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Transnational political action and ‘global civil society’ in practice: the case of Oxfam

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Abstract *The term ‘global civil society’ has taken on increasing significance within scholarly debate over the past decade. This paper seeks to understand transnational political agency via the study of a particular transnational actor, Oxfam. It argues that the various schools of thought surrounding the global civil society concept, in particular the prevailing liberal-cosmopolitan approach, are unable to conceptualise transnational political action in practice – due largely, in the case of liberal-cosmopolitanism, to a shared normative agenda. It also assesses the contribution of the literature on development and civil society to the analysis of groups such as Oxfam. In investigating Oxfam’s own perceptions of its context and the meanings of its agency, we discover an anti-political perspective, derived from an encounter between Oxfam’s long-standing commitment to liberal internationalism, and globalization discourse. The local or parochial nature of global civil society actors’ identities has not been sufficiently identified by existing scholarship.*

Keywords *Globalization, Global Civil Society, Oxfam, Transnational Agency, Cosmopolitanism.*

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‘Global civil society’ has become an extremely important concept to the analysis of world politics in the post-Cold War era, especially following the scholarly interest in transnational non-governmental action in the wake of the protests accompanying the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999 and various G8 meetings. Accounts of global civil society differ, of course, on whether the new phenomenon is best conceptualised as a set of like-minded political actors or rather a space where political action occurs, on whether it challenges or buttresses the global capitalist order, and on the extent of its significance and power. This article offers the case study of British-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Oxfam, and argues that the dominant analytical strain of existing scholarship on global civil society – what we call the liberal-cosmopolitan approach – fails to provide an adequate understanding of the transnational political action of groups such as Oxfam. Oxfam’s approach to trade justice, in particular, incorporates a radically anti-political perspective, derived from an encounter between Oxfam’s long-standing attachment to liberal internationalism, and globalization discourse. Although not in-itself problematic, we argue that the universalist pretensions of Oxfam in fact mask more local or parochial concerns and identities. Rather than interrogating the self-perceptions of global civil society actors, the liberal-cosmopolitan approach – due to a shared normative agenda on globalization – instead merely appropriates groups such as Oxfam into highly normative accounts of emergent transnational democratic processes. Alternative approaches tend to concentrate on reconceptualising global civil society rather than documenting the actual orientations of transnational political actors.

The first part of this article addresses the dominant liberal-cosmopolitan approach to global civil society, building upon existing critical commentary to question its analytical value. It also assesses recent work on development NGOs in particular, as the most immediate intellectual context of our inquiry into Oxfam’s perspective. Here we note the ways in which the literature on development queries the role of global civil society actors including NGOs operating in developing countries. The second part profiles Oxfam, with a focus on its campaigning on trade rules. This profile is based on extensive primary research, utilising documentary research and semi-structured interviews with Oxfam employees in Britain; we also used a small number of media articles written by prominent Oxfam spokespeople. We undertook interviews with five local organisers in Sheffield, Leeds, London, Manchester and Oxford, and Oxfam’s then Head of Advocacy Jo Leadbetter and then Head of Campaigns Adrian Lovett, throughout 2006 and 2007. The opinions of local organisers have been presented anonymously. The paper does not address genealogical questions regarding ‘who’ speaks for Oxfam. Such questions are certainly worth asking; it should be noted, however, that one of the main purposes of the interviews was to ascertain the extent of agreement between Oxfam employees at different levels, and that it appears that there is a high level of consensus.

A. ‘Global civil society’ in theory

What we term the liberal-cosmopolitan approach to global civil society delineates a range of theorists whose general normative positions are embedded in a wider range of positions than the term suggests, but whose work on developing notions of global civil society nevertheless underpin a particular liberal-cosmopolitan understanding to the rise of transnational political agency. This approach posits two key features of transnational political action. Firstly, in line with classic liberalism, that it constitutes the place where ‘activities... are undertaken for the public good by groups or individuals in the space between the family, the state and the market’ (Naidoo 2003: 2). Secondly, that this place can now be located at the global level; rather than distinct civil societies operating within particular nations, there is now a single civil society, albeit variegated, operating beyond *all* nation-states. As such, this places the dominant approach to global civil society in line with the recent resurgence of interest in cosmopolitanism as a response to neoliberal globalization based on universal ethics rather than parochial interests (see Held 1995; also Berry 2006; Gabay 2008). The work of Mary Kaldor (2003a; 2003b; 2005), particularly in documenting the various actors and campaigns of which global civil society is composed, best typifies the liberal-cosmopolitan approach. Whilst some theorists who fall into the liberal-cosmopolitan categorisation merely take a normative approach in their work (thus eschewing any claims to analytical applicability), crucially, Kaldor’s work illustrates how in many cases the liberal-cosmopolitan approach explicitly marries analytical and normative objectives; in seeking to understand the nature of transnational political action, it is also presented as an inherently positive phenomenon, contrasted with global market forces and the activities of powerful states.

In this analytical approach, transnational political action is conceived as more than a set of actors, and rather as a distinct form of political activity, occupying a distinct and novel space. David Chandler (2007) argues that this contributes to a lack of concern with agency, and with empirical inquiry: once global civil society is attributed with certain characteristics, the existence of *any* transnational political action is enough to satisfy the universal existence, and normative validity, of a global civil society, performing global public goods in the global space between market forces and national politics. Questions regarding who actually carries the positive, universal values of global civil society, how the public good is actually implemented, and what normative concerns actually motivate particular instances of transnational political action are therefore, while not entirely overlooked, of only secondary importance to the liberal-cosmopolitan approach.¹

Global civil society has been conceptualised by its proponents as something that both promotes and embodies the conduct of social relations ‘with a minimum of violence and a maximum of respect for the principle of civilised power-sharing among different ways of life’ (Keane 2001: 24). Indeed, according to Mary Kaldor, ‘[g]lobal civil society... is about “civilizing” or democratizing globalization, about the process through which groups, movements and individuals can demand a global rule of law, global justice and global empowerment’ (Kaldor 2005: 20). These features presuppose a set of shared norms and values amongst ideologically and culturally diverse actors which Donatella Della Porta (2005) has attributed to global civil society’s ability to house a variety and multiplicity of different identities, what she has called a ‘movement of movements’. From this perspective, global civil society is positive not *despite* these differences but because of them.

