim to universality, even though the concepts evolved in western discourse have penetrated into all parts of the world through the era of Western dominance. Thus, Western terms may cover realities that are different. To Westerners these terms may obscure these differences by assimilating them to familiar Western meanings. This must be borne in mind in using a term like 'civil society'. We must be alert not only to the surface appearance but also to a non-Western meaning that may be deeply buried. Nevertheless, it is necessary to retrace the concept of civil society to its European roots in the Enlightenment.

Civil society in Enlightenment thought was understood as the realm of particular interests, which in practice then meant the realm of the bourgeoisie. The state ideally embodied universality, the rule of law. The monarch was to be the first servant of

the state, bound by and applying the rule of law. An intellectual problem for the Enlightenment was how to explain the necessary compatibility of the two, of the realm of particular interests and the realm of universality. If the state were to embody universality, then civil society must generate universal principles in the ethico-juridical sphere; civil society must be seen as creating the basis of common welfare out of the pursuit of particular interests. Both Hegel and Adam Smith thought they had achieved this reconciliation by in effect refurbishing the Christian doctrine of Providence, in Smith's case as the 'invisible hand' and in Hegel's as the 'ruse of reason'.⁵ In its European origins, civil society and the bourgeoisie were synonymous. Civil society signified the self-conscious social group whose influence, if not necessarily its executive power, was expanding.

Karl Marx was, of course, sceptical about the emergence of common good from the pursuit of individual interests. He saw rather that civil society was generating a force within itself that would ultimately destroy or change it: the proletariat. He also cast his regard beyond Europe to sketch an outline of an 'Asiatic mode of production' in which rural villages reproduced themselves *ad infinitum*; and in his analysis of French society of the mid-19th century he discerned a social structure more complex than the bourgeois/proletarian dualism of his capitalist mode of production. If the bourgeoisie was the starting point for civil society, the 19th century opened up the concept to embrace a variety of conflicting social groups and interests.

A particularly significant 19th century addition to the complexity of the concept came from Alexis de Tocqueville's work on American democracy.⁶ What impressed Tocqueville was the flourishing of associations, spontaneously formed by people for the achievement of common purposes outside of the state. In the context of American politics, Tocqueville saw this proliferation of associations as a guarantee against a tyranny of the majority that might result from an electoral sweep in an era of populist politics. He drew an analogy to the stabilizing influence he saw in European societies as arising from the existence of secondary bodies inherited from medieval times which acted as a restraint upon monarchic power.

The spirit of voluntary association thus became a significant aspect of the concept of civil society. Civil society is no longer identified with capitalism and the bourgeoisie but now takes on the meaning of a mobilized participant citizenry juxtaposed to dominant economic and state power. For Gramsci, who was concerned with the problem of mobilizing the working class for action in combination with other potential class allies, there was never a pure spontaneity in the construction of social organization but always a combination of leadership and movement from below. His sense of the optimum relationship was to 'stimulate the formation of homogeneous, compact social blocs, which will give birth to their own intellectuals, their own commandos, their own vanguard—who will in turn react upon those blocs in order to develop them . . .' (PN pp. 204–5). Gramsci's historical context was very different from that in which Tocqueville discovered the spirit of association in a society of farmers, artisans, and merchants untrammelled by the class and status

⁵ Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932).

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

inheritance of European societies. To counter the fascist politics of the 1930s, he rejected both 'spontaneity' or 'voluntarism', on one side, and the notion of a revolutionary elite manipulating the masses, on the other.

As counterpoint to the flourishing in America of autonomous voluntary associations outside of the state, 19th century Europe experienced the merger of civil society with the state in the form of corporatism. State leaders, perceiving the disruptive potential of class struggle in industrializing societies, sought to bring employers and organized workers into a consensual relationship with the state for the management of the economy and the support of state political and military goals. Corporatism left those who are relatively powerless in society out of account; but being powerless and unorganized they could hardly be considered part of civil society. The corporatist era began in mid-century with conservative leaders like Disraeli and Bismark and extended into the post-World War II decades in the form of the welfare state. This era is well encapsulated in Gramsci's equation: State = political society + civil society.

The French Revolution left another legacy with implications for civil society: the rejection of anything that would intervene between the state and the citizen. Conceived as a means of liquidating medieval corporations, the principle as embodied in the Le Chapelier law of 1791 was in the early 19th century turned against the formation of trade unions. The same principle was reasserted by the Bolsheviks in the 20th century revolutionary Russian context: all allowable associations under 'real socialism' would have to be part of an all-embracing Party-state. Civil society was denied existence.

Gramsci recognized the weakness inherent in this situation in his juxtaposition of the war of manoeuvre with the war of position when he referred to conditions at the onset of the Bolshevik revolution:

In Russia the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks; more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying—but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country. (PN, p. 238).

The 'proper relation between State and civil society' suggests that the State should rest upon the support of an active, self-conscious and variegated civil society and should, in turn, sustain and promote the development of the constructive forces in that society. The organic intellectual was, for Gramsci, the key link in this process.

This brief review of the use of the term 'civil society' in European and American thought yields broadly two juxtaposed meanings. One shows a 'top-down' process in which the dominant economic forces of capitalism form an intellectual and cultural hegemony which secures acquiescence in the capitalist order among the bulk of the population. The other envisages a 'bottom-up' process led by those strata of the population which are disadvantaged and deprived under the capitalist order who build a counterhegemony that aspires to acquire sufficient acceptance among the population so as to displace the erstwhile hegemonic order. With regard to the latter,

Gramsci insisted that the revolution must occur (in civil society) prior to the revolution (in the form of the state).⁷

Civil society in the late 20th century

Since Gramsci made his analysis, there have been significant changes affecting the relationship of state to civil society and in the development of civil society in different parts of the world. The world crisis of capitalism of the 1970s brought about a reversal of corporatism. Business persuaded governments that recovery of investment and growth from a situation of 'stagflation' required an attack on the power of trade unions and a reduction of state expenditures on social welfare, together with deregulation of capital, goods, and financial markets. As governments acquiesced in this business analysis, trade unions and social-democratic forces were weakened in most economically advanced countries. Protection for the more vulnerable elements in society was cut back; and these elements were implicitly challenged to organize independently of the state both to protest the loss of state support and to compensate for this loss by voluntary initiative and self-help. The collapse of 'real socialism' in the late 1980s seemed to herald a possible rebirth of civil society in those countries where civil society had been eradicated by the Party-state. New independent organizations of protest grew into the political space that was opened

⁷ There is a current of 'political Marxism' expressed by Ellen Meiskins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism. Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), which is very critical of the hopes of some people on the Left that civil society will play an emancipatory role. In her view, civil society retains its original identity with the bourgeois order. This originated with the conceptual distinction made in bourgeois ideology between politics and economics, creating the illusion that economics, the realm of civil society, was not an arena of politics, that is to say, of power relations. This mystification of private power has made possible the acceptance and reproduction of the bourgeois social order. She writes: 'It is certainly true that in capitalist society, with its separation of "political" and "economic" spheres, or the state and civil society, coercive public power is centralized and concentrated to a greater degree than ever before, but this simply means that one of the principal functions of "public" coercion by the state is to sustain "private" power in civil society.' (p. 255) Her charge against the current appeal to civil society by the 'new social movements' and postmodernism is that it occludes the reality of class domination and fragments the opposition to the bourgeois order into a variety of distinct struggles for 'identity', thereby perpetuating capitalist domination.

Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society. A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994) transposes Ellen Wood's reasoning to international relations, arguing that the classical Westphalian concept of state sovereignty and the balance of power mystify the reality of power in the capitalist world order. The 'public' sphere of the state system is paralleled by the 'private' sphere of the global economy; and the state system functions to sustain 'private' power in the latter, the 'empire of civil society'.

'Political Marxism' provides a cogent argument with regard to the 'top-down' meaning of civil society, and in its critique of a postmodernism that indiscriminate deference to identities implies a fragmentation and therefore weakening of opposition to the dominant order. The argument is more questionable in its apparent rejection of the Gramscian 'war of position' as a counterhegemonic strategy for the conquest of civil society and for the transformation of civil society in an emancipatory direction. Two key points in the 'political Marxist' thesis that bear reexamination are: (1) the positing of capitalism as a monolithic 'totalizing' force which excludes the possibility of historicizing capitalism so as to perceive that it is subject to historical change and can take different forms; and (2) the freezing of the concept of 'class' in a 19th and early 20th century form with a two class model juxtaposing bourgeoisie and proletariat which obscures the ways in which changes in production have restructured social relations, especially during recent decades. Both points are discussed below.

by the disruption and uncertainty of political authority. In both cases, the political and social space in which civil society could develop was expanded. Whether or not the opportunity would be realized was a challenge to human agency.

The restructuring of society by economic globalization

The globalization of production is restructuring the world labour force in ways that challenge 19th and early 20th century notions of class structure. Gramsci's keen sense of the strategic importance of building class alliances into a counterhegemonic bloc which could ultimately displace the bourgeoisie—he advocated linking peasantry and petty bourgeois elements with the working class—remains pertinent in today's world. What is relevant today is the strategy of class alliance rather than Gramsci's particular form of alliance derived from his understanding of the class structure of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. It is problematic today whether the proletariat can still be considered to be a 'fundamental' universal class. Indeed, the very notion of a proletariat as a single class juxtaposed to the bourgeoisie has lost substance in reality even if its ideological persuasiveness retains some impetus.

International production is dividing the world's producers into broadly three categories:

- At the top is a core workforce of highly skilled people *integrated* into the management process. These people take the decisions about what is produced and where and by whom. They carry on research and development; they maintain the productive apparatus; and they staff the administrative frameworks and propagate the ideology of globalization.
- At a second level, this integrated core is flanked by a larger number of supporting workers whose numbers vary with levels of demand for products. Their lesser levels of skill make them more easily disposable and replaceable. These are the *precarious* workers. They are located where business is offered the lowest labour costs, the greatest flexibility in the use of labour, i.e. the least protection of workers' rights in jobs; and the weakest environmental controls. These workers are segmented by ethnicity, religion, gender, and geography, and thus are not easily organized collectively to confront management in a united manner. Transnationalized production has accentuated social fragmentation and environmental degradation.
- The third level comprises those people who are *excluded* from international production. They include the unemployed and many small low-technology enterprises in the richer countries and a large part of the marginalized population in poor countries.

The proportions in this three-fold hierarchical structure (integrated, precarious, and excluded) vary from country to country, but the categories cut across territorial boundaries and the ability of governments to alter the proportions is severely limited by their dependence upon global finance. Precarious employment and exclusion were accentuated by the decline in social expenditures that followed from the capitalist crisis of the 1970s. Economic orthodoxy now focuses on state budget deficits and urges states to further reduce social expenditures.

These tendencies give a new configuration to the material basis of civil society. People who speak of civil society today do not usually have in mind the realm of economic interests as did Hegel and Adam Smith. The distinction common today is between dominant power over society shared by corporations and states, on the one side, and popular forces on the other. 'Civil society' is now usually understood to refer to the realm of autonomous group action distinct from both corporate power and the state. The concept has been appropriated by those who foresee an emancipatory role for civil society. There is thus a marked distinction between the meaning of 'civil society' in the work of 18th and 19th century theorists and the way that term is commonly understood today. In the earlier meaning, civil society is another term for the social power relations deriving from the economy. Gramsci's usage stemmed from that of Hegel and Marx. It differed from Marx's, as Norberto Bobbio has shown, by including the ethical and ideological superstructure and not just the economic base.⁸

The current widely understood usage which excludes dominant power in the state and corporations from the concept of civil society received impetus from the movements of opposition to Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe. They were characterized as a 'rebirth of civil society'⁹ Similarly, movements of opposition to authoritarian rule and capitalist dominance in Asian and Latin American countries are commonly perceived as emanations of civil society. So 'civil society' has become the comprehensive term for various ways in which people express collective wills independently of (and often in opposition to) established power, both economic and political.

This current usage has more affinity to Tocqueville than to Hegel, Adam Smith or Marx. But it also has affinity to Gramsci's usage, since Gramsci regarded civil society not only as the realm of hegemony supportive of the capitalist *status quo*, but also as the realm in which cultural change takes place, in which the counter-hegemony of emancipatory forces can be constituted. Civil society is not just an assemblage of actors, i.e. autonomous social groups. It is also the realm of contesting ideas in which the intersubjective meanings upon which people's sense of 'reality' are based can become transformed and new concepts of the natural order of society can emerge.

There is little point in arguing that one usage of the term 'civil society' is correct and the other is wrong. Let us take current identification of civil society with autonomous social forces as a basis for discussion and examine its implications. Even conceived in this more limited way, i.e. without including the powerful economic forces, civil society in the late 20th century, though generally viewed as potentially emancipatory and transformative of the social order, can be seen to reflect the dominance of state and corporate economic power.

In a 'bottom-up' sense, civil society is the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalization of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives. This can happen through local community groups that reflect

⁸ Norberto Bobbio, 'Gramsci and the concept of civil society', in John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State. New European Perspectives* (London and New York: Verso, 1988). The essay was originally published in *Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Gramsciani*, Rome 1968.

⁹ Adam Przeworski, 'Democratic socialism in Poland?', *Studies in Political Economy* 5, spring 1981, pp. 29-54, esp. pp. 37-41.

diversity of cultures and evolving social practices world wide. Looking beyond local grass roots initiatives is the project of a 'civic state', a new form of political authority based upon a participatory democracy.¹⁰ More ambitious still is the vision of a 'global civil society' in which these social movements together constitute a basis for an alternative world order.¹¹

In a 'top-down' sense, however, states and corporate interests influence the development of this current version of civil society towards making it an agency for stabilizing the social and political *status quo*. The dominant hegemonic forces penetrate and coopt elements of popular movements. State subsidies to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) incline the latter's objectives towards conformity with established order and thus enhance the legitimacy of the prevailing order. This concords with a concern on the part of many people for survival in existing conditions rather than for transformation of the social order. For many people, clientelism may seem preferable to revolutionary commitment, especially when backed by the force of state and economic power. Moreover, the basic conflicts between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, are reproduced within the sphere of voluntary organizations, whether trade unions or the new social movements.¹²

Global governance

Gramsci's sense that national situations are specific still has validity but now these distinct national situations are much more dependent upon the global economy.¹³

¹⁰ I take the term 'civic state' from Yoshikazu Sakamoto, in personal correspondence. See also his article 'Civil society and democratic world order' in Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman (eds), *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 207–219.

