

CHAPTER 5

CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY AND POWER:
GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

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When commentators with very different political views converge in their dismissal of civil society as of little value for democracy, it is worth looking at what lies behind their consensus. Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment Trust sees the US government as the main hope for democracy, although he is critical of some of its policies (Carothers, 2004). Tariq Ali of *New Left Review* and a leader of the 1960s movement against the US war in Vietnam sees the US presence in Iraq as a disaster for democracy (Ali, 2002). Both writers question the common presumption that support for civil society makes a significant contribution to democracy; indeed, both maintain that such support often defuses opposition and falsely legitimises undemocratic regimes.

The arguments of Carothers and Ali share the premise that support for civil society rarely steps on the toes of those in power, and so at best leads to liberalisation in terms of cultural and social rights but not necessarily to the democratisation of a political regime. In fact, argues Carothers:

Support for civil society might help strengthen semi-authoritarian regimes by giving frustrated citizens the impression that important reforms are taking place, thereby bleeding off a certain amount of accumulated internal pressure for change . . .

He puts it bluntly:

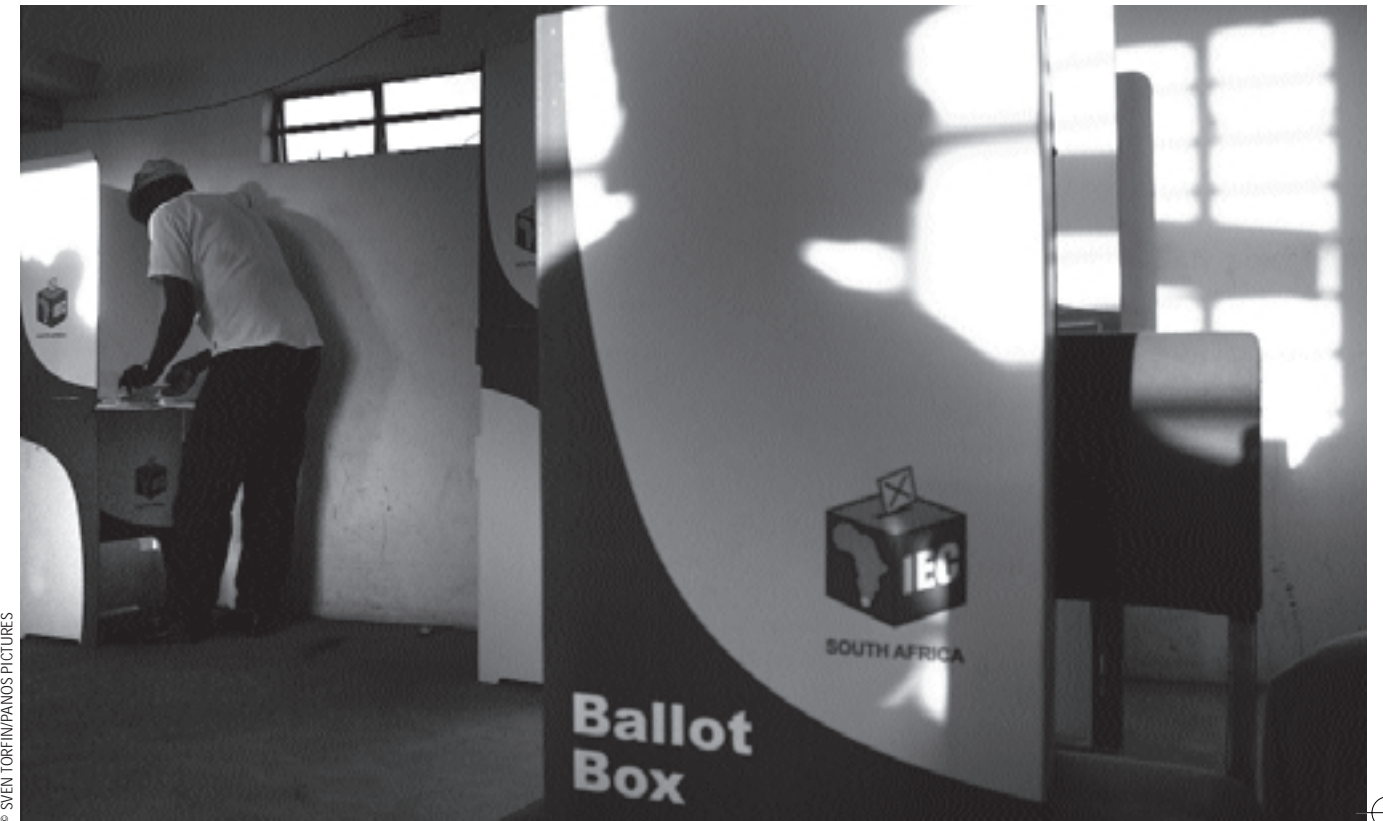
It is very possible that outside democracy promoters can work for years helping to . . . nourish civic advocacy, foster greater women's rights, and promote more democratic civic education without contributing to a basic change of regime type. (Carothers, 2003: 11)

His own proposals for supporting democracy are concentrated on direct aid for a plurality of political parties, elections, rights of political association and other aspects of representative democracy. Tariq Ali's conclusions are similar, though without particular recommendations:

NGOs will descend on Iraq like a swarm of locusts . . . Intellectuals and activists of every stripe will be bought off and put to work producing bad pamphlets on subjects of purely academic interest. This has the effect of neutering potential opposition, or to be more precise, of confiscating dissent in order to channel it in a safe direction. Some NGOs do buck the trend and are involved in serious projects, but these are an exception. (Ali, 2003: 03)

For Ali, the main problem is that civil society is separated from politics (except among religious groups that move in to fill the political vacuum, with undemocratic results). But this weakness in the ability of civil society to influence political power is not inherent in the character of organisations in civil society, as Ali and Carothers tend to imply. I will argue that they are probably right about many of the organisations receiving international funds, mainly American, as do civil society organisations in Iraq. There are good reasons for questioning assumptions of an automatic flow between civil society organisations that are (or claim to be) democratic, and the process of democratising state power. This chapter will explore several of them. I will also contrast the situations where civil society organisations fail to make an impact on political power with contexts in which civil society has been a unique source of power, exercised autonomously from the state, for democratic change. I will ask what conditions make this possible and what role global organisations and networks of civil society have played in the process. Finally, I will return to Iraq and illustrate my argument with references to organisations struggling for democracy that have emerged in civil society independent of, indeed out of resistance to, the occupying powers.

My purpose is not to defend some abstract or universal connection between civil society and democracy. Rather, I start from an analysis of democracy which points to civil society as a *potential* source of power for democracy. I then try to understand through



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Democracy is not only about the vote

several examples – some positive, some negative – the conditions under which, and the ways in which, this potential is realised.

Defining democracy

In this discussion of civil society and democracy, I am assuming the root definition of democracy: the people in power; 'demos' meaning 'people' and 'kratos' meaning 'power'. Democracy cannot be equated with particular institutions – free elections, a plurality of parties, for example – important though these institutions might be as a means of achieving the fundamental goal of democracy. There must be a definition of democracy based on principles against which it can be judged how far institutions are meeting the goals for which they were created. Rule by the people rather than an elite, a monarch or an aristocracy implies control of the decisions of the polity by all the people in that polity. Access to decision-making has to be on the basis of equality – anything less would produce rule by an elite. I therefore

take popular control and political equality to be the fundamental principles of democracy (Beetham, 1999).

Control will, of course, often be mediated rather than direct but the means of mediation and representation must be assessed in terms of the extent of popular control they afford, along with equality of access to them: how far do nominally democratic institutions enable people to control the decision-making process? The institutions of democracy vary historically and culturally, although clearly some almost have the status of a universal principle: the universal franchise, for instance. There has, however, to be a process of ongoing testing and experiment to discover improved mechanisms for popular control and political equality, which build on the foundation of the franchise. Decades of the vote have taught us that even the most transparent and direct forms of representation can be undermined by undemocratic institutions that flourish beyond the reach of elected representatives: *within* the state, bureaucracy and vested interests; *outside* it, pressure from private business and unaccountable international institutions. These principles keep democracy vigilant, since they make it clear that

institutions are more or less democratic; they are never perfectly democratic. The democratic power of civil society becomes relevant at both these points of vigilance: first as a means of resisting tyranny within the state and laying the foundations of political equality and popular control, and second as a means of building democratic counter-power to the anti-democratic sources of power outside the state, which have long been eroding the power of the franchise.

Recent highs and lows of civil society and democracy

The history of civil society's ability to play these roles has been varied. Indeed, in western and eastern Europe, the last 30 years have seen both the high point of this connection and, more recently, its almost complete severance. The high point of connection between civil society and democracy included the emergence in the 1970s in western Europe of sustained social movements rooted in civil society, and in the 1980s in the east the dissident networks building up to the 'Velvet Revolution' of Wenceslas Square in Prague and the fall of the Berlin Wall. A common feature of both these contexts was a conception of civil society not simply as a 'sphere' but as a source of power for democratic change. There are signs that we are seeing a revival – in new, more international forms – of this awareness of civil society as a source of power, including power to bring about political change. The victory in March 2004 of the Socialist Party in Spain, for example, against the pro-Iraq war People's Party of Aznar cannot be explained in terms primarily of party activity or psephological trends. The change of government was also the result of the anti-war movement's ability to mobilise a popular and, at least at that moment, hegemonic countervailing power far beyond the capacities of a traditional political party.

Sources of optimism and their collapse

As for civil society strengthening democracy, the distinctive feature of the movements of the 1970s is that they saw sites for social change beyond the state, for example in family and personal relationships, in culture, at work, with neighbours – wherever there were relationships between people, including internationally, and even spanning relations between humans and the physical environment. The feminist movement is perhaps

the classic example, but the same methodology – 'change starts at where you are' – permeated most of the movements, including the peace movement of that period. People refused to reproduce consciously the relationships of injustice or oppression in which they were complicit, including, in the case of women, relations which caused them to suffer, but in which they acquiesced. The actions taken to break out of daily acquiescence, whether by organising collective childcare, or by marching off to surround a missile base, or by refusing to work in unsafe conditions, became an independent base from which they tried to change government or municipal policies: to get public funding for childcare, to force a withdrawal of missiles, or to win legislation to give workers the power to veto unsafe conditions. Civil society at this point had the power to transform the state. In many situations, it used this power to ensure that elected governments implemented their election promises. In these historical examples, civil society directly strengthened democracy in the sense of its core meaning: 'government by the people'. They made the link between the people and their representatives more direct, more actively accountable.