John Keane describes the space occupied by these various groups as analogous to a living biosphere, comprised of innumerable biomes:

These ecosystems of global civil society... are interconnected. And they are more or less intricately balanced through continuous flows and recycling of efforts among... populations of individuals of the same species, which thrive within communities such as smaller cities, that are themselves embedded within non-living geographic contexts” (Keane 2001: 24).

It is these characteristics that encourage some commentators to conclude that global civil society is a specifically new and ‘postmodern’ phenomenon that exists outside of the system of nation-states and multilateral institutions that defined modernity. It is space entirely free from the state, or an attempt to claim such a space – with the modern state itself rendered inherently exclusionary and oppressive (see Chandler 2004: 315). Whether the normative sentiment is agreeable or not, what remains in doubt is the extent to which we are actually witnessing such change. What appears more certain is that this rendering of global civil society as entirely outside the system of ‘imperial globality’ (Escobar 2004: 207) permits its self-styled members (including Oxfam) to present their action as entirely progressive, since it exists beyond the world of borders, markets, self-interest, warfare, etc., which were produced by conditions of modernity. It is also important to note here that who populates or is allowed to participate in global civil society remains ambiguous by this rendering, as many different actors can and do claim the discourse of this space for their own sometimes contradictory activities.

Despite the apparent lack of systematic analysis of agency, that is, transnational political action in practice, many adherents of the liberal-cosmopolitan approach argue that global civil society exhibits a specific style of agency: the movement network (see Bandy & Smith 2005; Della Porta & Tarrow 2005; Saunders & Rootes 2006). The Oxfam-led Make Poverty History campaign serves as a prime example. However, on closer inspection the notion of movement network only further deflects attention from the activities and identities of actual agents. Rather than aiding our understanding of Make Poverty History, the liberal-cosmopolitan approach to global civil society instead appears to endorse *a priori* such endeavours. They are treated as precisely the inherently progressive and novel ‘global civil society’ activities, distinct from political and economic forces associated with global neoliberalism, that liberal-cosmopolitan theorists are expecting to find.

Alejandro Colas’ empirical work is useful here. Colas’ study of the internationalisation of Mahgrebi social movements revealed that ‘integration was highly uneven and contradictory, thereby opening up the crippling paradox in liberal renditions of global civil society: the historical reproduction of civil society across the world can itself generate virulent reactions against the project of global civil society’ (Colas 2005: 28). As such, rather than representing a civil space where public good is enacted, different conceptions of what a public good is exist within the space so defined – as groups not only compete for different outcomes, but define supposedly fellow members of global civil society as obstacles to the achievement of these outcomes. Clearly, when Joe Bandy and Jackie Smith (2005) make the empirical claim that ‘networks are beginning to coalesce into a transnational civil society’, this expected coalescence is only a reality if transnational civil society is reconceived as the emergence of new sites and forms of struggle, as well as co-operation. Such a move appears unavailable to the liberal-cosmopolitan approach. The mere fact of interconnectedness is deemed more important than the basis or content.

As we will see, this normative move is particularly problematic when dealing with transnational social justice and development NGOs such as Oxfam. It is nevertheless a move that has had to be made, we suspect, because of the analytical ambiguity implicit in the liberal cosmopolitan rendering of global civil society. John Keane's most recent work however has

attempted to resolve this problem by associating the development of NGOs with most recent developments in the history of democracy. Keane has argued that since 1945 we have witnessed the growth of what he calls 'monitory democracy'. From the inception of the United Nations and the central role of NGOs there to the progressive weakening of the nation state in the face of a globalising economy, Keane argues that NGOs have grown to play a 'monitory' role on governments and other agents of control to ensure accountability to groups disenfranchised by the loss of democratic control to unaccountable institutions and organisations (2008). Keane has thus developed his earlier normative claims for global civil society by linking the proliferation of social justice NGOs with a new democratic form. In one sense Oxfam and Make Poverty History appear to fulfil this role – the core message of that campaign and Oxfam's subsequent campaigns has been to hold governments to the promises they had made on aid, trade and debt. According to Make Poverty History this was only something that could be achieved outside of traditional democratic channels, and the manner in which large numbers of people were mobilised to communicate directly with their governments not only lends some support to Keane's argument linking a monitory action to a democratic one, but may even go some way, although not the whole way, to defending this linkage from accusations of a representation gap (see Chandler 2004 for a critique of NGOs along these lines).

Ultimately Keane's argument brings us back to a traditional liberal conception of civil society, locating it here nationally and globally between the private and public spheres. However, 'monitory democracy' brings us no closer the actual practice of the actors who participate in this field. Are they always monitory? Are they always democratic? Are they always as oppositional as the marriage of these two terms suggests? Whilst Keane has attempted to mark out some terrain specifically for NGOs within the sphere of global civil society, this has still not resolved the ambiguity and incoherence of the actors which participate in this supposedly progressive field.

