

**GLOBAL-LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL LOCAL-LOCAL  
RELATIONS IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF  
LATIN AMERICAN CIVIL SOCIETIES <sup>(1)</sup>**

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the XXI International Congress  
of the Latin American Studies Association, Chicago, September 24-27, 1998**

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**Abstract:** A huge wave of processes for the (re)organizing of so called "civil societies" has recently taken place at a worldwide level. The worldwide --and interconnected-- character of this kind of processes is not unique. In the present age of globalization, social representations and institutions are not shaped in isolated social spaces, but through transnational processes with the intense participation of both "domestic" and "non-domestic" agents. Studies about current "civil societies" (re)organizing processes often disregard the significance of "non-domestic" agents in these experiences. This paper discusses the significance of global-local and transnational local-local relations in shaping aspects of some current experiences of (re)organizing "civil societies." This paper is based on my field and documentary research about some "global" agents' practices and some events and networks that they promote and support, and the experiences of some "local" agents from Argentina and Venezuela participating in relations with those "global" agents and in their initiatives as well as in other transnational local-local relations and experiences.

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A worldwide wave of processes for the (re)organization of so called "civil societies" has taken place since the struggles of Solidarity and other Eastern European movements in the late 1970s. Due to local peculiarities significant differences may be found between these processes at both region and country levels. Nevertheless two significant commonalities may be identified. The first of these commonalities is the very use of the expression "civil society;" which is itself a significant factor because as we know this expression is not a "natural element," but a socially produced symbolic representation of social experiences. This is not a new expression, but it has become very much in currency only in recent years, and beyond differences in the attributed meaning, this expression has acquired a certain status as if it represent a universal feature of human societies. Given these circumstances, the impressive current worldwide diffusion of the expression "civil society" should at least stimulate our analytical curiosity. In this regard the second commonality becomes particularly significant. This second common factor is the participation of certain kinds of organizations in almost all these processes, I name these organizations "global agents."

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Based on the discussion of some examples, this paper explores how certain "global agents" play important roles in promoting the growing political status of the idea of "civil society," and in stimulating the development of transnational working relations between "domestic" organizations, as well as between these latter and themselves. I name "global" those organizations that actually or tendentially develop their practices at a worldwide scale, or at least at a continental scale, which contrast with the cases of "domestic agents" that develop their practices mainly at local, or sometimes national scales. Although domestic agents increasingly engage transnationally, this is not their main purpose <sup>(2)</sup>.

### **Global agents, global meetings, transnational networks:**

The variety of global agents currently developing programs oriented to strengthening "civil societies," "civil society organizations," and/or "civic organizations" in the region is illustrative of the importance that they attribute to the subject. Among other prominent global agents developing this kind of programs in Latin America are for example the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and other U.N. agencies, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other "Northern" governments' bilateral agencies, large private foundations (e.g. the Ford Foundation), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including among these latter some whose budgets are in part endowed by their national governments or the political parties that regularly holds government --e.g., the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) from the United States, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FEF) from Germany, etc..

Many global agents sponsor and/or directly organize transnational meetings that are striking for the initiation of new and the development of already existing transnational networks involving global and domestic agents, as well as for developing representations of the idea of "civil society." Currently, events of this kind are common, some involve organizations from all over the world, while others are more regionally focused. Each of them entail exchanges of alternate representations of the idea of "civil society," involving coincidences, conflicts, and negotiations, as well as opening possibilities for the appropriation or adoption of specific representations. I do not have space here to discuss details of these meetings, but to make brief references to a few of them that may be suggestive.

For example, in 1995 a meeting named "*Civitas@Prague.1995: Strengthening Citizenship and Civic Education. East and West*" was held in Prague, with the participation of more than 400 participants from 52 countries. The gathering achieved to creating a transnational network of activists of civic education. *Civitas* was conceived by seven U.S. based organizations, and received the support of the United States Information Agency (USIA), and the U.S. Department of Education (*Civitas 1995: 2*). This meeting mainly oriented to facilitate the encounter of Eastern European organizations' representatives among themselves, and with others mainly from the U.S. and Western Europe, also included the participation of two Latin American NGOs, one of them was the Argentine civic association *Conciencia*, which as a consequence of its participation in this meeting took the initiative of organizing a related Pan-American *Civitas* in 1996, a case about

which I will further comment later on in this paper. But, at this point, it may be significant considering a suggestive interpretation of the *Civitas* meeting in Prague offered by the Deputy Director of USIA: '[Civitas] was one of those events where a collection of people realizes that it has become a community ... The declaration signed by representatives of fifty-two countries called upon governments and international organizations "to make civic education a higher priority on the international agenda," and pledged the participants to create and maintain a worldwide network that will work toward this end.' (Civitas 1995:1)

