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Recent Breakthroughs in Civil Society Research

Reactive vs Proactive Exploration of Opportunities and Alternatives?

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This note benefits from the comments of Joel Fischer as editor of Volume 4 (annual) of the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (and specifically the section on *Publications Concerning Transnational Nongovernmental Organizations and Intergovernmental Organization*).

Introduction

The purpose of this note is to endeavour to create a framework through which to recognize what might be understood to be the "breakthroughs" in civil society research from the end of the 1980s. The question raised is whether the majority of these breakthroughs were in reactive response to events beyond the immediate preoccupations of the academic community.

In contrast to such "reactive" breakthroughs, pointers are offered to potential research breakthroughs that might be understood as endeavouring to frame and enable civil society processes in new ways. As a point of comparison, pointers to possible research in the 1970s are presented.

A.   "Reactive" Breakthroughs

1. Pressure to evaluate the efficacy of NGOs as vehicles for development initiatives: This concern dates from prior to the end of the Cold War during which use of NGOs in this way was perceived as indistinguishable from front-organization activity. More recently funds have been allocated to evaluate the capacity of civil society bodies and programmes to empower communities in support of sustainable development (as with the programme of the Global Action Plan in the Netherlands)

Typically calls for such evaluation have been used as political blocking or delaying initiatives, especially when there has been increasing recognition of the comparative effectiveness of such NGO vehicles in contrast to government mediated programs through which aid was diverted to other ends. Funding for such research, especially during the Cold War, may well have been allocated deliberately to prove the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of particular groups of NGOs.

2. Bypassing international development NGOs: UNDP, through its national Resident Representatives, sought in the late 1980s to develop direct contact with national and local NGOs -- effectively bypassing dialogue with any international NGOs with which they may have been connected. Research in the past decade has focussed on "intermediary NGOs" (nature, roles etc), perhaps institutionalizing this trend

This focussed attention on the role of field level NGOs has diminished any tendency to focus on the coordinative functions of international NGOs. However it tended to avoid the challenge of coordinating a multiplicity of civil society bodies. It provided an early pointer to the need to profile national civil society resources (but without providing funds to do so) and irrespective of the challenge of how to make meaningful use of that data.

3. Dissolution of the USSR (1989): This resulted in the expectation that freedom and western economic advice on market economy would naturally lead to an environment conducive to development.

The major learning was that in the absence of an extensive "civil society", many of the checks and balances essential to effective economic development were not in place. This resulted in extensive investment (notably by George Soros through the Open Society

[Institute and Soros Foundation Network](#) in "civil society" development in Eastern Europe. This triggered the need (articulated by some western foundations) for studies to better understand the civil society needs in the former Soviet Union countries and elsewhere. This might be understood as the key factor in reframing the distinct academic preoccupations with "voluntary association" (sociology) and "NGOs" (international relations) to legitimate a much stronger focus on "civil society" for which research funding had then become available in support of what was essentially a political agenda. However it is unclear that such research led to a sense of how a fruitful mix or ecosystem of civil society bodies might be "cultivated" or rendered sustainable.

4. UN Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, 1992): A major step was taken to broaden previous accreditation criteria by the UN to include national and local bodies (primarily on the initiative of Maurice Strong)

This brought to a higher degree of focus the challenge of the relationship between official UN conferences and parallel events, and led to studies of such relationships -- but with little insight into how such initiatives could be improved beyond simply physically accommodating representatives in parallel events. As is evident on their websites, a wide variety of IGOs now present / promote their relations with civil society (e.g. World Bank, OAS, Council of Europe), raising the question as to whether this is really engagement or a preemptive information strategy (The increasing implication of internet-based participation is referenced below)

5. Emerging emphasis on peoples' organizations: Some peoples' movements proved able to articulate the valuable contrast to traditional NGOs and civil society bodies characterized by them as unrepresentative and elitist. This engaged the attention of researchers on new social movements.

This phenomenon was significantly evident at the UN Rio Summit and has developed, most notably through the Porto Alegre gatherings, now institutionalised as a self-organizing World Social Forum. This activity has attracted significant research interest both in terms of the dynamics of the process and in terms of the alternative socio-economic models advocated. However the research has not served directly to respond to the challenges of of self-organizing groups seeking a measure of coherence on such a large scale.

6. Recognition of civil society bodies as a potential market: This recognition of the significant funds controlled, channelled or solicited by civil society bodies has resulted in increasing attention to market research by vendors of products and services. There has been increasing pressure to provide statistical data in support of such market research.

