

The following is my understanding of the key arguments in each of these texts:

- David Riff (1999) cautions the reader against over-emphasizing the role and potential of civil society as a force in the contemporary world, particularly in the context of the role of the nation state. Michael Clough is more optimistic about the current and potential role of civil society; however, he attributes the criticism of civil society to the idea that they “claimed too much too soon” and that perhaps civil society ought to acknowledge that bringing about real change and garnering respect is a slow and gradual process.
- Smith et al., (1997) outline a theoretical framework of social movements. The authors touch on mobilizing structures, various issue networks, opportunity structures, and movement strategies. A salient point made by the authors is that classical international relations typically accounted for interactions between governments and intergovernmental organizations. And that the inclusion of NGOs and transnational actors results in an expansion of this interactive network. This point underlies the three key assumptions of the author’s theoretical framework: interdependence makes international coordination critical, states are complex entities and should not be treated as unitary actors, and domestic and international political processes are increasingly interdependent.
- Kaldor (2003) aims to dissect the notion of ‘global civil society’. Kaldor offers an interesting history of the evolution of the concept of civil society from the 1800s to the 1990s. She underscores that in the 1990s the new perception of civil society represented two things: a withdrawal from the state and a shift towards global rules and institutions.
- Mathews (1997) provides a rather alarmist account of the imminent demise of the nation state and the equally imminent move for civil society to fill the subsequent void. She describes, in broad brushstrokes, examples of the momentum of globalization and way in which governments are “left behind” as a consequence. Mathews refers to the proliferation of multilateral environmental agreements, the globalization of financial markets, and the increasing prominence of international organizations.
- Clark (2003) provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of play of civil society. Clark describes the growth of civil society at the global level, the perception by civil society organizations that advocacy is a chief sector to focus on, and how civil society organizations orchestrate effective campaigns. Clark’s conclusion is particularly insightful: he questions why it is that civil society organizations tend to target intergovernmental organizations rather than the governments (specifically the Northern governments) themselves? Clark pointedly remarks that “[a]n unwillingness to blame either governments or national business elites for poverty and inequity denies the paths to poverty reduction that have been the mainstay of social reform in rich countries, such as progressive taxation and welfare benefits” (Clark, 2003).

In sum, I found Mathews (1997) piece, and particularly the alarmist tone of her piece, unhelpful. It is a gross oversimplification to claim the demise of national governments. Rather, a more thoughtful account of the *changing* role of national governments would have been more compelling. In stark contrast to Mathew’s article, the article by Rieff (1999) and Clark (2003) were very refreshing in terms of their critical analysis of both the strengths and weaknesses of civil society. Rieff (1999) underscores an often overlooked or ignored facet of the discourse on civil society – namely, the profound influence of liberal market capitalism and globalization on civil society.

Questions based on the Readings:

- Are civil society organizations targeting the right groups through their campaigns, papers, and activities on the ground? Clark (2003) seems to think that the way civil society organizations are “overemphasizing intergovernmental organizations is a form of scapegoating” (Clark, 2003).
- Both Clark (2003) and Mathews (1997) refer to the idea of a “democratic deficit”. Does this mean the same thing in all countries? To what extent can civil society organizations truly contribute to the discourse on democratic deficits?
- Kaldor (2003) lists three paradigms of global civil society in the 1990s: the activist version, the neo-liberal version, and the postmodern version. Is this list comprehensive? Why or why not?