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## Non-state Actors in World Politics: a Framework

*Daphné Josselin and William Wallace*

Non-state actors are heroes and villains in different narratives of international politics. Idealists often present non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as the vanguard of an emerging global civil society, challenging the instinctive authoritarianism of states and the power of international capital. Enthusiasts for globalization see private social actors as building networks across borders, promoting shared understandings, even international solidarity. Hard-line Realists, on the other hand, see NGOs either as front-organizations thinly disguising the interests of particular states, or as potential revolutionaries, seeking to undermine national solidarity and the stability of the state system. Realists and Idealists come together in their ambivalence about transnational economic actors – banks and multinational companies (MNCs) – as transmitters both of investment and influence, as bringing both modernization and external intervention.

Only the most determined ‘Realist’, however, would now deny that the balance between states and non-state actors has shifted, over the past 30–40 years – at least within the community of advanced industrial democracies. Democratic states have retreated from the post-war attempt to control substantial proportions of their national economies, and have progressively reduced barriers to cross-border trade, investment, production and provision of services. The communications revolution has transformed the ability of non-state actors to develop and maintain transnational contacts, and has radically lowered the costs of doing so. Rising educational standards, increased international travel, the emergence of global media, have widened the perspectives of elites and of counter-elites. Our starting point is, therefore, that any interpretation of international relations and global politics must now take the significance of non-state actors, operating transnationally, into account.<sup>1</sup> Over the past three decades there has been an explosion in the number of NGOs (Union of International Associations 1970–99), while deregulation of domestic economies and the strengthening of international economic regimes has allowed for a

parallel explosion of multinational companies (MNCs), banks, service networks and economic associations (Strange 1996).

The aim of this volume is to bring together expertise from different corners of this extensive field, to explore how far it is possible to agree on a common narrative, or at least on a common empirical foundation on which contending schools may build their theoretical structures. There is a tendency for those who focus on particular non-state actors to be familiar with the activities of private actors within that area, but not far beyond. Economists and students of the international political economy study MNCs, financial markets, even trade unions, looking at a very different group of private actors from those which students of conflict resolution or of transnational advocacy networks examine. We therefore bring together for a general audience some of the insights and information from recent detailed research, with which others in the field may not yet be familiar.

### **Non-state actors: a definition**

States and non-state actors form broad opposing categories. Yet defining non-state actors chiefly by their independence from states and state authority would be misleading. Both in domestic and international politics, the theoretical purity of these opposing ideal types is muddled by the complexities of practice. The relationship between banks and MNCs and their home governments may well be close, including 'golden shares' or partial state ownership.<sup>2</sup> Governments of liberal states provide financial support for some transnational groups, primarily those working in economic and social development. Think-tanks and elite networks often have close links with governments, from funding to participation by officials. Intelligence agencies subsidize 'autonomous' groups which promote appropriate causes.<sup>3</sup> The universe of non-state actors is thus necessarily diverse. Private actors shade into public: degrees of autonomy from state authority and control vary. Public-private partnerships exist beyond the nation-state as well as within it, with intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) contracting with think-tanks for policy advice, and with NGOs for the delivery of services. At one end of our spectrum lie companies and organizations the activities of which meet with full approval and support from one or more national governments; at the other groups and movements seen by the governments of most territories in which they seek to operate as threats to established order. Even here there are intermediate categories, with states sponsoring subversive groups (including 'state-sponsored terrorism') to undermine other governments.

International organizations, bureaucracies and what Mansbach (1976: 41) defines as 'governmental noncentral actors' such as cities or local authorities, are also semi-autonomous: public actors but not – strictly-defined – state actors. The network of central bankers does not always reflect the views even of national