Disconnections and exclusions: professionalization, cosmopolitanism and (global?) civil society

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Abstract In this article, we address the ways in which theories and practices of cosmopolitanism and professionalization intersect in the sphere of global civil society. We emphasize the experiences of grassroots development activists, arguing that although they have so far been pivotal to the legitimacy of these spaces and discourses, such activists are increasingly absent from the practices of global civic spaces. We explore this process of change over time using the example of grassroots health promoters in Peru, explaining it in terms of the articulation of neoliberal processes of professionalization with a particularly neoliberal version of cosmopolitanism. We argue that the two are mutually reinforcing and produce a particularly narrow, and arguably less cosmopolitan, rendition of global civil society, with implications for the possibility of building critical and transformative encounters across difference as a foundation for more equitable ideas and practices of development and democracy.

Keywords COSMOPOLITANISM, GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY, GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM, NGOs, PROFESSIONALIZATION, DEVELOPMENT

In this article, we begin to think through how theories and practices of cosmopolitanism and professionalization intersect and appear mutually reinforcing in the spheres of global civil society, transnational networks and civic spaces. Reflecting recent interest in notions of grassroots and non-elite forms of cosmopolitanism (Featherstone 2008; Kothari 2008), we bring to the fore the experiences of grassroots development activists being engaged in and excluded from transnational spaces and discourses. We consider the ways in which past forms of transnational activism, based on particular notions of solidarity – though certainly not without their own divisions and exclusions – appear to be being supplanted, under the rubric of global civil society, by new types of disconnection. In particular, we draw on empirical data from...
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Jenkins’s research with women community activists in Peru (Jenkins 2008, 2009). In this research, she focused on a group of 12 volunteer health promoters from a popular settlement in Lima who spent more than 12 years implementing a health promotion project. The narratives of these grassroots women provide a glimpse into the often-contradictory processes underlying macro-level development structures. Their experiences provide us with a starting point for interrogating the articulation of key concepts of professionalization and cosmopolitanism within the spaces and sites of global civil society.

In using the term ‘grassroots’ we refer to individuals at the forefront of development interventions, ‘those who are most severely affected [by global policy and economic shifts] in terms of the material condition of their daily lives’ (Batliwala 2002: 396) – as opposed to those organizations and individuals who advocate on their behalf, often with little direct accountability. We focus particularly on grassroots activists who are both volunteers and paid community workers, but not NGO staff, though they interact with them on a regular basis, and changing NGO policy and practice affect their work. We explore the rhetorics surrounding global civil society and transnational networks and suggest that, although an affinity with the grassroots is pivotal to the legitimacy of a range of actors working in these spaces, grassroots activists are increasingly less able to engage in dialogue, events and the production of knowledge at the transnational level. We conceptualize this disconnection through the articulation of particularly neoliberal renditions of professionalization and cosmopolitanism.

We begin by contextualizing these discussions through reflecting on the historical development of transnational solidarity, considering the ways in which grassroots interactions and face-to-face dialogue were central in creating diverse transnational civic spaces and fomenting the notion of global civil society. Wary of conjuring up an image of a golden transnational past, we recognize the fractures and divisions within past transnational organizing, and these provide a contrast for the emergence of the more recent disconnections we highlight in this article. We then bring this picture up to date by providing an overview of notions of cosmopolitanism in relation to contemporary global civil society, and the participation of grassroots actors within it. We devote the remainder of the article to an analysis of the ways in which so-called ‘global civil society’ may produce disconnections, articulating concepts of cosmopolitanism and professionalization. We end by problematizing the neoliberal incarnation of global civil society, and suggesting the possible de-cosmopolitanization of spaces for global dialogue and civic action, in terms of the values embodied and the actors able to engage in such spaces.

From transnational activism to a cosmopolitan global civil society

Keck and Sikkink (1998) were among the first to examine thoroughly the emergence of social organizing and campaigning across country borders. Since then, transnationalism has become increasingly central to conceptualizing international development activities (Henry et al. 2004). Transnational practices are those that consciously
transcend national boundaries (Moghadam 2000). While they involve forging strategic cross-border networks and alliances, and mobilizing around issues of common interest, they remain firmly grounded in the specific national context (Mackie 2001). The use of the term ‘transnational’ acknowledges that these connections and networks are partial and unevenly distributed, as opposed to the all-encompassing ‘global’ or ‘international’ (Mackie 2001). Transnational processes are primarily based on characteristics such as networks, mutual support, and information sharing. Keck and Sikkink highlight the way in which ‘transnational networks multiply the voices that are heard in international and domestic policies’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998: x), thereby giving space to campaigns silenced at the national level. The growth of transnational activism and solidarity provides an historical backdrop to the more recent rise of notions of global civil society, particularly in terms of contextualizing the role of grassroots activists. Here we highlight the international women’s movement as one example of the broad-based nature of participation in these early transnational networks and organizations, while also recognizing the divisions that characterize such spheres of transnational engagement. This also helps contextualize the trajectories of the Peruvian community activists whose stories inform our discussion.

