

**Defining the present, shaping the future:
Making the present amenable to transformation¹**

by

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The thinking in question remains unassuming because its task is only of a preparatory, not of a founding character. It is content with awakening a readiness in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain. *Martin Heidegger*

My role ... is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. *Michel Foucault*

PRELUDE

“The *raison d’être* of CoNGO,” Liberato Bautista states, “deals with facilitating the access of NGOs at the UN so that NGOs, particularly those in consultative status with the UN, are able to speak their voice and meaningfully exercise their crucial role as stakeholders in global governance and as one of the pillars of the international system.” “The voice[s] and aspirations of civil society,” he continues, “are welling up to be heard and heeded. But there is a global deficit in democratic governance, and venues for political discourse are shrinking.” Sounding a clarion call, your outgoing president concludes, “I hope we will seize the moment and act as an organization in helping ‘define the present and shape a future of a world that is more just, peaceable, secure, and sustainable, especially because it is founded on human rights and lived in mutual respect and tolerance.’”

While I am somewhat skeptical about the capacity of institutions that self-identify with “global civil society” to exercise a consistent and transformative role in the context of the UN system, I do not believe that they will wither away—or that they should. For these institutions, according to Jacques Derrida, have always re-presented human societies: its “scenography, its views, conflicts, contradictions, its play and its differences, and also its desire for organic union in a total body.” In fact, these institutions—such as we know them today—are more necessary than ever, because they are already implicated in society as sites for practices that shape human experience—and, as sites of contestation, of contending perspectives, commitments, values, about the good, the true, and the beautiful, they are necessary in the robust articulation of a just, sustainable, and participatory human future.

Focusing the conversation

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As I understand it, my task today is to speak to the theme of this assembly “from the perspective of “global civil society.” Being a relic in the extremely complex, not to mention contested world both of the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it, including their apparatuses, and discursive formations, I must acknowledge at the outset that in a world of information overloads, knowledge-based hyper realities, explosive asymmetries on a planetary scale, and diversities that are often perceived to be incommensurable—I find that such perspectival assertions about “global civil society” or claims about “global governance” not to mention convictions about being major players or pillars in the current world system, are deeply problematic, at best, ill-advised, and at its worst, possibly strategically-dangerous.

Please understand that I mean no disrespect, nor state a criticism. In fact, I speak less of our shared aspirations—for a more just, peaceable, secure, and sustainable, world founded on the generations of human rights and lived in mutual respect and tolerance of our multistranded diversities; and even far less of the very real achievements of many of our human institutions that have reached out beyond conventional personal, political, historical, and religio-moral boundaries—sometimes under extremely challenging circumstances. No doubt, these are worthy of our individual and collective recognition, acknowledgement, gratitude, and ongoing support.

However, I would be committing both a very real arrogance and an almost unforgivable disservice if I do not express at the outset a somewhat modulated skepticism about the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it—including CoNGO. There are at least two philosophical reasons for this: on the one hand, if there is one lesson that I have learned in my teaching, research, and advocacy over the past thirty years, it is that the work of institutions no matter how noble or desirous of the sublime, is still a passage through privilege; and unqualified privilege, particularly in a world of volatile asymmetries, is not only contagious or tempting, but often exacerbates already existing democratic deficits, eloquently described, for example in the Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations, “We the peoples” civil society, the United Nations and global governance.”

On the other hand, we all know that we are a species marked, not only by reason, or by freedom, but also by error and “fallibility.” In fact, if Michel Foucault is right, the history of institutions may be interpreted as an open-ended, experimental history of multiple visions and revisions, some more lasting than others, and that error and fallibility productively understood, constitute, “not a neglect or a delay of the promised fulfillment but the dimension peculiar to the life of human beings and indispensable to the duration [*temps*] of the species.”

In this context, I find it important, at least for my work to always begin with embracing the need for self-critical accountability as a spiritual, methodological, and political necessity, especially in the face of human tendencies toward hubris, benign neglect, or the failure of political will.

Instead of trying to provide yet another narrative about “global civil society,” or rehearse the issues that the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it should be addressing, I would prefer to make, in a spirit of dialogue, some general observations about the context in which “global civil society” finds itself, to raise some questions about some of the issues that are embedded in these dialogues, and to offer an evaluative/interpretive perspective about the political and institutional conditions of possibility that may have a bearing on how we might contribute to the definitions of the present and the shaping of the future from our respective as well as collective locations.

Entering the discussion in this way does at least two things, which I believe are important for the future of this ongoing, turbulent and necessary dialogue. First, by situating the conversation within an ongoing discussion of the relevance, adequacy, and desirability of normative foundations for politics and international relations, I wish not only to recognize the importance of the conversation itself, but the necessity of re-affirming the relationship between the public character of our normative foundations and the normative character of the public. Dominant political discourse post 9/11 particularly in the US bears the marks of an auto-referential subjectivity (subjectism) linked to racialized and sexualized imperial power, an exceptionalism that has infected

the dominant political discourse around international relations—despite some of the aspirational breakthroughs, say for example, under the Obama administration. At the same time, it reveals my “preferential option” for transformation as the explicit purpose of NGO work and therefore its orienting, if not operational, principle.

