

The Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society

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ABSTRACT: Much of the existing literature on transnational civil society makes two major assumptions: (i) that the present rise of transnational civil society is a novel phenomenon and (ii) that this rise is following an irreversible trajectory. This paper challenges both of these assumptions. It describes how transnational civil society has risen before and subsequently collapsed (in the late nineteenth / early twentieth century and in the interwar years). It also suggests a framework for explaining the rise and fall of transnational civil society, which incorporates not only external conditions but also the characteristics of transnational civil society itself. In showing how the contradictions within transnational civil society have contributed towards its collapse in the past, the paper argues that the rise and fall of transnational civil society is a cyclical phenomenon. The paper concludes by outlining some of the trends that could contribute towards the collapse of contemporary transnational civil society.

Three years before the outbreak of the First World War, a prominent American academic and diplomat, Paul S. Reinsch, claimed that 'the barren ideal of no war, no patriotism, no local interest, has given way to a potent centripetal force...cosmopolitanism is no longer a castle in the air, but it has become incorporated in numerous associations and unions world-wide in their co-operation.'¹ Similarly, in the post-Cold War era, it has become commonplace to argue that 'an answer to war' can be found in what is now termed 'transnational' or even 'global' civil society.² This paper, in its examination of the evolution of transnational civil society, seeks to show that there are reasons to be as cautious about such claims today as a century ago.

¹ Paul S. Reinsch, *Public International Unions: Their Work and Organization: A Study In International Administrative Law* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1911), pp. 2, 4.

² Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

After situating itself in the context of the contemporary literature on ‘transnational civil society,’ this paper will outline what it means by the ‘rise’ and ‘fall’ of transnational civil society, provide a brief description of its evolution since the nineteenth century, propose a framework for explaining this evolution, and show how in the past and in the present transnational civil society can contribute towards its own demise.

The Meaning of ‘Transnational Civil Society’

It is only recently – in the period since the end of the Cold War – that the term ‘transnational civil society’ and the bolder term ‘global civil society’ have entered popular usage in academic literature on international politics. As Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor have argued, the meaning of these terms is ‘subject to widely differing interpretations.’³ Nevertheless, most definitions refer to ‘uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values’⁴ that is non-governmental and not for profit.⁵ Whereas ‘*global civil society*’ involves activities that ‘straddle the whole earth, and...have complex effects that are felt in its four corners,’⁶ the less ambitious concept of ‘*transnational civil society*’ (that is the focus of this paper) refers to non-governmental non-profit collective action that *transcends national boundaries* but does not necessarily have global reach. The key actors in transnational civil society are international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), i.e. international organizations that are neither profit-making nor

³ Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor, ‘Introducing Global Civil Society,’ in Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor (eds.), *Global Civil Society 2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁴ London School of Economics and Political Science Centre for Civil Society, ‘What is Civil Society?’, http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm (last accessed on 15 December 2006).

⁵ Jan Aart Scholte, ‘Global Civil Society: Changing the World?’, CSGR Working Paper No 31/99, May 1999 (Coventry: Centre for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization (CSGR), University of Warwick, 1999), pp. 2-3.

⁶ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 8.

instruments of government,⁷ as well as internationally-orientated national non-governmental organizations.

The Literature on Transnational Civil Society

The literature on transnational civil society has reached considerable proportions,⁸ and it would be wrong to claim that this literature is homogeneous.⁹ However, a number of questionable features are common to much of this literature. One such feature is the claim that transnational civil society is a novel phenomenon: that, for instance, '1989 marked the beginning.'¹⁰ Another feature is the tendency to portray transnational civil society as a highly potent 'third force' in international politics, highlighted in Jessica Tuchman Matthews' claim that 'increasingly, NGOs are able to push around even the largest governments...The steady concentration of power in the hands of states that began in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia is over.'¹¹ Transnational civil society is also frequently portrayed as a progressive force that fills a democratic deficit at the supranational level of world politics: as Jan Aart Scholte has pointed out, with an idealism similar to that present among liberals before the

⁷ Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier, *Defining the Nonprofit Sector: A Cross-National Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997). The original definition of an international non-governmental organization adopted by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations was much broader: 'any international organization which is not established by intergovernmental agreement.'

⁸ For a survey of the literature on transnational civil society, see the annotated bibliography by Yahya A. Dehqanzada in Ann M. Florini (ed.), *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), pp. 241-76. A comprehensive bibliography on transnational civil society is provided in the fourth volume of the *Yearbook of International Organizations* published annually by the Union of International Associations in Brussels.

⁹ Compare, for example, Robert W. Cox's 'Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium: Prospects for an Alternative World Order' (*Review of International Studies*, 25, 1999, pp. 3-28) with David Chandler's 'Building Global Civil Society 'from Below'?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33, 2004, pp. 313-339.

¹⁰ Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*, p. 114. It should be noted that this book contains reference to developments before the 1980s, and that the quotation refers to *global* rather than transnational civil society.

¹¹ Jessica T. Matthews, 'Power Shift: The Rise of Global Civil Society,' *Foreign Affairs*, 76/1 (1997), pp. 50, 53.

Second World War, ‘many [present-day] advocates of progressive social change have...championed the “third sector” as an arena of virtue that overcomes domination in government and exploitation in the market.’¹² In addition, much of the literature on transnational civil society has a highly theoretical focus and contains limited reference to empirical material.¹³

Some of these questionable features of much of the literature on transnational civil society have been effectively addressed in more recent works on the subject. For example, claims in respect of the potency and representativeness of transnational civil society have been successfully challenged by Sandra Halperin and Gordon Laxer.¹⁴ However, other problematic aspects of the existing literature have been less successfully addressed. This is particularly true of the efforts that have been made to challenge the assumption that transnational civil society is a novel phenomenon and to examine the history of it before the end of the Cold War.

One of the key problems with the existing studies of the pre-1989 evolution of transnational civil society is their concentration on nineteenth century examples¹⁵ and/or the period since 1945.¹⁶ Despite the interesting features of transnational civil society in the first half of the twentieth century, this period has received little

¹² Quotation from Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 277, citing David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1990) and Richard A. Falk, *On Humane Governance: Toward a New Global Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

¹³ This is especially true of Michael Walzer (ed.), *Toward A Global Civil Society* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995) and Alejandro Colas, *International Civil Society: Social Movements in World Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Gordon Laxer and Sandra Halperin (eds.), *Global Civil Society and its Limits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