In central and eastern Europe, too, the thinking and the activity of the 1980s networks of dissent went beyond classical understandings (Tocqueville, 1835/1988; Kaldor and Vejvoda, 2002) of the relation between civil society and democracy. In the classic Tocquevillian view, the very existence of civil society – understood basically as social associations and relationships of all kinds independent of the state – was a protection against abuses of state power. In the thinking and language of the 1980s, central and eastern European dissident networks composing 'civil society' moved from this defensive role to something more proactive. Increasingly, the term was used to refer to a diffuse agency for change with an emphasis on self-organisation, mutual support and autonomy, which, not necessarily intentionally, increasingly became a de facto challenge to authority. Under almost total state domination, as Solidarity founder Lech Walensa put it, 'to laugh is to become political'. Jazz clubs in the beer cellars of Prague, informal gatherings in the baths of Budapest and 'networks of sympathy' across central Europe all nurtured political revolt. Such civil society initiatives formed, partly through the repressive reaction of the state, partly through their own persistence and moral integrity, the foundations of a struggle for democracy in eastern Europe. It was an experience which, like the social movements in the West, reinforced the idea of a natural spillover from democratic initiatives in civil society to the democratisation of political power.

Both these experiences of connection between civil society and democracy depended on conditions that were taken for granted at the time and even treated with contempt in the West, but which now have been all but devastated by unregulated market economics. In western Europe, the pressure civil society could apply to bring about democratisation of the state depended on already existing social democratic institutions at national and local levels, and a powerful mainstream party publicly

In western Europe, privatisation, deregulation and a generalised onslaught on state provision has weakened the leverage of civil society on political institutions

committed to social justice and dependent in part on the support of civil society networks, including trade unions. These social democratic institutions provided connections and wiring – sometimes tangled and blocked – through which currents of democratic energy could flow, from civil society through to political power. In eastern Europe, the idea of civil society as a source of democratic agency depended on loose forms of solidarity, values of mutual support and a subculture of social relationships that rejected both the bureaucratic collectivism of official Communism and the commercial, uncaring individualism encouraged by corporate capitalism.

In western Europe, privatisation, deregulation and a generalised onslaught on state provision has weakened the leverage of civil society on political institutions. In contexts of thoroughgoing privatisation, the absence or weakness of a partner or means of dialogue within the state has led to a separation, locally, of civil society from political power. This has led to the marginalisation of civil society as a source of power, sometimes paralleled by its elevation as a source of legitimacy for an increasingly undemocratic state. In central and eastern Europe, the rampant character of the market has made it difficult for the velvet revolution networks to sustain themselves as lasting pressures for democracy. Autonomous civil society activity continues, but with little purchase on political power.

New connections, local and global

There are exceptions, often local, that prove the rule. One that is explored in this chapter is the experience of

certain Brazilian cities where neo-liberalism has not yet wreaked its havoc. In several cities, a powerful alliance between civil society and a political party elected to municipal office (the Workers' Party or Partido Trabalhadores, PT), with a commitment to sharing power with civil society, was able to develop an impressive and now infectious process of popular participation in the decisions about the city's budget.

Such local initiatives have a new significance now, as a new relationship between civil society and democracy is being forged at the international level. One aspect of this is the rapid learning and creative imitation of local initiatives across the world. We therefore face a contradictory situation, which will be reflected in this chapter. In countries most acutely at the receiving end of the unregulated market – whether by legislation or by military force – the local connections between civil society and democracy have been weakened or have hardly emerged. At the international level, however, there is a new impetus to build organisations of civil society as a force for achieving and deepening democracy or rebuilding it in a radically new context.

The changing international relations of civil society

There has long been a tradition of international action by civil society to win or to defend democracy. Several factors in the past 20 years or so have enhanced and qualitatively changed the power of democratic civil society in this process. First, the global interdependence of nation states is now both far greater than ever and matched by an awareness of this interdependence: to adapt John Donne, 'no regime is an island, sufficient unto itself'. Even the most determinedly autarchic regime now depends on international institutions and relations, especially economic relations, with other countries. North Korea's Kim Il Sung has had to acknowledge this when faced with a major disaster. Sometimes, it is financial markets which provide life-support systems to dictatorial regimes – Iraq's Saddam Hussein and his elite benefited to the end from international financial flows. Sometimes, international investment facilitates oppression of minority peoples like the Ogoni: the Nigerian regime depended on international oil corporations. Sometimes, it is aid and trade: Israel's government would find it difficult to persist with its denial of Palestinian rights if the US refused to provide finance, and if the Europeans used Israel's dependence on their markets to back up their weak opposition to its policies. China too

Box 5.1: Funding democracy

A wide range of international NGOs, government aid agencies, intergovernmental organisations, private philanthropic foundations, and some religiously motivated interest groups are involved in the promotion of democracy. One general pattern is that democratic nation states figure prominently in this field, often as providers of overseas development aid but also as major sources of funding for NGOs that promote democracy. Private philanthropists also fund democratisation, whereas religious NGOs are much less likely to operate explicitly in terms of democracy.

NGOs and the promotion of democracy

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States is a non-governmental grant-making body, with organisational independence but significant funding from the US government. Since 1983, it has given grants to projects designed to promote democracy, currently funding programmes in over 85 countries. The diversity of projects funded can be illustrated by listing some recent grant recipients. These include:

- *The Welfare Association for Development of Afghanistan (WADAN)*, a body encouraging democratic practices among Maliks (regional traditional leaders), now expanding its project to 20 additional districts. WADAN is to set up regional offices in Kandahar and Kunduz to train 1,000 Maliks in peace-building, conflict resolution, democracy, and women's rights in ten districts each in the southern and northern provinces of the country
- *Poder Ciudadano* in Argentina. Its grant will support local community organisations working to increase citizen participation, civic education and advocacy in six provinces of Argentina.
- *Civic Exchange* in Hong Kong, which will receive a grant to conduct a programme to explore options for the post-2007 political system in Hong Kong
- *The Center for Sustainable Human Development, Inc. (CESHUD)* in Liberia, which is to provide civic education through its community radio station, aiming to stimulate public debate
- *Medienhilfe* in Serbia, which will work to support local independent media by covering the operating costs of nine independent electronic media sources in the so-called Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) network.

The NED also started the World Movement for Democracy, a global network designed to bring 'democrats, including activists, practitioners, academics, policymakers and funders' together to cooperate in the promotion of democracy. Similarly, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) in the UK receives significant UK government funding 'to provide assistance in building and strengthening pluralist democratic institutions overseas', which it does mainly by funding projects aimed at building pluralist democratic institutions outside the UK. The total annual value of grants made has recently averaged from £3 million to £4 million. A majority of these grants were for relatively small-scale projects with budgets under £11,000. Projects range from human rights education, training for political parties, political NGOs, journalists and trade unions, and leadership training for women, to equipment for parliaments. Since its creation in 1992, WFD has funded parliamentary strengthening projects in countries and entities as diverse as Armenia, Cuba, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Malawi, the Occupied Territories, Russia and Yemen. Support for NGOs concentrates on advocacy organisations and NGO networks and resource centres in central and eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

States funding democracy

Apart from funding NGOs like NED and WFD, democratic states promote democracy directly by supporting civil society organisations pushing for (or considered a part of) democracy, often through overseas aid programmes. Although donors increasingly focus on institutions and good governance (Öniş and Şenses, 2003), only some major overseas aid donors like the US, Canada and Sweden focus explicitly on promoting democracy. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) in 2002 spent over 15 per cent of its budget (Kr1,726 million, US\$233 million) on human rights and democracy. This included contributions for legislation, public administration, support to the mass media, conflict management and peace promotion. In comparison, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2002 spent 13 per cent (US\$990.6 million) of its budget on 'democracy and governance/conflict'.

An example of an intergovernmental agency supporting democratisation is the European Union's European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which aims to 'strengthen democratisation, good governance and the rule of law'. The European Commission has recently raised the budget of the EIDHR for 2004 by over €26 million to €132.6 million (\$163.2 million).

Private philanthropy and democracy

Many private philanthropic foundations work for democratisation in some way. Among them are the Mott Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Saskawa Peace Foundation. Some are very specific about their support for democratisation, however. The Democracy Coalition Project (DCP), for instance, was started in June 2001 as an initiative of the Open Society Institute (started by the financier George Soros). The DCP conducts research and advocacy relating to democracy promotion policies at the national, regional and global levels. It relies on an international network of civil society organisations, scholars, foreign policy experts and politicians committed to democracy promotion. The formation of the DCP was inspired by the signing by over 100 states of the Warsaw Convention, in which the signatories recognise, among other things, 'the universality of democratic values' creating a 'Community of Democracies'. Similarly, the Starr Foundation, set up by the insurance entrepreneur Cornelius Vander Starr, has concentrated some of its considerable funds, which total approximately US\$3.5 billion, in the area of 'public policy on international relations and the promotion of democratic institutions around the world'.

Religious organisations and democracy

Although there is some overlap, religious NGOs are less likely than states or independent human rights groups, for example, to frame their efforts in terms of democratic governance, preferring notions such as 'justice' or 'peace' instead. The otherwise politically engaged Quakers are a good illustration of this tendency. A recent development in this area, however, is the Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World, which convened in Istanbul, Turkey, in April 2004. The initiative was sponsored by a mixture of governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies: the National Democratic Institute, the United Nations Development Programme, the Turkish Democracy Foundation, and 16 governments and foundations from the US, Europe, and the Middle East. Delegates in the congress included current or former government officials, parliamentarians, and political leaders from ruling and opposition parties who had 'a proven individual record of democratic commitment and achievement'. They met to discuss 'their personal experiences with democratic governance, highlight progress made in many predominately Muslim countries, and address challenges that face the movement toward democratic reform'.