Transnational connections and the International Women’s Movement

Women’s organizations have historically been at the forefront of transnational networking (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Pearson 2000). Authors often cite the United Nations (UN) conferences, from the First UN Conference on Women (Mexico 1975) to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995), as the first major fora to enable transnational organizing among women to flourish (Basu n.d.; Friedman 2003; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Friedman (2003: 318) describes the 1975 Mexico conference as a catalyst in increasing ‘information exchange among women’s rights advocates, much of it through newsletters and information outlets started around the Mexico City conference … as well as the reports through word of mouth, phone, TV and radio’. Moghadam asserts that the Second UN Conference on Women (Nairobi 1985) marked a turning point in the emergence of a global feminism because ‘regional research centers, feminist book fairs, regional meetings of feminists (notably the Latin American Feminist Meetings) and international academic conferences on women began to proliferate in the period before and after Nairobi’ (Moghadam 2000: 63). Other thematic UN conferences, particularly the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (held in Cairo), also brought women activists together from across the world. Such meetings, and the NGO fora that ran alongside them, created a space in which networking could take place among women’s organizations and activists from North and South, and from NGOs and grassroots organizations, and laid the ground for the emergence of transnational activism. Activists played a key role in influencing the wording of final documents emerging from these conferences, which succeeded in making gender and women’s rights a central issue (Friedman 2003). The process was neither smooth nor uncontested: Western and Third World feminists had to negotiate
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their differences between one another and between feminism and the broader popular women’s movement (Basu n.d.; Vargas 1998).

As well as the more conventional North–South flows of funding, information and support, South–South transnational connections were also increasingly being made between activists and organizations. Friedman (2003) recognizes that much of this early transnational activity centred on relatively informal networking based on personal contacts and individual efforts, and Fraser asserts that by as early as 1980 there was ‘a complex network of activist women communicating through a range of informal, even intimate, media unnoticed by the regular media’ (Fraser 1987: 145).

In Latin America, a series of Encuentros feministas (Latin American feminist meetings), regularly held in the region since 1981, exemplified feminist transnational organizing. These meetings provided a space for reflection, debate, networking and agenda setting (Vargas 1998), and led to the creation of various Latin America-wide networks. The participation of a varied range of constituencies, including both feminists and grassroots women, was welcomed, although the encuentros were frequently a space in which identities and allegiances were contested and came into conflict (Alvarez 2000: 6). Despite the conflicting identities to be negotiated, the encuentros provided an umbrella for transnational organizing among diverse groups of women activists, engaging in face-to-face dialogue, sharing information and experiences, and promoting activism and social change at an international level. This women’s transnational organizing is just one example of a wide range of transnational activism that burgeoned in the 1980s and 1990s around key issues, including human rights, environmental activism and international labour solidarity.

The oral histories collected from Peruvian community health promoters provide an example of how grassroots women activists negotiated transnational spaces in the early 1990s. These women spoke enthusiastically about their experiences. Julia attended an NGO forum in China and Anita, who represented the health promoters’ project in Cuba, mentioned how:

They sent me to represent the health promoters at a meeting of women’s organizations from across Latin America; there was even a Spaniard there. It was a lovely course in Cuba about women’s organizations. Yes, I really made the most of it because it was an experience that really enriched me.

Anita (health promoter)

Anita and Julia’s opportunities to participate in transnational events exemplify the recognition and status that was attributed to grassroots women as producers and transmitters of local knowledge and practices at a global scale, at a time when alternative development paradigms and women’s international organizing were flourishing in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is clear that such experiences broadened their horizons:

I was in Cuba for two months. It was the most wonderful journey in every way. It made me feel really good; I gained loads of experience, taking part in
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an event like that, an international event for women’s organizations, it was a great experience!

Anita (health promoter)

How they [the women at the NGO forum in Beijing] look at sexuality in a different way. It was something that … for me, at least, changed my life, it changed my way of thinking. I feel like one can mature from one day to the next, with an experience like that. And … well, start to think differently. To know about countries that are so different…

Julia (health promoter)

Such encounters were central to forging the transnational connections that enabled the scaling up of feminist activities, facilitating information exchange, lobbying, mutual support and campaign coordination among women around the world (Moghadam 2000).

Dialogue and difference: activism, cosmopolitanism and global civil society

Alongside wider transnational communications and interactions – such as those risked by dissidents in Eastern Europe (Kaldor 2003) – these early forms of activist and NGO engagement beyond the nation-state laid the foundations for the subsequent emergence of the notion of global civil society. That we refer to global civil society as a notion is of course important. It is subject to increasing empirical and conceptual criticism and debate (see, for example, Anderson and Rieff 2004; Colas 2002) on the grounds that, at a conceptual level, a global civil society cannot exist in the absence of the counterpoint of a (global) state or a sense of corresponding political culture and community (Lupel 2003: 20). Munck (2004: 17), for example, has argued that, despite the ‘global’ title, contemporary global civic politics and conceptualizations are highly Eurocentric. Reflecting the conflation of the academic and the activist, definitions of global civil society can slip between the normative and the positive, making it even harder to establish whether what is being referred to is an existing state or an aspiration (see, for example, Anheier et al. 2001: 15; Munck 2004: 16).