This article is not primarily concerned with theoretical debates. We are more concerned with the empirical case of Oxfam as an actor in world politics, and as such discuss liberal-cosmopolitanism in order to demonstrate the way in which NGOs such as Oxfam are usually treated, and to note the potential role of liberal-cosmopolitan assumptions in Oxfam's legitimisation of its own activities. However, it is important to recognise the various, more critical alternatives to the liberal-cosmopolitan approach as a theoretical framework. Chief among them is the neo-Gramscian school. Antonio Gramsci's initial interest in the importance of civil society expressed his belief that class struggle is mediated by ideology, consciousness, and culture (see Gramsci 1971: 181-2; also Murphy 1994). The most important neo-Gramscian theorist on 'global civil society' is Alejandro Colas, whose empirical work was briefly discussed above. Colas argues that we would 'do well to appropriate international civil society both conceptually and politically as a domain which generates class struggles capable of being harnessed to the project of global socialist transformation' (2002: 167). Civil society, then, is central to the capitalist class' maintenance of hegemonic control, as its power is legitimised by social practices and institutions outside the central state structure and the economic sphere. Global civil society makes the global political economy 'governable' (Langley and Amoore 2004). By the same token, subaltern classes challenge hegemony through action in civil society, creating the novel ideologies and subjectivities necessary to delegitimise the capitalist system. The term 'global civil society' denotes for neo-Gramscian scholars, then, that processes beyond the nation-state are involved in establishing and challenging social orders (Colas 2002: 169).

The neo-Gramscian approach, therefore, offers a different understanding of the configuration and exercise of geopolitical power than offered by traditional International Relations theory, as well as relocating political and ideological struggle *within* civil society, contra the liberal-cosmopolitan approach. Most crucially, it allows inquiry into how states and the states system are located in and affected by non-state transnational political action. The problem, however, is that it does not necessarily encourage us to inquire directly into the self-conceptions of particular civil society actors, that is, to let them speak for themselves, as a part of ascertaining the meaning of their agency. As the quote from Colas indicates, the focus is on determining the relative strength of class formations present in global civil society; the ideas and perceptions of actors are deemed important insofar as they either support or challenge capitalism or neoliberal hegemony, with the meaning of agency attributed accordingly. Richard Day's challenge to the neo-Gramscian approach suffers from a similar problem. He argues that hegemonic struggle has merely resulted in the co-optation of movements by the state system, and that the most effective social movements operate 'non-hegemonically rather than counter-hegemonically. They seek radical change, but not through taking or influencing state power, and in doing so they challenge the logic of hegemony at its very core' (Day 2005: 8). While such a perspective may shed light on the activities of some civil society groups overlooked by other approaches, again it imbues particular meanings on groups, particularly those deemed compliant with hegemonic practices.

Approaches to global civil society as a phenomenon in-itself tend to under-value the actual activities and orientations of particular actors as aspects of analysis. Neither the liberal-cosmopolitan approach nor the neo-Gramscian alternative can account for the differentially experienced terrain of global civil society, and thus in order to understand the transnational agency of any single actor, in this case Oxfam, we must and do now turn to an analysis of that actor's understanding of the global order and its place within it. While we share with the neo-Gramscian approach a critical outlook on the role of Western NGOs in the reproduction of the capitalist global order, and of global civil society as a site of ideological struggle, we believe agents themselves require more direct attention. As such we turn now to the literature on NGOs in developing countries, a body of work which is strangely neglected in debates on global civil society. Bringing together global civil society debates with more empirical work on NGOs will aid our analysis of Oxfam's understanding of its developmental role in the context of globalization.

B. Transnational social justice and development NGOs

This section assesses the critical literature which has developed around transnational social justice and development NGOs. This will support our contention that the role of transnational social justice and development NGOs is sufficiently ambiguous to merit the investigation of these actors in practice before granting them *a priori* membership of some notional global civil society (as well as disturbing the very idea of this notion as being based on some kind of universal progressive programme).

Michael Edwards notes that 'most NGOs are still confused about their identity. They have always been both market-based actors, providing services at a lower price than the commercial sector, and social actors, representing particular non-market values and interests in the political process. These two identities have radically different implications' (2002: 29). and that 'NGOs tend to import the philosophy of the market uncritically, treating

development as a commodity, measuring market share as success and equating being professional in their work with being businesslike' (2002: 30). Indeed, Mawdesley, Townsend and Porter support this latter contention, finding that far from the kind of North-South hybridisation one might expect from a value-homogeneous global civil society, many Southern NGOs struggle to meet the standards and practices of their Northern partners (2005:78).

Mawdsley *et al* distinguish between 'compliant' and 'independent thinking' NGOs, arguing that the former, established in the face of growing funding opportunities from the 1980's onwards, prioritise securing their income streams and providing working opportunities for their main beneficiaries – the middle classes – without challenging dominant neoliberal development agendas. Whilst the few 'independent thinking' NGOs do attempt to make spaces for alternative visions, these NGOs do not constitute the majority of international or national NGOs working in development and social justice (Mawdsley, Townsend & Porter 2004: 872). This makes the claims of groups like Oxfam to be working in 'development' ambiguous; if the teleological meaning of development is contestable – if 'development' is itself yet another terrain of contestation and struggle, with some NGOs lining up as agents of an imperial form of development and others creating spaces of alterity - then what can we make of 'development' actors (like Oxfam) claiming membership of a progressive global movement – a global civil society – without investigating their actions, claims and self perceptions?