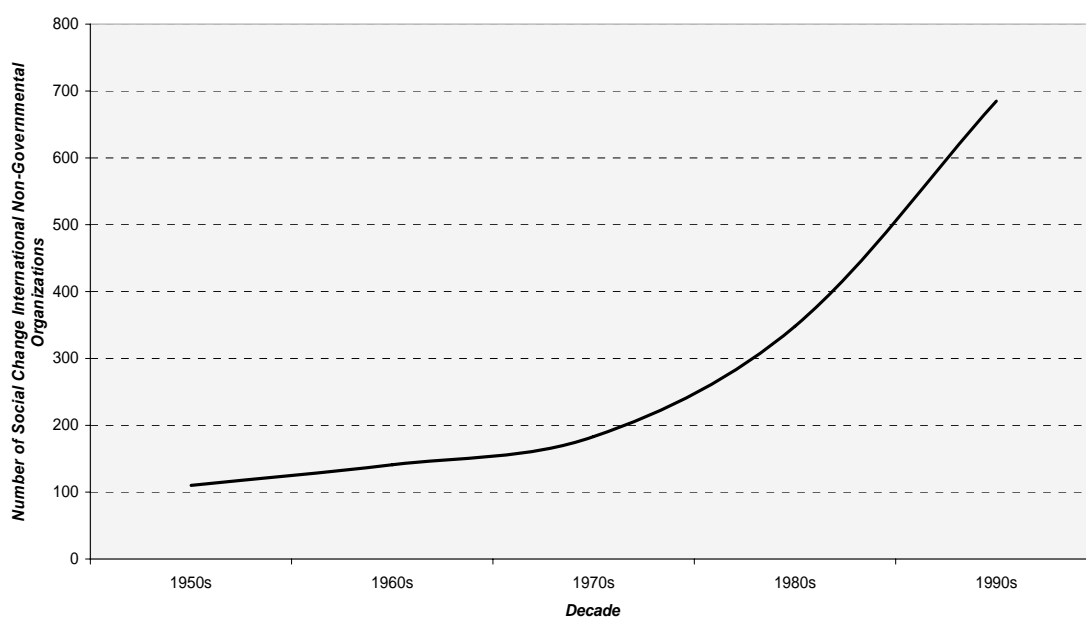
¹⁵ See, for instance, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), ch. 2.

¹⁶ Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) and Kathryn Sikkink and Jackie Smith, ‘Infrastructures for Change: Transnational Organizations, 1953-93’ in Sanjeev Khagram, James Riker and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 24-44 both concentrate on the post-1945 period.

attention.¹⁷ Furthermore, the dominant tendency has been for this literature to portray the evolution of transnational civil society as one of inevitable progress and expansion. Akira Iriye's pioneering study of the history of transnational civil society, for example, seems to describe linear progress towards 'global community.'¹⁸ Such claims are backed up principally by reference to the increasing number of international non-governmental organizations since the Second World War as shown, for example, in the graph below adapted from figures collated by Kathryn Sikkink and Jackie Smith, and in the statistics presented each year in the fifth volume of the Union of International Associations' *Yearbook of International Organizations*. One of the key aims of this paper is to show that this is a misleading picture of how transnational civil society has evolved.

Number of Social Change International Non-Governmental Organizations

Adapted from data provided in Kathryn Sikkink and Jackie Smith, 'Infrastructures for Change: Transnational Organizations, 1953-93,' p. 30



¹⁷ My doctoral thesis, *Transnational Activism and its Limits: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars* (Oxford University DPhil thesis, 2005, in the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the library of the United Nations Office in Geneva) was designed to address this problem by looking at a campaign that mobilized the overwhelming majority of transnational civil society organizations in the period between the two World Wars.

¹⁸ Iriye, *Global Community*, passim.

Describing the Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society

Before this paper proceeds to show how – rather than following a path of linear progress – transnational civil society has both risen and fallen, it is necessary to outline the basis on which this rise and fall can be measured. As Helmut Anheier has stated, the task of measuring transnational civil society is ‘immense’ and arguably almost ‘impossible’ due to the breadth of what could be taken into account.¹⁹

The previous section of this paper indicated that the principal measure that the existing literature has focused on is simply the number of international non-governmental organizations that exist, with the more sophisticated analyses (such as that of Sikkink and Smith) excluding purely functional INGOs and focusing on organizations that are concerned with promoting social change. This form of measurement is a useful starting point, but can be misleading: for instance, a large number of small, inactive and dispute-ridden INGOs could indicate less substantial transnational civil society than a small number of large, active and unified INGOs.

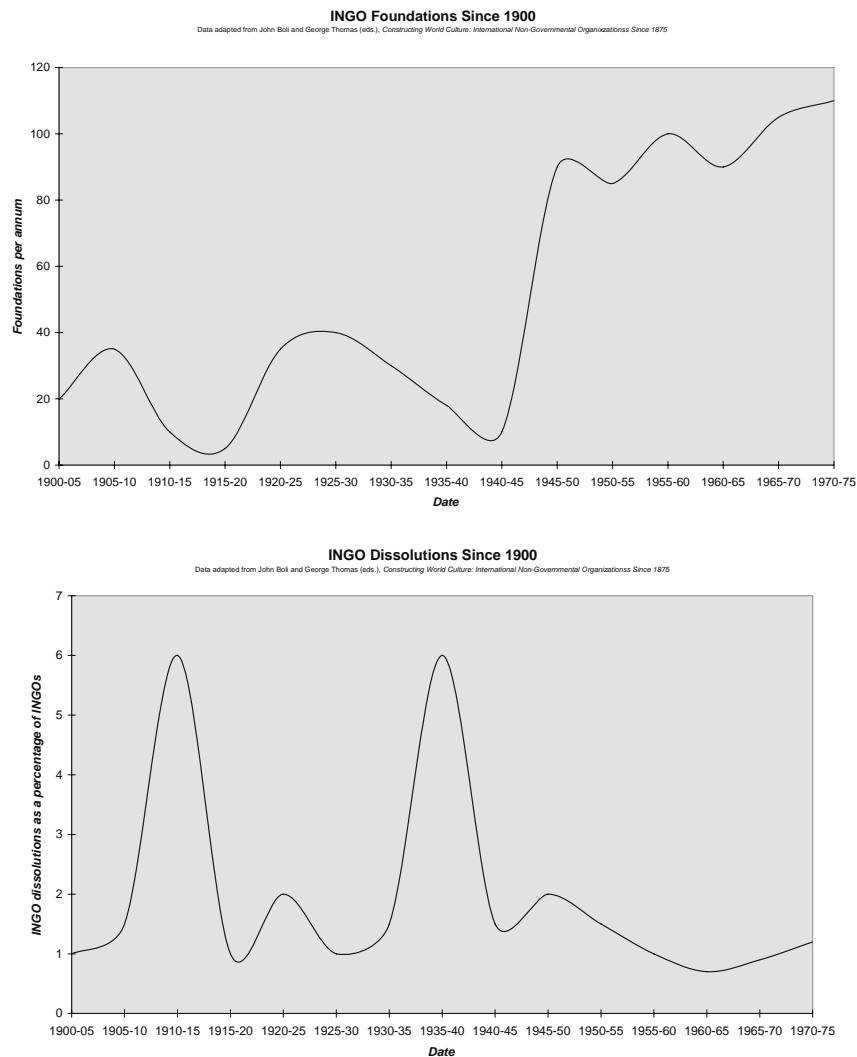
Beyond pointing to the increasing number of international non-governmental organizations, the other way in which the existing literature on transnational civil society has attempted to describe its ‘rise’ is by pointing to the apparent impact of transnational civil society actors on political developments. For instance, the role of these actors in such developments as the signing of the Ottawa Landmines Convention and the collapse of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment has been used to justify claims that in the post-Cold War era transnational civil society has become ‘a superpower.’²⁰ Trying to measure the relative weight of transnational civil

¹⁹ Helmut K. Anheier, *Civil Society: Measurement, Evaluation Policy* (London: Earthscan, 2004), pp. 3, 6.

²⁰ Quotation from the leader of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Jody Williams, cited by Jonathan Schell in ‘The Gift of Time,’ *The Nation*, 9 February 1998.

society as a factor compared with other factors in leading to these developments is a very difficult task, however, as is measuring the relative importance of such developments.

