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Neither Civil nor Info Society offers Muslims the Hope of Global Equity
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Debate

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There is a new stress on civil society. It has come in the aftermath of the Cold War, and in some sense it still perpetuates the Cold War. Equated with private property, the market, and pluralistic culture – the familiar teleological mantra of neo-liberalism – civil society is trotted out as the answer to all issues of global competitiveness and national reconstruction.

The history and current deployment of the use of civil society apply but obliquely to Arab civil society, as is apparent from the most significant study yet on this crucial topic: R. Augustus Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, 2 vols. (E.J.Brill: Leiden, 1995-1996). The scope of this edited volume is vast and includes an overview of Middle East and North Africa, and then country-by-country analyses. If the lessons for civil society in the Middle East are sober, they depend on grappling with an elusive term that does not resonate at the same level for all researchers. In the preamble to a study of the Jordanian case, we are told that:

'In traditional western writing ... civil society has been associated with the development of capitalism, with the right to private property, and the need to protect other individual (initially, male) rights ... Civil society is defined by three elements: associational life (including political parties outside the state), citizenship (meaning full rights and responsibilities), and civility in interaction ... It is concerned above all with a liberalization process, with carving out an even larger realm for civil non-state, associational activity and for civil rights.'

A quite different, more nuanced, model of civil society appears elsewhere in the same volume. On the one hand, 'civilian rule, citizenship, civisme, civility, civil liberties – all are remedies to different forms of despotism and all are evoked by the term "civil society". ... Yet not all these remedies go together and none of them is easily achieved ... The protection of individual liberty, for instance, proscribes imposing conformity of values or identity upon the citizenry and hence contributes little to nurturing the solidarity democracies require. Civil liberties and civic spirit may then be modestly conflicting goals, and (we should not be surprised) that democracies everywhere experience a conflict between the goals of liberty and community.' Neither of these definitions, or the cases they explore, calls into question the relevance of civil society to Arab/Muslim societies. Not so in the case of Gaza. When we look at the evidence of Gaza, civil society appears in a starkly different light. Sara Roy, author of the essay on Gaza, challenges extant models of civil society as they apply, or do not apply, to Gaza. She begins by posing a contrast between the liberal pluralist model and the Marxist model à la Gramsci:

'The liberal pluralist model posits an arena of potential freedom where citizens can engage in voluntary associations apart from, but not in opposition to, the state. By contrast, the Gramscian model privileges civil society over the state. It sees civil society as a weapon against capitalism, not an accommodation to it. Civil society becomes the sphere of resistance, where those who are marginalized, dominated, and exploited can struggle against state control. Who struggles? The family, political parties and labour unions, indeed, all those who are intent on mobilizing opposition to state-directed, capitalist-motivated hegemonic practices.'

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In a deft move, at once original and productive, Roy then goes on to note how both models – the liberal pluralist and the Gramscian resistant – presume a certain kind of state. Both presume that there is a unitary state, but with limited powers. They also presume that pluralism is invariably good, at once welcoming difference and promoting tolerance. Further, they presume that there exists a kind of social contract about what counts as good. Finally, they aver what Michael Walzer calls 'speaking in prose', that is, a normal life. Yet Roy goes on to demonstrate that neither of these models can apply in Gaza because neither the state nor the society is unitary; not only moral consensus but even normality are elusive, if not fictive. The result? 'The possibility of civil unrest', concludes Roy, 'appears greater than the capacity of civil society to address it.' Let us call this the Liberal Model (of civil society), in a phrase from Michael Gilson, Turned Inside Out.

Even while there is keen attention to the benefits of civil society in many quarters, there are also other moves to go beyond the traditional concept and use of civil society. If Roy questions its applicability in the desperate circumstances of current day Gaza, others note that it no longer applies at the top end of the global/local hierarchy, to those empowered by the Information Age. It may be time to explore a radical prospect: civil society has been, or is about to be surpassed by, cyber society.

