Environmental Movements, Civil Society and Globalization: An Introduction

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In recent years the issues of globalization, civil society and a heightened concern for environment have simultaneously made inroads in serious intellectual as well as public discussions. Environmental movements in the United States in the 1970s arose in the context of broader civil rights and feminist movements. Although these movements had a global dimension, they started as local, at best, national movements. The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 marked the coming of age of environmental movement as a global movement. Civil society organizations took part in the Earth Summit alongside the representatives of the states (McCoy and McCully 1993). NGOs (non-governmental organizations) as the visible constituents of civil society began to play an increasingly important role in the protection and nurturance of the environment. Civil society is defined as a social space beyond the realm of the state; it is neither government nor private market. It is a public realm constituted by private individuals and groups pursuing public interests. Environment being a public good per excellence came to attract the attention of a variety of civil society organizations.

Michael Walzer (1995) has defined civil society as the space of uncoerced human associations as well as the set of relational networks. The focus in this definition is on uncoerced, that is, voluntarily formed associations. It can be assumed that such associations are more likely to be found under conditions of democracy than non-democracy. Democratization and the emergence of civil society go hand in hand. Although it is difficult to indicate a temporal, unidirectional, cause-effect relationship between civil society and democracy, it can be said without inviting much controversy that civil society is a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for democratization. The set of relations that was believed to be contained within national boundaries now has gone transnational, global. Democracy, as a political institution as well as a set of ideals, has also become global. Since the collapse of the authoritarian regimes in South Europe in the 1970s, a wave of democratization has affected countries in Latin America and East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. In many of these countries, there were pre-existing realms of civil society that either played a key role
in the process of democratization, or where they were too moribund to play a role, became revitalized after the return of democracy.

The main function of civil society is to challenge and thus to prevent the establishment of monopoly of power and truth. This view of Ernest Gellner has particular relevance to the environmental movement that civil society shoulders. Issues of environment are too important to be left in the hands of a singular authority. Competing views, rational debates and pluralism — the ingredients of civil society and democracy — provide a more effective basis for the protection of environment.

Both civil society and the environmental movement have become global in the sense that:

1. More and more societies are experiencing a heightened concern for environment;
2. Organized groups of private citizens are engaging in collective actions to uphold public interest;
3. These groups are either acting alone, or are being aided by like-minded groups elsewhere; and,
4. Globally, the NGOs with transnational reach have gained more in terms of stature and legitimacy.

**Enter Globalization**

Discourses of globalization have grown manifold over the last decade (Robertson and Khondker, 1998). Globalization has become a contested conceptual terrain. There are globophiles as there are globophobics. Globophiles endorse the neo-liberal position of the presumed beneficial effects of the free-market. On the one hand, economic globalization following the logic of neo-liberalism is causing disruption to culture and environment throughout the world. On the other hand, environmental movements have become global in their connectivity as well as influence. When people across national borders take part in collective actions, sharing a common set of ideas and values, we can see a new form of globalization, a globalization from below (Falk 2000). Organized groups and coalitions of groups engaged in a common struggle to prevent environmental destruction are confronting the corporations or the states representing the other facet of globalization.

There is also globalization from above as there is globalization from below. The former refers to the integration of market and the forces of liberalization. This view has its roots in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (Marx and Engels 1967). Globalization from below refers to the organized resistance at the local level that seeks to forge solidarity with struggling people all around the world.