The few authors who have looked beyond these two ways of assessing the development of transnational civil society have provided evidence for a very different picture of this phenomenon's evolution. John Boli and George Thomas, for example, are almost unique in having looked at the evolution of INGO foundations and dissolutions.²¹ As the following two graphs based on their statistics show, the development of transnational civil society in these respects is far from linear progress:



²¹ John Boli and George Thomas, *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

There are further ways of looking at the rise and fall of transnational civil society that have been neglected in nearly all of the existing literature, such as unity and participation rates in transnational campaigns. These will therefore be amongst the material described in the following analysis of how transnational civil society has risen and fallen in the past. There are considerable problems with examining ‘unity’ and ‘participation;’ for instance, ‘unity’ is difficult to quantify and precise data on participation rates in transnational civil society organizations and campaigns is often scarce.²² Nevertheless, unity can be qualitatively described and the data on participation that does exist is worthy of attention, so these will be amongst the material outlined in the coming sections of this paper.²³ This paper will also refer to other important ways of evaluating the scale of transnational civil society, such as geographical reach, and the volume of INGO activities such as conferences, demonstrations and petitions. Given the vastness of the total number of possible measures, what follows is just an attempt at providing a representative sample.²⁴

Explaining the Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society

The next three sections of this paper will not only outline *how* transnational civil society has risen and fallen, they will also suggest reasons *why* this evolution has taken place. A selection of factors that help to explain why transnational civil society may both rise and collapse is provided in the table on the next page of this paper.

²² For instance, data on membership of INGOs is not systematically gathered by the Union of International Associations in its *Yearbooks* which are the principal resource scholars have relied on for data on transnational civil society.

²³ The material that follows is just a small sample of the much larger body of data that will be included in a book on *The Evolution of Transnational Civil Society* that I am currently in the early stages of writing.

²⁴ For a fuller account, please see my forthcoming book on *The Evolution of Transnational Civil Society*.

A Selection of Factors Influencing the Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society (TCS)²⁵

Category	Factor
Scientific/ Technological	New technologies (e.g. telephone, steamship, aeroplane, internet)
	Development of knowledge (e.g. methods of TCS & its opponents)
Economic	Economic growth / interdependence / globalization
	Global economic problems (e.g. North-South inequality, Great Depression)
Environmental	Emergence of transnational environmental issues (e.g. climate change, HIV)
Social	Demographic changes (e.g. urbanization)
	'Global consciousness' / education re. transnational issues
	'Donor fatigue'
External Political	Interstate harmony / peace
	International political divisions / war
	Balance of power
	Transnational political problems
	Rise & decline of nation states
	Evolution & orientation of national NGOs / domestic civil society
	Imperialism & its decline / decolonization
	Development of international governmental organizations
	Evolution of international rules & norms
	Spread of liberal / democratic national political institutions
	Rise & fall of illiberal / undemocratic national political institutions
Internal Political	TCS unity / co-ordination / centralization
	TCS heterogeneity / divisions / decentralization
	Nature of TCS objectives / policy / propaganda
	Accountability, finance & internal governing structures of INGOs
	Achievement of objectives of TCS
	Development of TCS expertise, experience, etc.
	TCS links to governments

This table is intended to be indicative of the factors that help to explain the rise and fall of transnational civil society and is only a starting point for developing a comprehensive set of explanatory factors. The table deliberately avoids making a distinction between factors facilitating rise and factors facilitating decline, since (as the next sections of this paper will show) many of the factors in this table can have both types of effect.

²⁵ Numerous publications influenced the composition of this table; see the books cited in the next three sections of the paper. Amongst the most significant were: Iriye, *Global Community*; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*; Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder, Co: Paradigm Publishers, 2004); Dieter Rucht, 'The Transnationalization of Social Movements: Trends, Causes, Problems' in Donatella della Porta, Hanspeter Kriesi and Dieter Rucht (eds.), *Social Movements in a Globalizing World* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 206-222; Michael Edwards and John Gaventa (eds.), *Global Citizen Action* (London, 2001); Joe Bandy and Jackie Smith (eds.), *Coalitions Across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Ian Clark, *Globalization and Fragmentation: International Relations in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Geir Lundestad, 'Why Does Globalization Encourage Fragmentation?' *International Politics*, 41, 2004, pp. 265-76; and David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

Transnational Civil Society to the First World War

If one focuses on the expansion in the number of international non-governmental organizations in the nineteenth century, which grew with increasing rapidity from the later decades of that century until the outbreak of the First World War, then it would appear that transnational civil society followed a course of linear expansion in this period. According to one estimate, whereas before 1850 fewer than five INGOs had been founded, 32 had been established by 1874 and 466 by 1914.²⁶ An examination of the increasing variety of issue-areas which were the targets of INGOs in this period is indicative of the same trend: these grew to include *inter alia* anti-slavery (the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was established in 1839), temperance (the International Order of Good Templars was founded in 1852), labour rights (the International Workingmen's Association was established in 1864), peace (the International Peace Bureau was created in 1891), and women's suffrage (the International Alliance of Women was formed in 1902).²⁷ There is also a case for arguing that the scale of transnational civil society activities expanded in this period: it has been estimated that whereas in the 1850s there were just 18 meetings of private international associations, there were over two hundred and seventy in the 1880s and nearly a thousand during the first decade of the twentieth century.²⁸ Transnational civil society activities in this period arguably peaked with the co-ordinated

²⁶ Charles Chatfield, 'Intergovernmental and Nongovernmental Associations to 1945' in Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield and Ron Pagnucco (eds.), *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 19.

²⁷ On the activities of these organizations, see F. S. L. Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe, 1815-1914* (Leiden: A.W. Sythoff, 1963) and Arnold Whittick, *Woman Into Citizen* (London: Athenaeum, 1979).

²⁸ Pitman B. Potter, *An Introduction to the Study of International Organization* (New York: The Century Co., 1922), p. 290.

transnational lobbying that took place during the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907.²⁹

The explanations that have been put forward for this rise include many of the factors listed in the table on the ninth page of this paper. For example, just as developments in communications and technology such as the internet are said to be facilitating the expansion of transnational civil society now, over the course of the nineteenth century the growth of railways, steamship travel, and communication by telephone and telegraph had a similar effect then.³⁰ Developments such as these also facilitated economic globalization and interdependence, which on some measures reached levels that arguably have never been matched since.³¹ Together these contributed towards the emergence of what Akira Iriye has termed 'global consciousness.'³² As Paul Reinsch argued in 1911:

The most important fact of which we have become conscious in our generation is that the unity of the world is real. The most remote regions are being made accessible. The great economic and financial system by which the resources of the Earth are being developed is centralized. The psychological unity of the world is being prepared by the service of news and printed discussions, by which in the space of one day or week the same events are reported to all the readers from Buenos Aires to Tokyo, from Cape Town to San Francisco. The same political dramas evoke our interest, the same catastrophes compel our sympathy, the same scientific achievements make us rejoice, the same great public figures people our imagination. That such a unity of thought and feeling is drawing after it a unity of action is plainly apparent. Our destiny is a common one.³³

Political developments were also very important in facilitating the development of transnational civil society in this period. For example, intergovernmental activities including major international conferences (such as those

²⁹ Merze Tate, *The Disarmament Illusion: The Movement for a Limitation of Armaments to 1907* (New York: Macmillan, 1942).