¹¹ See, e.g., David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order. From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Michael G. Schechter, 'Globalization and civil society', paper presented to the annual meeting of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS), San Jose, Costa Rica, June 1997, contains a critical review of literature on 'global civil society'. Even the most optimistic writers regard 'global civic society' in the emancipatory sense as something to be achieved, not as something that already exists. In the 'top-down' hegemonic sense, by contrast, Rosenberg (see footnote 7 above) refers to the 'empire of civil society' as control by global capitalism. In the same sense, but without the Marxist theoretical framework, Susan Strange has written about a 'non-territorial empire' (in 'Toward a theory of transnational empire', E.-O. Czempiel and James N. Rosenau (eds), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges. Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

¹² Laura Macdonald, *Supporting Civil Society. The Political Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Central America* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) gives a useful classification of 'ideal types' of NGOs according to their consequences for maintenance or transformation of social and political order. She suggests three types: neo-conservative, liberal-pluralist, and post-Marxist (or Gramscian) (pp. 15–23). With regard to opposition between dominant and subordinate groups within the labour movement, see Robert W. Cox, 'Labor and hegemony' and 'Labor and hegemony: a reply' in Cox with Timothy J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹³ Bernadette Madeuf and Charles-Albert Michalet, 'A new approach to international economics' *International Social Science Journal* 30: 2 (1978): pp. 253–83, made the distinction between the international economy (understood as flows of goods, payments, and investments across frontiers) and an emerging form of economy in which production was being organized on an integrated basis among entities located in a number of countries. In the English translation of their article, which was written in French, the emerging economy was called the 'world economy', which accords with the French term applied to the process generating it, *mondialisation*. The term 'global economy' is

The territorial distinctness of national economies and societies is penetrated by global and transnational forces. The problem of hegemony is posed at the level of the global political economy as well as at regional, national and local levels. As many analysts of world affairs have suggested, we seem to be moving towards a 'new medievalism' with multiple layers of authority and multiple loyalties.¹⁴

At the top, there is no identifiable regime of dominance. The new popularity of the term 'global governance' suggests control and orientation in the absence of formally legitimated coercive power. There is something that could be called a nascent global historic bloc consisting of the most powerful corporate economic forces, their allies in government, and the variety of networks that evolve policy guidelines and propagate the ideology of globalization. States now by and large play the role of agencies of the global economy, with the task of adjusting national economic policies and practices to the perceived exigencies of global economic liberalism. This structure of power is sustained from outside the state through a global policy consensus and the influence of global finance over state policy, and from inside the state from those social forces that benefit from globalization (the segment of society that is integrated into the world economy).¹⁵ Competitiveness in the world market has become the ultimate criterion of state policy which justifies the gradual removal of the measures of social protection built up in the era of the welfare state. Neo-liberalism is hegemonic ideologically and in terms of policy. Where ideological and policy hegemony is not sufficient to protect the structure of global governance, then military force is available. The Gulf War was an object lesson in how military force intervenes when a regional power tries to ignore the global hegemony.¹⁶

This global hegemony has profound consequences for the relationship of political society to civil society. As the state retreats from service and social protection to the public, the public loses confidence in the integrity and competency of the political class. Political corruption is inherent in the transformation of public goods into marketable commodities; a political favour acquires a market value. The loyalty of people to their political institutions becomes more questionable as scepticism and cynicism about the motives and abilities of politicians grows. These tendencies vary among countries. Americans honour the symbols of flag and constitution, but about

commonly used now in English to designate the organization of production and finance on a world scale and 'globalization' as the process generating it. Of course, much of the world's economic activity still goes on outside this global economy, albeit increasingly constrained by and subordinated to the global economy. I reserve the term 'world economy' for the totality of economic activities of which the global economy is the dominant part. The impact of the globalization process on power relations among social forces and states, and in the formation of institutions designed to entrench the global economy or in stimulating resistance to it is the realm of 'global political economy'.

¹⁴ See, for example, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) esp. pp. 254–5; also Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State. The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Bertrand Badie and Marie-Claude Smouts, *Le retournement du monde. Sociologie de la scène internationale* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques & Dalloz, 1992). On this theme of the increasing complexity of world politics and the obsolescence of conventional boundaries and distinctions, see also James N. Rosenau, *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier. Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ See Leo Panitch, 'Rethinking the role of the state', in James H. Mittelman (ed.) *Globalization: Critical Reflections* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

¹⁶ Robert W. Cox, 'Production and security', in Cox with Timothy J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 276–95.

half of them do not bother to vote and most seem to have low expectations of their politicians. Corruption scandals are rife in Europe and Japan, and public hopes for salvation through politics are equally low. Throughout most of the rest of the world, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, people have endured government more than they have felt themselves to be a part of it. At the end of this century, there is a world-wide problem of repairing or building political societies, of constructing a sense of identity between people and political authorities. There is a wide political space between constituted authority and the practical life of people.

Revival of civil society as a response to globalization?

Civil society would be the base upon which a new or reconstructed political authority would have to rest. This was Machiavelli's insight when he advocated the replacement of mercenaries by a citizen militia. There is some evidence of growth in civil society coming about as a reaction to the impact of globalization. In the French strikes of late 1995 and the strikes in South Korea in early 1997, reaction has come through trade union movements, in the French case with broad public support. In Japan and some other Asian countries, there has been a growth of many non-governmental organizations, often of a local self-help kind, and often actively building linkages and mutual help relationships with similar organizations in other countries. In some poor countries of Africa and southeast Asia, community organizations, often led by women, endeavour to meet basic needs on a local level, turning their backs upon states and international economic organizations that are perceived as acting against the people. In central America, the Mayan people have recovered historical initiative through armed revolt in the Mexican state of Chiapas, and the indigenous people of Guatemala have fought a civil war to the point of gaining recognition of their claims. These various instances are indicative of something moving in different societies across the globe towards a new vitality of 'bottom-up' movement in civil society as a counterweight to the hegemonic power structure and ideology. This movement is, however, still relatively weak and uncoordinated. It may contain some of the elements but has certainly not attained the status of a counterhegemonic alliance of forces on the world scale.

Exclusionary populism and the covert world

There is a gap between the retreat of the state and the still small development of civil society. This space, this void, attracts other forces. One is exclusionary populism: various forms of extreme right political movements and xenophobic racism. Social anomie is also a propitious recruiting ground for hermetic religious cults. Another set of forces can be called the covert world, a complex congeries of underground activities, some carried out secretly in the name of states, some criminal.

Exclusionary populism has an ambiguous relationship to established power. Extreme right-wing movements in some European countries (France, Italy, Austria,

Belgium, Norway) have captured fifteen per cent or more of the popular vote in the 1990s, and challenge the conventional right to legitimize them by accepting their support.¹⁷ In the United States, the far right perceives a global conspiracy against the basic principles of American life—especially private property, freedom from government control, and the right to have guns—in which the federal government is collusive.¹⁸ Cults like *Aum Shinrikyo* in Japan, or the Solar Temple in Canada, France and Switzerland, and Heaven's Gate in the United States, pose a nihilistic threat to society; they attract well educated people, an indicator of the extent of alienation, and mobilize them in the service of a doomsday scenario.¹⁹

The covert world comprises intelligence services, organized crime, terrorist groups, the arms trade, money-laundering banks, and secret societies. There is a certain overlap between right wing extremism and the covert world and also between doomsday cults and the covert world. Right wing terrorists have been suspected of collusion with intelligence services in Italy in several bombings. *Aum Shinrikyo* furthered its doomsday plans, including the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway in March 1995, with the help of transnational arms dealers.