- **Meetings industry**: This has had the longest interest in market research on NGOs in relation to use of meeting services and travel
- **Services to the aid industry**: This concerns the market for vehicle sales, air transport, temporary housing and aid supplies. The emergence of this sector parallels, but was anticipated by, the professionalization of association management. Although aid activities have existed for nearly a century, it is only in recent decades that these activities are perceived as an industry (and in many cases a problematic one).
- **Services to association members**: This concerns insurance, credit card programs, buying discounts etc. It also includes publishing services; electronic communication services (ISPs, web design and hosting etc).

7. Media visibility of civil society activities: The opinion forming potential of such bodies, and both their media and their access to media, has also attracted research attention:

- **Media campaigns by human rights NGOs:** A typical example is the landmine campaign which drew attention to the effectiveness of NGO action. More generally the role of bodies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch has become widely recognized. This has focused research on the opinion forming potential of such bodies.
- **Focus on the media role of NGOs**: This traditional way of framing the significance of NGOs for intergovernmental agendas has been extended through the development of extensive "briefings". These tend to preclude any effective dialogue and act as a substitute for "consultation". This has attracted research attention in terms of the ability of IGOs to "get their message out".
- **Media visibility of activist protests at key international negotiation trade events**: The dramatic imagery arising from the conference of the World Trade Organization (Seattle, 1999) and subsequent events provided a convincing demonstration of the degree to which the government-supported corporate agenda had been placed on the defensive and called for radical rethinking. The later success in destabilizing the WTO Cancun (2003) negotiations confirmed this. This successful action has evoked intensive "research" by bodies responsible for ensuring the successful organization of such events, and the security of delegations. The research has however focused on methods of containing protestors. Such containment has subsequently been considerably facilitated by anti-terrorist legislation (to which the research may well have contributed). Media coverage of the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre, etc) provided a focus / channel grassroots activities, giving them a legitimacy that they had been denied on other occasions, and reducing the concern about the rise of "the black block" etc.

8. Emerging significance of networks and networking: Although such phenomena had been recognized from the 1970s and were a subject of limited research (in relation to social network analysis), this research had not been extended to civil society bodies operating transnationally.

The need to do so became apparent as a result of the effective mobilization and operation of advocacy and other networks and their creative adaptation to the internet (see below). Pressures for further network research came from recognition of the use of such networks for the initiatives of uncivil society (crime rings, etc) and their successful use in international campaigns (landmines, etc). Most recently there ahs been even greater pressure due to the need for research by security services and intelligence agencies on the operations of terrorist networks - and their interface with networks of advocacy (and dissident) civil society groups.

9. Legal status of civil society bodies: This theme has been the subject of occasional (draft) conventions from before World War I.

Further legal research has been triggered in recent years by the legal harmonization programme of the European Community and the need to give legal form to a European association (to be consistent with similar preoccupations regarding a European corporation). The matter has become somewhat more acute as a result of:

- socio-political issues relating to the European constitution and the question of participative democracy
- the status of NGOs in humanitarian relief situations - especially given the dramatic failure of existing conventions to protect agents of the United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies
- the requirements placed by the US Patriot Act and other anti-terrorist measures to require more effective reporting from civil society bodies

10. Powerful articulations of deficiencies of traditional development models and insensitive globalization: These have taken the form of critiques of IMF and World Bank, and other conventional approaches to economic development, and their failures over decades with respect to social development and the environment. Action in the light of these alternative models has resulted in initiatives that have evoked research interest:

- **Articulation of alternative development models:** Notably promoted by green parties, and alternative movements, and following the earlier trend towards developing alternative communities and lifestyles
- **Recognition of value-based initiatives**: Exemplars that have attracted research attention include those recognized periodically by the Right Livelihood Foundation.
- **Mobilization of strong popular protest:** Notably at international trade conferences (which have proven increasingly vulnerable, both physically and conceptually) and in relation to environmental issues
- **Emergence of the World Social Forum:** This has provided a focus to counter-balance the inadequacies of the Davos Economic Forum.

11. Major scandals at the highest level of government and in relation to major corporations: These highly publicized affairs, focussing attention on the credibility and ethical standards of major institutions, have stimulated research interest in the ethical perspectives advocated by many civil society bodies. The organization Transparency International has provided a major focus for such research

- **Corporate social responsibility** (CSR): This initiative to introduce an ethical dimension to the strategies of corporations tainted by major scandals has been the focus of considerable research
- **Global Compact of the United Nations**: This initiative of the UN to provide a value framework for multinational corporate action has however proved problematic in conception and subject to only limited critical assessment.

