



WORLDS

APART

Civil
Society
and the
Battle for
Ethical
Globalization

John D. Clark


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Worlds Apart

*Civil Society
and
The Battle for Ethical Globalization*

JOHN D. CLARK



Worlds Apart: Civil Society and the Battle for Ethical Globalization

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*To Mary, my wife,
who gave me more help, encouragement, and inspiration
than words can tell.
I am eternally indebted.*

Preface

Politicians, economists, business leaders, and right-of-center journalists angrily berate those who protest against globalization for peddling ridiculous notions that are anti-progress, anti-poor, and simply not realistic. I tend to agree. But I wonder how many of them there are. Most of those I have spoken to, the leaders of the main groups opposed to the current order, are not arguing against globalization, but against a way of managing world affairs that puts business before people, trade before development, that is blind to widening gaps in wealth and power, and that ignores today's buildup of environmental and sectarian problems. They are not latter-day Luddites, but people who seek social justice—leaving aside for the present whether or not their ideas would work.

Similarly, those who criticize the status quo often construct a grotesque parody of the policies advanced by international organizations and governments in order to make the task of condemning them easier. Most of these agencies *try* to promote policies that are for the common good, not just for the few—though it isn't always easy to ensure that opportunities are equally taken up, and governments of large countries often have difficulty seeing beyond their frontiers.

Both sides in this debate either don't understand, or won't listen to, what the other is saying. *Worlds Apart* tries to bridge this divide and seeks to be fair to each. It gets behind the polemics to look at the issues through the lens of poor people and poor countries. It is not a search for a middle ground—I am closer to the critics of the present order than its defenders—but a search for an ethical management of world affairs that promotes enterprise and growth, that reduces barriers between peoples and countries, and that ensures everyone shares in these opportunities.

Worlds Apart assesses how citizens' pressure—through a myriad of civil society channels—has shaped the debate about globalization and indeed fundamentally changed the political landscape. But it also looks at how the same forces and opportunities that have changed the worlds of business and economics are also transforming civil society. Organizations that once worked just at the national level are now global in scope, and transnational citizens networks are transforming debate on international issues.

Civil society stands at the cusp of great opportunity, but this could be a brief window. It enjoys unparalleled public trust, global interconnectedness, strong communications skills, and great influence. But its advocacy skills lie largely in pillorying the deficiencies of the “system” rather than promoting viable alternatives. It proves quite easy to reach broad consensus among an array of civil society actors on what is wrong today, but each has his or her own lists of what should be done differently tomorrow. *Worlds Apart* looks at the system’s faults—including the deficiencies in civil society itself—but with a view to suggesting a framework with broad civil society appeal that could transform global relations and redress today’s injustices.

Worlds Apart at times praises civil society pressure yet finds fault with some of its messages; at times it criticizes the big institutions, such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization, and other times defends them. It may, therefore, appear rather schizophrenic—but this speaks to the diverse perspectives my career has given me. I have worked in radical pressure groups and experienced libel writs from transnational corporations. I have managed campaigning and policy-advocacy for Oxfam GB. I have worked alongside Southern NGOs fighting issues of international injustice, but I have also worked nine years in the World Bank (mostly running its NGO and Civil Society Unit), and I have advised governments from both North and South.

Perhaps it is the Gemini in me—but everywhere I have worked I have had colleagues whose perspectives I share or respect (I’m not saying *all* colleagues). I am convinced that these people are all equally committed to fighting poverty and injustice, even if they have radically different ideas about how best to do so. As with looking at a landscape, what you see depends on where you sit. Some vantage points are better to see the far horizon, others to obtain a closeup of the immediate surroundings. One is not necessarily better than the other. In fact, if you truly want to know the terrain, you need to see it from many angles. It is a great shame, therefore, that there are often walls of distrust compartmentalizing people into different disciplines and different institutions. The main thrust of my career over the last twenty years has been to try to break through these divides, and I hope this book proves a contribution to this endeavor. Nothing would please me more than to learn it has encouraged people of good faith from different institutions to understand one another better—to get together, drop the customary defensiveness and aggression, and seek areas of agreement rather than disagreement.

What else did I hope for in writing this book? First, I hope it is of practical help to people who work in civil society organizations; that it gives them a convincing picture of how global changes affect their sector, of the challenges posed and how best to handle them, and of future

opportunities. Second, I hope it is useful for those who are studying or are interested in civil society as a sector and why it has suddenly become so forceful in power and impact. And finally, I hope it is useful for everyone who is horrified by the extent of poverty and inequality in our world and wants to know what ordinary citizens can do about it.

Though much of it is about global processes, this book started for me in a small village I visited many years ago, when working for Oxfam, in the poor tribal belt of Gujarat State, India. Some people worked for forest contractors, and others made incomes gathering spices and other produce from the forest. Although the government set fair prices for the goods they bought *and* sold, the villagers knew that the local trader was cheating them by using two sets of rigged scales—one for sales and one for purchases. The solution was to buy the villagers their own set of scales. A lad would sit near the merchant's shop so that everyone could check the weight of whatever they bought or sold, and when there was an error, the whole community went to demand recompense. The merchant had to give up his trickery. Overnight their real income went up 20 percent. More important was the confidence this ability to seize justice through collective action instilled in the community. Its members went on to join other tribal villages in forming a new trade union of forest workers, and after a long struggle they forced through an increase in their pay.