Sangeeta Kamat critiques many of the underlying assumptions of the liberal-cosmopolitan approach to global civil society, in the process providing some theoretical understanding to the appraisal of NGOs initiated in the next section. She argues that 'the tendency among NGO analysts is to disengage from the structural reality of civil society, and locate NGOs/civil society as the 'third sector', separate from the market and the state... this theoretical disengagement can prove illusory in a rapidly expanding capitalist economy' (2004: 158). Kamat claims that the withdrawal of donor funding from the state social service sector and its re-channelling to civil society actors (with a concomitant growth in service-provision NGOs, or service provision arms to advocacy NGOs) is proof of the dependence and subjectification of many NGOs to the neoliberal capitalist project dressed up as 'development' (2004: 159). Indeed, Kamat argues that

[t]he emphasis of the state has been to direct NGOs – particularly the radical or struggle-based NGOs – towards development project work (read: income generation schemes), either in terms of financing projects designed by the NGOs for their local communities, or persuading and pressurising NGOs to implement the state's development programmes (2002: 20).

It is apparent that Kamat's position is an overtly structuralist one, and thus could attract some well-rehearsed criticism which we will not engage with here. As Mawdsley *et al* have argued, despite all these issues some NGOs, or individuals within NGOs, do manage to open contingent and fragile but nonetheless existing spaces for counter or transcendently hegemonic work (2004: 175). Kamat nonetheless poses significant questions of the role of transnational development and social justice NGOs within the liberal-cosmopolitan global civil society framework. More specifically she poses questions of specific actors like Oxfam. The heavy involvement and funding of United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Millennium Campaign in some Oxfam enterprises makes them seem less straightforward examples of civil society, and certainly of 'monitory democracy' than an *a priori* rendering of it would suggest.

This ambiguous account suggests that NGO success in challenging dominant discourses of poverty and justice are rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). They are unpredictable, unknowable, unstable, and certainly not traceable without the investigation of actors and their specific practices. We are not arguing here for the rejection of analytical concepts altogether, but rather that they are generated by empirical study. As Jenny Pearce (2000) argues:

we ought perhaps to abandon the search for *the* role of NGOs in development, or *the* role of ‘civil society’, and even such a thing as an uncontested goal of ‘development’. We could concentrate much more on discussing the choices for action and the principles and implicit theoretical assumptions that guide them (Pearce 2000).

The following section turns, therefore, to a specific development NGO, Oxfam. Our focus is the ideational and discursive aspects of Oxfam’s practices. We show how the liberal-cosmopolitan understanding of global civil society appears to contribute to Oxfam’s legitimisation of its practices, to some extent shielding their actions from scrutiny (Kenny and Germain 2005; Chandhoke 2002). This section has demonstrated the complex and contested nature of NGOs’ developmental functions; Oxfam’s skirting of such issues through reference to globalization seems to mirror the liberal-cosmopolitan approach’s focus on global civil society as a universal good at the expense of appraising the results of specific NGO behaviour. In fact, Jens Bartelson asks that we look specifically for the discursive (re)construction of the global civil society concept in NGO practice in developing countries:

the concept of global civil society should be understood in terms of its rhetorical function... [r]ather than asking what the concept of global civil society might mean and what kind of institutions and practices it might refer to, we should ask what is done by means of it – what kind of world is constituted, and what kind of beliefs, institutions and practices can be justified, through the usage of this concept? (Bartelson 2006: 372; see also Amoore & Langley 2004: 89).

We share Bartelson’s intuition, but do not in fact believe it is accurate to claim that Oxfam consciously refers to global civil society in liberal-cosmopolitan terms in justifying its actions. However, a shared understanding of globalization and the role of politics in conditions of globalization appears to underpin both the liberal-cosmopolitan approach to global civil society and Oxfam’s support for free trade as a development model.

C. Oxfam

In this section we profile Oxfam’s perspective on the nature and purpose of its agency. Oxfam is one of the largest NGOs in the world, and as such has received a large amount of scholarly attention. In recent years, appraisals have covered issues such as Oxfam’s role in countering gender-based violence in El Salvador (Bird et al 2007), in promoting women’s rights in Africa (Gawaya & Mukasa 2005), Oxfam’s cooperation with private sector organizations (Senge, Dow & Neath 2006), trade unions in Honduras (Eade 2004), and other NGOs (Yanacopulos 2005). Arvind Panagariva (2005) has offered an important critique of Oxfam’s support for agricultural liberalization. However, few of these studies offer analysis of Oxfam’s ideological perspective, which inevitably colours all of its activity (for a partial exception see Ilcan & Lacey 2006). Attention will be focused on Oxfam’s understanding of globalization, placed in the wider contexts of Oxfam’s understanding of politics and free trade. Technically, Oxfam is not a single actor. Oxfam International is a coalition of thirteen ‘national’ Oxfam organisations (there are separate organisations for Canada and Quebec). However, the coalition is dominated by Oxfam Great Britain (GB), to the extent that, in practice, its coalition partners are subsidiaries. Both Oxfam GB and Oxfam International are

based in Oxford, in Britain. Oxfam's action at the global level, insofar as such a conception is appropriate, is directed by Oxfam GB. For instance, most policy documents attributed to Oxfam International are written by employees of Oxfam GB. Britain is also the source of most of Oxfam's funding and volunteers (it has over 500,000 regular donors in Britain); it would be fair to say that Oxfam belongs to the liberal internationalist tradition long vocal in British public life. Oxfam's origins can also be associated with Christianity, although there appears to be no overt religious influence in today's Oxfam.² It should be noted here that this survey of Oxfam is not comprehensive, and is not intended primarily as critique; Oxfam is a large and complex organisation and the interview data collected is treated as illustrative rather than definitive. Rather, we seek to highlight several related aspects of Oxfam's discourse that seem to have been overlooked by the literatures on global civil society and development NGOs. Further investigation would be required before any comprehensive evaluation or critique of Oxfam's perspective can be made.

