"CIVIL SOCIETY ROMANTICISM":
A SCEPTICAL VIEW

REFLECTIONS ON HÅKAN THÖRN'S *SOLIDARITY ACROSS BORDERS*

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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND NGOS

Even though social movements in general, and transnational ones in particular, have a long history (viz. the anti-slavery movement of the 19th century), their role is arguably increasing. Even though the concept of social movements is broader than that of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the latter play a prominent, and apparently growing, role as the organisational pillars of social movements.[1]

NGOs have been defined by the UN as "any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level",[2] which is probably as good a definition as any, and which I shall use in the following. Alternatively one might, of course, define NGOs as

progressive or democratic, but that would tend to render most analyses circular. However, a lot of NGOs "happen to be" progressive as well as, in a certain sense at least, democratic—at least in the sense of representing a "democratic corrective" to governments.

Examples include the peace movements,[3] which have a very long history of ups and downs. Their activities apparently peaked with the anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s, but they have never completely vanished from the political spectrum since then. We have thus seen a certain resurgence of peace movements in the recent campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines,[4] the global campaign against "blood diamonds",[5] and the international campaign(s) opposing a U.S. war against Iraq—the latter featuring very large demonstrations. Besides the peace movements there are various solidarity movements such as the anti-apartheid movement (*vide infra*), a host of "green" movements,[6] and a wealth of movements and NGOs devoted to the promotion of human rights.[7]

Whereas some of these NGOs are political pressure groups, distinguished from political parties inter alia by the focus on a single issue, other NGOs "do something". Many are thus involved in various humanitarian tasks as is, for instance, the case of the Nobel laureate movement *Médecins sans Frontieres* which is involved in providing emergency medical aid in numerous crisis spots around the world—but which also seeks also to "raise awareness of crisis situations; MSF acts as a witness and will speak out, either in private or in public about the plight of populations in danger".[8]

In this capacity as well as others, NGOs tend to have an ambivalent relationship to governments. They are not merely acting as pressure groups "against" goverments, but they are also collaborating with, and often receiving most of their funds from, national governments.

Moreover, they have a long history of collaboration with the United Nations, e.g. with consultative status in the ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council)[9] and, most recently, with a special role under the auspices of the "Global Compact" alongside private companies, e.g. in conflict prevention and post-conflict peace-building—not least in Africa.[10]

THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE

Foreign and transnational NGOs certainly played an important role in the global struggle against apartheid,[11] e.g. by promoting sanctions as demanded by the ANC.[12] The means employed to the end of deposing the apartheid regime included a combination of support for the liberation movements (mainly the ANC) and pressure directed at the respective governments in the home countries of the NGOs—e.g. in the United States where the objective was to to make the U.S. government cease its support for the apartheid regime and impose sanctions.[13]

NGOs also worked closely with the UN[14], especially its Special Committee against Apartheid. The *Declaration of the International Conference on Sanctions against South Africa* (Paris, 27 May 1981) thus emphasised

> .. the importance of action by local authorities, mass media, trade unions, religious bodies, co-operatives and other non-governmental organisations as well as men and women of conscience, to demonstrate their abhorrence of apartheid and their solidarity with the legitimate struggle of the oppressed people of South Africa and Namibia. It draws particular attention to the constructive value of consumer boycotts, sports boycott, cultural and academic boycott (...) It encourages assistance to the victims of apartheid and their national liberation movements, as appropriate actions by the public, in support of international sanctions against apartheid. [15]

These recommendations were confirmed in the (very elaborate) *Programme of Action against Apartheid*, which was adopted by the UN

General Assembly in 1983, containing admonitions to NGOs, trade unions, political parties, etc. to cease all collaboration with the apartheid regime and to support the liberation movements.[16]

After the turning point in the struggle against apartheid in 1990, however, the emphasis of both the UN and the NGOs gradually shifted from struggle to assistance. What mattered now was to ensure a transition to majority rule which was as peaceful as possible. In this process the UN played an important role, partly on its own and partly via (or at least with the assistance of NGOs), inter alia through "peace monitoring" up to and including the 1994 elections.[17]

OTHER REASONS FOR THE FALL OF APARTHEID

It is inherently plausible that these anti-apartheid movements played a role. However, in order to assess their importance it is not enough to point to the eventual demise of apartheid, as this might also be the result of other causes. Three clusters of factors seem especially important as potential causes, namely the crumbling of the outer defences of South Africa, the mounting internal contradictions of the apartheid regime, and the end of the Cold War.