- European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/human_rights/doc/com01_252_en.pdf
- Open Society Institute: www.soros.org
- Quakers (American Friends Service Committee): www.afsc.org
- The Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World: www.cdiw.org
- The Democracy Coalition Project: www.demcoalition.org/html/home.html
- The Starr Foundation: <http://fdncenter.org/grantmaker/starr/#prog>
- Rowntree Charitable Trust: www.jrct.org
- USAID civil society programme: www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/technical_areas/dg_office/civ.html
- Westminster Foundation for Democracy: www.wfd.org
- World Movement for Democracy: www.wmd.org/information.html

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Note: The Guide to Sources of Funding in International Democratic Development, 2002, compiled by the National Endowment for Democracy Resource Center, contains information on and links to over 100 organisations that provide funding for groups working in the area of international democratic development: www.ned.org/research/funding/democracyfunding.html



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gets away with flagrant abuse of human rights because its Western trading partners turn a blind eye to it. Boycott is not necessarily the most effective tactic; its relevance depends to a significant degree on whether movements for democracy in these countries ask for it, as they did, for example, in South Africa. The intensifying global integration of international markets has increased immeasurably the scope for the kind of international civic action that helped to bring down apartheid in South Africa.

The second related reason for the new impetus towards creating civil society organisations across national boundaries is that many of the main threats to humanity are international in character, leading people to think and act beyond their national borders. The threat of nuclear war, coming from East and West, was one factor that stimulated the birth of an East–West citizens' movement against nuclear war and the institutions of the cold war in the 1980s. The international character of this movement changed the political imagination of a generation across Europe, making international organising and networking as natural as making a banner or writing a leaflet. By the late 1990s, it was issues of economic authoritarianism – the

outlawing, for example, of social, environmental or cultural regulation of trade, investment or subsidy – that posed the need for international action. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) provided an international focal point for the struggle for democratic control over these 'economic' machinations.

Third, the threatened damage to the ozone layer and the disastrous consequences of climate change make the world not only a more precarious place but also politically a smaller one – or at least a more cohesive place across which people feel they have no option but to get organised. Finally, new technology has provided not only tools of communication with which civil society can organise itself increasingly easily at a global level, but also tools which can be used – it is not an automatic technical fix – to extend openness, transparency, and the spread of information and debate across national borders and through many cultural and political barriers.

There is one consequence of these changing global circumstances, whose character is now only just coming into view. My perception of it is probably little more than a tentative hypothesis, namely, that in the past ten years or so, the relations between civil society organisations and movements North and South have become more egalitarian, based more on a sense of a common struggle and a common search for democratic and economically just alternatives. In the past, sympathetic people in the North have related to movements for justice and democracy in the South through solidarity: raising political and financial support, explaining the movements' case to the public, putting pressure on Northern governments, perhaps volunteering to help the Southern struggle directly. Now, for a start, solidarity is increasingly about finding the common points of leverage in the international system through which together we can focus our power: for example, the WTO negotiations over the agreement to open up public services to international corporations. Second, movements in the North are finding themselves increasingly needing to go beyond solidarity and *to learn* from social and political innovations coming from the South for the development of alternatives.

As we shall see later in this chapter, this creates new possibilities for democratic civil society to realise its potential as a source of power to democratise political power. Despite good motives, however, the support of international groups – notably civil society groups in the North for civil society organisations in the South – can sometimes weaken the power of local civil society. This chapter will consider the case of Guatemala immediately after the end of the dictatorship, where the

consequences of (mainly) financial support from European organisations for democracy were, to say the least, ambiguous. One reason for the problems was an unequal power relationship between international sources of funds and other supports and local groups. Northern civil society funders insisted on their own criteria and objectives at the expense of precarious local needs and dynamics.

My suggestion is that, although the Guatemalan experience is still common, there is a greater alertness to inequalities of power on the part of organisations in the South (and the East) at the receiving end of Northern and Western support. Second, the connection between international civil society and local democracy is now less one of patronage (from a powerful Northern funding body to a local initiative, as in Guatemala) and more one of local initiatives spreading innovations, building campaigning networks that join together groups from many different countries. Towards the end of this chapter, I assess the significance of the emergence of the World Social Forum (WSF), a self-organised space that aims to nurture this process. The WSF, held for the first time in Porto Alegre in 2001, is an extraordinary, perhaps precarious, development in global civil society. It emerged out of movements that challenged (and began to fill) the democratic vacuum surrounding global economic institutions such as the WTO, the IMF and the Round Tables of global corporations. Its fourth 'edition' in 2004 in Mumbai brought together over 130,000 civil society activists. The WSF and the regional, national and local social forums that it has generated aim to create space for global civil society debate and networking, around the conviction that 'another world is possible'. Is it fulfilling its promise? Can it create a means of global self-help in the struggle for democracy everywhere? What is its role in the interconnected struggle against not only political repression but also the authoritarianism of the economic institutions that now dominate the world market?

The democratic force of civil society: a local example

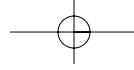
A useful case study to start with is one that shows civil society strengthening popular control and achieving greater political equality, and in so doing reinvigorating corrupt representative institutions. The increasingly well-known, almost emblematic, experience of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, the site of the first three WSFs, though local in origin, has become

influential internationally, spreading the principles of civil society as a means of deepening democracy.

While the movements for democracy in central and eastern Europe emphasised the democratic power of civil society through *autonomy from* the state, the Brazilian initiatives illustrate the democratic impact of civil society as a source of power, based on this autonomy, *over* the state. From the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) won electoral victories in significant cities like Porto Alegre, the capital of the southern region of Rio Grande Do Sul, Brazilian civic movements and NGOs working closely with the PT pioneered participatory budgeting (PB), a form of municipal government through which democratically organised civil society strengthened popular control over local state institutions. Through a process of direct popular participation in determining the priorities of the city council's budget, and then in monitoring how these priorities were carried out, direct and delegated forms of democracy provided a means of democratic control over the state apparatus, and also corporate investors, which complemented the relatively weak control of elected representatives. An open process of negotiation replaced a more hidden decision-making process, which, though accountable to the mayor, had involved public officials exclusively.

The historical origins of PT are distinctive to Brazil, though international experiences of exile and continent-wide influences, such as liberation theology, have been important. Formative influences on the PT lie in the popular movements: militant trade unions from the industrial hinterland of São Paulo; radical Catholic cells, rural and urban; the landless movement; committed intellectuals and students. The end product, the Partido Trabalhadores, has been uniquely influenced by and dependent on grassroots civil society organisations. In resisting the dictatorship, these organisations created their own kinds of participatory democracy at the same time as they campaigned for liberal democratic rights and the democratic rule of law. These two kinds of democracy have been fundamental to the PT ever since. They are glued together by, among other influences, the cultural egalitarianism of Paulo Freire.

Freire's approach illustrates what has been distinctive about the PT. Known in the West primarily as a theorist of education, he was also a theorist of power, observing the way we imitate traditional patterns of power and reproduce them when we ourselves gain any power. The goal of his approach to education was to break these patterns and so obstruct the reproduction of established power relations. The PT's participatory



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Some Brazilian citizens share control of their cities' financial planning

methods of government carry through to politics Freire's emphasis on cultural as well as political and economic transformation.

This leads to an unusual modesty for a political party, which could account for the longevity and self-correcting mechanisms of the experiment. Celso Daniel, a founder of the PT and former mayor of Santo Andre, expressed this awareness of the limitations of political office. 'We believed in taking with us into office the principles of democracy from the movements from which we came', he said. 'That meant sharing political power, the management of the city, with the community: 'Finance is power', declared Daniel. So the first test of sharing power was to open up the process of setting the budget (Wainwright, 2003: 31).

The invention in Pôrto Alegre of what has since become an elaborate, law-governed, transparent process of popular negotiation across neighbourhoods and between participatory and municipal representatives began with a practical problem. When the newly elected PT mayor in 1989 looked at Pôrto Alegre's finances, he found the city virtually bankrupt, with evidence of

rampant corruption. Instead of presuming to sort the problem out within the town hall, the PT called a meeting of residents and community organisations in the city. Together, they worked out a system not only for direct popular involvement in setting priorities but also for democratic monitoring of spending. The consequences in terms of democracy were not consciously planned, but what began as a precarious experiment produced a new kind of public institution. In practice, if not yet in theory, elements of a new paradigm of relations between civil society and political democracy came into being. There is a tendency to make an icon of Pôrto Alegre whereas, like any experiment with democracy, it is a messy, uncertain process, now with 15 years' hindsight to learn from its mistakes. Some achievements, however, can be summarised for their wider relevance.

First, over time, it led to the creation of an autonomous, transparent and generally accountable public sphere, which acted as a permanent watchdog over state institutions, supplementing the weaker but formally more legitimate role of elected politicians. This watchdog ensured the effective delivery of the mayoral

mandate, in particular the reduction of inequalities of income and access to services (Wainwright, 2003: 66)¹. Second, it established transparency and accountability over municipal state departments that had become a law, and a little empire, unto themselves, moving into orbit beyond the effective control of elected politicians, who were often preoccupied with their careers. Finally, the combination of a participatory process honed by years of experiment and self-correction, and a representative system shaken into vigilance by this new citizens' watchdog, increased the overall legitimacy of local democracy. This, in turn, increased the city's bargaining power with international organisations such as multinational corporations, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

The case of Pôrto Alegre – and of the other Brazilian cities that have followed it, including parts of São Paulo – does not *prove* the democratic impact of civil society. Possibly, this cannot ever be proved in a general way. It does, however, illustrate the strengthening of democracy through the sharing of important decisions, often the outcome of tough negotiation between elected politicians and democratic civil society. The mayor, whose power derives from votes, has the final say, but without the effective participation of civil society, the mayor will not be able to carry through the policies for which he or she was elected. Hence the quality of life in the city will suffer and the mayor might well lose his or her position. Mutual dependence, therefore, underpins the process of negotiation, which needs two preconditions: first, that civil society mobilises sources of popular power (including knowledge) unavailable to the state and lets them speak, and second, that the political representatives of the state listen and act.