Such critiques have failed, however, to diminish the celebration of emergent civic spaces (see, for example, Clark 2003) that transcend nation-state borders. These spaces are underpinned by a growing technical capacity to ‘network’, as travel and communication technologies become ever faster and ever more accessible to more of the world’s population (Szerszynski and Urry 2006), and these communications technologies – initially the fax and subsequently internet and email – have played a key role in the accelerated growth of transnational organizing (Sreberny 2001). What is significant in the context of our analysis of transnational activism, professionalization and cosmopolitanism, is the articulation of key concepts of global civil society in terms of interactions, dialogues and connections; this allows us to locate the material experiences of transnational activism in relation to some of the key stated and normative characteristics of a global civil society.
The dialogues and conversations mentioned above fit closely with accounts of the practices that it is suggested herald the formation of new global civic spaces, as well as those that some claim global civil society should exemplify. In the 2001 Global Civil Society Yearbook, Anheier et al. (2001: 4) identify ‘dialogue, debate, confrontation or negotiation’ as central to the changes in the 1990s that underpinned an emergent global civil society. Kaldor (2003: 46) defines global civil society as a deliberative space defined by ‘purposeful interaction’ and emphasizes the importance of a ‘conversation in which we talk about our moral concerns, our passions, as well as thinking through the best way to solve problems’ (Kaldor 2003: 160). Baillie Smith’s (2008) analysis of the relationships of INGOs with their constituencies in the global North and their capacity to facilitate deliberative democratic practices that might underpin the development of a democratic global civil society takes this focus further. The interactions and transnational engagements the health promoters outlined above would, in many respects, seem to exemplify central features of emergent global civic and political space, as well as resonating with Waterman’s (2000: 140) conception of ‘complex solidarity for a complex globality’. Waterman suggests that in social movement responses to globalization, what we have witnessed so far is a globalization from the middle, and what we need is an articulation of this with a ‘globalization from below’. For Waterman, one part of what we need is an ‘alternative global solidarity culture’, something made possible by increasing cultural globalization (Waterman 2000: 137). Anita and Julia’s comments resonate with the conception of solidarity that Waterman sees as having a positive articulation with ‘equality, liberty, peace and tolerance, and more recent emancipatory/life-protective ideals’, involving ‘an active process of negotiating differences, or creating identity (as distinguished from traditional notions of “solidarity as community” which may assume identity) and being a relationship between people and peoples, however institutionally mediated’ (Waterman 2000: 140). We can also locate these engagements in relation to the theory and practice of cosmopolitanism.

Although contested, ideas of cosmopolitanism provide a broad critical and analytical framework for analysing global civic spaces and the engagements of activists within those spaces. Debates on cosmopolitanism have seen a recent resurgence in academic circles, particularly in relation to the rise of NGOs (Calhoun 2002: 91) and the idea of cosmopolitan democracy (for example Archibugi et al. 1998). However, the concept encompasses a very wide range of meanings:

For some contemporary writers on the topic, cosmopolitanism refers to a vision of global democracy and world citizenship; for others it points to the possibilities for shaping new transnational frameworks for making links between social movements. Yet others invoke cosmopolitanism to advocate a non-communitarian, post-identity politics of overlapping interests and heterogeneous or hybrid publics in order to challenge conventional notions of belonging, identity and citizenship. And still others use cosmopolitanism descriptively to address certain socio-cultural processes of individual behaviours, values or dispositions manifesting a capacity to engage cultural multiplicity.

(Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 1)
Diverse and often contrasting disciplinary interests, normative and positive articulations, and highly abstract as well as ethnographic analyses underpin these varied meanings. In the spirit of Hannerz’s suggestion that ‘it may simply be time for the political philosophers of cosmopolitanism to let more ethnographers in’ (Hannerz 2006: 15), three features of the practices of the Peruvian health promoters we discussed above best elucidate what we mean by cosmopolitanism. These are their interest in and openness to difference; the structuring of their encounters with difference as ‘purposeful interaction’ (Kaldor 2003: 46) within the context of transnational activism; and the embedding of the health promoters’ cosmopolitanism in their everyday lives and social relations. This is not to overstate the activists’ cosmopolitanism in terms of an unambiguous openness to all forms of difference but to focus attention on particular aspects of their practice as these relate to transnational civic spaces. As we note elsewhere, individuals’ cosmopolitanism can be temporal and strategic (Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2009; Kothari 2008; Pecoud 2004).

We see the health promoters’ openness to difference, practised through their participation in transnational fora, as exemplifying a form of socio-cultural cosmopolitan practice. Such activists may fall between the elite cosmopolitanism of ‘a transnational group of globetrotting, highly skilled, highly paid, professional, managerial and entrepreneurial elites who circulate in a series of career or business moves from one city to another’ (Yeoh et al. 2003: 209), the ‘non elite openness to difference’ of transnational migrant workers (Datta 2009; Kothari 2008: 501), or working-class cosmopolitanism (Featherstone 2008; Lamont and Aksartova 2002: 1). They have simultaneously been afforded opportunities to engage with difference as a function of their community activism. They did this in ways that allowed them to build their own capital, but from a very different perspective from the globetrotting executives, being rooted in the everyday micro-level struggles of gender politics in Peru. Such experiences also resonate with Datta’s search for non-elite cosmopolitanisms produced through ‘a desire to engage with “others” beyond survival’ (Datta 2009: 354).