Are we perhaps witnessing not merely new forms of social practice and labour that limit the utility of civil society, as in Gaza, but also the rapid shift from a state-civil society model to an all-pervasive information society? Whether we call it an information society or cyber society, its very possibility underscores the radical technological shifts that envelop both the state and its adjuncts, including civil society, especially but not solely in Western Europe and North America. It was Marshall Hodgson, the major Islamic historian of the 20th century, who warned us in an essay published over 30 years ago (in 1967) that the speed and scope of technicalism would overwhelm not only Orientals but also Occidentals: both the West and the East would be transformed by 'the expectation of continuous innovation' and its (often unintended) consequences.

Among the major respondents to technicalism has been Manuel Castells. A Berkeley urban sociologist, Castells has tried to theorize the unexpected advent of the computer and also to assess its long-term social impact. Looking at what Hodgson termed the latest phase in the cumulative history of the whole Afro-Eurasian Oikumene, Castells calls it the Information Age. Like Hodgson's earlier trilogy, Castells' *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Blackwell's: 1996-98) is at once spatially comprehensive and boldly predictive. Castells traces how computer-driven telecommunications have intensified global interactions at the same

time that they have created innumerable networks which reconfigure indeterminate, atomized groups of individuals into new virtual communities. What is emerging, in his view, is a global network society. The dark side of the Information Age does not escape Castells. He notes how informational politics renders the state less powerful in its supervisory, regulatory and disciplinary functions, and most conservatives would welcome that shift, but informational politics also reduces the protective and redistributive functions of the state, which most liberals would not applaud. Moreover, Castells laments the 'black holes of informational capitalism'. They give rise to social exclusion and the rise of what he terms 'the fourth world'. The radically divided benefits of the Information Age portend a global economy that is at once mercurial and criminal, and its outcome may well be a prolonged experience of the 'New World disorder'.

Central to Castells' argument is the role of world cities, and world cities as the sites of immigrant experience. It is, above all, urban location that defines the current diasporas of the post-Vietnam and now post-Cold War eras, in both North America and Western Europe. Among those refining and developing an urban accent for the immigrant experience in late 20th-century America is the feminist theorist, Saskia Sassen. Her *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (1998) documents the pernicious effect of 'cyber-segmentations' or increasingly disparate and unfair distribution of economic wealth, social benefits and life options. For Sasken globalization is above all the hyperlinkage of global cities through international nodes which constitute a new transterritorial 'centre' of global economic activity. Yet it is difficult to give specificity to particular groups of immigrants, mostly labourers from third world countries, who participate in this system from the margins even while seeking citizenship on new terms. Civil society drops out of the discourse, except insofar as it is inflected through the international human rights agenda, and the specific groups with whom we began this survey only reappear as foreign others – not the domestic others who are both Arab and netizens. Jon Anderson has made a singular effort to address what he calls 'cyberonauts of the Arab Diaspora'. Yet electronic mediation in transnational cultural identities has impacted overseas Arab emigres, exiles, labour migrants, students and new professionals unevenly, yet they are often glossed as global citizens, difficult to analyse socio-economically or to identify with particular cities, whether in Western Europe or North America.

To the extent that the Internet has begun to connect the global with the local, the overseas with the home, we are told that 'the members of Middle East diaspora communities most able to reconnect with the homelands through the Internet are (above all those) engaged in business, at least ini-

tially.' In other words, the commercial classes and those related to them who need commerce-enabling information still have the greatest access to, and use of, the Internet. And so information technologies remain inherently conservative. They reinforce global capitalist structures and asymmetries, as Sasken has demonstrated, and they do not augur a new or revisionist notion of civil society. What we are likely to see as the lure of cyberfantasies expands is the further marginalization of the already marginal.

Euro-American elites, together with their Asian, African, and Arab counterparts, will continue to project interests and promote options via the Net, but most of their energies will be directed to non-political goals; neither a new civil society abroad nor a reconstituted civil society at home is high on their list, and to the extent that the undervalued become less visible as also less empowered, we may well wonder how socially transformative the revolution, which Castells has deemed the biggest since the invention of the Greek alphabet in 700 BCE, will be. Muslims, especially the urban poor in Africa and Asia, will likely be the least of its beneficiaries. ◆

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