This is a reference point for me—the scales of justice. It is a parody of the global economic system. On the surface, the rules are fair, but in reality the terms are stacked against the poor. To break through this requires access to critical information, an effective campaign strategy (drawn up with the help of a trustworthy civil society organization) and—most important—the newfound collective action of the poor. Combined, these generate a force that can be turned toward ever-greater challenges. What was true in Gujarat then is true in the wider world today.

STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Part One describes the processes of globalization—how they generate huge new opportunities and why they are controversial (because the benefits are so unequally shared). Chapter 1 is an overview of these themes and how they relate to the rest of the book. Chapter 2 examines the economic issues the sources of inequities—this is the macro-view. Chapter 3 takes a more micro-view, looking at globalization from the perspective of poor people and how it generates widening disparity from the local to the global level. Chapter 4 then looks at global changes in the political realm, the causes of the increasingly apparent

“democracy deficit,” and the important roles that civil society can play in tackling these problems.

Part Two looks at the challenges to civil society in the globalizing world. Chapter 5 describes how the forces that are reshaping the economic and corporate worlds are also changing the citizen’s sector, fostering a new “global civil society.” Chapter 6 then examines the various challenges this brings, why very different organizations are facing remarkably similar problems, and how they are addressing them. The following chapter looks specifically at the international development NGOs, and, in contrast, Chapter 8 examines the vigorous “anti-globalization” protest movement and its related Internet-based mobilizing groups (or “dot-causes”). There is a rapid dynamic in civil society, but what are its prospects? As it becomes more influential, it is experiencing increasingly sharp challenges, both from the establishment outside and from internal conflict. Chapter 9 describes these and discusses how it might stand up to the backlash.

Part Three addresses morals, voice, and responsibility; that is, how governments, international organizations, and corporations could be reformed to assume responsibility for the “global footprint” of their decisions. In particular, it looks at the role of civil society in these reforms. Chapter 10 looks at *processes*—how globalization could be “civilized” by reforms in the governance of the institutions that steer it. The final chapter looks more at *content*—what would the reformed institutions *do*; how could they contribute to a style of development that is fully inclusive and equitable. It sketches a new international moral order—a shift from narrow *economic* to *ethical* globalization.

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Part One

The Impact of Globalization

Globalization—Agony or Ecstasy? Setting the Scene

Today's real borders are not between nations, but between powerful and powerless, free and fettered, privileged and humiliated. Today, no walls can separate humanitarian or human rights crises in one part of the world from national security crises in another. . . . We have entered the Third Millennium through a gate of fire.

—KOFI ANNAN, NOBEL PRIZE SPEECH,
DECEMBER 10, 2001

This book tells the story of globalization. Like others already published, it sees the crumbling of national boundaries today as one of the most powerful geo-political forces of our times. Like others, it finds that these forces have brought new opportunities as well as heightened risks—but that the distribution of these increases inequalities in terms of income, wealth, security, and power. Hence, like other books, it argues that what is needed is not a Canute-like bid to turn back the tide of globalization but a Herculean effort to harness its power for the common good.

From this point, however, it takes a different route. It argues that civil society is emerging as the new critical player. Democracy, as we are familiar with it, has been thrown into turmoil—because globalization affects politics as profoundly as it does economics. This book explores the diverse issues of global change through the lens of poor people and the groups they associate with, and it explains why globalization is so controversial. It describes how civil society organizations from North and South¹ could hold the key to changing its course—insisting that it is managed so as to empower the weak and enrich the poor.

Civil society—the collective activities of citizens for purposes of social change rather than individual gain—is far from homogenous, and not always civil. But paradoxically, the same processes of globalization

that have made many rich and marginalized others, and that are so fiercely resisted by a growing protest movement, also afford civil society opportunities to grow immeasurably in strength.

New technology and communications enable a *global* civil society to emerge. The failure of national governments to wrestle effectively with global challenges has exposed the deficiencies of democracy and created a vacancy for new policy actors. The shabby scandals of corporate greed have dented faith in untrammelled markets and opened opportunities for market curbs, independent watchdogs, and codes of corporate ethics. And the proven ability of civil society to “get it right” so often, both in providing services and in advocating change, has inspired public confidence. Civil society, therefore, stands at the cusp of unprecedented opportunity—but this may be just a brief window. Already a major challenge to civil society has been leveled, questioning the legitimacy of the prominent voices in the policy debate.

Maximizing this opportunity calls for a strong vision and concerted strategy. Civil society will never be unified—its strength lies partly in its diversity—but a critical mass of respected activists, working together and with the confidence of a growing support base, could trigger a chain reaction of reform that defenders of the status quo would find difficult to stop. We are now starting to see such a broad coalition emerge.

Our bipolar world is on a diverging course in two senses. First, the gap between weak and powerful is growing shamefully. And second, the faith binding each school to its opposing philosophy and world view is strengthening such that the space for intelligent dialogue is shrinking. The cheerleaders of globalization and their critics might just as well live on different planets; the rich and poor virtually do so. We are *worlds apart*.

A global civil society coalition—spanning radicals, reformers, academics, activists, faiths, feminists, pressure groups, unions, charities, consumer groups, and others—such a grand coalition could bridge these gaps. It could construct a common ground, combining realism and idealism, that would be compelling to all but entrenched vested interests and the politically comatose; it could generate the political will for a coordinated management of globalization that brings benefits to all; it could create a popular demand for *ethical* globalization.

CONFLICTING WORLD VIEWS

The protagonists of the globalization conflict do not fall neatly into the left-right spectrum. Indeed the political fissure between internationalism and parochialism is to a large extent displacing old left-right