One can characterize the health promoters’ opportunities to experience and engage with difference at a transnational level as the ‘purposeful interaction’ that Kaldor (2003: 46) identifies as central to a global civil society. Their practices have been located in and shaped by transnational political structures that exemplify a more political form of cosmopolitanism rooted in plural political identities and structures of governance and democracy that transcend nation-states (for example, Held 2006: 387); they have engaged with transnational networks and actors seen as pivotal to a more cosmopolitan political system. This is problematic, not least given the slippage between an account of global civil society as actually existing cosmopolitan practice, and the more normative claims of authors such as Held. INGOs’ cosmopolitanism can also be seen to be highly ambivalent (Yanacopulos and Baillie Smith 2007), and as we explore later, the emergent global civil society can be seen as expressing distinctly uncosmopolitan characteristics; ““Enlightenment Man” is seen as the privileged actor in the GCS [global civil society] play we are asked to support’ (Munck 2004: 17).

The third feature of the health promoters’ cosmopolitanism lies in its embeddedness in their everyday social relations. Their encounters with difference, the values
these convey and the structuring of those encounters are embedded in the realities of struggles over women’s health and gender relations in Peru and in the strategies they devise to deal with them. This cosmopolitanism is perhaps better captured by what it is not – an ‘impartialist’ cosmopolitanism that requires abstraction from ‘the perceived prejudices of particular ties and loyalties’ (Erskine 2002: 460). We see the health promoters’ cosmopolitanism exemplifying Calhoun’s call for a greater emphasis on the local grounding of cosmopolitanism, and an engagement with the foundations of solidarity at local and global level (Calhoun 2001, 2002). We are not saying that relations and engagements outside the local are trivial, particularly given some of the shared languages and interests of the global women’s movement, but that the health promoters’ activism is rooted in their community and society and in how they explore their understanding of this in relation to the experiences and settings of others. We do not assume openness to difference at all levels, but rather that their openness to difference at transnational levels is rooted in their particular experiences of racialized and gendered inequalities (Jenkins 2009).

Considering the grassroots activists’ situation in terms of a distinct type of cosmopolitanism provides an important and useful framework for understanding their practice and its significance for the constitution of global civil society. We would argue that experiences such as those of the health promoters exemplify a grassroots activist cosmopolitanism that has political and cultural significance. In the health promoters’ cosmopolitanism one can see the ‘elective affinity’ between the political and cultural that Hannerz (2006: 15) identifies and that ‘the ability to make one’s way into other cultures, and the appreciative openness toward divergent cultural experiences, could be a resource for cosmopolitical commitments’ (Hannerz 2006: 14).

Our interest in, and understanding of, cosmopolitanism therefore focuses in this article on how far activists’ engagements with and celebration of difference, rooted in and articulating with their everyday struggles, intersect with emergent global civic spaces and the knowledges and practices these spaces foster. The opportunities afforded to the health promoters in engaging with networks and organizations beyond the nation-state in emergent global civic spaces, outlined above, provide us with an example of the ways in which such spaces were themselves characterized by an openness to difference and an emphasis on dialogue with others. Bearing this in mind, we argue that the globally savvy grassroots activist, who is able to develop, articulate and negotiate values and strategies that transcend the local and global as well as cultural and social boundaries, needs to be placed much more firmly at the centre of the development of contemporary global civic and political spaces. It is not enough merely to be at the centre of rhetorics around those spaces.

Some authors perceive transnational grassroots organizing as a strategy for overcoming the questions of representation and accountability that can arise when others represent grassroots activists in global civic spaces (Batliwala 2002). However, during her research in Peru, Jenkins found herself questioning to what extent such notions of global activism and solidarity correspond to the contemporary realities experienced by grassroots women activists, despite the prior interactions of the health promoters with transnational women’s activism. In this regard, what we suggest in the
next section is that processes of neoliberal professionalization and increasing NGOization are actually de-cosmopolitanizing global civic spaces by marginalizing and excluding grassroots activists and celebrating an elite, instrumental and neoliberal cosmopolitanism whose apparent universalism betrays its Western origins. We argue that such processes can only diminish the capacity and transformatory potential of emergent global civic spaces.