The various elements of the covert world have usually been studied one by one. Their activities have often been treated as *faits divers*, the material for spy novels and crime fiction. They have not been considered in their interrelationships as constituting a particular sphere of politics existing between visible government and the people. Yet there are many instances of cooperation as well as of conflict among its component elements.

The covert world penetrates the visible authorities in government and corporations. Its expansion was encouraged by the Cold War when, for instance, *mafia* in Italy and *Yakuza* in Japan acquired a supportive relationship with the political party formations that constituted the bulwark against internal opposition to United States Cold War strategy. Money for electoral politics was channelled through covert agencies to sustain anti-Communist coalitions and to influence electoral outcomes. Covert forces assume a functional relationship with neo-liberal deregulated economies. Covert power substitutes for legitimate authority in a totally unregulated market—contracts are enforced by goons with guns.²⁰ The high cost of electoral politics encourages clandestine political financing which opens the door to covert influences in national politics.

The political space between constituted authority and the people is the terrain on which civil society can be built. A weak and stunted civil society allows free rein to exclusionary politics and covert powers. An expansive participant civil society makes

¹⁷ Ignacio Ramonet, 'Néofascisme', *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 1998.

¹⁸ Mark Rupert, 'Globalisation and contested common sense in the United States', in Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman (eds), *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). The most extreme manifestation of this tendency is withdrawal from American political society with the formation of private militias and perpetration of terrorist acts like the Oklahoma City bombing.

¹⁹ Yumiko Iida, 'Virtual kingdom and dreams of apocalypse: contemporary Japan mirrored in *Aum Shinrikyo*', paper presented at the 10th annual conference of the Japan Studies Association of Canada, Toronto, October 1997.

²⁰ The most obvious case today is the role of *mafias* in the Russian economy; but an anecdotal instance relates to Argentina where deregulation has led to increased polarization of rich and poor and former members of the naval intelligence service, notorious torturers during the 'dirty war', have been reemployed by private corporations as 'security' staff. 'Argentine killers find new line of work' by Amaranta Wright, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) 28 February 1997.

political authority more accountable and reduces the scope for exclusionary politics and covert activity.

The question of civil society in the late 20th century takes us back to the Machiavellian question of the 16th century: how to form the social basis for a new political authority. Where Machiavelli concluded reluctantly that his contemporaries were too corrupt to do it on their own and looked to the Prince to provide the initiative, Gramsci envisaged the Communist Party as the Modern Prince. At the close of the 20th century, comes the vision of a 'post-modern' collective Prince constructed through a coordinating of popular movements. The feasibility of this project would depend upon a resurgence of civil society.

Gramsci's thought and the making of civil society

Gramsci's starting point for thinking about society, consistent with Marxism, was class structure derived from the relations of production. He referred to 'fundamental' classes (bourgeoisie and proletariat); but other non-fundamental classes, e.g. peasants and some elements of the petty bourgeoisie, had considerable importance as potential allies for the working class in the formation of a counterhegemonic bloc. The consciousness of social groups and their organization for political action was built upon this basic material condition.

Consciousness was not, for Gramsci, a direct derivative of class; it was an historical construction, not an automatically determined condition. There were different levels of consciousness. The lowest form was what Gramsci called 'corporative', the collective self-interest of people in a particular material situation. Corporative consciousness did not challenge the *status quo* in any essential respect; it just looked out for the interest of a particular group. The next higher level was class consciousness; it posed the question of the state. For whom was the state? Class consciousness unified various forms of corporative consciousness, e.g. among different groups of workers or among bourgeois whose specific material interests were in competition with one another, to focus upon the formation of political authority that would advance a concept of society based upon the leading fundamental class, in actuality the bourgeoisie but potentially the working class. Class consciousness accentuated the sense of cleavage necessary to move the dialectic forward. Today, 'class' has become a more ambiguous notion as in common discourse it is mixed with a variety of 'identities' in the formation of consciousness: gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality. Often these identities are subjectively opposed one to another and are open to manipulation by dominant powers in state and economy so as to fragment opposition. The common sentiment among them is a sense of oppression or exclusion. Class, in its generic meaning of social divisions arising from exploitation, can be seen as the substratum of this variety of grievances. But the practical problem remains of forging the links among divergent disadvantaged groups that would bind them together in a counterhegemonic formation.

This challenge leads to what for Gramsci was the highest level of consciousness. Hegemonic consciousness, according to Gramsci, would transcend class consciousness by incorporating interests of the 'non-fundamental' social groups into

a vision of society based on one or other of the 'fundamental' classes; and it would make this vision appear to be the 'natural order' of society. Gramsci's particular objective in the 1930s was the formation of a bloc led by the industrial working class in alliance with peasantry and petty bourgeois intellectuals. The questions now, towards the close of the 20th century, are: Who will lead? Who will follow?

This progression in consciousness from corporative through class to hegemonic can be taken as a natural history of civil society. On the basis of the material conditions of production, the potential for collective human action is built upon self-conscious human groups. It is necessary to know when production relations have created the conditions requisite for arousing consciousness and for forming a strategy for change. Not to have these basic conditions would be to fall into idealism and utopianism, leading to failure. Though the formation of class or hegemonic consciousness depends upon the existence of these material conditions, consciousness is nevertheless an autonomous force. Ideology and the organization of social forces does not flow automatically from material conditions. The critical agents in the raising of consciousness for Gramsci are the organic intellectuals; they serve to clarify the political thinking of social groups, leading the members of these groups to understand their existing situation in society and how in combination with other social groups they can struggle towards a higher form of society.

Two other Gramscian concepts are relevant to this process of building civil society: the war of position and passive revolution. The war of position is a strategy for the long-term construction of self-conscious social groups into a concerted emancipatory bloc within society. It is only when the war of position has built up a combination of organized social forces strong enough to challenge the dominant power in society that political authority in the state can be effectively challenged and replaced. The war of position is contrasted to the war of manoeuvre which might seize state power before this groundwork of social organization had been built up. To win a state by a war of manoeuvre would constitute a fragile victory, likely to succumb to the entrenched forces of a recalcitrant civil society. Thus, a civil society animated through popular participation is an indispensable basis for durable new political authority.

Passive revolution has a variety of meanings in Gramsci's thought. It represents an abortive or incomplete transformation of society and can take various forms. One is change induced in a society by an external force that attracts internal support from some elements but does not overcome the opposition of other entrenched forces. This can lead to an ambivalent situation of 'revolution/restoration' where neither of the opposed bodies of forces is victorious over the other. Passive revolution can also take the form of a stalled war of position strategy which is strong enough to provoke opposition but not strong enough to overcome it. Furthermore, a strategy on the part of the dominant power gradually to coopt elements of the opposition forces—a strategy known in Italian politics as *trasformismo*—is another form of passive revolution. Yet another form would be emancipatory strategies divorced from the material conditions of the social groups involved, inevitably incurring the illusions of utopianism and idealism. Gramsci cited Tolstoyism and Gandhism in this regard. So passive revolution points to many of the inadequacies and obstacles in the attempted construction of civil society.

Variations in prospects for civil society

The restructuring of production is experienced world-wide in generating the three-fold hierarchy of social relations referred to above: integrated, precarious, and excluded. The proportions, however, differ from society to society. The balance between top-down and bottom-up forces in civil society, and the relative importance of right-wing populism and the covert world, result in distinct types of state/society configurations with different implications for civil society. Tentatively, four different patterns may serve to illustrate the range of conditions and prospects of civil society in the world today. These patterns or types are not intended to be exhaustive in covering the whole world, but they do illustrate some of the significantly different situations and prospects for civil society at the present time.

