

Book Review: Global Civil Society 2012: Ten Years of Critical Reflection

by blog admin

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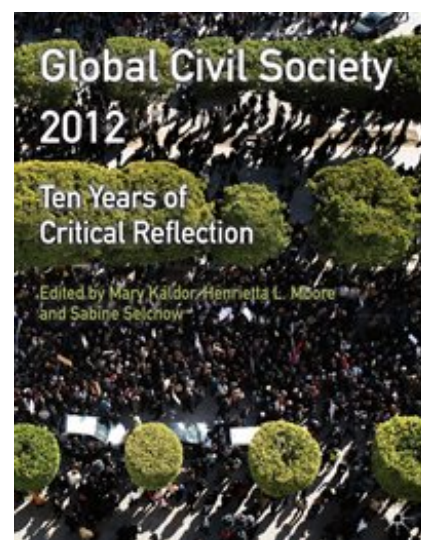
The *Global Civil Society Yearbook* has attempted to debate, map and measure the shifting contours of this contested phenomenon, relationships between state and society have shifted. In this anniversary edition, activists and academics look back on ten years of 'politics from below', and ask whether it is merely the critical gaze upon the concept that has changed – or whether there is something genuinely new in kind about the way in which civil society is now operating. **Martin Shaw** hopes that in the coming years the Yearbook will still be with us in some form to help us interpret the radical social changes that globalisation will continue to bring.



Global Civil Society 2012: Ten Years of Critical Reflection. Mary Kaldor, Henrietta L. Moore and Sabine Selchow (eds). Palgrave Macmillan. 2012.

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Global civil society is an idea of the period since the end of the Cold War: it has reformulated the old idea of civil society for the new global era. The original concept had, of course, several previous incarnations: once a synonym for the free market economy, it was influentially reshaped by Antonio Gramsci as an idea of the social space beyond both state and market, and most recently was transformed as the theme of movements for change in Stalinist Eastern Europe. This last incarnation helped shape its importance for progressive thinking after the Cold War, and the 1990s saw the global version take wing as a major concept of the social sciences. Here it mainly captured the possibilities of transnational social movements and non-governmental organisations to extend the reach of traditional national civil society into the burgeoning arenas of global politics.



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By the turn of the millennium it seemed that global civil society's time had come, and on the initiative of [Mary Kaldor](#), long associated with civil society ideas in the 1980s peace and democracy movements, the London School of Economics provided the base from which the ambitious series of *Global Civil Society Yearbooks* was launched. From the start, the creative tension between the normative and analytical functions of the idea was evident. Yet few could have predicted that within days of the first publication in late 2001, the 9/11 attacks would have drastically reshaped world politics and radically challenged the assumptions of secular growths in globality and civility. This was the first of three world shocks that have punctuated the Yearbook's first decade, to be followed in 2008 by the financial crisis and in 2011 by the Arab Spring. All three have changed the terms in which global society has been thought about and reshaped the original normative-analytical tension.

The Yearbook has survived these challenges and others closer to home (not least its movement between three publishers over the decade). It now celebrates its tenth edition, the first in which neither of Kaldor's founding co-editors, [Helmut Anheier](#) and [Marlies Glasius](#), joins her in producing the volume, although they combine with her to offer an introductory balance-sheet of their subject and their decade of joint work. They open with the Middle Eastern events of 2011, and the claim that "however these events unfold, an active civil society has begun a movement for democracy across the region." They insist on civil society's non-violent character, but warn of "low-level pervasive violence" where states fail to restrain it. It is a pitfall of the yearbook format, especially when it offers an annual review, to be overtaken by events: clearly the authors did not foresee the horrors of the Syrian war in 2012-13. Yet the commentary demonstrates a consistent feature of the editorial steer, the combination of optimism about the possibilities of civil society organisation to weaken authoritarianism with a realistic understanding that violence is rarely far away.

In a defining chapter of this volume, Kaldor evaluates the vicissitudes of the principles of humanitarian protection in the face of crises in Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur and Libya. She ends on a cautiously optimistic note, hoping that "the end of the decade of the War on Terror will open up space for the revival of the humanitarian idea."

Yet for Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius, and indeed for the many contributors to this as to previous volumes, these directly political and military contexts are only part of the evolving story of global civil society. President George W. Bush's anti-terror campaign may have crystallised a 'regressive globalism' – of which violent Islamism was another face – as I put it in a contribution to the 2003 volume. But civil society has continued to expand and renew itself in many ways that do not depend on the macro-political context, and a valuable function of the Yearbook has always been to chart and explore the changing patterns.

The 2000s have been the decade of both alter-globalisation and an ongoing search for economic alternatives to the discredited financial order exposed by the economic crisis, which has led to a veritable depression in much of Europe including the UK. These issues are represented here by thoughtful chapters by Robin Murray and Geoffrey Pleyers. But perhaps above all, from a long-term perspective, they were the decade in which the internet became the prime means through which civil society was simultaneously expressed and further globalised. A chapter by Kaldor's new co-editors, [Henrietta Moore](#) and [Sabine Selchow](#), examines the implications of this shift and suggests that it is rebuilding the "island of meaning" in terms of which the Yearbook initially conceptualised global civil society.

Thinking through the implications of this development, it is evident that the perspective with which Kaldor and her collaborators have approached global civil society over the last decade has not only captured an essential question of our times, but has confronted issues that will only become more central to world society throughout the twenty-first century. We must hope that the Yearbook will still be with us in some form – perhaps itself online in a more comprehensive way than its present [Facebook page](#) – to help us interpret the radical social changes that globalisation will continue to bring.

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