**Marginalizing grassroots activists**

Paradoxically, despite all the global chatter, we argue that grassroots activists and organizations are increasingly not part of new global civic spaces, creating a sense of fragmentation and isolation, as many grassroots actors find themselves unable to engage in civic spaces beyond the local community level. The exclusion of individuals, groups and organizations in the global South from the production of development knowledge, decision-making processes and project implementation is of course well known. Evaluations of the Asian tsunami reveal the ways in which local responses were often undervalued and capacity sometimes even undermined by the arrival of well-funded international agencies (Telford et al. 2006: 19). There was often a lack of engagement with community based and local NGOs (Schepet et al. 2006: 9). We argue that, even outside the context of service delivery or emergency relief, activists from the global South are being excluded from broader global civic spaces (see also Taylor and Naidoo 2004). In other words, as well as development service delivery and project processes being exclusionary, broader global civic and political spaces are subject to parallel processes of neoliberal professionalization and elite conceptions of cosmopolitanism that are mutually reinforcing, effectively ruling out the participation of grassroots activists and their engagement in building meaningful global solidarity.

In addition, as at the national level, inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity characterize the transnational sphere (Bretherton 2003; Mackie 2001), which make the equitable participation of grassroots activists, particularly women, problematic (Calhoun 2002). Nagar et al. observe that ‘globalization both connects women into networks across varied spaces and plays on and reconstitutes differences among them’ (Nagar et al. 2002: 259, our emphasis). Mackie identifies the existence of ‘hierarchies based on linguistic and cultural competence, access to more or less privileged languages and access to the technologies which facilitate transnational communication’ (Mackie 2001: 188). Bearing in mind Kaldor’s (2003) emphasis on the importance of communication and conversation in constituting global civil society, these issues suggest some of the ways in which grassroots activists may easily be excluded from active participation in contemporary global civil society. Echoing this, Bretherton suggests that the involvement and interactions of environmental grassroots organizations at the transnational level are relatively constrained, with ‘little evidence of sustained transnational links’ (Bretherton 2003: 116).

Reflecting broader processes of neoliberal professionalization in the sphere of international development, the Peruvian health promoters expressed frustration with
their current situation, which they felt was one of stagnation and relative isolation within an increasingly inter-connected sphere. Some of their lives had been transformed by early experiences of travel and activism – reminding us of the emancipatory potential of cosmopolitan practices (Nederveen Pieterse 2006):

And after [having been to Cuba], there were events organized by the NGO … we used to have an end of year event, when all the women who had been trained by this NGO would get together. I used to work with them. And I’ve also travelled here in Peru. I’ve been to various places, to visit universities. And because of this, I sometimes feel, what now? With everything I’ve learnt I feel a bit hemmed in. I feel a bit limited.

Anita (health promoter)

It’s difficult to go to other places. Even to go to Ayacucho [rural province in Peru], I don’t know if you know but up until now … we still don’t know if we’re going to be able to go. Because before they told us that two of us would be able to go to help train [the new promoters] in Ayacucho. But now I don’t know what’s happening.

Isabela (health promoter)

It’s important, you know, to go on these little trips. How we’d like to go on a journey, when we see what people like you do in coming here, we’d like to have a trip … to be able to tell people about our experiences. For example, Julia was one of the people who went abroad, the only one. That was for an event there was in China. She’s the only health promoter who has been able to travel. If only someone else could go! Anita went to Cuba too. The only two of us health promoters who have been abroad. Since then we’ve never had a chance to go anywhere. We’re always here, always here. Even living here in Lima, we’ve not even been able to visit the provinces, never. Not even to go and see the new projects that the NGO has opened, we’ve not been able to go. They say that we’re going to go, but no one knows when. If only! Just to be able to know more of the world, about the reality of women from other places, from the provinces.

Sandra (health promoter)

While travel is by no means the only way either of actively engaging in global civil society or of gaining a cosmopolitan outlook, the health promoters’ circumscribed situation implies that they have limited direct involvement in wider networks beyond their local community. Consequently, they will have trouble making contacts and creating new opportunities in a globalized world (Jenkins 2009). As discussed, this has wider implications for the articulation of a truly democratic cosmopolitan politics and the development of inclusive and effective global civic spaces. How can we consider such spaces to be in any way representative of a global consciousness if such actors feel marginalized from them (see also Chandoke 2002)? How can we
explain this apparent shift from a previously relatively broad-based participation at a transnational level, to an apparently more exclusionary ‘global’ civil society? In the following section, we suggest that one way to do so is via an analysis of the articulation of neoliberal professionalization with notions of cosmopolitanism.

Articulating cosmopolitanism and professionalization

Literatures around processes of neoliberal professionalization and forms of cosmopolitanism have remained largely separate. What we want to suggest in this section is that the convergence of these practices in the spaces of global civil society is producing particular disconnections and exclusions. In speaking of ‘neoliberal professionalization’, we draw on the extensive literature concerned with critiquing a process of increasing formalization of third sector interventions in the North and South, accompanied by an emphasis on accountability, efficiency and bureaucracy (Townsend and Townsend 2004), and the co-option of previously radical or alternative concepts and ideologies (Hintjens 1999; Laurie and Bondi 2005). In terms of international development and global civil society, this professionalization has been particularly manifested in the process of NGOization (Alvarez 1998), and in the increasing absorption of NGOs, activists and volunteers into mainstream practices of doing development (Clark 1997; Jenkins 2008; Kamat 2004). The rise of experts and an emphasis on readily transferable expertise are other key elements in the professionalization of development (Laurie et al. 2005). This neoliberal focus on ‘expert’ knowledge essentially prioritizes Western knowledge, based largely on technical, managerial frameworks located within a neoliberal agenda. Citing Crewe and Harrison (1992), Kothari (2005) suggests that local people are often cast as ‘ignorant’, as they are rarely able to keep up to date with the ever-changing fads and buzzwords of development discourse.