The apartheid regime had established an extended defence perimeter to protect itself against the wave of anti-colonial liberation which hit Africa around 1960. The outer defence ring consisted of the hold-out Portuguese colonies Angola and Mozambique, the Ian Smith regime in "Rhodesia" (established through a unilateral declaration of independence, hence sometimes referred to as the "UDI regime"), and its former mandate territory "Southwest Africa" (the present Namibia) which South Africa refused to abandon, even after its mandate has been retracted by the UN.

Starting in 1976, however, this outer defence ring began to crumble,

starting in Angola and Mozambique with the departure of the Portuguese colonialists and the formal institution of black majority rule in 1976—to which South Africa responded by supporting rebel movements (UNITA and RENAMO in Angola and Mozambique, respectively)as well as by direct military intervention.[18] Shortly after, with the Lancaster House agreement of 1979, the UDI regime in "Rhodesia" had to relinquish power, and in 1980 it was replaced though elections with a government by the ZANU liberation movement.[19] With the enforced, albeit negotiated, withdrawal from Namibia in 1988 and the accession to power of the former liberation movement SWAPO,[20] there were no "buffers" left to shield the apartheid regime from the rest of Africa.

By that time internal contradictions of the apartheid regime had reached the point where an "implosion" appeared imminent. The "total strategy" instituted by the P.W. Botha regime to protect white minority rule against the dreaded "total onslaught"[21] had managed to alienate large segments of the white populations, thereby eroding its own foundations. The semblance of democracy and civil liberties which the white population had hitherto enjoyed (at the expence of the rest of the population) had been undermined by the security services; political and other violence was becoming a growing problem; and the business community was beginning to lose faith in the survival of the regime, leading to a certain capital flight. This, in turn, exacerbated the economic crisis to which the excessive mulitary expenditures also contributed, as did the international sanctions which were by then becoming effective and comprehensive. Being white in South Africa was simply no longer as attractive as it had been; hence the growing reluctance to fight for a preservation of apartheid.

Finally, the Cold War began to "whither away" by the late 1980s, and with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 it was definitely over. Even

before that, however, the USSR had begun to disengage from the Third World (Angola, Afghanistan, etc.). Since 1991 Russia has continued this disengagement simultaneously with a change of orientation, from opposing to supporting democracy and market economies.[22] Hence there was no longer any need for the United States or its allies to support any "bastion of anti-communism in Africa" and, as a corollary of this, turn a blind eye to the regime's blatant violations of human rights and standards of democracy.[23] On the contrary, any association with the apartheid regime soon became a liability which could cost a candidate his or her share of "the black vote" as well as the support of the more liberal and internationalist parts of the U.S. electorate.

All of the above, of course, does not mean that the role of the anti-apartheid movement was insignificant role. It is entirely conceivable that it was the combination of all three sets of causes with the presence of a transnational movement which ensured success.

FROM ANTI-APARTHEID TO SOLIDARITY

Rather than dissolving themselves after "a job well done", several of the former anti-apartheid movements have since the fall of apartheid transformed themselves into solidarity movements or friendship associations with the new South Africa—similar to all other such associations. For instance, on the European level ENIASA (European Network for Information and Action on Southern Africa) is a successor, created in 1995, to the former Liaison Group of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. It presently serves as a coordinating structure, working within the European Union to promote international solidarity with Southern Africa. It has fifteen member organisations from thirteen EU member states and with associate members in Norway and Switzerland.[24]

In Denmark, a host of NGOs have activities related to South Africa

e.g. *Sydafrika-kontakt* (South Africa Contact[25]), *Ulandshjælp fra Folk til Folk* (Humana People to People[26]) and *Ulandsorganisationen Ibis* (Development Organisation Ibis[27]), all of which have programmes in South Africa. Even though it has no aid activities in South Africa, another NGO, *Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke*[28] (Danish Association for International Co-operation) has served as a political support group, e.g. when it came to the court case raised in 2001 by the medical company Novo Nordisk against South Africa for producing anti-retroviral drugs for the treatment of AIDS[29]

GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY (?)

There shall be no disputing claims (by Håkan Thörn or others) that NGOs and other transnational social movements have played important roles in the anti-apartheid struggle of the past—nor can one deny that they continue to play a significant role in ensuring that the "new South Africa" is not forgotten.