³⁰ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 45.

³¹ See Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1996).

³² Tilly, *Social Movements*, p. 99; Iriye, *Global Community*, p. 9.

³³ Reinsch, *Public International Unions*, p. 3.

held in Berlin in 1878 and the Hague in 1899 and 1907) and the establishment of the first ‘public international unions’ provided fora for transnational non-governmental groups to target. Other political developments were also critical: the consolidation of the nation state in Europe, for instance, provided the rule of law and (together with social changes within each state such as urbanization) helped make possible the development of domestic associational activity which in turn forged cross-border links to create transnational civil society. Imperialism, too, with its effect of opening up new frontiers and its accompanying missionary activity also boosted internationally-orientated civic activism.³⁴

However, the picture thus far presented of continuous progress driven by the aforementioned variety of factors is a misleading one. Even within this period transnational civil society arguably developed not in a linear path but in waves. For example, whereas a focus on the number of INGOs in existence in the early and mid-nineteenth century would suggest that the scale of transnational civil society was insubstantial at that time, an examination of the volume of *politically significant* cross-border associational activity in this period suggests that there was a peak of such activity – especially in the form of the anti-slavery movement – that was arguably subsequently unmatched until the Hague Conferences. Although there was arguably only one major international non-governmental organization for the abolition of slavery (the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society), the volume of cross-border associational activity for this cause was considerable: as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have argued, a substantial transnational network ‘served as a vehicle for diffusing tactical recipes and collective action repertoires...[and]...succeeded first in helping create abolition as a pressing political

³⁴ Keane, *Global Civil Society?*, p. 47.

issue in the United States, and then, when the issue ultimately contributed to war, became a critical factor in preventing British recognition of the South.³⁵ This apparent success in achievement of objectives provided a precedent that was subsequently emulated by later transnational campaigns such as the women's suffrage movement. However, success in achievement of its objectives (and thereby rendering itself redundant) is also one of the simplest reasons why transnational civil society may decline, at least temporarily, rather than follow a path of inexorable progress.

Further evidence for the argument that transnational civil society evolves in waves is provided by the last phase of the period currently under consideration. As the graphs on the seventh page of this paper show, there was a significant decline in the number of INGO foundations and a substantial increase in INGO dissolutions at the onset of the First World War. The volume of transnational non-governmental meetings also declined.³⁶

Many of the factors that help to explain this decline are the same as those used earlier to explain the ascendance of transnational civil society. The rise of the nation-state, for instance, not only provided the context within which domestic civil society could flourish: it also provided a foundation for nationalism. Imperialism, too, acted as a centrifugal force; and the technological advances that had previously facilitated transnational co-operation acted to inhibit transnational civil society when used for the purposes of war.³⁷

Most interesting is the role of transnational civil society itself in contributing towards its own decline in this period. As the pre-eminent scholar of European internationalism in the period from 1815 to 1914 F.S.L. Lyons has argued, the leaders

³⁵ Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, pp. 45, 51.

³⁶ Potter, *Introduction to the Study of International Organization*, p. 290.

³⁷ Clark, *Globalization and Fragmentation*, pp. 47-8.

of transnational civil society in this period ‘fell into the mistake of assuming that they were living in a rational world...

Even as late as June 1914 the directing body of the Union of International Associations – to which most of the large and influential unofficial organizations belonged – were looking forward to two great events which almost entirely filled their horizon, the Third Peace Conference at the Hague and the Third World Congress of the Union of International Associations at San Francisco, both of which were due to be held in 1915. This, we may concede, argues a wonderful and touching faith in human nature, but it also reveals a remoteness from reality which is almost inexplicable in view of what we know to have been the state of Europe at that time.³⁸

Michael Howard, in his classic work on *War and the Liberal Conscience*, goes further:

hypnotised by the apparent transformation of warmongering capitalists into a strong force for peace, liberals and socialists in 1914 underestimated the true dangers: those arising from forces inherent in the states-system of the balance of power which they had for so long denounced, and those new forces of militant nationalism which they themselves had done so much to encourage. It was these which combined to destroy the transnational community they had laboured to create...³⁹

Transnational Civil Society from the First World War to the Second

Adding weight to the argument that the evolution of transnational civil society is cyclical is the fact that although the First World War provided the catalyst for the collapse of many of the most significant elements of pre-war transnational society, it was also the spark for creation of a new and arguably more substantial generation of transnational non-governmental bodies. For instance in the case of the peace movement, although the Great War sent the ageing International Peace Bureau into decline, a new transnational movement of societies for the promotion of the League of

³⁸ Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe*, p. 369.

³⁹ Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 72.

Nations was brought into existence, with the brutality of the War a key reason for their sometimes considerable membership.⁴⁰ The War also sparked the creation of new types of transnational civil society organizations such as the Interallied Federation of Ex-Servicemen.

The post-First World War organizations were larger and more ambitious than their pre-War predecessors. As the pioneering student of international non-governmental organizations Lyman Cromwell White argued:

Before World War I, international non-governmental organization was still in its infancy. Compared with the work of the post-war period, it was visionary rather than practical; it existed more for the sake of being international than for the sake of getting something accomplished; debate rather than action was the rule; and consequently in the pre-1914 period the organizations on the whole exerted less influence than they did after 1919. Likewise, the structure of these groups was not as highly developed as that of their post-war counterparts. They were willing to get along with little in the way of permanent headquarters and few of them saw the need of setting up permanent committees for continuous study.⁴¹

The expansion of transnational civil society after the First World War is evident in several ways. For instance, the number of international non-governmental organizations founded in the 1920s was twice the number founded in the entire nineteenth century, and by 1934 the total number of INGO foundations had reached 941.⁴² The breadth of transnational civil society expanded, too: for example, a new international organization explicitly devoted to human rights was founded in 1922: the International League for the Rights of Man; and new humanitarian assistance organizations were created, such as the Save the Children International Union, established in 1920. Many INGOs acquired considerable mass memberships in this

⁴⁰ The British League of Nations Union, for instance, claimed to have a membership of more than a million people at its peak. On the transnational movement for the League of Nations, see Thomas Richard Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnationalism: The International Federation of League of Nations Societies and the International Peace Campaign, 1919-1939* (M.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2002), Part One.

⁴¹ Lyman Cromwell White, *International Non-Governmental Organizations: Their Purposes, Methods and Accomplishments* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 5.