The drive towards neoliberal professionalization clearly resonates with certain cosmopolitan discourses outlined earlier, particularly in terms of the globally literate and savvy technocrat, apparently able to move seamlessly between different cultural and social spaces. There are also connections with van de Veer’s critique of colonial cosmopolitanism (van der Veer 2002) and the appropriation of the ‘other’ – such as through the mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge (Laurie et al. 2005) – as part of the effort to dominate. In considering the convergence of cosmopolitanism and professionalization in the arena of global civil society, we argue then that these processes, practices and theoretical conceptualizations of engagement beyond the nation-state are mutually reinforcing in ways that produce exclusions and disconnections at the global level.

We argue that neoliberal professionalization produces a particular and narrow type of cosmopolitan space and, in turn, a particular neoliberalized rendition of global civil society. This is a space shaped by processes of NGOization and new managerialism (Townsend et al. 2002), in which a coterie of professionalized development workers, experts and advocates circulate around a relatively narrow selection of transnational locations, disseminating so-called ‘best practice’ among themselves, applauding...
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transferability and accountability, and deploying appropriate buzzwords and expert knowledge. Townsend et al. (2002) outline the way in which the formalization of NGOs has created a new breed of development expert, one who is well versed in the bureaucracy of funding proposals, fluent in ‘donorspeak’ (Townsend et al. 2002), and up to date with the current buzzwords of the development world. This situation contributes to the creation and consolidation of social hierarchies within and between NGOs, particularly in relation to issues of class and levels of education, with ‘highly professionalized, thematically specialized and transnationalized’ NGOs (Alvarez 1998: 294) dominating global civic spaces and producing narrow renditions of cosmopolitan interactions.

Several authors have begun to consider the tensions that such professionalization creates between grassroots activists and professionalized NGOs. Jenkins highlights a process of polarization between on the ground, hands-on activists and professionalized advocates (Jenkins 2009). Similarly, Markowitz and Tice assert that processes of professionalization have ‘contributed to the persistence or creation of social hierarchies within and between women’s organisations’ (Markowitz and Tice 2002: 941). Lebon highlights ‘the challenges presented by the creation of NGOs for the representation and participation of working-class and non-professionalized activists, due to the fast working pace of professionalized activists’ (Lebon 1997: 2). She poses questions regarding the way the ‘[professionalization of] organizational forms and practices can impinge upon groups’ collective identity and strategies, on the way social movements achieve change, and can constrain or contribute to feelings of belonging and solidarity’ (Lebon 1997: 2).

In this space of professionalized development practices, voices of dissent and contestation are increasingly few. This is a cosmopolitanism that, despite appearances, does not engage with issues around exploitation but instead, as Kamat suggests in relation to the use of ‘good governance’ strategies, moves away from a ‘structural analysis of power and inequality, and instead adopt[s] a technical managerial solution to social issues of power and oppression’ (Kamat 2004: 168). As Chandhoke has observed, interactions within the current rendition of global civil society are ‘permeated deeply by the ethos of the capitalist market, that of self-serving and instrumental action’ (Chandoke 2002: 50). What we can observe is, in a sense, an increasingly instrumental cosmopolitanism, expressed through ‘common’ languages, log-frame systems and ways of doing. In other words, a universality that, in the name of technical expediency, is very much from somewhere, and which generates a set of exclusions and inclusions.

It therefore appears that the neoliberal professionalization of development is generating a narrow version of cosmopolitanism. This underpins a global civil society which in turn demands civic practices that conform to norms of organization and management that appear universal and ‘common sense’. However, these are in fact firmly rooted in Western neoliberal ideals of efficiency, accountability and replicability. This cosmopolitanism neither emerges from openness to difference nor is likely to encourage it. Indeed, it can be seen as reflecting a decosmopolitanization that resonates with Nandy’s claim that Europe and North America have increasingly
lost their cosmopolitanism, paradoxically because of a concept of cosmopolitanism that considers Western culture to be definitionally universal and therefore automatically cosmopolitan (Nandy 1998, cited in Hannerz 2006: 16).