Evolved capitalism in Europe and America

Evolved capitalism in North America and western Europe constituted the point of impetus for economic globalization. Its influence penetrates to the rest of the world, the impact varying according to the level of material development and the resistance of persisting cultural practices in other regions. Production is being restructured in the form of post-Fordism which brings about the pattern of integrated core workers flanked by precariously linked supporting workers. Global finance exerts a continuing pressure on state budgets to reduce the social expenditures built up during the era of Fordism which gave social legitimacy to capital.

There is an implicit contradiction here between production and finance. Production and the 'real economy' that provides goods and services requires time to develop (research and development and the training of a committed labour force); finance has a synchronic space-oriented perspective directed to short-term returns which can often ignore the time dimension and undermine not only the social legitimacy of capital but also the productive apparatus itself (for example, through predatory buy-outs and asset stripping). In the late 20th century, it is global finance rather than production and the 'real economy' that focuses people's attention on the frailties of the economic order.

Another contradiction is between the real economy and the biosphere. Expansion of consumer demand is the driving force of the global economy. World-wide emulation of the consumption model of North America and western Europe would, however, through resource depletion and environmental destruction, bring ruin to the biosphere—the ultimate feed-back mechanism. To escape this disaster would require shifting the use of labour which is surplus to that required to satisfy the basic needs of society (the labour resource currently employed in arousing and in gratifying the superfluity of consumerism) to investment in social and human services (education, health, care of children and the aged, protection of the environment, and conviviality in social life). This would imply a fundamental change in economic organization and values—a revolution in social practices and in the structure of social power.

A further contradiction is in social relations. A large proportion of jobs are in the precarious category. Downgraded skilled workers in this category are often resentful

of immigrants and women who are the other significant groups among the precariously employed. Youth and minorities are prominent among the more or less permanently excluded, a volatile and potentially destabilizing group. There is no longer any such formation as the 'working class' of the early 20th century. A privileged part of that former working class has been absorbed into the integrated category. Other elements are in both precarious and excluded categories; and their material conditions can easily be perceived as generating adversarial relationships between downgraded manual workers, immigrants and women workers. The fragmentation of the old working class, a consequence of post-Fordism reinforced by pressures of global finance towards dismantling of the Fordist-era social safety net, has strengthened capital and weakened and divided labour.

The problem for the organic intellectuals of the Left is how to envisage a strategy that could build from this fragmented situation of subordinate social groups a coherent alternative to economic globalization that would transcend (*Aufhebung* in Hegel's meaning) the contradictions just referred to. These organic intellectuals are now themselves a fragmented lot: trade union leaders, environmentalists, social activists on behalf of the poor and homeless and the unemployed, and promoters of self-help community organizations. They compete for potential clientele with right-wing populists, anti-immigrant racists, and religious cults. All of these various movements are meanwhile developing transnational linkages and organizations.

The covert world (organized crime, the drug trade, and intelligence services) occupies a political space that has, if anything, been enlarged by public disillusionment with conventional politics. The high cost of electoral politics sustains hypocrisy in the political class, who ostensibly respond to public support for campaign finance reform while continuing to rely on occult financial contributions, thus remaining open to occult influences. This, in turn, further erodes public confidence in political leadership.

In Europe, evolved capitalism has two variants. One is the 'pure' hyperliberal form which espouses removal of state intervention in the economy by deregulation and privatization and makes competitiveness in the global market its ultimate criterion. This is the dominant variant. The other is the European tradition of social market or social democratic capitalism which sees the viability and legitimacy of an economy as dependent upon its being embedded in social relations recognized as equitable by the general population.²¹ The issue between the two forms of capitalism is being fought out at the level of the European Union in the debate over 'social Europe' and the filling of the 'democratic deficit' in European institutions.

In very general terms, we can think of three constellations of forces: first, the dominant forces in states and markets (corporate management and the political class, surreptitiously sustained by the covert world); second, a heterogeneous category of groups commonly identified as constituting civil society in the emancipatory sense (trade unions and 'new social movements'); and third, right-wing and populist movements and religious cults that compete with the preceding groups for support among the unorganized mass of the people.

In attempts to construct a 'bottom-up' social force, the question arises of compatibility between trade unions and the new social movements, e.g. environmentalism, feminism, anti-poverty movements, and peace movements. The new

²¹ Michel Albert, *Capitalisme contre capitalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

social movements have often been suspicious of organized labour, fearing domination by labour's tighter and more hierarchical organization which might not respect the social movements' far more loosely structured and more participatory forms of organization. Moreover, the new movements arise more frequently from problems related to consumption, e.g. poverty and homelessness, rather than, as for unions, from the realm of production. On the other hand, organized labour can sometimes, despite its weakened condition in evolved capitalism, be a catalyst for a more broadly based social movement to confront the established powers in state and corporations. Furthermore, a sustained concertation of social forces, i.e. one that would outlast a particular event or crisis, is hard to achieve among groups with the loose and participatory character of the new movements. Coherence and durability over time would be a necessary condition for having a sustained impact on political parties and thus on the state.

Asian capitalism and the cultural dimension

Japanese capitalism is the prototype of another form of capitalism with a different social context.²² In its origins, the pre-capitalist social and cultural form provided a foundation for imported Western technology and state sponsorship of industrialization. The result was a Japanese form of corporatism in which the state worked closely with business, and the firm developed on the concept of an extended, if bureaucratized, patriarchal family. Group loyalty contributed to organizational strength; but workers were divided between those integrated with the firm and others with a more casual or remote link to the central production organization (contract or out-sourcing workers). The lifetime employment of the first category corresponded to the impermanence of the second. In this manner, Japanese practice prefigured the pattern that globalization has projected on to the world scale.

This initial Asian pattern coincided with authoritarian political structures. The rapid growth of economies, first in Japan during the post-World War II years, and subsequently in several of the newly industrializing Asian economies (Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, followed by the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia), brought into existence both a large middle class oriented towards consumerism and a more combative working class. In some of these countries, pressures from both of these social forces has resulted in attenuation of authoritarianism.

Japan's political structures show continuity in many respects with pre-war patterns. Democratization was introduced under the auspices of the American occupation authorities. Domestic forces in Japan, reacting against the militaristic state that had brought war and ruin, supported the democratic innovations. These forces continued to urge further democratization when US policy shifted ground to bring Japan into the anti-communist Cold War alliance. Other domestic elements, including those associated with the wartime regime, rallied to the new US anti-

²² See Shigeto Tsuru, *Japan's Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); and James Fallows, *Looking at the Sun: The Rise of the New East Asian Economic and Political System* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

communist line.²³ Japan's post-war condition is a case of passive revolution in Gramsci's sense. The revolution/restoration balance remains non-catastrophic because the economic growth priority of Japanese governments during the later Cold War period achieved, at least temporarily, a high degree of depoliticization. The democratizing forces of the post-war years were to a large extent demobilized by the general preoccupation with economic growth.