12. Preoccupation with accountability of civil society bodies: This followed from the earlier focus on (defensive) evaluation of civil society bodies:

- **Focus on sects**: Stimulated by scandals, considerable research has focussed on cults and sects without successfully distinguishing them from more conventional organizations and from prestigious secret societies. The value of some research has also been undermined by efforts to use it deliberately to marginalize unusual social experiments in alternative lifestyles by associating them with manipulative cults.
- **Focus on fraudulent operations**: The use of some NGOs as a cover for money laundering, and other covert or illegal operations, has focussed some research on the need for measures analogous to those developed for corporations.
- **Focus on standards of accountability**: This was notably stimulated by the problems of major scandals in multinational corporations and an effort to extend the same logic to civil society bodies, notably in relation to their representativity.

13. Transfer (whether deliberate or tacit) of social safety-net and support functions to community NGOs by overburdened governments:

- **Community civil society**: Reinforced tendencies to research local civil society groups (kindergarten, hospices, etc) reinforcing tendencies to frame "civil society" in terms of the local framework.
- **Developmental experiments**: Research attention has also been drawn to evaluate and legitimate successful social experiments like local currency (LETS) systems, the Grameem Bank, and the microcredit movement generally. (see earlier remarks on the Global Action Programme)

14. Professionalization of management of civil society bodies: The management and strategic challenges of some civil society bodies forced them to make use of increasingly professional management skills. This resulted in:

- **Academic training in nonprofit management**: Increasingly business schools have offered training courses and qualifications in nonprofit management. This has encouraged associated forms of research.
- **Emergence of association management companies**: Offering the service of handling the day-today operations of certain types of societies / associations.
- **Conference organization services.**

15. Development of civil society use of internet and presence on the web: The importance of this has increased exponentially since the mid-1990s.

- **Mobilizing political campaigns, notably in opposition to trade negotiations**: This capacity was first widely recognized in 1998 through the action by civil society groups in successful opposition to the OECD's Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). By pooling their information, civil society bodies were able to break through the wall of secrecy that traditionally surrounds international negotiations, forcing governments to deal with their complaints.
- **Development of techniques of increasing participation and organization** (notably in relation to parallel events): This resulted in a wide range of innovative experiments by practitioners but without much initial academic involvement
- **Development of electronic survey technology**: The internet has considerably facilitated the capacity to survey civil society bodies, and their capacity to survey their members. This has encouraged particular research approaches
- **Development of electronic voting technology**: this has been associated with interest in electronic democracy (to some degree in

relation to campaigns for a world parliament or world civil assembly)

- **Emergence of portals dedicated to facilitate civil society processes:** Whilst some of these have been set up as an activity of civil society bodies, others may be understood as substituting for them. IGOs and INGos are using topic specific websites (with unique domains) for specific campaigns (often of limited duration / project specific)
    - Portals in support of particular campaigns
    - Coordination of civil society bodies through portals
    - Portals for employment opportunities (notably for volunteers)
    - Portals in support of particular belief systems
    - Development of .ORG as a civil society space on the web

16. Increasing preoccupation with participative democracy: This has had several recent points of research focus:

- **National level pressures for increased involvement**
- **Regional level concerns**: as typified by the provision of the European Constitution
- **Focus on increasing effectiveness of lobbying**: This follows the pattern set by corporate interests, which may indeed set up "front" NGOs to perform their lobbying functions.
- **Intergovernmental consultation**: as typified by the continuing efforts to ensure greater access of NGOs to statutory and other meetings of the UN system. The research has however ignored the purely quantitative problems of processing the communications of large numbers of civil society representatives by a very small number of civil servants. with respect to a complex evolving range of issues.
- **Regional and world civil assemblies**: The challenges of participatory democracy, and the increasingly obvious limitations of elected assemblies, have encouraged research on world parliaments and civil assemblies. This has however failed to address weaknesses inherent in the dynamics and dialogue processes of such large number of representatives.

17. Increasing preoccupation with violence, security and terrorism-related concerns: This follows in part from the increasingly vigorous protest at official international events and the reactions to the deliberately violent activities of those who resort to terrorism. It has resulted in the emergence and institutionalisation of the study of transnational criminal activity ("uncivil society") with little clarification of the space occupied by more conventional civil society bodies.