⁴² G. P. Speeckaert, *Les 1978 Organisations Internationales Fondées depuis le Congrès de Vienne* (Brussels: Union of International Associations, 1957), p. viii.

period: for instance, two of the principal new INGOs founded after World War I, the Interallied Federation of Ex-Servicemen and the International Federation of Trade Unions, had memberships of eight million and twenty million respectively. At the beginning of this period there is also considerable evidence for the impact of transnational civil society campaigns on major political developments such as women's suffrage and the establishment of the League of Nations.⁴³ Individual leaders of international non-governmental organizations were also influential in the key diplomatic developments of the 1920s: for instance Charles Dawes of the International Chamber of Commerce was partly responsible for what have been termed 'the first "real" peace settlements after the First World War.'⁴⁴

The scale of transnational mobilization that became achievable in this period is particularly well illustrated by the campaign for disarmament that took place in the 1920s and early 1930s.⁴⁵ This campaign mobilized a uniquely broad spectrum of civil society groups (from Rotary International to the Communist International!), including the world's principal labour, humanitarian, religious, students, women's and peace organizations of the period. The campaign peaked during the World Disarmament Conference convened by the League of Nations in 1932-3. International non-governmental organizations with a combined membership estimated to have been between two hundred million and a billion co-operated to promote disarmament at a special session that opened this conference.⁴⁶ Several transnational organizations to

⁴³ On the impact of the transnational dimension of the women's suffrage movement, see Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, pp. 51-8. On the impact of the transnational movement for the creation of a League of Nations, see Peter Munch (ed.), *Les origines et l'oeuvre de la Société des Nations* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1923-4) and Laurence Martin, *Peace Without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the British Liberals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

⁴⁴ Patrick O'Coehrs, 'The first "Real" Peace Settlements after the First World War', *Contemporary European History*, 12,1 (2003).

⁴⁵ For full details of this campaign, see my doctoral thesis, *Transnational Activism and its Limits*.

⁴⁶ The higher estimate can be found in Philip Noel-Baker, *The First World Disarmament Conference, 1932-1934, And Why It Failed* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), pp. 73-4. The lower estimate is the most realistic: this is the estimate of the Vox Populi Committee in *Vox Populi* (Geneva: Vox Populi

co-ordinate the disarmament work of numerous INGOs were established, such as the Disarmament Committee of Women's International Organizations (which had a combined membership of 45 million) and the International Consultative Group for Peace and Disarmament (which had a combined membership of a hundred million, and included representatives of all the leading women's, peace, religious, humanitarian, students' and ex-servicemen's INGOs of the period).⁴⁷ The scale of the activities that these organizations undertook is illustrated by the disarmament petition circulated by women's international organizations from 1930 to 1932: with over twelve million signatures this remains 'the biggest international petition there has ever been' in terms of the proportion of the world's population that signed it.⁴⁸

Transnational activism on this scale was facilitated by many of the factors listed in the table on page 9 of this paper. Technological developments, for instance, were important in enabling instantaneous cross-border communication, with the first radio news broadcasts and the first commercial transatlantic telephone calls being made in the 1920s. Post-war economic recovery (facilitated by international lending) and continued social trends such as urbanization also played a role. As for 'internal political' factors, the apparent success of movements such as for women's votes and creation of the League of Nations ensured that the idea that civil society actors could have a significant impact internationally gained popularity, and the post-war structural changes to INGOs and their increasing concern with promotion of political change (as

Committee, 1932), p. 15. The membership of the constituent bodies of the International Consultative Group was 100 million, plus 70 million families in the International Co-operative Alliance, plus 25 million people in the International Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, and 21,500,000 workers represented by the Labour and Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions. The estimate of the Vox Populi Committee allows for an overlap of 16.5 million people in the memberships of these organizations, but the actual overlap may have been greater.

⁴⁷ Vox Populi Committee, *Vox Populi*, pp. 77-84.

⁴⁸ Noel-Baker, *First World Disarmament Conference*, p. 68. The Jubilee 2000 petition acquired twice as many signatures as the women's disarmament petition, and the 'Live 8 List' acquired 2½ times as many names, but world population had tripled between 1932 and 2000.

highlighted in White's quotation on page 15) improved the means for the realization of this idea.

Several 'external political' factors were particularly significant in assisting the growth of transnational civil society in this period. The role of the First World War has already been touched upon: its brutal consequences provided a need for the creation of humanitarian and ex-servicemen's organizations, while the wish for prevention of recurrence of such a conflict revitalized the peace and disarmament movement. The First World War also increased awareness of humanity's common fate and accelerated significant socio-political changes, especially in respect of the role of women in economic and political affairs: as one feminist pamphlet published in 1915 argued, an increased role for 'woman' in political life was significant because 'she has neither part nor share in the slaughter of humanity, and *she* may speak where *man* dare not...woman, because to her has fallen the task of bringing into the world those human souls and bodies which in war are but food for cannon, is able to realize what man is not able.'⁴⁹

After the First World War there was greater idealism in national political affairs than there had been before the conflict, with the success of communist revolutionaries in Russia and the establishment of democratic institutions in the countries of the former empires of central Europe: this, too, provided a favourable context for the growth of transnational civil society. Also very important was the role of the post-war peace settlement, which contained elements based on Wilsonian ideals, especially the creation of the League of Nations. This organization assisted INGOs in many ways: it published data on their activities in a quarterly bulletin and

⁴⁹ Anonymous pamphlet entitled *Militarism versus Feminism: An Enquiry and a Policy Demonstrating that Militarism Involves the Subjection of Women* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915), quoted in Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 100.

in a *Handbook of International Organizations*; it sent representatives to observe INGO gatherings; it gave INGOs the opportunity to participate in League of Nations meetings and to address special sessions of League of Nations conferences; and it printed the petitions of INGOs in its official publications.⁵⁰

From 1933 onwards, however, transnational civil society again began to decline. The Great Depression was responsible for a dramatic reduction in INGO revenues, and many organizations had to cut back on their conferences, publications and other activities. Although the rise of far right regimes in some countries provided a strong reason for anti-fascist campaigners elsewhere to increase their activities, in countries such as Germany, Japan, Austria, Italy, Spain and Portugal many social change INGOs were forced to close their branches.⁵¹ INGO membership consequently declined, and by the second half of the 1930s the rate of INGO foundations was about half that of the late 1920s, a rate that halved again with the onset of the Second World War.⁵² With the spectacular failure of large-scale transnational activism at the World Disarmament Conference (which collapsed in 1933), INGO influence in world political affairs was also diminished.

Central to explaining this decline are three significant developments: the Great Depression, the rise of fascist governments, and the onset of the Second World War. Factors that had previously contributed towards the rise of transnational civil society were important in precipitating each of these developments. For instance, the unsustainable lending of the 1920s that had previously facilitated economic revival (and thereby ensured considerable revenues for INGOs) had the opposite effect when this lending was withdrawn. Similarly, while democratization in countries including

⁵⁰ Steve Charnovitz, 'Two Centuries of Participation: NGOs and International Governance,' *Michigan Journal of International Law* (18/2, Winter 1997), pp. 220-37.

⁵¹ White, *International Non-Governmental Organizations*, p. 6.

⁵² Speeckaert, *Les 1978 Organisations Internationales*, p. viii.