Liberal Internationalism and Free Trade

Liberal internationalism is not necessarily a straightforward ideological category. Essentially, it is not easy to identify which actors or perspectives in contemporary world politics have the most plausible claims to the label. Immanuel Kant's original articulation of a world community based on universal ethics and free trade – giving rise to 'a perpetual peace' – seems to have many heirs. To some extent one could argue that the United Nations and the near-universal subscription to individual human rights institutionalise Kant's perspective, although this would be a highly disputed proposition. The liberal-cosmopolitan theorists of global civil society can be plausibly associated with the liberal internationalist position, given the emphasis on a supranational political community, in the absence of a global state. So too can groups like Oxfam, with their emphasis on global justice and international development. As we will show in this sub-section, Oxfam also subscribes to a further key tenet of liberal internationalism: free trade. Yet it is precisely this emphasis on free trade, and universal rights expressed in economic as well as political freedoms, that gives *neoliberalism* claim to the liberal internationalist mantle. We will argue in fact that although Oxfam contests the neoliberal approach to development, its approach to globalization – an evolution of the traditional internationalist discourse on 'interconnectedness' – leads Oxfam close to neoliberal ideological terrain, typified by its anti-political perspective to trade policy. Through its technocratic vision of governance in conditions of globalization Oxfam offers a complex perspective easily appropriated by advocates of global civil society yet not actually immediately amenable to liberal-cosmopolitanism's allusion to global democracy.

Oxfam's most important campaign in recent years has been directed at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Oxfam has sought to influence public opinion and the foreign economic policies of WTO member-states so that international trade rules can be made fairer for poor countries. The closely-related Make Poverty History campaign, noted earlier, had 'trade justice' as its central political aim, but also aimed more generally to raise public awareness of poverty, and to lobby for increases in international aid to poor countries. But for Oxfam, 'fairer' trade is largely synonymous with 'freer' trade. Oxfam's flagship report *Rigged Rules and Double Standards* (2002), which all interviewees agreed was the centrepiece of its campaigning platform, suggests no equivocation within Oxfam regarding the moral primacy and empirical effectiveness of 'the market'. Thus the WTO is not criticised because it embodies a trade liberalisation agenda – a position we could associate with the anti-globalization perspective – but rather because this agenda does not go far

enough in certain directions, namely ‘market access’ issues, agreement on which would allow poor countries to trade their own way out of poverty. The following passage captures Oxfam’s distinctive style of support for free trade:

Today, the doctrine of free trade reigns supreme. So pervasive is the belief, so absolute the conviction of its adherents, that it has emerged as the economic religion of globalization. But it is a curious religion. Throughout history its followers have applied the creed to their own behaviour on a selective basis (2002: 25).

There is an apparent disdain for the pervasive ‘doctrine of free trade’. Yet it is not itself criticised. It is labelled ‘curious’ only because of what its adherents do – or more precisely, do not do – in its name. Duncan Green (2006), Oxfam GB’s Head of Research, labels continuing protectionist measures like agricultural subsidies ‘grotesque’. In agriculture and textiles, Oxfam specifically advocate duty-free and quota-free access for all low-income countries, a general reduction in tariff peaks, and a comprehensive ban on export subsidies (2002: 11-12). As such, Oxfam marks out its support for free trade with reference to specific measures that it believes will help people in poor countries. But these proposals are usually framed by general support for open markets on a world scale. Adrian Lovett, Oxfam GB’s Head of Campaigns, described free trade as a common good, adding that ‘it’s either a moral issue or a question of good economics, take your pick’.³ What can be inferred from *Rigged Rules* is that, for Oxfam, there is no distinction in the long-term between a general, global interest and the interests of poor countries, if a more perfect global marketplace can be created. While not necessarily unusual that an advocate of liberal internationalism would support free trade and market mechanisms, this distinguishes Oxfam and similar groups as development organisations. Oxfam’s model of development is very much depoliticised.

A further, crucial aspect of Oxfam’s approach to the WTO is Oxfam’s support for a stronger and more authoritative institution. The actual, multilateral nature of the WTO appears not to be a major consideration for Oxfam in this regard. Oxfam obviously recognises the intergovernmental basis of the WTO, but emphasises the role of ostensibly supranational organs like the Secretariat and the Dispute Settlement Mechanism as key to the organisation’s future capacity to manage globalization and free trade. As such, the WTO is deemed already capable of providing many of the required governance functions – demonstrating Oxfam’s view that sound management is technocratic rather than political. Some Oxfam employees interviewed, it should be noted, would prefer a new trade institution to be established, more firmly within the remit of the UN. Most, however, are broadly happy with the current arrangements; what they criticise is rich countries’ ‘abuse’ of the WTO.⁴ Adrian Lovett argued that ‘a rules-based system is necessary. If you got rid of the WTO you’d have to replace it with something that looked quite like the WTO’. He characterised a hypothetical world without the WTO as ‘a free-for-all, survival of the fittest’. This opinion is of course somewhat paradoxical: Lovett thinks that the WTO represents something more than ‘survival of the fittest’, but also that rich countries (the fittest) are wrong to treat the WTO as a forum for securing parochial benefits for themselves. This seems to be, firstly, a somewhat naive view of what the WTO is, and how it came to exist. More importantly, it again suggests the depoliticised nature of Oxfam’s model of development. Documents produced on the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) imply that Oxfam imagined that the trade round could have – or even *did* – represent the realisation of this form of governance, in terms of both process and outcomes. The DDA, for Oxfam, contained the implicit understanding of a global governance institution escaping its intergovernmental foundations to bring about certain public goods on a universal basis, namely free trade and development (2005a: 8-11). The co-

operation of nation-states is expected and required, but the institution steers the process independently (see Oxfam International 2005a; 2005b; Stuart 2006).