What seem more questionable are the more general claims about the perspectives entailed by NGOs, cast in the role of representing "civil society".[30] Some have certainly envisioned (and Thörn seems to share these views) the emergence of a true "global civil society", heralding new forms of governance which will transcend that based on the State. Such "civil society romanticists" have seen this trend as tantamount to a democratisation of world politics.[31] In the same vein, many concrete suggestions have, indeed, been made for a "democratrisation" of the United Nations that should allow it to become an organisation of peoples rather than states—as was seemingly implied by the opening words of the UN Charter: "We the peoples of the United Nations..." In such an attempted "democratisation", NGOs have been envisaged as playing a central role.[32]

Arguably, this might even constitute such a "transcendence of the State" as the primary ordering principle in world politics as may be a precondition of promoting the rights and interests of peoples (i.e. individuals), granting them rights at the expence of State rights—which would indeed be tantamount to a weakening (or even abandonment) of the norms of sovereignty.[33] Such a transcendence of sovereignty to "higher" forms of governance might even be more in line with the dictates of globalisation, where governance requires authorities transcending State boundaries,[34] and where the boundaries between "inside" and "outside" are arguably eroding.[35]

First of all, for all their attractions such visions may be highly premature. It may be true that the importance of sovereignty and State rights are being eroded within, say, the European Union in favour of "something else" (termed "neo-medievalism", by some).[36] However, on the very periphery of the EU, states are being created rather than dismantled—as happened as a consequence of the break-up of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia or the Sovuet Union. Moreover, in the Third World in general, and Africa in particular, a protracted process of state-building is going on,[37] the goal of which is to provide the State with a weberian "monopoly on the legitimate use of force".[38] NGOs and civil societies may certainly play an important role in ensuring accountability and respect for human rights in this process, but there is very little to suggest that the eventual product of the process will be anyting other than a modern State.

Secondly, there is a tendency to regard, NGOs as somehow more legitimate than states. There can by no denying that many States, not least in Africa, are entirely unrepresentative of their populations and thus desperately lacking in legitimacy—sometimes making labels such as "criminalised states" or even "vampire states" entirely appropriate.[39] On

the other hand, NGOs and other organisations of "civil society" are neither necessarily "representative" of any larger constituency, nor are they necessarily progressive, internally democratic or unselfish in their relations with the outside.

Many NGOs thus represent minority viewpoints, some of which may be far from pacific or progressive. Right-wing organisations such as the National Rifle Association and fascist ones such as the Ku-Klux Klan or the Aryan Nations[40] would thus count as NGOs according to the UN's definition quoted above, as would (to a certain extent, at least) the *Al-Qaeda* network and other terrorist organisations.[41] Moreover, some NGOs are run quite dictatorially, often by charismatic leaders as is often seen in religious NGOs, some of which have also had close relations to terrorism.[42]

Finally, even though NGOs are, by definition, non-profit, this does not mean that they are not, at least partly, driven by economic motives. In fact the "rules of the game" dictate that they maximise their revenues and minimise their expences, just as private, profit-seeking, companies.[43] Moreover, to the (growing) extent that governments are channelling their (declining) development aid to countries in Africa via NGOs, jobs are created in the NGO sector in the recipient country which may be very attractive—which may be a partial explanation for the rapid growth of the NGO sector in countries such as South Africa.[44] While many of these NGOs as well as their staffs are surely competent as well as unselfish, examples could undoubtedly be found of some which are not (hence the pejorative term "MONGO" standing for "My Own NGO"), in which case the lack of general standards of accountability for NGOs may be a problem.

While NGOs and civil society may thus be valuable correctives to State power, it would probably be both premature and unwise to expect

or want them to somehow replace the State—as entailed by the "ideology" that I have labelled "civil society romanticism", elements of which would seem to have inspired Thörn's account of the anti-apartheid movement.

ENDNOTES

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[41] Williams, Paul L: *Al Qaeda. Brotherhood of Terror* (No address: Alpha, 2002); Gunaratna, Rohan: *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (London: Hurst, 2002).

[42] For examples see Juergensmeyer, Mark: *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Lifton, Robert Jay: *Destroying the World to Save it. Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence and the New Global Terrorism* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000).

[43] See Cooley, Alexander & James Ron: "The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action", *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Summer 2002), pp. 5-39.

[44] See for instance, Cawthra, Helle Christiansen with Gerald Kraak: "Annual Review: The Voluntary Sector and Development in South Africa 1997/98", *Development Update. Quarterly Journal of the South Afrrican National NGO Coalition and Interfund*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1999).