Second, by accepting the multiple locations and positionalities of our multi-stranded diversities as the methodological and spiritual starting point for NGO work, I wish to signal my refusal to enter into the extremely well rehearsed disputes about whose claims about “global civil society” take precedence or which models, perspectives, and strategies are more relevant or important—disputes that I have found largely unhelpful, if sometimes debilitating, and frequently polarizing. At the same time, my particular affirmation of diversity is tied to a recognition not only that the boundaries, territories, and containers of NGO work, in particular, and of “global civil society” in general, are far more permeable than has often been acknowledged in theory and in practice, but also that the virtue of living in leaky containers lies in the strength it provides to refuse the temptation of essentializing or homogenizing the meaning and significance of the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it. Such essentializing tends to accompany assertions about the desirability of impermeable, uncontaminated boundaries, territories, and containers—a temptation that continues to this day to hold many captive under its enchanting spell. Such uncontaminated boundaries are, in my view, not only a human impossibility; but a sure recipe for the “end of politics.”

Defining the present:

THE NORMATIVE AND PUBLIC CHARACTER OF “GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY”

One of the important, though by no means globally unique, features of the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it is its normative and public character. While these institutions have not always been perceived as “useful” or “relevant” to life on this planet, nonetheless, they have generally been associated with judgments about the quality of institutional and political life, and have been seen as an important, if not the primary structure and process for achieving a level of peace and security, social justice, economic well-being, ecological sustainability, and positive identity on a world scale. It is true, of course, that the reality of a “global civil society” is not exhausted by accredited organizations around the UN system, embodied, for example in the work of NGOs represented at this important gathering. In fact, some of the most interesting, not to mention innovative and relevant, forms of non-state based political work in the service of transformation are occurring “outside” the UN system. By “transformation” I mean, the creation and nurture of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better.

Such NGO work not only addresses the needs of specific communities, but they are also, by their existence, challenging the very nature, understanding, and boundaries of “global civil society,” in general, and of NGO work, in particular. While not the primary concern of my presentation today, let me simply remind us that the long and continuing contestation regarding the relationship between “NGOs,” “peoples’ movements,” and/or other “social networks” that some of you will recall reaches back to the 1980s, remains critical today as we seek to define the present and shape the future. More than a populist ideological argument, the question of the relationship is an historical, empirical, representational, and ethical one. To put the matter starkly, if you will agree that the NGO world is only a small sliver of humanity, albeit an important one, on what basis do we think, act, and feel that we can represent the rest of humanity—as our claims about global governance and our place in the “international system” seem to suggest?

It is well for us to be reminded of the richly-textured and variegated normative foundations on which are based the work of institutions that surround and accompany the UN which self-identify with “global civil

society”: from the UN Charter itself, to the declarations on human rights, and, the rights of indigenous peoples, to the conventions on women, children, and, persons with disabilities; to the UN summits and world conferences; and, to the respective founding and programmatic documents of these institutions themselves. Not to be forgotten are the efforts in the past decade alone, of your own work on the Millennium Development Goals, “We will spare no effort,” encouraged no doubt, by the normative inertias of the work within the UN system itself, including, for example, the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations, noted previously. And of course there are the UN FAO hosted World Food Summits in 1996 and 2002, perhaps the least documented of the UN international conferences, yet extremely significant for the participation of civil society, due in no small measure to the relevance to vast populations of the world of the issues they tried to tackle.

While the content of these normative foundations—both documentary and practical as well as institutional—are context-specific, as the UN FAO world food summits illustrate, they nevertheless provide a common framework and understanding for what might constitute human need, as well as what it might take to meet these human needs on a world scale. And while the quality of human life cannot be guaranteed by these normative foundations as such, the framework that they provide, the practices that arise from their shared interpretation, and the willingness of the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it, to submit to their authority, allow for public space to emerge without which there can be no responsibility, accountability, and assessments for and of “the good, the true, and the beautiful” in most parts of our deeply troubled and threatened planet. Illustrative of what I mean here is the work of some organizations around maximizing the impact of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that “formally recognized the relationship between women, peace, and security, and the critical importance of women’s participation as reflected in leadership, empowerment, and decision making.”

The abiding challenge, of course, has always been less the linguistic and documentary victories occasioned by these documentary examples, and more, the creation and nurture on the one hand, of what Nora McKeon has called, “intercommunicating terrains on which meaningful confrontation and negotiation can take place” among the UN and the NGOs that surround and accompany it—much in the same way it happened over “sixty years ago when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was crafted around a table fractured by the Cold War”; and on the other hand, the creation and nurture of appropriate, innovative, and self-critical competencies—other than knowledge and information—both within and across the NGOs that surround and accompany the UN. To put the matter bluntly, while both access and giving voice to our aspirations are constitutive of this critical intercommunicating terrains, and are therefore necessary within the wider UN system in order to define the present and shape the future, the transformation of the present and the future also requires of us the personal and institutional grace and courage to hold up a mirror to ourselves in order to determine whether we are truly bearers of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better, or whether we have wittingly or unwittingly played into the hands of the “iron cage of bureaucracy” or worse, mistaken it for the promised land.