Globalization Discourse and Anti-Politics

The notion of globalization is clearly extremely important to Oxfam's perspective, but importantly, it is a particular conception of globalization and its implications that may not automatically resonate with other global civil society actors. Globalization, for Oxfam, is principally economic; it is a characteristic of the world trading system. In short, globalization is a descriptive term for massive increases in world trade, creating in very general terms global markets for most products and services. The cause of globalization is generally identified as technology. It is technological development, in communications, transport and, most significantly, production, that has occasioned the growth in trade.

[P]owerful technological forces... are driving globalization. The marriage of computer technology and telecommunications – or digitalisation – is revolutionising international economic relations (2002: 8).

Inevitably, however, there is some confusion. Relations of cause and effect are rarely specified precisely. When interviewed, one local organiser said:

While [globalization] might be about economics its also about great big global communications and communities, great big global organisations. Technology, culture...

Furthermore, even *Rigged Rules* refers to economic processes as a *cause* of globalization: the term globalization 'describes the growing interdependence of the countries of the world. International trade, allied to huge increases in capital movements, the rapid expansion of transnational companies, and technological change, is one of the most powerful motors driving that interdependence' (2002: 32). The general argument seems to be that both market forces and technological change have contributed to the development of globalization. The principal implication of globalization, however, is the birth of a global economy operating beyond the confines of nation-states. Crucially, moreover, this is generally a positive development. Even criticism of transnational corporations (TNCs), the apparent targets of the anti-globalization movement, is muted:

Technological change has made globalization possible. Transnational companies have made it happen. Through their investment, production and marketing activities, TNCs bring the world's economies and people more closely together' (Oxfam International 2002: 14).

Oxfam therefore merely identifies TNCs as the carriers of the inexorable force of technological development, the logical outcome of which is increased trade. In general, there appears to be no appetite within Oxfam to challenge what they deem the process of globalization. Two local organizers argued:

The challenge is to make globalization, which is unavoidable in some ways and in some ways very, very desirable, work for people. I think in some ways it has been shown not to work, but in others there have been some very positive outcomes of globalization.

If we take the best aspects of globalization, the best results of globalization... if we can use the forces of globalization to create a baseline around the world so that everyone has a choice, everyone has access to a doctor, a school, these real baseline Millennium Development Goals-type aspirations, I do think globalization can deliver.

It seems the problem with globalization for Oxfam is that it is not working for enough people. It is its goal of rectifying this situation that gives Oxfam its identity as a 'development' organisation. Yet we see this strange paradox whereby globalization is said to require better management, yet it is deemed in itself positive: Oxfam separates current governance arrangements, orchestrated by nation-states, from the economic process.

As such it is precisely politics which is stopping the WTO successfully managing free trade rules in the interests of the entire world. Oxfam does not simply disagree with the decisions made by national politicians that cause, sustain or exacerbate poverty through hampering free trade. Rather, it finds politicians contemptible, particularly – but not exclusively – those representing rich nation-states at the WTO. Some of Oxfam's publications suggest a significant aversion to what Oxfam understands as formal politics, or 'realpolitik'; national politicians are generally depicted as parochial, unprincipled and even devious (see in particular 2005a; and 2005b) It is this self-defined conception of politics and representation that lays the ground for the adoption of positions which locate the scale for transformative change beyond the nation state, at the 'transnational'.⁵ It would be unfair without a larger survey of Oxfam's discourse to claim that such aversion represents a conscious Oxfam agenda. However, the language used in some places is quite startling: references to 'rigged rules', 'fraud', 'robbery' and 'blood on the floor' in relation to WTO rules indicate Oxfam's general orientation towards the activity of politicians. There is no real suggestion by Oxfam in either the documents or from interviewees that rich countries undertake any actions at the WTO not permissible by the institution's procedures; yet they are frequently described in terms which invoke images of unlawfulness, dishonesty, and even violence.

Anti-politics was a consistent theme of the interviews. It was argued by one interviewee that the WTO had become 'skewed' by politics. This of course means skewed in favour of the interests of rich countries, rather than poor countries. But since this interviewee was also extremely positive about the role of the WTO, it is tempting and even plausible to presume that an additional meaning was intended; that is, that the presence of power-politics skews the WTO's agenda away from its legitimate function as the institutional embodiment of the norm of free trade, or of the proper management of free trade in conditions of globalization, as discussed above. Liz Stuart, now Oxfam's head of relations with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, boldly argues that

The Doha talks were going to be different from previous rounds of trade negotiations. Instead of delivering liberalisation and nothing else, they would instead unlock the potential of poor countries to use the profits of trade to lift themselves out of poverty... They also promised that poor countries would have to do less than them, and have longer to do it... But the poison in the system has been politics (2006).

Stuart also claims specifically that the European Union could have supported liberalisation in agricultural trade, had it not been 'hostage to politics of member states'. For 'politics', read 'self-interest'. For Stuart, it could be claimed that acting politically is the opposite of acting ethically. The Oxfam briefing note *From Development to Naked Self-Interest* (2005b) is the most blatantly anti-politics official paper, claiming that the DDA has 'degenerated from a focus on development to the pursuit of self-interest'.

Oxfam does not solely criticise politicians from rich countries. *Rigged Rules and Double Standards* argues:

Not all of the problems can be traced to international rules and the behaviour of Northern governments. Developing countries have much to answer for. Southern governments rightly condemn rich countries for denying them the opportunities that trade can provide. They call for policies to redistribute wealth and opportunity. Yet the vast majority are loathe to apply the same principles at home. Trade policies reinforce other policies that perpetuate inequality and injustice (2002: 22).