Germany had previously enabled civil society actors to flourish, the flaws in the democratization process provided an easy path for anti-democratic forces such as the National Socialists to seize power. In addition, the idealistic elements of the post-war peace settlements not only provided a rationale for transnational civil society activities: they also acted in a dangerously conflictual manner with the power-political aspects of the settlements [for instance, the conflict between assertion of the principle of national self-determination and prohibition of German-Austrian union]. The League of Nations, too, in its attempt to implement collective security in respect of Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, disrupted efforts effectively to balance the growing power of Nazi Germany: a key moment in what Michael Howard has called the 'melancholy story of the efforts of good men to abolish war but only succeeding to make it more terrible.'⁵³

As with the decline of transnational civil society at the onset of the First World War, the role of transnational civil society itself in contributing towards its own demise in the 1930s is highly significant. The transnational disarmament campaign described in pages 16 to 17, for instance, may not have succeeded in its objective of a convention for general and comprehensive disarmament, but it was substantial enough in scale to influence the policies of major powers in significant ways. As Martin Ceadel has argued, governments 'allowed inflated hopes about disarmament to develop, and risked being blamed when they were not achieved.'⁵⁴ Thus when in 1932 the last moderate German leaders of the interwar era put forward plans for modest rearmament, these were neglected by the other major countries (a decision that undermined the position of these leaders in Germany); and after Hitler's subsequent rise to power the persistence of pro-disarmament feeling in other countries

⁵³ Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 280.

was sufficiently extensive to inhibit the drive to rearm against the expansionist threat: as Churchill argued, disarmament activism in the remaining liberal countries had made them 'an easy prey' in the run-up to the Second World War.⁵⁵

Transnational Civil Society since World War Two

The apparent recovery of transnational civil society since the Second World War has received considerable attention in the existing literature, so a brief summary of its principal features will suffice here. As the advocates of transnational civil society have been keen to stress, it cannot be doubted that the number of INGOs in world politics has expanded remarkably since 1945, with an estimated 13,000 having been established by the turn of the millennium.⁵⁶ Within this figure, the number of *social change* INGOs has grown from 110 in 1953 to 685 in 1993 according to Sikkink and Smith.⁵⁷ In addition, decolonization in the period since the Second World War has enabled expansion of the geographical spread of transnational civil society: whereas before World War Two four fifths of INGO headquarters were in Europe, in the post-Cold War era that figure has been reduced to three fifths. The breadth of INGO activities has also expanded, with the emergence of the transnational environmentalist movement from the late 1960s and the rapid growth of the development aid sector from the 1980s onwards.⁵⁸ The influence of INGOs in world politics recovered

⁵⁵ For details of the impact of the disarmament movement during the World Disarmament Conference, see my doctoral thesis, *Transnational Activism and its Limits*. For an account of the missed opportunities of 1932, see A. C. Temperley, *The Whispering Gallery of Europe* (London: Collins, 1938). For the argument that disarmament activism contributed to slowness in anti-fascist rearmament, see Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 5 (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 696, and Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, pp 324, 347.

⁵⁶ Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor, 'Introducing Global Civil Society,' p. 4.

⁵⁷ See the chart on page 5 and Sikkink and Smith, 'Infrastructures for Change,' p. 30.

⁵⁸ Sanjeev Khagram and Sarah Alvord, 'The Rise of Civic Transnationalism' in Srilatha Batiwala and L David Brown (eds.), *Transnational Civil Society: An Introduction* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2006), p. 67.

towards the end of the Second World War, too, when it contributed to the founding of the United Nations⁵⁹ and played a role in post-war reconstruction.⁶⁰ Although the constraints of the Cold War subsequently limited INGO impact in international affairs, that period saw successes such as in the case of the European federalist movement; and the post-Cold War era has witnessed several influential transnational civil society campaigns such as for the banning of landmines, for debt reduction (Jubilee 2000), and against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment.⁶¹

As with the previous phases of growth, the recovery of transnational civil society in the post-World War Two period has been facilitated by a range of factors highlighted in the table on page 9. For instance, technological innovations such as jet aeroplane travel and more recently e-mail and the internet have expanded the possibilities for cross-border activity, as has the declining cost of all forms of transnational communication. In the economic sphere, post-war reconstruction and post-Cold War economic globalization have also been important, as has the rise of transnational business enterprises which have provided a target additional to governmental and intergovernmental actors for transnational activists to aim at.⁶² As for political developments, significant examples from the start of this period include the end of the Second World War (which generated issues for civil society actors to tackle, such as the need for a peace settlement and for solutions to the economic and social dislocation caused by the conflict) and the foundation of the United Nations (which, like the League of Nations, was to work closely with INGOs and granted

⁵⁹ On the role of transnational civil society in the origins of the United Nations, see Dorothy Robins, *Experiment in Democracy: The Story of U.S. Citizen Organizations in Forging the Charter of the United Nations* (New York: Parkside, 1971) and Clark Eichelberger, *Organizing for Peace: A Personal History of the Founding of the United Nations* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

⁶⁰ On the role of transnational civil society in post-war reconstruction see Iriye, *Global Community*, ch. 2.

⁶¹ Khagram and Alvord, 'The Rise of Civic Transnationalism,' p. 67.

⁶² On transnational activism beyond the state and against multinational enterprises, see Paul Wapner, 'Politics beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics,' *World Politics*, 47, April 1995, pp. 311-40.

many of them 'consultative status'). A significant later political development is decolonization, which facilitated the growth of domestic civil society in formerly suppressed parts of the world and which brought to the fore 'Third World issues' such as economic development that external NGOs have sought to tackle. Other important issues that have emerged in the post-war era include climate change, HIV and increasing migration flows, which governments are unable to tackle on their own and which transnational non-governmental organizations have made a focus of their activities. The spread of democratic institutions to all regions of the world in the post-war era has also been important, especially in facilitating the growth and influence of civil society within states. Even the Cold War arguably helped transnational civil society, by contributing towards the 'long peace' after 1945 and by creating global challenges such as the threat of nuclear annihilation.⁶³ Conversely, the end of Cold War is said to have been the critical event in facilitating the accelerated growth of transnational civil society in the last two decades.⁶⁴

It should be noted that - just as in the period leading up to the First World War - transnational civil society activities in the post-Second World War era have arguably developed in waves, with periods of particularly concentrated activity such as in the years 1945, 1968 and 1989.⁶⁵ [Unfortunately due to the space limitations of this paper it is not possible to explore these waves in depth here.]

More importantly, and contrary to conventional opinion, it can be argued that in some respects transnational civil society has failed fully to recover from the mid-century shocks of the Great Depression, Second World War and Cold War. By many accounts transnational civil society in the last couple of decades has reached

⁶³ Iriye, *Global Community*, p. 38.

⁶⁴ Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*, p. 114.

⁶⁵ On these peak periods, see Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kelly (eds.), *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

proportions that 'did not seem imaginable prior to the end of the Cold War.'⁶⁶ But a closer scrutiny of some of the evidence that has been used to back up this claim reveals that in certain ways (especially participation and impact) transnational civil society still needs to develop considerably to regain the position it has reached in the past.

For instance, the ability of the Jubilee 2000 campaign to gather 24 million signatures to its anti-debt petition, the collaboration of organizations with a combined membership of 150 million in the Global Call to Action against Poverty, and the involvement of diverse organizations in the World Social Forum might all be used as evidence for considerable *participation* in recent transnational civil society initiatives. But arguably a greater proportion of the world's population and a broader range of transnational social movement organizations participated in the petitions and organizations promoting disarmament in the early 1930s.⁶⁷

Similarly, claims about the *impact* of transnational civil society in recent years tend to be supported with reference to its contribution to developments such as the 1992 Rio Earth Summit agreements, the 1997 Ottawa landmines convention, limited debt reduction initiatives, and the collapse of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998 and of the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle in 1999. In comparison with earlier cases of transnational civil society influence, such as in promoting slavery's abolition, women's enfranchisement, and the creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations, these apparent achievements seem small, indeed. The only claim to recent significance that can better these is the one made by

⁶⁶ Khagram and Alvord, 'The Rise of Civic Transnationalism,' p. 67.