The "Conference on Strengthening Civil Society" organized by the Inter-American Development Bank in September of 1994 in Washington D.C., was oriented to address the issue in association to ongoing economic reforms and the shrinking of the state in Latin America. This meeting counted with the participation of representatives of UNDP, USAID, OAS, jointly with representatives of governments and civic organizations from Latin America. The Summary Report of this Conference suggestively states that: "*Although the strengthening of civil society is a fundamentally domestic process set against widely differing and specific circumstances, it needs to be supported by the international community*" (IADB, 1994: 3). The Report also make explicit the connection between the Bank's economic concerns and its new interest in "strengthening civil society": "*There is a close relationship between modernization and reform of the State and the strengthening of civil society ... . In this respect it was recognized that redefining the role of the State and resizing it mean ... [among other things] strengthening the capacity of citizens, individually or in partnerships, through profitmaking activities or otherwise, to assume responsibilities --some of them economic-- that the State has been shedding and to monitor and supervise the act of governing.*" (IADB, 1994: 4-5)

As I said above, it is interesting for the purpose of this paper to comment about the *Civitas* encounter held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, between September 29 and October 2 of 1996. *Conciencia*, the Argentine civic association that participated in the Prague's meeting and which is also represented at the Civita's International Committee, played a key role in the organization of this event, that was conceived as a *Pan-American Civitas*. This *Civitas* meeting, like the former, counted on the support of USIA. This US governmental agency contacted what its officers considered to be potential participants from every involved country, and also took charge of their expenses. Other global agents also participated in the meeting, among others: UNESCO, USAID, NDI, IADB, OAS, and the European Commission. The meeting was attended by representatives of NGOs from almost every Latin American country (except Cuba), some of them represented by the presence of several NGOs. A good number of U.S. based NGOs also participate in the meeting, as well as representatives of NGOs from three Eastern European countries, four African countries, two Asian countries, Turkey and Canada. The educational authorities of three Latin American countries, Jamaica, and the United States were also represented in the meeting, as well as, professors of about twenty academic institutions from Latin America and the U.S.. This meeting was attended by six representatives from Venezuela, one of them a member of the *School of Neighbors*, about which I will discuss in the following section.

### **Domestic agents' transnational experiences**

It is worthful to complement the former tips about global meetings with some views

offered by representatives of domestic organizations from Latin America that participated in some of them, and/or in other similar experiences and related networks. I will briefly report from interviews with representatives from four organizations, two from Argentina, and two from Venezuela.

The Venezuelan organization *Escuela de Vecinos (School of Neighbors)* is a small civic organization that has achieved to develop a very important work in strengthening civil society at a national level. The *School's* leadership concedes special importance to what they name "international relations" and the "internationalization of the *School*." Several of its leaders regularly travel abroad to link the *School* internationally, learning about other countries' experiences, and presenting its experience to foreign audiences. The U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) has recently granted a *School's* project to strengthening citizen participation in electoral processes at a national level. In connection with this project the NDI has also made possible for some *School's* representatives to teaching courses and participating in experiences in other Latin American countries, and more recently it has also sponsored the "III International Meeting: Civil Society and Electoral Reform" held in Caracas in November of 1996, which was organized by the *School* with the support of a couple of Venezuelan government agencies. The *School's* experience with the NDI is not lone. For example a representative of the School has also participated in the already mentioned *Pan-American Civitas* meeting held in Buenos Aires.

Elías Santana, the initial promotor of the *School* and part of its leadership team, explained to me that:

*'Since the beginning of this decade we decided to make contact with experiences in other countries as well as systematizing our experience in order to share it abroad. In fact, we name the year 1996 as the "Year of the Internationalization of the School." In only 18 months we have been represented in 16 countries by 12 different individuals. [...] During our two most recent assemblies each "traveler" has told her/his experience and formulated recommendations.'* [my translation, D.M.].