- **Concern with security of humanitarian NGO action in the field:** This follows early concern regarding field operatives of the UN system, especially in the light of the increased role that NGOs have come to play in humanitarian relief, even where the UN is unwilling to act.
- **Increasing recognition of the level of violence employed by government forces against dissidents and protestors:** This was highlighted by the actions against protestors at the Genoa trade talks (2001).
- **Increasing governmental use of proxies, surrogates and mercenaries, whether overtly or tacitly**: Such groups, effectively nongovernmental operatives ("NGOs") have further blurred the categorization of civil society bodies in ways that have not been effectively addressed - as with "terrorist groups" in relation to "dissident groups".
- **Concern with terrorist networks and their relation to dissident organizations:** This research question has been extremely controversial with the conflation of "dissident", "terrorist suspect" and "terrorist" - in the absence of evidence subject to research scrutiny - or adequate taxonomies by researchers to clarify such distinctions. It has given a particular focus to research on the legal status of NGOs.
- **Recognition of significance of criminal networks**: Increasing research attention has emerged in response to transnational criminal networks, notably in relation to drugs, traffic in persons, arms trade, and money-laundering.
- **Possibility of (usefully) marginalizing dissident organizations under anti-terrorist legislation:** It remains unclear what research has been funded as a means of justifying the marginalization of civil society bodies holding dissident views.
- **Concern with mapping and profiling bodies (and especially their networks) that may in some way be considered supportive of terrorism**: This is notably a response to the much-publicized "intelligence failure" associated with 9/11and Iraq. it has resulted in a notable increase in interest in research on networks in contrast to that on isolated organizations and sets of organizations.

B.   In Search of "Proactive" Breakthroughs

Part of the difficulty in seeking proactive breakthroughs is that scholarly research, as conventionally understood, does not have as a priority, or even a concern, the "improvement" of civil society and its operations. Such concerns are the more natural preoccupation of "applied" sciences - recognizing that there is traditionally a somewhat problematic relation between "theoretical" and "applied" research. Beyond descriptive and analytical research clarifying how civil society functions, how would research empowering civil society to function more effectively be recognized? The question is then what research has sought to provide enabling improvement in civil society operations?

Possibilities might include:

- Action learning
- Appreciative inquiry (eg Case Western)
- Community empowerment (eg GAP, ICA)
- Community and collective intelligence (knowledge)
- Intermediate technology (eg Development Alternatives)
- Community facilitation (eg ICA)
- Dialogue research

- Research on alternative forms of organization
- Cultural creatives -- values

The identification of research critical to the improved functioning of civil society might include:

- How organizations of very different types and preoccupations might function together in their various complementary roles in civil society. Namely how can the richness of civil society interactivity be improved? What "species" are important to such an organizational "ecosystem"?
- How can representatives of diverse sectors of civil society interact more fruitfully - whether to focus their concerns more fruitfully in a consensus, or to operate more effectively, as a sustainable "ecosystem", through mutual reinforcement in their respective domains?
- How can insights and beliefs of different quality, articulated by civil society bodies with quite different kinds of members, be meaningfully shared to engender more powerful insights - rather than being constrained in unfruitful ways?
- How can civil society bodies avoid entrapment in "positive" groupthink without being fragmented by "negative" critical analysis?
- How can civil society bodies with different value priorities (ensuring that they oppose each others' strategies) be more fruitfully organized - given that one group will be seeking to undermine the activities and resource base of the other? How can strategic dilemmas and value-based disagreements be more creatively managed within a community?
- How can civil society identify, and embody more effectively, checks and balances so as to ensure that its initiatives are not systematically coopted in the service of particular agendas?
- How can the learnings from (courageous) experiments in alternative modes of organization be ordered to enable (legitimate and inspire)) new experiments of potentially greater value to civil society?
- How can the multi-media marriage (of visualization, sonification, etc) of relational databases on civil society be enhanced to highlight new strategic opportunities - and render them more comprehensible and credible?
- How can the challenges of communication across languages, cultures and disciplines be reframed to take advantage of the unique insights of each rather than the subjection of many to a dominant majority view?

C. Research drivers

Some research has been driven by the attention given to the fields of study by disciplines which previously were not concerned with civil society or which had small and specific interests. Examples include sociology, management / business studies, public relations and media studies.. Some of this is due the changes to modern culture in the past 35 years (from Mcluhan forward; broader use of, and developments in, communications technology etc). Some disciplines are now "discovering" civil society as they endeavour to undertake "new research" hitherto unknown in their field of study. Also to be noted are the rise of new disciplines -- development studies; gender & women's studies etc.

Questions can usefully be asked about the extent to which research on civil society, and the research agenda, has been appropriated by:

- **Intergovernmental organizations**: in seeking to promote politically-relevant research, as with the case of the European Commission's funding of research projects on community and in relation to participative democracy

- **Foundations**: in seeking to promote particular kinds of research consistent with their political agenda

- **Academia**: in seeking (possibly through policy thinktanks) to associate themselves with recently discovered fashionable topics for which research funding is available, in such a way as to reframe those topics as the domain of particular disciplines

- **Alternative groups**: in seeking to avoid the constraints of existing institutions, perceived as unconstructive, enabling them to reframe their own initiatives with minimal reference to other research efforts

Conclusions

The question to be asked is the extent to which research on civil society is currently:

- Dollar driven
- Policy driven (including belief system, or in response to security concerns)
- Issue driven

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