The local and global flows of civil society

The Brazilian practice has generated much thinking. A constant stream of would-be participatory municipal representatives, students, journalists and others contact

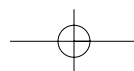
the mayor's office in Pôrto Alegre to arrange a visit or gather information; the city council has set aside cheap apartments especially to house them. There is regular contact with other Latin American movements and parties already experimenting or intending to experiment with similar ideas. In Montevideo, for example, local movements and the radical political coalition, Frente Amplio, have been working on a slightly different model. There is an interesting reversal here of the usual flow of knowledge within international civil society. All too often, technical and intellectual support flows North to South. This time it is South to North. Similarly, the chain of influence is not from global civil society to a local struggle for democracy but from a local innovation – the product of unique historical circumstances – to an increasingly international web of innovative political actors, who then spread different interpretations of the local experiment.

Some of the greatest interest in PB comes from countries in the North struggling to control their public sectors, keep them public, or stop corruption. A French-based network, Democratiser radicalement la démocratie (DRD), was set up in 1998 to spread the practice of participatory budgeting and administration through a process of mutual learning and exchange. Experiments in participatory administration have since spread to 18 countries, partly through the organisation of seminars at the WSF, each attended by several hundred people. Another group, Association of the New Municipality, was set up in 2002 in Italy following a visit by several Italian mayors to Pôrto Alegre. It brings together mayors, NGOs, unions and local social forums to work on the issue of participatory budgets and administration. There is growing interest in central and eastern Europe even as far as Nirilsk, a rich isolated Russian town near the Arctic circle, where a recently elected radical mayor plans to learn from the Pôrto Alegre model.

The most developed application of the idea is in Italy, where municipalities large and small have not only applied similar principles of administration but also passed the ideas on to towns and cities with which they have international connections.

The seaside town of Grottamare illustrates this combination of the local and the ambitiously international. In the mid-1980s, it saw popular resistance to an attempt, driven by a group of international financiers, to turn its harbour into a marina and complex of swimming pools and large hotels, creating a centre for 'global tourism' and relegating the medieval town centre to a residual curiosity. This followed years of neglect by the local Christian Democrat and Socialist political elite.

¹ The statistical evidence backs up this conclusion. Progress towards social equality is far more advanced in Pôrto Alegre than in other cities. Nine thousand families who, 12 years ago, lived in shacks now have regularised brick housing; nearly the whole population (99%) have treated water; the sewerage system serves 86% of the city compared with 46% in 1989. A detailed analysis of the municipal budget after 1989 shows that the lower the average income of the participatory budget region, the greater the volume of public investment per head (CIDADE/PMPA, 2000).



The 'No' campaign was successful and its leadership – a coalition named Participation and Democracy, made up of people from within parties and outside them – won the municipal elections. After the election, the coalition convened public meetings for every citizen, leading to the creation of self-organised neighbourhood committees that became an independent monitor of, and pressure on, the municipality's ability to enact its promises. Thus began a process of shared decision-making about the content of a new urban plan, whose aim, as far as the tourism of the town was concerned was, in the words of the first radical mayor, Massimo Rossi, 'a tranquil tourism that was about nature, culture and human relationships – not consumerism'. The new administration soon made international contacts. It has been engaged for many years in work with Itiuba, a village in northeast Brazil, with a village in Guinea Bissau and a town in the Ukraine, sending skilled staff from Grottamare both to train local people in hard engineering and other mechanical skills, and to disseminate participatory principles of public administration. Rossi explained how these participatory envoys work not just with the municipalities in these towns but also with grassroots organisations. His account revealed the usually invisible capillaries through which the democratising currents of international civil society can flow (Alegretti, 2004; Wainwright, 2004a).

The ambiguous consequences of support from global civil society: the case of Guatemala

How should groups in other countries relate to local civil society in order to increase democracy? The well-documented case of Guatemala in the 1990s, following the end of 33 years' war between an insurgent army and a dictatorial government, provides an interesting example of the ambiguous impact of international support for local civil society organisations, including the practical consequences of different definitions of democracy (Howell and Pearce, 2001). The idea of civil society was quickly grasped and applied to local circumstances, especially by the urban movements of Guatemala. Political parties had lost credibility during the dictatorship, and activists wanted focal points other than the guerrilla army for their continuing campaigns for democracy, human rights and social justice. The peace negotiations were only a beginning for achieving these goals. The economic and political elite behind the

dictatorship remained virtually intact. The guerrilla army was disbanding and turning itself into a political organisation but without any clear vision of its role. The idea of civil society became a vessel into which people poured a mixture of their utopian hopes and pragmatic needs in response to the political moves of the new government. The Indian groups took a particularly functional attitude: 'If the concept is useful and achieves things, they will adopt it superficially, convincing outsiders that their perspectives are more shared than is the case in reality' (Howell and Pearce, 2001: 15).

Donor priorities (targets, monitoring requirements, timetables) often conflicted with the needs of Guatemalan organisations

Outside support first took the form of solidarity organisations during the years of repression and later funding through both private donation and pressure on international agencies. After decades of war and devastation, local resources were minimal; international funders of local organisations therefore had huge strategic leverage, whether or not they used it consciously. One analyst wrote:

Virtually all the organisations participating in the Civil Society Assembly [Asamblea de la Sociedad Civil, set up 1994 to bring together all the NGO, social movements and other civil society organisations] were dependent on support from private aid agencies. Without this support many alliances (including indigenous, Indian and Mayan organisations) would not have been able to meet, travel and elaborate proposals. (Biekart, 1999: 271)

International financial and also political support was undoubtedly of huge benefit in providing the space for civil society to grow. There were problems, however. These revolved around tension between donor assumptions and objectives, and the realities of the social and political problems faced by Guatemalan NGOs, social movements and other organisations. Donor priorities (targets, monitoring requirements, timetables) often conflicted with the needs of Guatemalan organisations to develop their agendas, think through their own strategies and debate their differences while cooperating on common causes and reaching out to vulnerable

and excluded groups. Civil society groups in the North and the governmental or intergovernmental donors that they influenced thus contributed to a situation in which organisations in Guatemala City moved away from the grassroots contacts with rural society that they had built during the resistance to the dictatorship. As a result, these urban organisations lost an understanding of the social needs and political dynamics of the rural areas².

Limitations to the democratic usefulness of outside support existed at several interconnected levels in Guatemala. This has been revealed by extensive interviews with civil society organisations carried out for the United Nations Development Program by Creative Associates International in 1998. It seems the civil society and governmental donors (both multilateral and bilateral) had timetables and methods insensitive to the working methods of many local groups. Local organisations tended to be engaged in multiple activities rather than single projects. Their priorities were changes they could help to bring about. This didn't mesh comfortably with project cycles. Their multiple engagement, whose rhythm was strongly influenced by local developments and understandings, was often more appropriate to the problems they were facing than to a 'project' approach. Because they needed to ensure that the local organisations they funded were accountable for funds, donors imposed their own particular forms of accountability in a way that took little account of the continuing struggle for democracy and development. There was a strong political debate about the appropriate role of donors and civil society organisations. In this debate, donor and civil society organisations, rather than accepting, and working within, local contours of discussion (thus enabling groups to clarify their strategies and build political cohesiveness), influenced debate to accommodate 'projects'. There was also selective funding, which was divisive in circumstances where cooperation was at a premium. Such funding also created pressure for depoliticisation at a moment when people needed the space collectively to rethink their politics in the aftermath of the civil war. Creative Associates International also found significant differences in motivation and understanding between donors and popular organisations. Interestingly, this was particularly true on issues of democracy. The donors tended to stress work that would make existing political institutions more

² This analysis is based on the work by Howell and Pearce (2001), whose conclusions draw on both their own research and a survey carried out in 1998 by Creative Associates International for the United Nations Development Program, which involved in-depth interviews with members of civil society organisations.

representative with the highly pragmatic idea of 'making democracy work'. For many Guatemalans, however, the problem went deeper: the existing institutions of democracy were seen as reproducing the inequalities (of wealth, social power and political representation) that they had been resisting. They had a deep distrust of these institutions, feeling that the 'advocacy' that the donors were urging them to engage in would have no serious effect or concerned no issues that really mattered. 'Relatively few advocacy efforts', Creative Associates International concluded, 'are related to the most felt needs of the sectors whose interests Civil Society Organisations claim to represent, such as socio-economic demands, access to land, work and basic services such as health, education, housing etc.' (quoted in Howell and Pearce, 2001: 170).

The experience of Guatemala, a country facing extreme inequalities, illustrates the importance of how democracy is defined. The problem was partly the way that international funders implicitly imposed their definition of democracy on local groups in the conditions of their funding. It was also the narrowness of their understanding of democracy. In such conditions of extreme inequality, defining democracy in terms of the real substance of popular control and political equality – rather than just the formal institutional arrangements of a multiparty political system based on free elections and so forth – becomes vital. Genuine popular control and political equality require more than free elections and the rule of law, more even than basic human rights against the authoritarian tendencies that can lurk behind apparently pristine democratic structures. Real democracy demands a political mechanism that can address the poverty that excludes so many from effective participation. The exclusion of the poor majority empties formal structures of any real content, leading to disillusion, disaffection and conditions that favour a return to authoritarian rule.