Japanese society has sufficient cohesion on its own, sustained by the long period of economic growth, so that it has in practice made slight demands upon the state. Whether this would continue through a prolonged period of economic stagnation or recession is an open question. Moreover, some Japanese are concerned that the formerly strong cohesion of family and community may be dissolving as a consequence of modernization leading to more emphasis on individualism as well as consumerism and to a lesser commitment to work and organizational loyalties.²⁴ The covert world, particularly in the forms of organized crime and political corruption, thrives in Japan as it does also in South Korea and other Asian countries.

Asian scholars point to a distinction among three spheres: state, market, and civil society.²⁵ They see civil society in Asia as a late and still, relatively to Europe, weak development which has focused on democratization, environmentalism, human rights, the peace movement, and various mutual self-help and internationalist goals. In these respects, civil society has made gains in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines. Private groups (including organized crime) contributed spontaneously and effectively to relief after the Kobe earthquake disaster of 1995, when the state's response proved to be disorganized and ineffective. Indeed, the current emphasis on civil society in Asia could be seen, in its emancipatory aspect, as the transnationalizing of the democratizing and people-based forces of Japan and their effort to atone for Japan's war guilt by building cooperative arrangements with communities in other parts of Asia. There is also a movement towards 'Asianization', or the imagining of a regional Asia-wide community of which Japan is a part, which reflects both the consumerist material values of middle-class economic success and a right-wing aesthetic rejection of 'the West'.²⁶ Authoritarianism has impeded the democratization movement in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, although many local non-governmental organizations exist in these countries. It is difficult to speak of civil society in China so long as the authoritarianism of the Party-state limits the expression of aggrieved elements, although rapid economic growth and social polarization in coastal China is generating stresses that may be hard to contain.

²³ Yoshikazu Sakamoto, 'The international context of the occupation of Japan', in Robert E. Ward and Yoshikazu Sakamoto (eds), *Democratizing Japan: The Allied Occupation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987); also Yoshikazu Sakamoto, 'Fifty Years of the Two Japans', typescript, 1995.

²⁴ Professor Tamotsu Aoki, a cultural anthropologist, Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, University of Tokyo, at a symposium convened jointly by the International House of Japan and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Tokyo, September 26, 1996.

²⁵ Yoshikazu Sakamoto, Professor emeritus of International Relations, Tokyo University and Young-Ho Kim, Professor at Kyungpook National University, South Korea, at a symposium on Prospects for Civil Society in Asia, International House of Japan, Tokyo, September 24, 1996.

²⁶ The 'Asianization' idea is presented in Yoichi Funabashi, 'The Asianization of Asia', *Foreign Affairs* 72: 5 (1993). The notion of a regional civil society is discussed in Mitchell Bernard, 'Regions in the global political economy: beyond the local-global divide in the formation of the eastern Asian region', *New Political Economy* 1: 3 (November 1996). For a critical assessment, see Yumiko Iida, 'Fleeing the West, making Asia home: transpositions of otherness in Japanese pan-Asianism, 1905-1930', *Alternatives* 22 (1997), pp. 409-432.

Recent events in South Korea have thrown new light on the condition of civil society. The challenge here has come from the effort of the large South Korean corporations, the *chaebols*, to compete as multinational corporations in the global market. Towards this end they persuaded the government to revert to earlier authoritarian practices by restricting labour rights recently acquired so as to give the *chaebols* more flexibility in hiring and firing. At the same time, the government sought to increase the powers of the intelligence services (Korean CIA). This attempt to revert to authoritarianism and to enlarge the sphere of the covert world provoked a general strike in which the labour movement became united and gained support from students, teachers, and religious organizations. The protest was a direct reaction to globalization.²⁷

As in the case of the French strikes of December 1995, the trade unions in South Korea provided the impetus for a response by civil society to state authoritarianism. Change in South Korea may be more authentic than passive, but it does not seem to be oriented towards radical structural transformation, but rather to a more liberal legitimation of political authority. In Japan, trade unions have not been identified with a 'bottom-up' transformation of civil society. They have been more aligned with corporations and the jobs they provide. During the 1970s, environmental protests that resulted in political changes at municipal and regional levels in Japan were led by citizens apart from unions. Union members identified their jobs with corporate interests in maintaining production, while their wives might feel freer to participate in the environmentalist revolt.

Thus in some Asian countries capitalist development has generated the class basis for a development of civil society which is weaker than that of Europe in the face of state and corporate authoritarianism but which has nevertheless made some significant progress in recent years. The social forces involved in this emergent civil society are both middle class (including students, environmentalists, peace activists and feminists) and organized workers. The coherence between middle class and worker elements is problematic. Asia gives a mixed picture of authentic and passive structural change in societies.

State breakdown and predatory capitalism

The prototype for this category is the breakdown of the Soviet Union; but instances of the phenomenon are not limited to the former Soviet bloc. Similar situations have arisen in countries of Latin America affected by the debt crisis. In broad outline, the circumstances leading to this situation are: an economic crisis generated by both internal and external causes leaves an authoritarian state unable to carry out the functions it has assumed; external pressures, welcomed by a politically aware stratum of the population, lead to the establishment of a liberal democratic regime based on electoral politics, but civil society is insufficiently developed to provide a firm basis for the new regime; external pressures then succeed in reducing state powers over the economy in favour of an expansion of market forces; the weakness

²⁷ A series of articles by Philippe Pons in *Le Monde*, 3 January, 15 January, and 16 January, 1997; and by Laurent Carroué, *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 1997.

of institutions to regulate the market and the collapse of state authority open the way for organized crime and political corruption to gain control in both state and market spheres; the general population, struggling for personal survival, becomes politically apathetic and non-participant, while some elements nourish a nostalgic hope for salvation by a charismatic leader. The weakness of civil society is the critical element in this catastrophic cycle.

The domestic cause of the collapse of the Soviet regime stemmed from its failure to make the transition from extensive development, i.e. the addition of more productive capacity of the same kind, to intensive development, i.e. innovating production technology with higher productivity. This was exacerbated by the external pressure to accelerate the arms race which placed an intolerable burden on the economy, preventing the state from maintaining the social services it had instituted as basic citizen rights.²⁸

In the eastern and central European countries of the bloc, where the arms burden was less than in the Soviet Union, opposition movements developed openly. In Poland, *Solidarność* as a trade union became a rallying point for a broad based opposition to the communist regime; and the Catholic Church had long stood as an alternate pole of loyalty to the state. In East Germany, *Neues Forum* mobilized people into the streets to demonstrate against the authoritarian regime. As noted above, the current scholarly interest in civil society very largely originated in observation of the popular movements in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the German Democratic Republic which toppled the communist regimes in these countries after the Soviet Union had signalled it would not or could not support them.

These movements crumbled later after they had achieved their initial purpose of overthrowing established state power. In retrospect, in Gramsci's terms, they may seem more like the phenomena of a war of manoeuvre than of a war of position. Liberal democratic regimes were then established in these countries, encouraged by western politicians and media and welcomed by local citizens. These were cases of passive revolution. In the Soviet Union, change came from the top. In Eastern and Central Europe, civil society played a bigger role. But after the collapse of the communist regimes, those who led the popular revolt did not for long remain as major political forces; and the bureaucratic elites of the former regime became the typical private market elites of post-communism. The solidity and durability of civil society remains questionable.

External support for the new regimes came more in the form of exhortations and technical advice urging 'democracy and market reform' than in large-scale investment and access for trade. It was clear that market reform in the ex-communist sphere had priority in western policy and that democracy was perceived as instrumental towards market economics.