Mr. Santana also pointed out that the *School* work has been particularly motivated and enriched by the experiences of several comparable organizations from various Latin American countries, about which they learned through each other visits and/or participation in international encounters.

Elizabeth Cordido also part of the *School's* leadership team, and who participated in the *Civitas'* meeting of Buenos Aires, emphasized that her participation in both an exchange program in the U.S. and the *Civitas'* meeting in Buenos Aires have allowed her to learn about other countries' experiences, which have been important sources of ideas for conceiving programs and strategies of action.

When I asked Andrés Cova, also part of the *School's* leadership team, if he considered that his ideas about civil society have been affected by his international exchanges, he answered:

*"Of course, to begin with, it is the very fact of speaking of civil society. We did not talk of civil society before the '90s. The expression civil society is in Venezuela an idiom of the '90s. ... Before 1990, or 1991, we did not speak of civil society, but of non-governmental."* [my translation, D.M.]

Andrés Cova's appreciation about the incorporation of the term "civil society" in Venezuelan public vocabulary becomes even more significant when considered in connection with the case of *CESAP*. It is not incidental that *CESAP*, which has employed the expression "popular" in its very name since about twenty years ago, and that has framed its practice in relation to the word "pueblo" (the Spanish expression to name mainly the economically poor strata of society), has begun to use the expressions "gente" (the generic expression to name people from any economic strata) and "civil society" since about seven years ago. Importantly, this reflection is not mine but of *CESAP*'s president, Mr. Janssens, who was inclined to assume that this change may be related primarily to the incorporation of the idiom in the Venezuelan context, and secondly to *CESAP*'s exchanges with other countries' organizations. He also stated that among these foreign organizations he would emphasize the importance of other Latin American organizations, and would place second several church related donor agencies from Europe and the Inter-American Foundation from the United States.

*Conciencia*, the already mentioned Argentine civic association that organized the Pan-American Civitas meeting and, and whose main purpose is providing civic education to the citizenry, has been strongly connected to similar organizations in Latin America, receives funding from several global agents. It has for example received support from the USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, as well as from several foundations from the US and Europe.

During a round of interviews I recently made to several members of *Conciencia*'s leadership, Mrs. Marie Luise Martín de Gorleri emphasized the significance of the role play by some international sponsors (global agents in this paper's vocabulary) in stimulating the formation of networks around certain issues. In the interview I made to Mrs. María Rosa de Martini --- *Conciencia*'s current Vicepresident, and formerly its president, and who participated in both the Civitas@Prague.95 meeting and the 1994 IADB meeting on Strengthening Civil Society--- I requested her opinion regarding the significance of the roles played by global agents and the meetings and networks they sponsor in promoting the idea of "civil society," she immediately said: "Of course," and continued arguing why she thought in this way. Her arguments not only commented on the importance of those global meetings, but also of certain scholar exchange programs, like the Fulbright Program. Significantly, she highlighted the importance of the above mentioned Conference on Strengthening Civil Society organized by the Inter-American Development Bank. She said:

[Before, we talked in terms of] *voluntary associations, I think that it was the United Nations who begun naming them non-governmental*

*organizations [...] in my memory some 15 or 20 years ago [...]; civil society: there was a conference organized by the Inter-American Development Bank held in Washington in 1994 [... that] was very important [...]. [We still*

talked in terms of] *non-governmental organizations, and when I came back [from that conference], I remember very clearly, that we were here in a meeting of our organization's board, and I said to my colleagues: Well, the new key idea is the strengthening of civil society.*" [my translation, interview of 09/16/97]

In Ms. Martini's view the expression "civil society" resulted to be a new name and idea. For her and her colleagues, who, as most contemporary leaders of these organizations in Latin America, probably were not familiar with theoretical bibliography on this idea, nor with the usage the Latin American left made of it in the 1960s. In her socially very significant view --a social significance that derives from the projection that her organization work has both in Argentine, and, through networks, in Latin America, where this and related organizations are involved in the implementation of social and educational programs-- the importance of this "new" expression was that it allowed her and other related organizations to visualize what since then they began to name "the sector" in its vast largeness, which, in turn, allow them building alliances and formulating politics in ways that were not conceivable before.