The dialectic of international contact and the strengthening of local autonomy: women's organisation in China

China is a one-party state struggling to keep control of a country where the day-to-day control mechanisms are no longer functioning as they used to. The rapid introduction of market reforms has created too great a range of social and economic actors for a single



Participants of the UN Fourth International Conference on Women

organisation, however octopoid its reach, to oversee. The party, however, through the state, retains its ultimate coercive power. Since the economic reforms began in 1978, people have initiated local civil society organisations, planting them in the cracks opened up through the contradictions facing the state. This process was brutally interrupted by the repression of 1989, when these contradictions burst into the open and the state made efforts to regain control. Local organisations are constantly pushing to expand the openings that were then revealed. International financial support has been important in some contexts, for women's organisations for example, but other organisations – like independent unions – have grown independently of Western support. So, in some areas, there is a degree of dependency comparable to Guatemala. Unlike Guatemala, however, China has a strong tradition of, and self-confidence in, getting the best out of the West for local benefits and according to locally determined agendas. Self-definitions are strong: there is explicit concern not to become 'lackies' of outside donors; concern about who is in control – the donors or local organisations – is explicitly debated. This tradition goes back to the modernisation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when China's approach was to get what it could from Western technology but use it for local ends.

The Communist Party's attitude to civil society is contradictory, as is the ambivalence of civil society towards political power. On the one hand, the party encourages a certain contained growth of civil society as a political vent for discontent and also as a source of mediation between itself and society. 'Small government, big society' is its latest slogan. Increasingly, too, the party looks to parts of civil society for welfare provision, especially in areas where private markets will not venture. On the other hand, the party is watchful and repressive of any signs of independence and autonomy, such as local groups making wider connections across the country, or taking up issues beyond their own spheres, especially issues of political reform.

A further twist to the relationship between China and the West, and the repercussions for civil society and democracy, is the Chinese government's need to restore its legitimacy – ultimately for trading purposes – with the West, after the brutal suppression of the democracy movements 15 years ago. It was this cynical imperative that led the Chinese government to agree to host the United Nations Fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The process of preparing this event and the event itself were extremely tense, as could be expected from holding a conference about the rights of half the human race in a country where all democratic (including reproductive) rights of women were being

suppressed or were seriously under threat. But the end result has been a significant and lasting growth in independent women's organisations in China and more confidence on the part of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), the organisation that historically has had a monopoly over the organisation of women, to push for greater autonomy from the Communist Party and the state.

State feminism and women's desire for autonomy

State-derived feminism, of which China is a clear case, has both advanced and constrained the position of women (Howell, 2003a). With women accounting for 21 per cent of all deputies in the National People's Congress, China is near the top of the league of female representation in national legislatures. Conversely, there is not a single woman in the Politburo; and when women do make it to leadership positions, it is almost invariably as deputies and with portfolios with a low political status. The driving force behind women's participation in the public world has been the need to mobilise their energies and their labour for the national tasks of reconstruction, land reform, agricultural collectivisation and industrialisation. This has meant challenging many of the traditions and prejudices that lie behind the long historical subordination of women in China. To help achieve this task, when it gained power in 1949, the Communist Party created the ACWF to mediate between women, the party and state.

The public role of Chinese women has waxed and waned according to the policies and needs of the party. There have been moments when the ACWF played a genuinely emancipatory mobilising role, for example in the 1950s, tackling child marriage, polygamy and other patriarchal traditions, and encouraging women to achieve economic independence and also play a more active public role. In the 1960s, however, the ACWF bent to the will of the party and acquiesced in economic policies that reinforced deep-seated prejudices emphasising women's domestic role and the importance of the family. The same swing from responsiveness to the needs and demands of women to responsiveness to the dictates of the party is evident in recent years. In the late 1980s, the ACWF responded to the economic reforms by setting up new departments addressing the changing needs of women, while demanding greater autonomy from the party and more of a role for women to influence government policy (rather than being a transmission belt solely for the traffic of impulses in the other direction, that is, for the party to convey its message to the female population). A delegate at the

1988 ACWF Congress said: 'The ACWF should be able to manage its own affairs, both according to the constitution and in law' (Howell, 1996: 133). One of the Federation's journals, *Zhongguo Funu*, followed up the congress with debates and imaginative proposals. Then came the 1989 clampdown on dissent and democracy and with it the ACWF's demands for autonomy.

By 1993, new profit-conscious economic reforms presented women with a whole new range of problems, especially at work. Managers began to see women as a burden, with their need for maternity leave, their right to equal pay and so on. There were pressures to take away their statutory rights. They began to face higher unemployment. Health and safety standards collapsed. At the same time, the commercialisation of the economy permeated the sphere of sexuality: prostitution became commonplace in the Special Economic Zones, and sexual harassment at work became an increasing problem. This new and more precarious situation for women gave new life, and presented new dilemmas, to the ACWF, which now came under increasing pressure from its members to prioritise the representation to the party of the interests of women in gender-related policy-making. This led to all sorts of initiatives to represent the different interests of women more effectively, to research their new situations, and to support special measures for women facing discrimination in the workplace. From the standpoint of our concern with civil society and democracy, it led some cadres in the women's federation to express openly the desire for greater autonomy from the party. This began soul-searching essentially about whether the ACWF could wrench itself away from the party state – which paid and appointed its officials – and become a part of civil society's efforts to gain democratic control over the state. It was at this moment that the Chinese government agreed to host the UN Fourth International Conference on Women in 1995.

More than the other organisations set up by the party in 1949 to mediate between the state and society, the ACWF appears torn between the needs of its constituency (it is a huge organisation with branches right down to the village level) and loyalty to the party. Contradictions in official Communist Party policy are perhaps most acute in relation to women. In particular, there is an obvious contradiction between the much-vaunted and occasionally practised principle of gender equality and the suppressed, but no doubt subjectively desired corollary, of personal self-determination and autonomy for women. One reason why the Beijing Women's Conference, and in particular the encounter of Chinese women activists with the new 1970s and 1980s wave of

feminism, was so significant is that it gave Chinese women access to a language and a stream of thinking that theorised and valued the subjective dimension of women's liberation.

The Beijing Women's Conference made ACWF's contradictory roles particularly acute. Officially, the ACWF was involved in organising the conference to show the world that China cared about women's rights. The ACWF would, and did, gain from the conference in terms of both prestige and resources, but the most dynamic part of the conference was the NGO Forum also hosted by the ACWF, and the drive and creativity for this came from independent women's organisations and NGOs. *Their* intentions included lobbying and protesting around the governmental meeting, and presenting their arguments about women, including within China.

Beijing and feminist cross-fertilisation

As usual, the ACWF spanned its contradictions. On crunch issues, loyalty to the party prevailed, the most important example being the location of the NGO Forum 50 kilometres outside Beijing, but some ACWF cadres were undoubtedly contaminated by a highly infectious international feminism. One aspect of this, as already mentioned, was the language – though severely restricted by translation – of the subjective dimensions of feminist experience. Another was the subsequent spread of independent women's grassroots organisations and NGOs. The idea of both was strange in China. From the first years of the reform period, the late 1970s, numerous professional organisations, chambers of commerce and learned associations had proliferated, but the idea of bottom-up, grassroots organisations was almost unheard of. Since 1989, moreover, all non-state organisations had had to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which forbade associations to be formed on a gender basis.

In the process of organising the NGOs, the ACWF began to realise what it meant to be an NGO. In a sense, NGO status gave coherence to its bridging position between the state and the mass of women, but it moved it towards a lobbying role on behalf of women rather than a transmission belt for the party. This enhanced its legitimacy as a representative of Chinese women's interests in the international arena. But the ACWF's adoption of this term was more to ease international cooperation with other NGOs than to make a statement about ACWF autonomy from the party. However, it is difficult, by definition, for an organisation to be both a responsive NGO and obedient to a party.

After Beijing, the future of women's organisations no longer depended on the swaying loyalties of the ACWF.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the conference was the way that it supported and accelerated the emergence of new, more autonomous women's organisations (Howell, 2003b); Chinese women learned lasting lessons and created ongoing networks. The conference also stimulated research into women's policy issues. In many contexts, this would not be seen as particularly political, but, in a modest way, the plethora of research projects that developed in the wake of the Beijing Women's Conference provided the beginning of a significant challenge to the Communist Party's monopoly on policy. These developments have a significance of their own but they also make it difficult for the ACWF to swing back to the party when under pressure. The ACWF has a cooperative but sometimes tense relationship with independent women's organisations within China that need the ACWF's support to exist in the face of hostile regulations. Interestingly, the feminist cross-fertilisation that occurred both in preparation for Beijing and at the conference also stimulated movements for democracy in other countries. For example, women from Sierra Leone created a network to prepare for Beijing and then played a leading role in the successful campaign to end to military rule.

Stronger women's organisations: what relevance for democracy?

What these developments within civil society – the wrenching of a quasi-state organisation towards greater accountability to civil society – mean for democracy is uncertain. A pessimistic view is that the Chinese government has learned how to play the position of Chinese women as a political card in its international relations, especially with the US. And with the cooperation of ACWF it puts the debate about women into a nationalist perspective, comparing the position of Chinese women with US women, rather than seeking to understand and address gender oppression in China. This would amount to a corporatist relationship between state and civil society, in which a civil society elite (mainly the ACWF and groups they managed to co-opt) influence government policy; but there is no wider participation and no strongly independent public sphere.

Another scenario would be the growth of women's groups at a local level but isolated from each other (there is a prohibition on regional and national organisation across associations) with negligible wider political impact. Certain factors favour this, especially when the position of women's groups is compared with more radical sections of the labour movement, which have been forced to go underground. The party tends to consider women's issues

less important than labour issues and the development of autonomous women's initiatives is therefore seen as less threatening. This means that women's organisations can grow stronger unnoticed but that reaction to women's initiatives is less political, even though these initiatives have long-term implications for the power of the party. Perhaps, as a result, women's groups are less conscious of the wider repercussions of their activities. Women's organisations tend not to link their concerns with wider issues of democratic reform, something which labour organisations invariably tend to do. Independent labour

The political context for the momentum behind the formation of the WSF is that the mass of people, especially in the South, has for two decades suffered the battering of unregulated market forces

organisations appear *anti*-governmental, women's organisations appear *non*-governmental. Some feminists, however, do recognise the link between their work and political reform; as one put it, 'The future of women's organisations is linked to the political democratic process. It depends on political reform. Only then can women's organisations develop. If political reform is limited, then women's organisations cannot develop more' (Howell, 2000: 374).