⁶⁷ Compare the statistics on pages 16-17 with those mentioned here. The World Social Forum, despite containing major INGOs such as Oxfam and Greenpeace in its International Council, remains dominated by organizations of the Latin American left and its International Council does not contain anything approaching the breadth of membership of the International Consultative Group for Peace and Disarmament in terms of the variety of sectors of associational activity represented.

Matthew Evangelista that transnational peace organizations ‘contributed to...the end of the Cold War.’⁶⁸ This particular claim is especially dubious: if the movements Evangelista describes had not existed, the sequence of events in the late 1980s is very likely to have taken largely the same course;⁶⁹ without the movements suggesting the creation of a League of Nations during the First World War, on the other hand, that institution is very unlikely to have been established.

There are further ways in which contemporary transnational civil society is arguably inferior to its predecessors. For instance, some elements of transnational civil society have suffered splits from which they have been unable to recover: one of the foremost examples of this is the splintering of the international trade union movement that was a consequence of the onset of the Cold War. To this day, the international trade union movement remains divided between the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the World Federation of Trade Unions when previously it had been united in the International Federation of Trade Unions. The trade union movement also exhibits another trend that is common to many formerly significant transnational movements: declining membership. As a recent ILO report stated, ‘workers’ organizations are experiencing serious difficulties almost everywhere and are losing members.’⁷⁰ Other movements that are weak in comparison with their historical predecessors include those for peace, temperance, and Esperanto.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Quotation from Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 280; the argument is most fully outlined in Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁶⁹ It should be noted that the *national* movements in Eastern Europe for liberation of their respective countries did play a critical role in 1989, but these are not the focus of Evangelista’s argument.

⁷⁰ Mark Anner, ‘The Paradox of Labour Transnationalism: Northern and Southern Trade Unions and the Campaign for Labour Standards in the WTO,’ paper presented at the 2001 American Political Science Association meeting, p. 1.

⁷¹ Sikkink and Smith, ‘Infrastructures for Change,’ p. 34.

A very important development in civil society within some countries has been noted by Robert Putnam in his classic work on *Bowling Alone*: a remarkable decline in domestic associational activity.⁷² This has vitally important repercussions for transnational civil society, for the overwhelming majority of transnational social movement organizations consist of *international federations of national* groups, yet few existing authors on transnational civil society have been prepared to acknowledge these repercussions.

Authors such as Theda Skocpol have noted that within some countries ‘between the 1970s and the 1990s older voluntary membership federations rapidly dwindled, while new social movements and professionally managed civic organizations took to the field in huge numbers.’⁷³ This has also been evident at the transnational level, with the decline of mass-membership INGOs (such as in the labour movement mentioned on the previous page) and the rise of centrally managed low-membership INGOs such as Greenpeace.⁷⁴ Those who regularly donate to organizations such as Greenpeace are often called ‘supporters’ rather than ‘members,’ since they tend to be given little role in the policymaking of these organizations, which are often run by a self-selecting clique of activists. David Chandler has therefore argued that ‘the new breed of post-modern activist is more concerned to act as a moral individual than to engage in collective political action.’⁷⁵

Given the material discussed in the last three paragraphs, some of the evidence used earlier to justify the argument that transnational civil society is expanding in the

⁷² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁷³ Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civil Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), p. 219.

⁷⁴ For example whereas the ICFTU and WFTU both have over a hundred million members, Greenpeace has only about three million ‘supporters.’

⁷⁵ David Chandler, ‘Building Global Civil Society “From Below”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33/2, 2004, p. 337.

post-Cold War world looks much less convincing. For instance, the frequently quoted figures in respect of the increasing *number* of international non-governmental organizations may indicate not so much the expansion of transnational civil society as its fragmentation into numerous low-membership organizations in place of a few, unified, mass-membership groups. One way in which fragmentation of transnational civil society is evident is in the growth of regional international non-governmental organizations, whereas before the Second World War the great majority of INGOs were universal (at least in intention, although their memberships were usually concentrated in Europe).

Even if the argument that transnational civil society has reached new heights in the post-Cold War era is accepted, there are a number of external circumstances that could contribute to it collapsing again, just as it had in 1914 and in the 1930s. As in the earlier periods, many of the factors that have arguably contributed towards transnational civil society's post-World War Two revival may also have the reverse effect. For instance, decolonization has not only provided the opportunity for transnational civil society to spread all over the world, in so doing it has also stimulated the creation of transnational associational organizations at a purely regional level and enabled the perception of a North-South divide. Another development – the growth of national civil society in parts of the world where it was previously insignificant – not only provides the building blocks for transnational associational activity in these places, it may also contribute towards nationalism, just as it had in Europe in the nineteenth century.

Nationalism in some countries today may be far more powerful than transnational civil society: for instance, whereas the global efforts of the Jubilee 2000 coalition succeeded in acquiring just 24 million signatures to its anti-debt petition (an

achievement that put it in the *Guinness Book of Records*), the names of 44 million people were obtained for a Chinese petition opposing Japan's membership of the Security Council in 2005. It is possible to argue that a similar situation may exist today to the situation in the 1930s, when nationalism in Germany and Japan and the isolation of these countries from transnational civil society undermined that phenomenon. Today, nationalism in China and Islamic fundamentalism in much of the Arab world is combined with the relative absence of liberal internationalist civic activity in both of these places, and this may pose a considerable threat to contemporary transnational civil society.

Amongst the key factors cited as contributing towards the apparent growth of transnational civil society in the post-Cold War era are progress in transnational communications and economic globalization. These, too, can also have the reverse effect on transnational civil society. As Geir Lundestad has argued, globalization and fragmentation 'exist in a dialectical relationship with each other...when globalization is strengthened, so is fragmentation.'⁷⁶ Thus, arguably, the growth of transnational communications technology and transport has, by bringing different peoples into closer contact with one another, made them also more aware of their differences. And economic globalization – with its negative consequences for those unable effectively to compete in the world economy – has provoked nationalistic reactions. The growth of xenophobic anti-immigration movements in European countries, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements further afield, need to be understood in this context. As was noted in the previous paragraph, growing nationalist and fragmentary forces such as these have considerable potential to undermine transnational civil society.

⁷⁶ Lundestad, 'Why does Globalization Encourage Fragmentation?', p. 1.

More interestingly, transnational civil society itself may, as it has done before, contribute towards its own demise. Although they have not discussed the potential for contributing towards the demise of transnational civil society, a minority of authors on this phenomenon – notably Michael Shaw-Bond⁷⁷ – have pointed out that transnational civil society has a number of significant problems in its contemporary form. One problem according to Jan Aart Scholte is that transnational civil society contains elements that ‘actively seek to undermine human well-being and social justice...various groups of racists, ultra-nationalists and fundamentalists have used global communications to preach intolerance and violence,’⁷⁸ thereby undermining the more liberal elements of transnational civil society. These illiberal elements can be dismissed as being ‘uncivil’ rather than civil society actors. However, it is important to note that the growth of xenophobic and fundamentalist groups is arguably partly a defensive reaction to a perceived threat to local cultures and values posed by the apparently ‘Western’ ideals promoted by many of the predominant liberal elements of contemporary transnational civil society. INGOs that focus on the civic and political rights of individuals, which arguably conflict with possibly more communitarian ‘Asian values,’ may be especially likely to provoke such a reaction.