When I asked about the incorporation of the term "civil society" to Ms. Silvia Uranga, current Conciencia's president, she said:

*"We often do projects with foreign foundations. Through this one begin to know certain expressions, which become kind of familiar keywords, or, ... you see, one begin to name things in a different form. I tell you, when we begun to speak of civil society nobody understood about what we were talking. By that time, when we sent our message to our affiliates in the rest of the country they often argued about it. But the good thing is that the term has demonstrated that the sector is important. That is, the term has helped to circumscribe the sector, to define something that already existed."* [my translation, interview of 09/16/97].

And when I asked Ms. Uranga about the importance she attributed to her experiences abroad. She told me:

*"One acquires capacitation, personal knowledge ... , personal ties ...; and also a common language that it is very important in this globalized world ..., and, well, it also generates a commitment."* [my translation, interview of 09/16/97]

Finally, let us briefly discuss aspects of the interviews I made to members of *Poder Ciudadano (Citizen Power)*, which is another important civic organization from Argentine. This organization's mission is promoting citizen responsibility and participation, as well as civil liberties and democratic values. As the other organizations reviewed in this paper, *Poder Ciudadano* also receives funding from several global agents and participates in several

networks, among others the *Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy* which receives support from USAID. Suggestively when I requested the opinion of Carolina Varsky, a

project coordinator at *Poder Ciudadano*, about this paper's hypothesis about the significance of global agents in spreading the idea of *civil society* and related others, she immediately answered: "*Clearly*," and put the mentioned *Network* as a significant example.

Mr. Roberto Saba, Executive Director of *Poder Ciudadano* at that time, answered my question saying:

*"Yes, I share your hypothesis, but I would add that this incorporation of others' ideas has accelerated in recent years thanks to certain technological changes."*  
[my translation, interview of 09/18/97]

He also stated that he knew the cases of several individuals who currently held salient positions in the field of civil society in Argentina who about seven years ago were asking him what civil society meant. He told me this anecdote to illustrate how recently this wording has acquired currency within Argentine sociopolitical life. Of course, he added, there were some specialists who knew and used the expression from well before. And he also pointed out the following:

*"It was by the mid eighties when it begun to come from anywhere the ideas of civil society and citizenship. Then they become mixed with other concept that was also imported, that of third sector, or independent sector. Notably it also begun to develop a confusion that lead to take third sector and civil society as the same thing. Similarly, current initiatives to elaborate legislation favoring the development of the third sector also come from abroad."* [my translation, interview of 09/18/97]

When I asked Mr. Saba about how financial links between Latin American civic organizations and global agents affect the spread of the ideas of civil society and related others he said:

*"The issue of financing is very important. Most of these organizations have not been able to self-financing their activities, they receive foreign support. There is much foreign influence in the origin of these organizations. It is a positive influence, I am not of those who believes in the idea of a conspiracy. I believe that there are happy coincidences. I believe that there have been convergences of interests. For example, it has been fortunate that in a certain moment the interests of the Argentine group of people which created Poder Ciudadano have coincided with the objectives of the agenda of the United States Agency for International Development. As a result of such a coincidence of interests a project of citizenship control of corruption has happily been possible. [...]. It is not that we [Latin American civic organizations] change our agendas in order to obtain foreign support. What we often have to do is altering our agendas' order of priority, the order of priority of our projects. [...]. It is not that we sell our souls to de devil, but to change the order of priorities."* [my translation, interview of 09/18/97].

## Final Comments

The examples offered above illustrate about the importance of transnational networks of domestic and global agents in the increasing political currency of the idea of *civil society*, as well as in current processes of (re)organizing of "civil societies" in Latin America. The effective importance of these transnational networks in specific social processes of production of representations of civil society and associated agendas and practices must be studied for each specific case, and this is precisely what I have been doing in recent years. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the brief references that this paper length allows one to discuss are enough to illuminate about the importance of these networks and of that of the global agents that make the creation and development of these networks possible. These references also contribute to argue that global agents decide about inclusions and exclusions in those networks, and set up their initial agendas and the system of representations that inform the negotiations within their context. Of course, the existence and significance of these networks and the importance of these global organizations cannot be interpreted in terms of any conspiracy theory, or simplistic assumptions that global agents impose their representations. Our examples also show the importance of transnational relations held between local or domestic agents, as well as processes of re-elaboration of global agents' views.