This leads to a third possible outcome of the process begun in Beijing, in which women's organisations pursue not only their particular campaigns and projects but also, away from the contemptuous eye of the party, develop informal links with each other across issues and regions, and where possible with other social networks, challenging from below the party's 'overview'. This would lead to direct challenges over issues of democracy, but women's organisations, precisely because of the party's male chauvinism, could develop a popular base for democratic rights before the point of confrontation arrives. The international networks of these women's organisations will help protect this process through China's present sensitivity about its international image. Campaigns for democracy that flow from the struggles of women are on particularly high moral ground in such circumstances, so women's organisations are likely to be in a position to develop programmes for political reform flowing directly from their needs as women. This could prepare the path for other movements whose demands

are seen by the Chinese government as so threatening that they are denied the opportunity to make the wider connections that would give them some protection.

The World Social Forum: a catalyst for democratic change?

The World Social Forum (WSF) and the social forums born from it – across continents, nations and cities and around a variety of themes – is in one sense no more than a frame for developments in progressive civil society across the world, which are already under way. These include the sometimes unacknowledged, and constantly under relationships of progressive civil society to political power. The social forum process has helped intensify the growth of plural networks of international actors. In its charter, the WSF conceives itself as a 'space' – it makes no claims to represent anyone and does not seek to come to agreements collectively, as a single body. It is a space, however, that has facilitated common action by many of those who use it. Since no human space is ever stable, the shape and character of the forums is permanently contested and changed.

The political context for the momentum behind the formation of the WSF is that the mass of people, especially in the South, has for two decades suffered the battering of unregulated market forces, and found that the means of finding solutions offered to them by existing, supposedly democratic, political systems are a dead end. In response, a whole variety of new movements, groupings, alliances and initiatives for social justice and democracy emerged, with an increasing need to converge without losing their autonomy and identity. The WSF, and indeed social forums generally, provided an open-ended opportunity to do this. Their potential was reinforced by the initial symbolism of being hosted by the participatory local government of Porto Alegre, itself an actor, as we have seen, in an alternative experiment in democracy that stimulates possibilities well beyond the imagination of the traditional left.

The WSF and the democratic power of civil society

From the point of view of civil society's relationship to democracy, the WSF and the international connecting and campaigning that it has helped to stimulate raise four distinct issues. First, the WSF has strengthened the transformative power of civil society. Second, this power is being asserted in order to call governments to account for their acquiescence in the international treaties and

Box 5.2: E-democracy

E-democracy does not simply mean more effective engagement of citizens in the political process. There are as many definitions of e-democracy as there are definitions of traditional democracy, and many more varieties in its application and real-world experiences. Definitions tend to stress the potential of information and communications technologies in a broader democratic process at local, regional, national and increasingly at global levels, in which people interact, deliberate, make decisions and conduct elections. But can e-democracy simply be defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by stakeholders in the democratic process?

There is no doubt that ICTs are changing the way people interact, think, communicate, live and ultimately, how they wish to be governed. Some scholars (see Riley and Riley, 2003) have speculated about the potential for the Internet to change the meaning of democracy and create new forms of participation that cannot be envisaged at this time, given the nascent nature of the e-democracy movement. Yet how is, or could, e-democracy be different from 'conventional' or classic notions of democracy, and how will it change the nature of traditional democracy? In a report for the UN's *World Public Sector Report*, Pippa Norris outlines the effects of 'e-governance' on classic theories of democracy:

By strengthening government transparency, theories of representative democracies stress that e-governance could improve accountability via the electoral process, allowing citizens to become more informed so that they could evaluate the collective record of the government, the work of particular elected representatives, the contents of parliamentary debates, and the alternative policy proposals of the parties and candidates standing for office. And by facilitating new forms of interaction between citizens and the state, proponents of direct democracy hope that e-governance could channel citizens' voices and priorities more effectively into the public policymaking process. (Norris, 2003: 4)

Although e-democracy has the potential to make government more effective and more efficient, does it have the potential to engage actively those who would not or cannot participate in the political process through traditional means? A look at current efforts and examples of e-democracy is instructive.

Minnesota E-Democracy is a non-partisan citizen-based organisation with a mission to improve participation in democracy in the state through information networks, in particular the Internet.

*Minnesota E-Democracy was established in 1994 and created the world's first election-oriented web site. We sponsor election year online partnerships to promote citizen access to election information and interaction. We are known for hosting online candidate debates. In 2002 we launched MyBallot.net, a popular service that allows you to look up who is on your ballot and your polling place location. (www.e-democracy.org)**

Austria is a European leader in the promotion of e-democracy, developing a secure Internet voting system, using national ID cards, which were first tested in May 2003. Among the aims of this e-government initiative is an increase in voter participation among key segments of the population, including professional bodies and chambers of commerce and Austrians living abroad (www.e-voting.at)*.

In Scotland, the Scottish Parliament, established in 1998/9, has developed online petitioning.

The Scottish Parliament wished to better support the electronic participation agenda of the Parliament. Therefore they established an e-petitioning system to fit into the normal business of the Public Petitions Committee of the Parliament. The Public Petitions Committee website is at www.scottish.parliament.uk/petitions. The e-petitioner tool has the functionality to create petitions; to view/sign petitions; to add background information, to join an integrated discussion forum; and to submit petitions. (Macintosh, 2003: 18)

The private sector, too, is exploiting the Internet to offer public participation and consultation services to other businesses, the public sector and non-profit sector. Dialogue by Design, a British company, has provided online consultation services for a range of clients, including the Energy Savings Trust, London's Metropolitan Police and Britain's Department of Trade and Industry.

*Dialogue by Design's mission is to help people understand each other better through effective engagement and participation – especially around controversial or complex issues such as sustainable development, social responsibility, human rights, the environment, planning and development. We believe that the Internet is an exceptional tool for expanding dialogue around such issues, and we want to see its potential fully realised. We believe that new technology, well used, can enhance participation and engagement processes – but never replace the need for direct contact between people. (www.dialoguebydesign.net)**

How effective are these various initiatives in encouraging public participation in democratic processes? Based on survey and country case studies, the OECD (2003) has identified a number of key factors that can make online engagement more effective:

1. **Timing:** most examples of online engagement are to be found at the agenda-setting stage of the policy cycle
2. **Tailoring:** a wide range of public bodies are now exploring the use of new ICTs to engage citizens in policy-making; from local governments, to national governments and parliaments as well as those operating at the intergovernmental or international level (for example, the European Commission)
3. **Integration:** experience to date highlights the importance of ensuring the integration of online and traditional methods for citizen engagement in policy-making.

Apart from the question of effectiveness, there are many other issues surrounding e-democracy that require further development. These include:

- The digital divide: how to ensure that e-democracy benefits everyone, not only those people with the technology infrastructure and access
- Two-way flow: how to ensure that e-democracy creates a dialogue between government and citizens, and is not just a one-way channel of communication
- How to ensure that ICTs are not used only for streamlining government bureaucracy
- How to ensure that e-democracy does not create too much 'noise' from citizens, which makes the government less effective.

Useful websites and resources

- The Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance: www.electronicgov.net
- Oxford Internet Institute: www.oii.ox.ac.uk
- International Teledemocracy Centre: itc.napier.ac.uk
- Community Informatics Research & Applications Unit: www.cira.org.uk
- IST e-democracy cluster: www.cordis.lu/united_kingdom
- Centre for Democracy and Technology: www.cdt.org
- Multimedia Victoria: www.mmv.vic.gov.au
- National Center for Digital Government: www.ksg.harvard.edu/digitalcenter
- Publicus.net: www.publicus.net
- UK online: www.ukonline.gov.uk
- Office of the e-envoy: www.e-envoy.gov.uk
- European Commission – Your Voice: [//europa.eu.int/yourvoice](http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice)
- IPM: Interactive Policy Making: ipmmarket.homestead.com
- Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance: www.electronicgov.net/
- E-government bulletin: www.headstar.com/egb
- Evaluating Practices and Validating Technologies in E-Democracy (EVE): www.eve.cnrs.fr
- Electronic Democracy European Network: www.edentool.org

Marcus Lam, Center for Civil Society, UCLA

*Websites consulted on 14 July 2004



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Demonstrators at the WSF in Mumbai

deals of free market economics, and their support for US military and political ambitions in the Middle East. Third, these developments are producing a radical, open-ended shift in the relations between civil society and political parties. And fourth, *within* the WSF and the social forums, forms of organisation are being invented to fulfil the forum's aim of facilitating a plural horizontal network of active campaigns. Many questions arise about the sustainability of this process: questions about the obstacles and legacies of more traditional, vertical traditions of the left that these innovations come up against; and questions about whether the WSF process has the depth and resilience to overcome these conflicts and tensions of emphasis and understanding (Corréa Leite, 2004)

On the first issue of strengthening the transformative power of civil society, the social forum process has strengthened the power of civil society to bring about democratic change, in several ways. First, the forum has progressed from a predominantly Latin American affair, appealing mainly to the organised trade unions, landless movements and progressive intellectuals, to becoming a genuinely open and near-global public space for

resistance and alternatives to the neo-liberal world order. The result is that it has given otherwise isolated groups – young people, unemployed, precarious workers, Dalits (the 'untouchables' in the Indian caste system), abandoned rural and urban communities – a boost in collective self-confidence and experience of being part of a wide and potentially powerful movement. Just as the encounter of Chinese women with Western feminism gave independent Chinese women's organisations access to a new language and stream of thinking about self-determination, autonomy and self-organised agency, so encounters within the WSF have enabled traditionally marginalised groups that lack obvious strategic power to move from a consciousness of injustice and oppression to an awareness of feasible connections and directions through which they can achieve change.