Participation in this particular cosmopolitan order pertains to the availability of social, economic and cultural resources that enable actors and organizations to engage in cosmopolitan practices and spaces – including literacy, access to the internet and resources for foreign travel. In particular, the cosmopolitan spaces of global civil society, whether actual or virtual, tend to demand an advanced level of literacy and a good command of English – as the lingua franca of the international community, of funding bids and of buzzwords. Lacking proficiency in this language of the transnational arena potentially precludes grassroots participation. This acts on two fronts – (i) the use of ‘elitist language’ and ‘abstract terms and words’ (McIlwaine and Datta 2003: 372) can often act to exclude grassroots women from taking part, and (ii) the predominance of English as a lingua franca in international circles excludes the majority of grassroots actors from developing countries. Both these aspects were apparent in the narratives of the Peruvian grassroots activists:

As I said to you, sometimes I don’t know many technical words. I’d like to study more. Do you know why? Because what they taught me at school, I tell you, what they taught me at school was just multiplication, and how to read, and that was it, because my spelling is sometimes terrible. I have to study something, although I don’t know what. To improve, that is, to improve the way I speak, the way I communicate with others. Because, well, when I’m talking to people, chatting like this, I’m relaxed and it’s fine, but with professional people, there are words that they use, technical words, words that leave me not knowing what to say. That’s why I say, ‘no, I’ve got to study. Yes, I’ve got to improve’.

Pilar (health promoter)

And when you were there, in China, did you meet other women who were doing … I don’t know, who were from other parts of the world and had similar experiences?

Interviewer

No … No, no … There wasn’t anything similar, but also there were language difficulties. We only looked for people who spoke Spanish.

Julia (health promoter)

An ability to speak English also appeared to have a certain cachet associated with it. The Peruvian NGO workers Jenkins interviewed would often scatter English words into their conversations with her, as if to mark their cultural capital and to demonstrate their ability to engage with foreign actors in a way that grassroots actors, who spoke only Spanish, could not (see also Datta 2009). In doing so, interviewees could demonstrate proficiency in the ‘donorspeak’ (Townsend et al. 2002) that has become
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essential for successfully engaging with donors and accessing ‘privileged circuits of information and knowledge’ (Mawdsley et al. 2002: 137). Batliwala also highlighted the need to adopt a particular, professionalized discourse in order to engage successfully with transnational actors: ‘both SDI and WIEGO are taken very seriously by international policy institutions because of their capacity to straddle the worlds of global, national, and local policies, to speak the required language, to bring to the negotiating table solid data, analysis, and alternatives’ (Batliwala 2002: 406, our emphasis).

Finally, sustained engagement in the cosmopolitan spaces of global civil society requires the means to travel. While it is by no means essential to travel widely to be cosmopolitan, it may be more necessary to engage in the particular narrow cosmopolitan spaces of neoliberal global civil society, premised on engaging with an internationally mobile elite of professionalized development actors (Taylor and Naidoo 2004) and their technocratic systems of accountability and legitimacy. Although opportunities to travel were previously available to grassroots activists (see discussion above), with alternative and grassroots development now lauded on the international stage, such opportunities seem increasingly reserved for NGO professionals. The latter can, as one NGO director put it, mix with the ‘more modern and more sophisticated [people] … from the North American donor agencies’ (see also Chandoke 2002; Jenkins 2009).

The nature of this cosmopolitan engagement impels actors who participate in these spaces towards ever greater professionalization, while potentially (and, we would argue, actually) excluding those who are unable to fulfil these requirements. Ironically, this excludes those whose participation would make these spaces more genuinely cosmopolitan because they engage in dialogue about values and commitments as opposed to strategy and funding compliance (see also Larmer et al. 2009 for discussion of these issues in relation to the World Social Forum). Implicit in global civil society is an impetus towards the scaling up of ideas and practices beyond the nation-state, again both requiring professionalization and engendering a sense of cosmopolitanism. We thus begin to see some of the ways in which neoliberal professionalization both produces and is predicated on a particular version of cosmopolitanism, and how the intersection of professionalization and cosmopolitanism produces divides within and between global civil society actors, with initial evidence suggesting the marginalization and exclusion of the grassroots from meaningful engagement in transnational political spaces. We suggest that this reflects a decosmopolitanization in its constraint of opportunities to engage with difference at grassroots level and in its one-sided and unacknowledged embeddedness in the social relations and organization of the West.

Reifying the grassroots

So far, we have outlined a scenario in which community-based actors are increasingly excluded from global civil society, as discourses of neoliberal cosmopolitanism and professionalization become ever more established. Paradoxically though, we would
argue that while they are in reality marginalized, the grassroots are actually reified in this process – they are simultaneously central to the spaces of professionalization and cosmopolitanism but distant from them. Let us now consider this assertion in more detail.

Bebbington claims that increasing professionalization of the NGO sector has led many popular organizations to be more wary and more critical of the NGOs that claim to represent them and their interests, creating a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ among many NGOs (Bebbington 1997: 126); this notion of legitimacy is key to our consideration of the dynamics of global civil society. To operate effectively in this sphere, NGOs and other actors must seem to be legitimate representatives of those whose views they claim to represent (Chandoke 2002). They need (at least) to be perceived to be ‘in touch’ with their grassroots constituencies and to share similar perspectives with them. NGOs therefore need the grassroots if they are to maintain their position of authenticity (and ultimately their jobs). Indeed, in Latin America, Pearce contends that ‘popular organisations have asked themselves whether they need NGOs at all, given that these organisations have access to funds, infrastructure and salaries which they gain through claiming to act on their behalf’ (Pearce 1997: 271).