If, as proposed here, we leave aside any idea of a conspiracy, then it becomes more visible one important form of socio-political change in the age of globalization. This form is related to the significance of the transnational relationships between global and local agents, as well as between local agents of different countries. These relationships are the site of (co)production, adaptation, negotiation of social representations of ideas of civil society and related others that inform the agendas of significant social actors. It is in this regard that is necessary to highlight an important issue about "global agents." This issue is that they are not "de-territorialized" as may be inferred from some literature about globalization. Be they governmental or non-governmental, some of these global agents are "domestic" with regard to certain societies (the U.S., Canada, Japan, or Western European countries), and therefore their representations of the idea of civil society, and associated agendas and practices are dependant upon conflicts and negotiations mainly---but not only---related to those societies to which public opinion and/or government instances, their bureaucracies and board members are accountable. Other global agents are multilateral banks characterized by particular institutional purposes, within which particular voices from the U.S. and a few other countries have special influence in conflicts and negotiations involving the making of institutional representations and agendas. In any case, their institutional representations and agendas inform their practices and particularly their actions regarding the (re)organization of civil societies (as the above examples illustrate). Still other global agents are international organizations and the representations that inform their practices result from more complex systems of conflicts and negotiations, which --depending on the cases-- are more or less directly related to diverse domestic contexts, as well as to transnational networks of experts. But also a great diversity of local or domestic agents are involved in these transnational networks, whose systems of representations and agendas are diversely formed.

The recognition of these complexities makes it necessary to approach the study of current processes of (re)organizing civil societies, as well as other global processes, from the perspective



of a "microphysics of globalization processes". This microphysics involves analyzing how these processes result from the interrelations between specific social agents from, or based on, diverse transnational, national, or local spaces, and their institutional systems of representations and agendas vis a vis their social contexts <sup>(3)</sup>. Carrying out such a microphysics is a necessary step if we want to surmount the limitations of certain studies present current globalization processes, as if it were just a matter of the macdonalization of the planet.

The worldwide development and transnational character of current processes of (re)organizing "civil societies" are not surprising if we understand them as elements of the present age of globalization. Although perhaps particularly acute, the case of current processes of (re)organization of "civil societies" is not unique in this regard. In the present age of globalization, social representations and associated agendas are not shaped in isolated societies, but through transnational processes with the intense participation not only of "domestic" social agents, but also of "non-domestic" agents. I do not have space here to abound about this, but have discussed elsewhere cases showing the significance of transnational relations in the social production of representations of race, ethnicity, and civil society in Latin America, as well as some interrelations between them (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998)<sup>(4)</sup>.

#### Notes:

(1) I am grateful for comments made on earlier presentations of some ideas informing this paper by Yogesh Atal, Arturo Escobar, Néstor García Canclini, Nina Glick-Schiller, Alberto Moreiras, Jan Servaes, Goran Therborn, Pradip Thomas, Peter Waterman, and George Yúdice. I am also thankful to Elizabeth Cordero, Andrés Cova, Elías Santana, and Liseth Souquet of the *Escuela de Vecinos*, to Armando Janssens and José Luís López of *CESAP*, to Marie Luise Martín de Gorleri, María Rosa de Martini, and Silvia Uranga of *Conciencia*, and to Carolina Varsky and Roberto Saba of *Poder Ciudadano* for participating in my interviews, providing documentation, and discussing my views. Of course, I am the exclusive responsible for this article's interpretations.

(2) I have discussed a research based typology of non-domestic agents in a recent article (Mato 1997a).

(3) I have essayed partial contributions to such a microphysics of globalization processes in some former writings (e.g., Mato 1995, 1996a, 1996c, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998). My use of this expression borrows from Foucault's idea of a "microphysics of power."

(4) I call transnational those relations maintained between two or more social subjects across nation-state borders, when at least one of these subjects is not an agent of a government or of an intergovernmental organization (Keohane & Nye 1971), and term international relations those maintained between governmental agents.

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