While extending the reach of radical civil society, the meetings of the WSF and the process of working together for them have also strengthened the cohesiveness and strategic thinking of international campaigns and action-oriented research. Although after four annual forums there is a wariness of being or becoming a 'talk shop', there is no doubt the forums have stimulated the growth and spread of a huge variety of campaigning, cultural, solidarity and other networks – including networks of groups working on practical alternatives in, for example, production and agriculture, or public administration. The extraordinary show of organised and politically disenfranchised public opinion seen in the anti-war demonstrations of 15 February 2003 is one sign of the increase in the international cohesiveness and density of progressive civil society. The date was suggested at the European Social Forum in Florence, echoed through innumerable networks, reinforced and spread globally at the third WSF in Porto Alegre in January 2003, and on 15 February became a symbol of 'the second superpower', which the first power, the US government, ignores at its peril.

Behind the scenes of these dramatic mobilisations, the No US Bases Campaign provides a good example of the WSF helping to initiate all kinds of sustained cross-border coordinated action. These bases are the points at which the US government becomes physically present across the world, so providing a focal point for calling it and its allies to account. The campaign draws strength from a long tradition of international peace movement collaboration, as well as established local campaigns of base-affected communities. This mixture of local campaigning experience and international networking is crucial to the campaign's success. In particular, the work of creating a global network has been facilitated (not led) by radical

NGOs with extensive experience in this area. The WSF was treated as an important part of a wider process rather than an end in itself. The No US Bases Campaign was the product of two strategic international peace conferences held in May 2003: the Hemispheric Encounter against Militarisation in Chiapas, Mexico, and the Jakarta Peace Consensus in Indonesia. An open coordinating group and email list were established after the Jakarta Conference, and related meetings were held in Cancun and Paris (Reyes and Bouteldja, 2004). This offers a valuable lesson in how the WSF can be used in conjunction with other campaigns and international encounters of the global justice and anti-war movement. Although a thorough mapping of the actions that flow from a meeting of the WSF or another social forum has yet to emerge, this kind of development is central to the potential of the WSF as a new organisational form through which to realise the transformative potential of civil society.

Opening up the political institutions

Where does this development of civic power lead in terms of democracy, or lack of it, in political institutions? This touches on an underlying tension in the 'alter-globalisation' movement between, on the one hand, developing bases of power – including power to organise the means of daily life autonomous from the state, Zapatista-style – and, on the other, directly calling to account politicians and governments or seeking representation, albeit on different terms, within the political system. The WSF process feeds into both approaches and combinations of them.

The impact of the WSF process is easiest to track in relation to transparency – confronting and trying to open up political institutions. Consider the issue of trade and the needs and demands of the economically weaker countries in the South, which was a major motivating factor in the early networks that converged partly through the WSF. A number of very significant NGOs in the South have been working for many years on issues of justice and democracy in trade relations between North and South. Usually, they are both research organisations and, to differing degrees, organisations of popular education with strong connections to mass organisations – trade unions, peasants, social movements of women, young people and so on. They have an ethos of collaboration with these movements, an attentiveness to their needs and a shrewd sense of politics and issues of power. This makes them different from conventional NGOs, which may have good intentions but do not strive for an egalitarian relationship with grassroots organisations and can be naive about power relations. In different ways, all these radical NGOs,

along with other organisations, have been campaigning for alternative trade policies to the patterns of trade, which now perpetuate North–South inequalities. This is an important issue of democracy because whether or not there is a market for the products of developing countries is a matter of subsistence or starvation to millions of people. It is also an issue of self-determination: in many areas, people are struggling, through cooperatives, fair trade networks and socially driven financial institutions, to create sustainable and socially just economic relations. They need trade policies that prioritise social equity and environmental sustainability, and this requires, at some point, governmental – or rather inter-governmental – action. And trade is something on which governments, through negotiation, can act – although how governments act is usually decided in secret without even the minimum of accountability to elected parliaments. This was certainly the case in the early years of the WTO and, before that, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).



RIP: international financial institutions

The achievement of campaigns like Our World is Not for Sale and of the NGOs and movements campaigning through the WSF is that there are now several Southern governments that have been forced to make themselves to some degree accountable to progressive civil society, regarding their negotiations on trade and at the WTO. South Africa has had to move beyond the corporatism of the National Economic Development Labour and Agriculture Council, through which the ANC government negotiated with the unions and business. It has now established a regular consultative council, which precedes meetings of the WTO, to discuss the approach of the South African delegation with a wider constituency of social movements, involving women, young people and other groups not organised through the traditional, national and 'vertical' structures.

Increasingly, African governments have had to admit that, if they want to achieve anything in their negotiations with the US and Europe, they need organised civil society. They need its knowledge of the complexity of the trade agreements (which committed NGOs have researched from every angle); they need links with powerful lobbying NGOs based in Geneva; and they need the campaigning strength that NGOs and social and trade union movements can trigger through their alliances in Europe and the US, aided by the regular meetings of the WSF and other social forums. Recognition of this has meant that, for example, the inter-governmental South and East African Trade Information and Negotiation International asks to meet regularly with radical and independent civil society organisations – not just 'tame' NGOs – to prepare its bargaining positions. This kind of alliance has helped shift the balance of power, slightly – it is important not to exaggerate – towards the South. For instance, the EU and US had to concede in 2002 a long-standing demand from Southern governments for 'special and differential treatment for weaker developing countries'. At the Cancun meeting of the WTO in 2003, an alliance of Southern countries – including South Africa, Kenya, South Korea and Brazil, where there is strong pressure from social movements – blocked the agenda of the US and the EU on agriculture and the privatisation of public services. These are advances for democracy since wider participation has meant both a move towards increased political equality and greater popular control than previously. The ability of elected politicians, for example those of the ANC and other African political parties, to respond to the needs of the people and resist the pressures of the US and the corporate lobby, has been enhanced by these developments.

A further way in which the WSF process has made space for civil society to affect political democracy is as host. In India, the process of organising the forum in Mumbai under the malevolent eye of the chauvinist neo-liberal Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had a significant impact, both drawing the attention of the international left and liberal press to the present realities of poverty, fundamentalism and the BJP, and bringing international attention to the struggles of the Indian dispossessed, especially the Dalits. Furthermore, the WSF affected the Indian left: the significant parties to the left of the

The WSF's respect for diversity and plurality is based on a recognition of the fact that these struggles and movements are a source of creativity, insights and power for change

amorphous Congress Party, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), were still largely unrepentant of their Stalinist traditions and tended to treat 'movements' as 'their' mass fronts. The necessity of making a political success of the Mumbai WSF brought them closer to Indian social movements and to a respect for the autonomy of these movements. Conversely, the Indian forum persuaded social movements to reconsider the importance of political parties. No general perspective was agreed to guide further cooperation, but the experience of close collaboration strengthened the influence of anti-Stalinist, radically democratic forces of socialist feminism and green politics on the wider left. 'In retrospect', concluded left writer and activist Achin Vanaik, 'Mumbai 2004 might well be identified as the first major collective warning of the shape of things to come' (Vanaik, 2004). The elections in India several months later bore out the truth of this remark more dramatically than Vanaik could have imagined, not because Mumbai had any causal connection to the surprise defeat of the BJP but because Mumbai was an *early sign* of growing anger, self-confidence and self-organisation of the Dalits, whose high turn-out at the election was decisive for the victory of the Congress Party.

Political parties and civil society: rethinking the relationship

This brings us to the third way in which the WSF influences and throws into relief changing relations between radical civil society and left political parties.

This is a vital issue because the relationship between civil society and democracy hinges on the many different connections between electoral and participatory (not necessarily direct) forms of democracy. Political parties are – in ways yet to be theorised – a vital mediating link between the two levels of democracy.

The emphasis in the WSF is on civil society and its autonomy from political parties and the state. Formally, political parties and state bodies are excluded, though there are signs that they are forming a generally supportive but uneasy relationship with the forum. The PT, as we have seen, provides support through its position in the government of Pôrto Alegre. The Italian Partito Rifondazione Comunista, or its members, played a vital role in organising the European Social Forum in Florence. Similarly, the Indian Communist Party was central to the Coordinating Committee for Mumbai. Indian anti-dam campaigner, Medha Patkar, described the Mumbai WSF's relationship to electoral politics thus:

Electoral politicians are not untouchables here, but the WSF is really an expression of people power and non-electoral politics. Non-electoral politicians need to build their strength to challenge elected politicians. Those representing an alternative view of development need to realise the commonality of their ideologies and strategies. (Quoted in Wainwright, 2004b: 32)

In this way, social forums put into practice the assertion of the women's and ethnic minorities' movements of the 1970s that movements of the oppressed and marginalised need autonomy to develop and identify their own needs, identities and sources of power. Now, as in the 1970s, these movements have a sense not just of particular injustices but also of a need for a wider alternative. The movements that participate in the social forums see themselves as political in the sense of having a full vision of the changes they would like to see, and a comprehensive critique of society as it is. Implicitly and explicitly they challenge the monopoly of the power to achieve change that left political parties have historically presumed is theirs. What has become clear in recent years is that even strong, mass electoral parties cannot adequately defend popular control and political equality against corporate economic power, military apparatuses or bureaucratic state institutions. Movements have grown up in civil society to exert that democratic power precisely where the elected parties failed. The WSF is testimony to a strong desire on the part of radical movements and networks to connect with each other.

It is a search for new ways of connecting the universal and the particular, a function which, in the past, belonged to the party. In the traditional notion of the party, the particular became subsumed in the universal: the party programme. The WSF's respect for diversity and plurality is based on a recognition of the fact that these struggles and movements are a source of creativity, insights and power for change. A respect for movements' autonomy at the same time as facilitating their interconnections is fundamental to the WSF.

