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Radical Resistance ‘From Below’

Introduction

Whereas the morality of global civil society was seen to lie in political ends in the constructivist approach and in the separate sphere of communicative ethics in the Habermasian approach. The radical approach of constructing global society ‘from below’ derives the morality of global civil society from the methods and organisation of its members, from their refusal to participate in territorial state-based politics. The social movement approach sees global civil society as morally progressive in so far as its demands do not ‘seek to replace one form of power with another’ and instead have the ‘objective of “whittling down” the capacity of concentrated centres of power’ (Stammers 1999:1006). As Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss argue:

Individuals and groups, and their numerous transnational associations, rising up from and challenging the confines of territorial states, are promoting ‘globalization from below’, and have begun to coalesce into what is now recognized as being a rudimentary ‘global civil society’. (Falk and Strauss 2003:209–10)

As considered in the previous chapter, the communicative realm of global civil society separates moral engagement from the formal political sphere. Radical global civil society theorists share this perspective but tend to focus less on theorising global civil society as a totality and more on the highlighting of new forms of informal political activism, activism which is held to reconnect politics and morality. In this sense global civil society is more narrowly defined on the basis of political activism and political advocacy, rather than purely non-governmental
interactions. Mario Pianta, for example, defines global civil society as ‘a sphere of international relationships among heterogeneous actors who share civil values and concern for global issues, communication and meanings, advocacy actions, and self-organization experiments’ (Pianta 2003:237).

Advocates of this global civil society approach suggest that the radical movements, attempting to institute ‘globalisation from below’, bring politics and morality together by expanding the sphere of moral concern and by developing political strategies which avoid and bypass the constraints of state-based politics. Falk argues that: ‘If there is to be a more benign world order enacting a transformed politics of non-violence and social justice, it will be brought about by struggles mounted from below based on the activities of popular movements and various coalitions.’ (Falk 1995:18) Whereas state-based political action is held to reinforce frameworks and hierarchies of exclusion, new social movements from below are seen to herald new forms of emancipatory political action, which seek to recognise and include diversity and build new forms of global ‘counter-hegemonic’ politics.

In this perspective, states are no longer perceived to be the focus for political organisation and political demands. Unlike the empirical project of global civil society, which involves (Western) states in the moral sphere of international relations, the normative theorists, informed by critical, postmodern and cosmopolitan approaches, argue that nation-states are a barrier to emancipatory political practice. Rather than capturing state power, the normative goal of global civil society is to constitute alternatives to the enclosed space of territorial politics. As Nikhil Aziz explains:

Broadly speaking, the new transnational social movements’ concerns with eliminating political, economic, and social inequalities are the same as the goals of past socialist and communist movements. However, the new movements seek non-violent as opposed to violent revolution; and they generally abjure power in the sense of control of the state, seeking instead political alternatives to the state itself. (Aziz 1995:14)

Advocates of global civic activism assert that the state-level focus of old movements limited their progressive potential:

....it was through the state that ‘old’ movements were ‘tamed’. This was true both of workers’ movements, which became left political