While previously people regarded the grassroots as legitimate and authentic participants in transnational activism, processes of professionalization have embedded a requirement for neoliberal expertise, allowing NGOs to forge a central role for themselves as intermediaries in the global construction and consumption of development knowledges. Bretherton observes that ‘estrangement from grassroots movements is an almost inevitable consequence of sustained participation [by NGOs] in transnational networks’ (Bretherton 2003: 115), and she characterizes transnational networking and conference attendance as creating a growing gap between elite women’s environmental advocacy networks acting in the transnational arena, and grassroots women’s primarily local environmental concerns. This is also echoed by Basu’s assertion that ‘as global activists become more mobile, with community-based activists largely confined to the local level, the chasm between the local and the global becomes more glaring’ (Basu n.d.). An interesting historical parallel can be found in Waterman’s discussion of the labour movement and the decline of ‘proletarian internationalism’ and growth of ‘party internationalism’ in which ‘particular international organizations … were now isolated from the experiences of actually existing proletarians in whole quarters, thirds or halves of the world’ (Waterman 1998: 25).

Returning to the example of the health promoters, despite a growing distanciation, the NGO that oversees the project continues to use the emblematic health project as a source of ongoing authenticity and a symbol of the NGO’s embeddedness with grassroots activists, presenting the health promoters’ work to journalists, researchers and other foreign visitors as an exemplar of successful grassroots development (Jenkins 2009). The project is also cited as best practice at an international level. As Jenkins observed, ‘an ostensibly close relationship with the grassroots is essential to legitimate the knowledges that NGOs produce about the grassroots’ (Jenkins 2009: 890) – whether these knowledges are in the form of funding proposals, project
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reports, books, research, or video documentaries, they are the products of the development industry. This all serves to consolidate the position and legitimacy of the NGO in the wider development sphere, particularly in terms of securing future funding (principally for other larger scale projects), rather than to consolidate the position of the health promotion project, the future of which is uncertain.

Particular ‘types’ of grassroots activist are also required to confer this legitimacy. These are often indigenous or ‘exotic’ bodies that serve to reinforce issues of difference, distance and ‘otherness’ but appeal to Western publics and donors as ‘authentic’. ‘Ethnicity is increasingly salient’ to the successful insertion of social movement activism into the transnational sphere (Brysk 2000: 29), and grassroots activists whose identities are not currently constructed in such appealing or exoticized terms may therefore be at greater risk of marginalization from global practices (see also Jenkins 2009). When one of us showed the health promoters ‘their’ webpage about the health promotion project (published by the NGO), they were very surprised to find that a picture of a rural indigenous woman in traditional Andean dress represented their urban project. They asked, ‘why does it show a photo of a woman from the sierra? No one who comes [here] will ever meet a woman like that!’ In engaging in these forms of knowledge production, NGOs act as intermediaries between the grassroots and the broader professionalized cosmopolitan sphere. They simultaneously construct and reinforce a particular rendition of ‘cosmopolitan’ global civic spaces in which grassroots actors are apparently present yet actually absent.

Conclusion

Scholars often portray spaces of transnational activism as non-hierarchical oppositional networks (Harcourt and Escobar 2002) that can provide development activists with a source of strength and power to further local agendas through transnational and translocal solidarities (Castree 2004). The scenario we outline, however, suggests a very real need to consider the power dynamics and hierarchies embedded in transnational development networks and global civil society more broadly. Bartelson calls for a focus on what can be achieved through deploying the concept of global civil society – ‘what kind of world can be constituted, and what kinds of beliefs, institutions and practices can be justified through the usage of this concept?’ (Bartelson 2006: 372). In this light, articulating understandings of neoliberal professionalization and neoliberal versions of cosmopolitan practice provides an opportunity to unsettle assumptions about the representativeness of global civic spaces, both actual and imagined. Our theorization suggests the possible decosmopolitanization of global civil society, as global civic spaces become less cosmopolitan in terms of having a real openness to difference and dialogue, and an engagement with development agendas beyond the nuts and bolts of neoliberal efficiency. We therefore highlight the need to interrogate further the implications of this shrinking of cosmopolitan possibilities for grassroots activists who have so far been pivotal to the legitimacy of these spaces. What we see is a move away from traditional notions of solidarity, political transformation and multi-scalar dialogue, towards a much more
instrumental conception of global civil society and the transnational and (potentially) cosmopolitan encounters that take place within it. These interactions are increasingly predicated on the need to demonstrate legitimacy and authority, and on the need for NGOs and other actors to secure a viable ongoing role in the transnational sphere. In the process of doing this, very real political possibilities are being removed, and we argue that this has important implications for legitimacy and authority, as well as for the broader articulation of global civic spaces that allow for critical and transformative encounters across difference as the foundation for more equitable ideas and practices of development and democracy.

Notes

1. This was part of the Fourth UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.
2. This need for English language skills has also been highlighted as a requirement for effective engagement in other cosmopolitan spaces and contexts (Datta 2009).
3. This webpage has now been changed and the photo removed, though we have no way of knowing whether this reflects this incident.

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