Autonomy, however, can be the basis of new relationships, and there are tentative signs that this is the case for social movements, and new and old political parties of the left. The experience of the anti-war movement has led to a new self-confidence to act in electoral politics on terms set by radical civil society. We have referred already to the significance of the Spanish elections. In the US, there is a symbolic phenomenon of the League of Pissed Off Voters: young people who are organising support for US Democratic Party presidential candidate, John Kerry, in the swing states, but on their own terms. There are signs, too, across the left that political parties, or significant groups within political parties, are prepared to move beyond the instrumental approach to civil society (the mentality of asking how the party can control it, hegemonise it, lead it) to a recognition of civil society's autonomous sources of power and, as a corollary, an understanding of the position of the party as one actor among many in the process of radical transformation. The WSF and other social forums reflect this development with an increasing number of open debates about the role and relevance of political parties. It retains its determination to grow as an autonomous space, however, and any attempt by political parties to dominate or manipulate its processes is met with stubborn resistance.

Finally, how democratic is the space of the WSF itself? The forum is not a new form of political agency; its founders and those involved in its International Council are consciously determined not to be drawn in that direction. In the vision of WSF founders like the Brazilian radical Catholic, Chico Whitaker, it is 'a laboratory', 'a factory of ideas' or 'an incubator from which new initiatives aiming at the construction of another world can emerge' (Whitaker, 2004: 113). It does not aim to produce common declarations or agreed actions; rather, it nurtures and creates the conditions for many, and increasingly interconnected, actions. Therefore, the democratic principles within it must favour such nurturing.

Like any emergent organisational form, the WSF displays the characteristics of old forms – new

approaches struggle with the conservative, inward-looking, self-important habits of the political traditions from whence people come. The WSF and its committees are not meant to be loci of power, yet any participant in the meetings that organise forums can observe intense power struggles over the number, content, length and speakers chosen for the moments in the forum that are seen as most publicly setting the agenda.

A creative and influential search is under way into how to dissolve those power centres, rather like the way a massage works on a knot, seeking to get the blood and muscles working across the body. Since the first forum, there has been an uneven move towards the Forum Committees (the International Council and the Organising Committees for different forums) playing more of a role in facilitating consultation processes along cross-national and cross-issue lines, rather than being decision-makers on the content of the agenda. In 2004, this has moved in a radical direction, with the Methodology and Programme Commission (created by the International Council) setting out to create the whole programme through a process of electronic communications, followed by face-to-face discussion between organisations grouped around common 'axes', or areas of concern. This process is more democratic, practising the participatory democracy preached by the WSF Charter. It links organisations to one another, helping the WSF to facilitate '... the formulation of alternatives and the construction of common actions'. If it works, it will be achieving a lot more than being a more or less democratically organised mass event; it will be taking practical steps towards solutions to age-old dilemmas about how to achieve effective common action with a diversity of actors; how to create a framework for debate and the development of ideas while meeting the needs of those engaged in action; and how to develop strategy and visions rooted in the experience of those seeking to create new sources of power.

The WSF could be a source of principles for linking universal visions to the convergence or collaboration of particular struggles and campaigns. Idealistic, I'm aware. The proof will be in the practice, both at the next WSF in Porto Alegre and on the ground in campaigns across the world.

Concluding comments

If by 'global civil society' we mean non-state organisations that operate across borders, there is no inherent connection between global civil society and democracy.

As in Guatemala, civil society organisations can exist in a sphere of their own: meeting Western funders' capacity-building targets but having no roots among the poor and those who have a vested interest in challenging unaccountable power (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Edwards, 2004).

As the Chinese Communist Party intends with women's organisations, and British New Labour with community organisations, well-respected groups in civil society can perform practical functions – running daily welfare services, for example – on terms set by central government without any wider repercussions. In such situations, civil society accepts a contained space, within welfare and within the community, without questioning the wider political framework. Civil society organising can be an escape, playing micro-democracy while the wider democratic institutions burn. In many parts of the US, people spend an admirable amount of time on neighbourhood democracy but, because it is impossible for them to influence federal politics without millions of dollars and they are not part of a powerful national movement, none of this democratic impetus filters upwards, or brings the powerful federal and global institutions downwards. Again, 'tame' civil society organisations, lacking real autonomy, can create an illusion of democracy. There is no doubt, as Ali and Carothers imply, that this has been *part* of the reality in Iraq, where the US-chosen Iraqi Governing Council funded 'civil society' groups to 'promote democracy' at the same time as it cancelled and overrode elections for university posts and city mayors that threatened results that did not please Paul Bremer, administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the Pentagon.

But this is not the whole story of civil society and democracy. Civil society, however messy and experimental, has always been a necessary precondition for democracy. For democracy to exist, in the sense of movement towards political equity and popular control, there has to be challenging, critical engagement, from autonomous popular bases of power, with the political process. Nowadays, in a globalised world, such critical engagement often seeks and receives empowerment through horizontal cross-border links.

Participatory public administration, whether in Brazil or Italy, in which the power of elected politicians is genuinely augmented by participation, is one example of a source of power to deepen democracy that is rooted in civil society. In participatory budgeting, for example, a public sphere of organised civil society helps, and challenges, elected politicians to achieve popular control over state institutions and increases public bargaining

power over the private market. The cross-fertilisation of ideas of self-emancipation to a social group with a strong sense of dignity and equal rights, but a weak sense of its own agency, is potentially another illustration, as we saw with women in China. Such cross-fertilisation may encourage women to use their rights in a self-determining manner. The problem with civil society in Guatemala, influenced by Western donors (sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally), was that it developed no autonomous sources of popular power to challenge the country's economic elite. The potential and need were there, especially among the rural poor and the indigenous people, but the energies of the NGOs and other urban civil society organisations were elsewhere, diverted on to agendas set by international donors.

The WSF illustrates the democratic potential – not yet fully realised – of a horizontal net of connections interlinking civil society across borders. It facilitates a multi-driven process whereby progressive civil society simultaneously maps and resists unaccountable, authoritarian power structures. The established institutions of power may be unified but the resistance comes from many different angles, depending on where the democratic leverage lies. Thus, a multinational

corporation exploiting women workers down the chain of sub-contracting is a unified power structure, and is difficult for any conventional political power structure to control, even if it had the will to do so. But such companies can be and are being challenged at many points: in sweatshops and in private homes, where women workers, with the help of women in the community, have organised themselves; and at the supermarket checkout by consumers exposing the companies' policies and using the companies' need for a morally clean brand.

The idea of global civil society as a multiple source of democratic power (latent, not given) can be illustrated through a part of the reality of post-war Iraq, which has unfolded in the early months of 2004. After the invasion, with the Provisional Authority in place, civil society produced all kinds of movements, hastily organised, first to protest at the policies of the Governing Council, then to attempt from outside to assert power over those policies, if only by blocking them. The Union of the Unemployed, formed in the aftermath of hundreds of thousands losing their jobs in Paul Bremer's wholesale dismantling of the Baathist state, organised large demonstrations and demanded jobs. The independent Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions



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Iraqis protest against the Coalition occupation

organised protest actions and meetings, demanding the right to strike and resisting privatisation. Students took action to stop the occupying forces from coming into the universities, which have traditionally prided themselves on autonomy. They organised in support of those who won elections to positions of university rector, only to be replaced by an appointee of the Governing Council. The mosque, the one institution that Saddam and now the US cannot control, became a focal point for opposition to both regimes. This, of course, is contradictory from a democratic point of view. Iraqi religious leaders are gaining disproportionate influence with serious implications for the rights of women, for example. But Iraq's religious leaders are not all cut from the same cloth. Some are secular-friendly, holding democratic elections and defending the rights of the Kurdish people. Some are even enlightened on the rights of women, who have been especially hard hit by the sanctions and the occupation. Moreover, some Islamic leaders have taken the lead in organising people who rejected the strategy, advocated by other religious leaders, of ending the occupation by cooperating with the occupier. Shia and Sunni religious leaders formed an anti-sectarian front, the Moslem Scholars Committee (MSC). The MSC has organised most of the large demonstrations in Baghdad, encouraging Muslims to unite and pray at each others' mosques, where secular people are also welcome.

The result of these various and contradictory impulses has been a power struggle, a process that neither Carother's nor Ali's cavalier dismissal of civil society as a serious force for democracy would appear to recognise. The refusal of the Iraqis to be fobbed off by promises of democracy in the 'never-never land' of an unspecified future, or by a 'local' transitional government over which, in fact, they have no democratic control has forced the US to abandon (for at least two years) its plans to rule Iraq directly and to reshape its institutions, including its plans to privatise its massive natural and human resources. The Iraqi Governing Council, effectively controlled by Paul Bremer, was discredited and abolished, to give way much sooner than originally planned to the transitional government, custodian of 'full Iraqi sovereignty' until elections scheduled for January 2005. The result is not democracy, because the ambitions of the US government for Iraq and the Middle East mean that the Bush administration is determined to maintain control, by military means.

The US government has bowed to the inevitable on social and economic government institutions, while unleashing repressive military force – closing opposition newspapers, shooting at meetings at the mosques and at demonstrations and street protests. As I write, public opinion and organisation is increasingly polarised and increasingly militarised, which presents major obstacles for the development of broadly based sources of civil power.

If the situation in Iraq points to the importance and potential of civil society as a source of power for democracy in even the most unfavourable circumstances, it also points to the limits of that power. A democratic 'civil' sphere locally or nationally can enhance popular control and political equality in a sustained way only where the political party that holds elected office genuinely believes in sharing power with civil society, as in Pôrto Alegre and Grottamare. Where such a belief is lacking, and those in power fear or despise civil society, the sources of power that local civil society can organise bash their heads against a brick wall or find themselves smothered in cotton wool. This brings us back to the importance of international civil society, working with and through local grassroots organisations: the 'second superpower' that was in evidence on 15 February 2003. Already the combined forces of local and global civil society have had a restraining influence on the first superpower. As Noam Chomsky put it:

Had the problems of Fallujah, for example, arisen in the 1960s, they would have been resolved by B-52s and mass murder operations on the ground. Today, a more civilized society will not tolerate such measures, providing at least some space for the traditional victims to act to gain authentic independence. (Chomsky, 2004)

The final achievement of that independence may depend on democratic organisations in local and global civil society transforming electoral democracy, as they began to do with Spanish elections of March 2004, while preserving their distinctive sources of more immediate and popular democratic power. That is the challenge of 2005.

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