Development is primarily being hampered by the political interference of rich countries in the WTO's mission, but also by the actions of the governments of poor countries in relation to their own populations. To reiterate an earlier point: Oxfam accepts that states are required for development, but favours a thoroughly depoliticised form of statecraft.

It should be noted that despite this apparent aversion to politics, Oxfam *does* engage in the policy-making and policy-implementation processes, in two key regards. First, its employees regularly contribute as experts to the work of government departments and parliamentary committees. Second, Oxfam receives large amounts of state funding, particularly from the UK government, for its work in the developing world.⁶ As such, Oxfam is regularly criticised for being 'too close' to the government – as they admit (see Quarmby 2005). Yet there is a fascinating paradox at work here. Working with policy-makers fits in perfectly with the technocratic view of the world espoused by leaders such as Adrian Lovett and Jo Leadbeater. Oxfam does not refuse to 'join in' with the structures of authority in democratic capitalist societies; rather, more specifically, it neglects to 'pick a side' when it comes to formal democratic processes. It seems Oxfam, as an organisation, will work with any party or individual in order to 'get things done', but offers little leadership when it comes to determining through democratic means who should fill the offices of formal political power.

Oxfam and Agency

Given that the liberal-cosmopolitan approach appropriates the presence and activities of groups like Oxfam for its vision of a global civil society (as discussed in the first section), it is worth considering exactly how Oxfam employees conceive of agency in world politics, and how they legitimate the organisation's actions. Again, we find suggestions of an anti-political sentiment among Oxfam employees – a sentiment undetected by the liberal-cosmopolitan approach. It is tempting to associate this aversion to representative politics directly with Oxfam's belief in the onset of globalization and the meanings conferred on the WTO as an institution of global governance. Oxfam's mission in support of the universal value of free trade allies with globalization as the development of a global economy, organised on market principles under the supervision of the WTO – in such a system, supporting free trade through the WTO is apolitical, since it is rendered incontestable on empirical grounds by globalization. Nation-states, and therefore the actually-existing processes of representation, are rendered anachronistic and unsuitable as vehicles for improving people's lives; any state action is therefore inherently unethical. Oxfam's own agency is not justified simply on the basis that they uphold the universal value of free trade, but rather that only groups such as Oxfam – operating beyond nation-states, in order to challenge attempts to 'skew' the global governance project – have the authority to uphold such values.

Those interviewed located Oxfam's own agency within this (implicit) narrative. According to the liberal-cosmopolitan approach to global civil society, groups like Oxfam represent a *response* or *challenge* to globalization at the global level, offering an alternative model of

globalization to the dominant neoliberal perspective. However, while Oxfam does utilise the notion of global civil society to explain and justify its position and activities, for Oxfam the development of global civil society is deemed *constitutive* of globalization. Thus the notion of an inherently progressive postmodern form of agency is overlooked by Oxfam in favour of pitching their agency as the only appropriate form of agency in the era of globalization. One local organizer argued, using terminology echoed by other interviewees, that:

The fact that groups like Oxfam realise that [the world] isn't fragmented and that you do need a world voice is part of globalization.

All interviewees referred to the phenomenon of transnational or global social interaction, and concomitant political organization, as a significant aspect of globalization. This interaction is seen as a challenge not to economic globalization but rather the 'political' manipulation of globalization, through abuse of global governance mechanisms, by nation-states. As Adrian Lovett explained, 'a sense of interconnectedness' accompanies technological and economic change, encouraging both the acceleration of change, but also a greater awareness of how people in other parts of the world live. There are few mentions in official Oxfam policy statements and reports of a positive case *for* global civil society as a new form of agency – in contrast to the case *against* politics, as they see it. The positive case was evident, however, in most personal interviews with Oxfam employees. It would appear that global civil society – or its recognition – is not something that Oxfam actively campaigns for, but rather represents a particular mentality underpinning Oxfam's agency. With the exception of Jo Leadbetter, Oxfam's Head of Advocacy, no interviewees used the term 'global civil society' without prompting, but the familiar argument that Oxfam exists in the space outside nation-states and the pursuit of parochial political and economic interests, and that this made its position inherently legitimate, was widely employed.

Predictably, interviewees upheld Make Poverty History as an example of how to 'make a difference' in the era of globalization. Its coalition structure both reflected and aided globalization as a process of increasing socio-political interconnectedness. It was also deemed to represent a bottom-up movement, with support throughout the world, bypassing national governments to express a common (or universal) interest in 'trade justice', essentially market access issues. However, while separate Make Poverty History campaigns were held in different countries, it is difficult to define the campaigns as a transnational or global 'movement'. For instance, there is little organisational legacy of Make Poverty History, other than within the Oxfam coalition itself. Oxfam's campaign was, and technically still is, actually part of a global movement for aid, debt cancellation, trade justice and gender equality, the Global Call for Action on Poverty (GCAP), yet this is hugely underplayed by Oxfam – it was not mentioned by name a single time in discussions of Make Poverty History during interviews, and we can find no references to it on Oxfam's website. We can speculate that the message of the GCAP – with signatory NGOs in more than a hundred countries – was too unwieldy, and perhaps too radical, to justify Oxfam's full support. More importantly, however, it shows that Oxfam does not support unequivocally the transnational movement networks which it is affiliated to, let alone those which it is not. We of course would not expect Oxfam to support every transnational coalition of NGOs simply because they are transnational coalitions – the point is that the academic literature does not problematise enough the political struggle *among* or *within* movements or networks, as well as the struggle between states and global civil society in general. To be clear, Oxfam *does* engage in what can plausibly be termed global networks or coalition-based movements (see Yanacopulos

2005), but Oxfam employees, particularly its leaders, do not appear to value them qua networks.

