

## A VERY COMPLEX SOCIETY

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We have an extreme situation in a country like the USA, where, on the one hand, inequality has increased sharply. At some point, extreme inequality breaks the social fabric of a country... perhaps we can no longer speak of a national society. It would seem to say that, **within a nation, such as the USA, and perhaps this holds for Russia as well and also India we now have several societies**, and there are very few bridges or ladders connecting the lower income to the higher income. There was a time when mass manufacturing was the basis of the national economy, when there were indeed such ladders.

The liberal democracies that we have today in many countries can no longer deliver prosperity to a growing proportion of their people as they used to do in the 1940s to 1960s. **Now the foundational elements of that liberal democracy are becoming visible.**

Global civil society and also local civil society, are emerging as potential new historic subjects for the making of a new political regime - one that is more distributed and that resists (though it cannot eliminate) the enrichment of some parties and the impoverishment of majorities.

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Globalisation and new information and communication technologies (ICTS) have enabled a variety of local activists and organisations to enter international arenas that were once exclusive to national states. Multiple types of claim-making and oppositional politics articulate these developments. Furthermore, the process of going global has been partly facilitated and conditioned by the infrastructure of the global economy, even as the latter is often the object of those oppositional politics.

The organisational side of the global economy materialises in a worldwide grid of strategic places, the uppermost of which are the major international business and financial centres - namely, global cities. We may think of this global grid as constituting a new economic geography of centrality - one that cuts across national boundaries and increasingly across the old North-South divide. It has

emerged as a transnational space for the formation of new claims by global capital, but also by other types of actors; this is one way in which cities can become part of the live infrastructure of global civil society. The space constituted by the worldwide grid of global cities - a space with new economic and political potentialities - is perhaps the most strategic, though not the only space for the formation of transnational identities and communities. An important question is whether it is also a space for a new kind of politics - one that goes beyond the politics of culture and identity while also likely to remain, at least partly embedded in it.

**The cross-border network of global cities is a space where we are seeing the formation of new types of 'global' politics of place that contest corporate globalisation, environmental and human rights abuses, and so on.** The demonstrations by the alter-globalisation movement signal the potential for developing a politics centred on places that are understood as locations on global networks. This is a place-specific politics with a global span. It is a type of political work that is deeply embedded in people's actions and activities, but made possible partly by the existence of global digital linkages. These are mostly organisations operating through networks of cities and involving informal political actors - that is, actors who are not necessarily engaging in politics as citizens (narrowly defined), where voting is the most formalised type of citizen-engaged politics.

These practices constitute a specific type of global politics -

one that runs through localities and is not predicated on the existence of global institutions. The engagement can be with global institutions, such as the IMF or the WTO, or with local institutions, such as a particular government or local police force charged with human rights abuses. Theoretically, these types of global politics illuminate the distinction between a global network and the actual transactions that constitute it: the global character of a network does not necessarily imply that its transactions are equally global, or that it all has to necessarily happen at the global level.

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At the same time, the new information and communication technologies are not automatically going in that favourable democratic direction. We should remember that finance also uses such technologies, and it succeeds in raising the level of concentration of wealth, which is not very democratic.

The technical properties of electronic interactive domains deliver their utilities through complex ecologies, not only through the technology itself. The particular social, political, economic aims of actors make a difference. And these aims may have little to do with the technologies used per se. Finance is not about these technologies, even though it is completely dependent on them. The logic of finance is not the same as the logic of the computer engineers and scientists who designed the hardware and the software that is used by financiers. Social networks such as Facebook are completely dependent on such technology although they are not about the technology itself.

Civil society and political networks vary enormously in their aims and uses of the technology. It is impossible to do justice to this enormous variability here. At this point, I just want to bring up two aspects. One is that, in the hands of civil society groups, the technology demonstrates to what extent it is a mutant – it gets used and combined with an almost a limitless range of aims. Just think of the variety of civil society networks in Berlin. Women in Kabul or women in Dharavi, Mumbai's vast slum, each have several networks, and so is the case across cities and neighbourhoods worldwide.

But there is a second critical feature of the lives of these technologies in civil society. There is a serious concern among some of these networks with the technology itself. This makes clear to what extent much of the development of such technology is now in corporate hands that have in mind, first of all, the interests of their clients – corporations, financial firms, and mass market firms. ■

## GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY IS A NEW PLAYER



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I believe that different nation states invariably look for situations where global arrangements can best harmonize with their nation's real needs. The failure of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to advance beyond its original agenda, particularly during the Doha Round, is a reminder that, in today's multipolar world, nation states are less willing to cede their national interest to global agreements that do not also advance their real interests.

Another example of this difficulty is the current status of negotiations connected with climate change. Most scientists and analysts around the world consider the Copenhagen Summit last year a failure, and things do not look any more promising for the upcoming Climate Change Summit in Cancun. If there is one issue that nation states should be rallying around and cooperating more closely on it is climate change, where a failure to reach a solution endangers everyone. Yet, it has been difficult to achieve consensus at the global level even on this issue.

**The civil society has an important role to play in this particular context, especially as state power becomes multipolar and not just centered in the United States of America.** When a global movement seems to be headed in a problematic direction, it will mobilize and influence the position of nation states. And when governments seem to be headed in an appropriate direction, movements in general will follow them, albeit critically, as was the case with the Earth Summit and all the different UN Summits of the 1990s.

This is exactly what happened at the Copenhagen Summit when the global movement known as 350 helped influence the outlook of dozens of nation states. And currently, different portions of global civil society are mobilizing against the geo-engineering solutions to climate change that certain scientists and business people are proposing in the wake of the failure of the Copenhagen Summit. ■

*An international campaign that's building a movement to unite the world around solutions to the climate crisis, see [www.350.org](http://www.350.org)*