This ideational clash is exacerbated by a number of further problematic features of transnational civil society, such as the tendency for INGOs to be ‘unelected and accountable only to their funders,’ who are located primarily in the rich nations.⁷⁹ This problem is particularly significant in the case of humanitarian assistance organizations, where there is a very clear social divide between those on

⁷⁷ Michael Shaw-Bond, ‘The Backlash Against NGOs,’ *Prospect Magazine*, issue 51, April 2000, downloaded from <http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id=7173> on 18 March 2006.

⁷⁸ Scholte, ‘Global Civil Society,’ p. 29.

⁷⁹ Laxer and Halperin, *Global Civil Society and its Limits*, p. 10, citing James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, *Globalization Unmasked: Imperialism in the 21st Century* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 2001).

whom the organizations depend for funding and those whom the organizations claim to serve. International non-governmental organizations concerned with aid distribution have also been susceptible to accusations of being more expensive and less effective than local actors in performing the same tasks:⁸⁰ resentment of better-paid foreigners performing tasks local actors can do more cheaply and more effectively is therefore another factor that can provide fuel for the nationalistic reactions described in the previous paragraph. Problems such as the lack of internal democracy within many INGOs may also contribute towards the collapse of such organizations if they lead to alienation of their members or if they lead to bureaucratic inertia.⁸¹

In addition to the problems mentioned so far, aspects of contemporary transnational civil society that on first impression appear to give grounds for optimism may also be a cause for concern. For instance, as was described on pages 26-27, the unprecedentedly large number of INGOs in existence today may be indicative of an increasingly fragmentary, disunited transnational civil society.⁸² This can lead to many problems, such as difficulties in co-ordination when working for a common cause, tensions over how to achieve common objectives, clashes over objectives, and competition for limited resources. Potential problems such as these have already led

⁸⁰ Abebayo Adedeji, Reginald Green & Abdou Janha Pay, *Productivity and Public Service: Priorities for Recovery in Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: UNICEF & UNDP, 1995).

⁸¹ Rucht, 'Transnationalization of Social Movements,' p. 218 and Scholte, 'Global Civil Society,' p. 30.

⁸² The arguably relatively fragmentary nature of contemporary transnational civil society in comparison with its historical precursors is evident in the differences between the centralized transnational structure of the International Consultative Group for Peace and Disarmament and the highly decentralized nature of the World Social Forum. The World Social Forum's International Council is a weak institution that has shied away from issuing declarations and has relied largely on national rather than international NGOs to organize each World Social Forum. The existence of regional Social Forums (such as the European Social Forum) is further evidence of the relatively fragmented nature of contemporary transnational civil society.

some authors to speak of the emergence of ‘NGO wars’ amongst themselves.⁸³ Even Jessica Tuchman Matthews admits that ‘for all their strengths, NGOs are special interest groups...The best of them...often suffer from tunnel vision...A society in which the piling up of special interests replaces a single strong voice is unlikely to fare well.’⁸⁴ This statement points towards a vitally important problem: that INGOs have the potential to undermine state structures, and if they do so this in turn has the potential to undermine transnational civil society (which is dependent on reliable, liberal state structures that provide the rule of law and the stability that is necessary for effective associational activity). Liberal INGOs can threaten state structures by, for instance, providing essential services that are normally provided by governments. If this contributes to the complete collapse of state structures, a vacuum may be left for illiberal actors to fill. These actors in turn are likely to implement measures that undermine transnational civil society in the area.

A particularly important way in which transnational civil society can contribute towards its own demise is poor policy. For instance, even though one of the key factors enabling transnational civil society to reach its current position has been the process of economic globalization, numerous transnational campaigns have been undertaken by transnational civic coalitions to undermine this process despite the knock-on effect for the campaigners. Take, for instance, the popular slogan ‘Fair Trade Not Free Trade:’ this implicitly promotes protectionism, a policy that undermines the globalization process of which transnational civil society is a part. This slogan was put into successful practice by movement for the destruction of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. This movement, as Edward Graham has shown, ‘fought the wrong enemy’ in inhibiting an agreement that could have brought

⁸³ Ben Rawlence, ‘NGO Wars: The New Field of Politics in Africa,’ *African Studies Association Annual Meeting* (Washington, DC: 2002).

⁸⁴ Matthews, ‘Power Shift,’ p. 64.

substantial benefits for labour in developing countries.⁸⁵ Another example of transnational civil society hurting those whom it is supposed to assist is the successful opposition to large scale infrastructure projects funded by the World Bank.⁸⁶

Poor policy on the part of transnational civil society actors is also sometimes evident in the claims these actors have made. For instance, exaggerated claims have been made in respect of the scale of particular transnational challenges that need to be addressed: Greenpeace's successful campaign to prevent Shell from abandoning the Brent Spar oil rig, for example, featured an overestimation by a factor of 37 the amount of hydrocarbons in the rig with the potential to leak into the sea.⁸⁷ As Dieter Rucht has pointed out, inaccurate claims such as this can lead to disillusionment and demotivation once the truth reaches the public domain.⁸⁸

Elements of transnational civil society may also make claims to be able to achieve unattainably ambitious objectives, such as the World Social Forum's claim that 'Another World is Possible.'⁸⁹ Claims such as this have the potential to raise to an excessive degree expectations as to what transnational civil society has the capacity to achieve, and even thereby to reverse the development of transnational civil society. The evidence of the last century indicates that transcendence of capitalism and of the state system is an unattainable ideal, as anti-capitalist idealists found after the 1917 revolution in Russia and as pacifist and pacifist idealists found in the periods preceding the two World Wars. In each of these cases, there is a strong case for arguing that the already unpleasant externalities of the normal functioning of the

⁸⁵ Edward M Graham, *Fighting the Wrong Enemy: Antiglobal Activists and Multinational Enterprises* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2000).

⁸⁶ Sebastian Mallaby, 'NGOs: Fighting Poverty, Hurting the Poor,' *Foreign Policy*, issue 144, Sep/Oct 2004, pp. 50-8.

⁸⁷ Shaw-Bond, 'Backlash Against NGOs,' p. 5.

⁸⁸ Rucht, 'Transnationalization of Social Movements,' p. 219.

⁸⁹ José Corrêa Leite, *The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 82.

capitalist world economy and of the state system were made worse by the attempts of elements of transnational civil society to transcend them, and this worsening in turn set back transnational civil society.

Concluding Summary

Contrary to conventional wisdom, transnational civil society has not followed a course of linear progress. Instead, this paper has attempted to show that it has risen and fallen in waves over the course of the last two centuries. The rise and fall of transnational civil society appears to be a cyclical process, and the factors that promote its rise are often also the same factors as those that promote its decline. Furthermore, transnational civil society itself has in the past and could in the future contribute towards its own demise. Transnational civil society may at the present time seem far from collapse and may have the potential for considerable further expansion. However, this is not a good reason for the leaders of transnational civil society to be complacent. If they desire the continuation of the current ascendance of transnational civil society, then they must attempt to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated, and especially not to undermine state institutions or to promote unachievable objectives. For my part, I will be conducting further research into the history of transnational civil society – and in particular where transnational civil society has failed – in the hope that this might help to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ I made a start on this with my doctoral thesis, *Transnational Activism and its Limits*. This objective will drive my research for my forthcoming book on *The Evolution of Transnational Civil Society*.