When the erosion of state authority and the absence of effective regulation of the market led to a dramatic growth of mafia control over economic activity, corrupt penetration of the state, and the forging of international criminal links, apologists

²⁸ See various writings of János Kornai, including *Economics of Shortage* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1980); and 'Dilemmas of a socialist economy', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 4: 2 (1980); also Włodzimierz Brus and Tadeus Kowalik, 'Socialism and development', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 7 (1983); and Robert W. Cox, "'Real socialism" in historical perspective' in Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch (eds), *Socialist Register 1991* (London: Merlin Press, 1991).

for liberal economics showed their preference for crime over state regulation. They could view it with equanimity as a probably necessary stage of primitive capital accumulation.²⁹ The collapse of state authority also unleashed sub-national forces of ethnic nationalism which became vehicles for garnering the residues of economic and political power.

Several Latin American countries also fit the model—Mexico and Columbia, for example. The decline of state authority is associated with the imposition of ‘structural adjustment’ policies advocated with financial leverage by the International Monetary Fund and backed by US pressure. Initially, US policy looked to authoritarian solutions to introduce economic liberalism in Latin America, in the manner of the Pinochet coup in Chile. Subsequently, US policy began to advocate liberal democratic forms of state as being more able to sustain the continuity of a liberal economic regime while allowing for changes of government, making the economy less vulnerable to political coup.³⁰ This, again, implied passive revolution.

In these societies various forms of popular movements have taken root—trade unions, left wing political parties, and the ‘new social movements’, as well as the episodic manifestations of ‘people power’ such as toppled the Marcos regime in the Philippines or ‘IMF riots’ provoked by rising food and transport prices. There is some evidence that, under the impact of structural adjustment, unions and social action movements have pulled together despite their mutual suspicions of earlier years and have worked to support left wing political parties.³¹ However, groups led by social activists have focused more on local demands often obtained by the old patterns of clientelism and compromise with authorities than on the broader aims of change in social and economic structures which are the concern of left wing political parties. These left wing parties have, in turn, been weakened nationally by the hegemony of globalization ideology. Furthermore, promotion of civil society has been coopted by forces behind the propagation of neo-liberal economics as a way of defusing and channelling potential protest.³² Consequently, civil society, in its dual form of class-based organizations and social activism, has a latent but not very fully realized potential for social and political transformation. The covert world, in the form of organized crime, drug cartels and political corruption, is rife in these countries. The decline of state authority is not matched by a development of civil society.

The most open challenge to the impact of globalization on social and political structures has come from a new type of revolutionary movement, the *Zapatista* rebellion of the Mayan Indians in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas that broke out on New Year’s day 1994. This was the day on which the North American Free Trade Area came into effect, which symbolized the anti-globalization message of the

²⁹ László Andor, ‘Economic transformation and political stability in East Central Europe’, *Security Dialogue*, 27: 2 (June 1996).

³⁰ See William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy. Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) which contains case studies of the Philippines, Chile, Nicaragua, Haiti, South Africa, and the former Soviet bloc; also William I. Robinson, ‘Globalization, the world system, and ‘democracy promotion’ in US foreign policy’, *Theory and Society*, 25 (1996), pp. 615–65.

³¹ Judith Adler Hellman, ‘The riddle of new social movements: who they are and what they do’, in Sandor Halebsky and Richard L. Harris (eds), *Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

³² Laura Macdonald, *Supporting Civil Society*, (see footnote 12 above).

revolt. Indigenous peoples in different parts of the world have proclaimed their distinctness as social formations demanding control of their ancestral lands. The *Zapatistas* have gone beyond this to cultivate international support and attempt to change the Mexican political system. They have sought to transcend both the hierarchical military character of the rebellion in its initial phase and its ethnic base of support in order to become a rallying force in civil society of all forces for democratic change, in other words to create the beginnings of a counterhegemonic bloc.³³

Africa: civil society versus the state

In Africa there are even more extreme cases of state breakdown and of alienation of people from the state. State structures inherited from colonial regimes had no close relationship to local populations to begin with; yet the state controlled access to any economic activity more substantial than peasant agriculture and petty trading. The political struggle for control of the state was thus a struggle for a share of the economic product of the country, a product divided between foreign investors and the power holders in the state. There has been a history of resistance to this pattern. Some social revolutionary movements and attempts at social democratic experiments have endeavoured to create political authorities that were based on African community life—movements led by Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, Samora Machel in Mozambique, and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, for example. However, obstacles, mainly external in origin, impeded the success of these struggles for a more participant polity.³⁴ The Cold War came to dominate African politics as both the United States and the Soviet Union chose allies among the power-holders in African states and armed them. This strengthened the tendency towards military rule and towards African states taking the form of kleptocracies—dictators with armed bands that served both as praetorian guards and as gangs who pillaged the population. Mobutu's Zaire was a prime example.

In these circumstances, it is not to be wondered that African people did not readily identify with their rulers. Furthermore, foreign capital proved to be equally hostile to people's welfare. Foreign investors, with the connivance of African states, have damaged the ecology upon which local people depend for their livelihood. The international financial agencies (IMF and World Bank) impose structural adjustment policies that have placed heavy burdens on the populations of these countries.

³³ Maurice Najman, 'Le grand virage des zapatistes' in *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 1997. A sketch of the world view of the *Zapatistas* is to be found in Sous-commandant Marcos, 'La 4e guerre mondiale a commencé', *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 1997.

³⁴ Amilcar Cabral was a particularly articulate leader who expounded in theory and practice the position that popular participation in revolutionary action and cultural change were essential for African peoples to raise themselves out of imperialist domination. Although the momentum of his movement stalled, following Cabral's assassination by agents of Portuguese colonialism, the historian Basil Davidson thinks that Cabral's success in mobilizing Africans to make their own history has left its impact and example to inspire a renewed movement. See Basil Davidson, *The Search for Africa. History, Culture, Politics* (New York: Random House, 1994, esp. pp. 217–43); and *Unity and Struggle. Speeches and Writings of Amilcar Cabral* (New York and London: Monthly Review, 1979). Cabral's speeches and writing have striking similarity to Gramsci's thought.

In consequence, many Africans have come to see the state and the international institutions as their enemies and have organized in a variety of self-help community groups to confront the daily problems of life, shunning any link to the state. Women have been prominent as initiators and leaders in this movement. An Ethiopian economist has called it 'the silent revolution in Africa'.³⁵ Similar movements exist in some other poor countries.

This is a form of incipient civil society that has turned its back on the state. The question remains open whether it could develop into a force that would engage with the state to alter the state's character and become the foundation for a new participant form of democracy.³⁶

Conclusions

The nature and condition of civil society is very diverse, looked at on a world scale. It is, nevertheless, tempting to look at this diversity through the analytic lens of Gramsci's conceptualization of relations of forces (PN, pp. 180–85). Civil society is itself a field of power relations; and forces in civil society relate, in support or opposition, to powers in state and market.

The first level in Gramsci's relation of forces, is the 'relation of social forces' by which he meant objective relations independent of human will brought about by the level of development of the material forces of production. Through the effect of economic globalization and the passage from Fordism to post-Fordism in the present day world, this has brought about a basic cleavage between, on the one hand, the beneficiaries of globalization or those people who are integrated into the world economy, and on the other hand, those who are disadvantaged within or excluded from the world economy. The latter would include some who, in a precarious way, may become intermittent adjuncts to the world economy and whose

³⁵ Fantu Cheru, *The Silent Revolution in Africa: Debt, Development and Democracy* (Harare and London: Zed/Anvil Press, 1989). Basil Davidson, *The Search for Africa* (see footnote 34 above) has also referred to this phenomenon: 'One finds [in Africa] the striving of countless individuals and collectives towards new types of self-organization—perhaps one should say self-defense—aimed in one way or another at operating outside the bureaucratic centralism of the neocolonial state' (p. 290).