Oxfam leaders appear to see the organisation as the embodiment of legitimate practice in an age of globalization. When Jo Leadbetter was asked whether globalization meant that global political groups are required in order to challenge its effects, she answered ‘Yes, that’s why I work for Oxfam’.⁷ When Adrian Lovett was asked whether the internationalist orientation of Oxfam was necessary and/or desirable due to globalization, he said ‘Yes, that’s why I do what I do’ (they are both employees of Oxfam GB). Oxfam is certainly an important organisation within world politics; its size and resources guarantee its voice is heard, and confer it with considerable legitimacy. But the assumption, seemingly within Oxfam as well as in the academic literature, that it is *exemplary* of a global civil society with universal scope, seems to too hastily overlook its federal structure and the essential Britishness of Oxfam GB. We believe that to conceive of such a role for groups like Oxfam involves a particular view of the nature, causes and potential benefits of globalization. Lovett and Leadbetter may believe they were simply directly answering a straightforward question, but their understanding of the issue at stake actually depends on implicit assumptions which may not only not be shared throughout the world, but may in fact be actively opposed by the populations that Oxfam claims its agency serves or represents. Only if we overlook this contestation does Oxfam become exemplary of global civil society rather than an advocate of its own parochial values and policy solutions. The problem here is not Oxfam; it is not necessarily wrong to do and believe the things it does. The problem is scholars taking Oxfam’s self-conception at face value, and not sufficiently interrogating the nature and motives of transnational political action, because its meaning is taken for granted. Again, we can only speculate on the actual links between the liberal-cosmopolitan approach in academia and Oxfam as a real-world actor, but it would appear that the worldviews are mutually reinforcing.

Conclusion

There is clearly a need for analysts of transnational political action to engage more critically with particular actors. While NGOs are an important subject of study, as we have shown, in development studies, the meaning of transnational non-state action is rarely addressed in relation to specific NGO activities. Currently, particular conceptions of global civil society tend to shield transnational NGOs from inquiries into their particular origins and motives: the dominant liberal-cosmopolitan position appropriates the agency of Oxfam into its vision of global democracy. We have found, however, a profound scepticism about politics – particularly the formal processes of democratic representation – within Oxfam. The liberal-cosmopolitan approach imbues Oxfam’s agency with meanings that are not actually reflected in Oxfam’s self-understanding. Instead Oxfam upholds a distinctive approach to free trade and globalization not inquired into by liberal-cosmopolitan theorists. Liberal-cosmopolitans, sharing a broad commitment with Oxfam to a liberal internationalist heritage, therefore fail to problematize the understanding of globalization and model of development upheld by groups like Oxfam. We sympathize with the main alternative to liberal-cosmopolitanism, the neo-Gramscian perspective; however, neo-Gramscian theorists focus upon organizing transnational actors into schemes of class-based hegemonic/counter-hegemonic struggle, without interrogating the particular ideas of specific actors, or studying groups like Oxfam qua transnational non-state actors.

We do not share David Chandler's contention that activism based around the notion of global civil society is a retreat from the responsibility to 'win the argument' at the level of electoral politics (Chandler 2004; see also Bickerton *et al* 2007: 13). Groups like Oxfam hold their beliefs sincerely, and whether they are erroneous or not, such arguments perhaps overstate the progressive potential of action by nation-states, in theory and practice. Following Louise Amoore and Paul Langley (2004), we believe it is possible to recognise the transformative potential of transnational political action, while also acknowledging the neo-Gramscian point that global civil society may serve to make the global political economy 'governable'. Oxfam's perspective on politics and globalization may cross into the intellectual territory of neoliberalism, but it remains distinctive, and requires investigation and appraisal on its own terms. That said, Oxfam's anti-politics approach to development does appear to be a self-imposed limit on its agency. In eschewing the progressive possibility of state-based political action (including party-politics), campaigns such as Make Poverty History, for example – which embodied for many Oxfam employees interviewed the ideal form of agency in an era of globalization – seems not have made any lasting impression on British politics or indeed 'trade justice' throughout the world. Of course, the success or otherwise of Make Poverty History requires a more sustained assessment than offered here. Our main point is that it is necessary to critically-engage with the self-perceptions of groups like Oxfam, in order to consider both the global civil society schemes declared on their behalf, and the role of transnational non-state actors in the politics of development.

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Notes

1. As Ruth Reitan notes: 'who are these new global actors? What are their points of convergence, contradiction, and outright conflict? And how do they engage with, legitimize, or challenge both the state and international governance regimes that states have constructed?' (2007: 446).
2. Oxfam started life in 1942 as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, the brainchild of prominent clergyman Canon Theodore Richard Milford.
3. Personal interview.
4. This is what Duncan Green means when he argues 'what's needed is a new mindset, not a new institution' (2006). While the discourse is ostensibly woolly, the transient prattle of newspaper columns, something significant about Oxfam's ideology surely lurks beneath. Political legitimacy is never entirely 'formal', but in the case of Oxfam's judgement on the WTO's purpose, the institution's ideal source of legitimacy is largely if not wholly 'informal', or in other words, outside the normal legitimization structures stipulated by norms of sovereign statehood and representative democracy.
5. See Colin Hay's *Why We Hate Politics* (2007) for an interesting discussion of the relationship between globalization discourse and anti-political attitudes.
6. See <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/DFIDwork/ppas/oxfam-ppa2.asp>

7. Personal interview. Christian May (2007) has documented more specifically the relationship between global civil society discourse and the delegitimization of formal democracy at the global level.

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