³⁶ Basil Davidson, 'Africa: the politics of failure', *Socialist Register 1992* edited by Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch (London: Merlin Press, 1992), envisaged the possibility that more participatory politics in Africa might develop within the framework of market economics, but concluded rather pessimistically: 'How far the developed world of multinational concentrations of power will bring itself to tolerate this devolutionary politics of participation, and its democratic implications, is [a] question to which, at present, we do not have an answer' (p. 225). The fall of the Mobutu regime in Zaire and its replacement by the Democratic Republic of the Congo under Laurent-Désiré Kabila did not really test Davidson's proposition. Kabila's victory was achieved by military means with considerable support from Ugandan and Rwandan military forces. The struggle seemed to take place over the heads of the vast majority of Zaire's population which has evolved techniques of survival in communities that have avoided involvement with the state and the formal economy. Although these elements of autonomous civil society do exist, they have not yet been able to evolve a real politics of participation that could be the foundation for a new state. See e.g. Colette Braeckman, 'Comment le Zaïre fut libéré' *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 1997. In other works, Davidson seems more optimistic about the long range potential for the development of civil society and 'the elaboration of a culture capable of drawing the civilization of the Africans out of the fetters into which it has fallen, and of giving that civilization, in its multitudinous aspects and varieties, a life and meaning appropriate to its present tasks and destiny.' (Basil Davidson, *The Search for Africa*, pp. 261–2 (see footnote 34 above)).

interests may thus waver between hope for more stable affiliation and outright antagonism in despair of achieving it.

This cleavage does not yield anything so clear as the Marxian cleavage along property lines between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The proletariat is divided now between some beneficiaries of globalization and many disadvantaged. The petty bourgeoisie is also divided between some who would identify with the world economy and others who are disadvantaged or excluded in relation to it. Many people would need to be understood more in their relationship to consumption (or the inability to consume adequately) rather than to production—the more or less permanently unemployed, the inhabitants of shanty towns, welfare recipients, and students. The old production-related categories are not entirely superseded; but the scheme of categories of people relevant to the problematic of social change needs to be rethought.

Gramsci's second level, which he called the relation of political forces, addresses the question of consciousness. In today's context, the challenge is to bridge the differences among the variety of groups disadvantaged by globalization so as to bring about a common understanding of the nature and consequences of globalization, and to devise a common strategy towards subordinating the world economy to a regime of social equity. This means building a counterhegemonic historic bloc that could confront the hegemonic formation of globalization in a long term war of position.

Gramsci's strategic concepts are pertinent here, including particularly the role of organic intellectuals. Their task now is to be able to work simultaneously on local, regional and world levels. The obstacles are considerable in that the active or potential opposition to globalization is divided on many issues. There is opposition between manual workers protecting their jobs in environmentally destructive and polluting industries and environmentalists working to stop these industrial practices. Other conflicts arise between manual workers in mature industrial countries who face downgrading through global competition and workers in recently industrializing countries or immigrant workers from poor countries who are perceived to be taking away their jobs. Still other conflicts arise from the claims by indigenous peoples for lands and control of resources that conflict with the aims of mining and forestry corporations and their workers. Also there is the issue between the claims of women's movements for equity in employment and the fears of precariously employed male workers. Organic intellectuals linked to these various groups face a difficult task of transcending the immediate corporative instincts of these groups and the oppositions they engender to other disadvantaged or excluded groups, in order to achieve a commonly shared vision of a desirable and feasible alternative future and a strategy for joint action. They must at the same time do battle with the right wing forces of anti-immigrant racist nationalism, neo-fascism, authoritarian populism, and nihilistic religious cults, which compete for the allegiance of people where social bonds have disintegrated and apathy and alienation has become the norm.

Gramsci's third level in the relation of forces was the relation of military forces, which he divided into two parts: one, the technical military function which we may read as control of the repressive apparatus of a state; and the other, the politico-military, refers to the morale of a population, to the degree of coherence or disintegration among people. In the absence of high morale, struggle against a

dominant power over people, whether foreign or domestic, would be improbable. The condition that sustains an oppressive regime, Gramsci wrote, is a 'state of social disintegration of the . . . people, and the passivity of the majority among them' (PN, p. 183). This, in varying degrees, is the situation characteristic of the populations engulfed by globalization today. To overcome this social disintegration and passivity will require the creation of a vibrant civil society inspired by a strong spirit of solidarity at the community level and, by linkage with other strong communities in other countries, at the transnational or global level. Upon such a basis of participatory democracy new political authorities may in the long run be constructed at national, regional and world levels.

One aspect in developing a vision and strategy is to shift from a predominantly space-oriented and synchronic mode of thinking to a predominantly time-oriented and diachronic or dialectical mode of thinking. Oppositions that are apparently objective in the immediate may be overcome through attacking the structures that ensure the persistence of these oppositions. First among these is the doctrine subscribed to by corporate capital and most governments, and propagated by the intellectuals and media of the status quo, that competitiveness in the world economy is the ultimate criterion of policy. This is the primary form of alienation in the world today—the imagining of a force created by people that stands over them proclaiming that 'there is no alternative'. This contemporary deity will have to be deconstructed to make way for an alternative vision of a world economy regulated in the interest of social equity and non-violent resolution of conflict.

The other important aspect of creating a counterhegemonic bloc is revival of a spirit of solidarity. The crisis of capitalism in the mid 1970s and the subsequent supremacy of the globalization dynamic has not only weakened psychological bonds between people and states but also the level of trust among people themselves and their disposition for collective action. The result is an increase in cynicism, apathy and non-participation of people in politics and social action.³⁷ Increasingly politics are not about choices concerning the future of society but rather about choices among competing sets of would-be managers of the status quo, many of whom are tainted by corruption and most of whom are professedly incompetent to think of, let alone pursue, an alternative.³⁸ The political space abandoned by people has been readily taken up by the covert world, which has become functional to the financing of established political systems and is involved in a substantial part of world markets.

Civil society has become the crucial battleground for recovering citizen control of public life. It seems that very little can be accomplished towards fundamental change through the state system as it now exists. That system might be reconstructed on the

³⁷ The American sociologist Robert D. Putnam has suggested that civil society in the United States has lost much of the spirit of association once noted by de Tocqueville as its salient characteristic. He sees this as being replaced by non-participation in group activities and a privatizing or individualizing of leisure time. He calls this a decline of 'social capital' which refers to networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. See Putnam, 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6: 1 (January 1995). The same author has made a study about social capital in Italy: Putnam with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³⁸ See, for example, the brilliant essay by Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *La fin de la démocratie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993).

basis of a reinvigorated civil society which could only come about through a long term war of position. Meanwhile, a two-track strategy for the Left seems appropriate: first, continued participation in electoral politics and industrial action as a means of defensive resistance against the further onslaught of globalization; and secondly, but ultimately more importantly, pursuit of the primary goal of resurrecting a spirit of association in civil society together with a continuing effort by the organic intellectuals of social forces to think through and act towards an alternative social order at local, regional and global levels.