Moreover, conventional wisdom understands these normative foundations as having both aspirational as well as regulatory dimensions. While the ideal relationship between these dimensions is one of complementarity, we all can acknowledge that it has not always been fully achieved in practice. In fact, when normative foundations are oriented exclusively around regulation, their character as discursive practices by particular communities tends to be eclipsed. They lose their dynamism and are reduced to regulatory “technologies”—that are suspect across the political and institutional terrains. Similarly, when normative foundations are oriented to contingent aspirations devoid of any regulatory expectations, human community

slides down the slippery slope into mere survival. Even if many of us would refuse Hobbes characterization of humanity as *homo homini lupus* (“man is a wolf to man”), the asymmetries occasioned by human diversity and exacerbated by scarcity may require certain regulatory technologies appropriate to the nurture and preservation of human life. The work, for example of Global Action to Prevent War (GAWP) in relation to the United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) “promoting the United Nation’s ability to respond quickly and effectively to outbreaks of genocide, crimes against humanity, or other humanitarian disasters,” is illustrative of what I mean here.

However, the proverbial “elephant in the room” is not so much whether we can balance the aspirational and the regulatory. Rather, it is whether we, as a species have the grace and the courage to refuse the temptation of orienting normative foundations exclusively around the notion of *compliance*—compliance either to an aspiration or to a regulation. In fact, normative foundations, both documentary and practical as well as institutional, are more than aspirations or regulations; and political and ethical life is more than compliance. They are, to borrow from the language of literary theory, not only “empty signifiers” that invite interpretation, but are also “cartographical markers” not for what quality is, but what quality should include. Comprehensively understood, normative foundations are a collection of codified, summative (and therefore retrospective) “best practices”—a tradition, if you will—not only of life together on this planet, but of “living well together”—to use Jacques Derrida’s phrase, by and for what Etienne Wenger, in a different though not unrelated context calls, “communities of practice,” which are not unlike the “intercommunicating terrains” noted previously.

DILEMMAS AND ORIENTATIONS: SOCIAL, POLITICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, INSTITUTIONAL

What is not always readily admitted in discussions of NGO work at the UN is that not unlike the institutions out of which such work arises, NGOs are creatures of multistranded histories comprehensively and variously understood as “space,” as “political-economic-cultural artifact,” as “religio-moral event,” as “structures and processes of capital, goods, information, people, ideas and images” and, as “ecosystem”—each calling for their own appropriate mechanisms and technologies of thinking, feeling, and acting. Put in this way, any discussion about “defining the present, shaping the future” will have to carefully attend to these histories that not only gave them birth, but which continue to nurture, shape, and engage them.

In the first place, our world in the early years of the 21st century no longer resembles the world, which gave birth to the UN system. The cultural critic Slavoj Žižek provides us with a clear, if somewhat pessimistic interpretation of our present context. “The global capitalist system,” he writes, “is approaching an apocalyptic zero point. The ‘four riders of the apocalypse’ are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property); forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food, and water; and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.”

It is true, of course, that global capital, the transnational reach of multinational corporations, modern science, technology, and higher education, the so-called information and cyberspace revolution—and the post-9/11 long march towards an all encompassing incarcerative design for society that seeks to preserve and defend the gains of capitalist-led globalization post-1989, are generating movements toward global integration presided over by the unrepentant mandarins of modernity. At the same time, movements in the Global South that are celebrating, in the midst of struggles against global capital, the gains of hard earned structures and processes of shared governance, globally-oriented citizenship, and compassionate transnational, particularly South-South solidarities, cannot be denied.

The proliferation of states, peoples, and movements, often local in orientation, as well as the growing and widespread skepticism towards the project of modernity (the limits and pitfalls of modern science and technology, as well as the international system of states, for example), are generating countervailing movements, sometimes profoundly conflictual even violent, not only towards fragmentation, displacement and dislocation, but also to an appreciation of plurality, locality, and particularity. I have argued elsewhere that these movements have always often been associated with the realities of Diaspora and the intersectionalities of “race,” gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, generation, and nationalism including both productive and coercive forms of power across multiple spatial and temporal locations and positionalities.

In the second place, the UN itself, and the NGOs that surround and accompany it, continues to be *sites* of contestation, precisely because the successes of global predatory capital, its market-driven institutions, and the values that legitimize these institutions no longer offer a compelling vision of the future. It can be argued, that this contestation is fundamentally about the conviction, as Richard Falk puts it, that “the struggle for a sustainable and just world order is no longer primarily a matter of institutional arrangements, global governance, or developmental strategy as seemed the case up until the start of the present century.” In fact, I am almost persuaded to revive an earlier conviction of mine that, in the words of Falk, “the main historically relevant emancipatory forces are those associated with a variety of grassroots and transnational social movements, ecumenical aspects of the world religions, localized agriculture and self-sustaining communities, and private forms of spirituality”—an almost symmetrical argument made by CoNGO and other NGOs that surround and accompany the UN.

The argument, compelling as it may be, needs to be qualified, at least on two equally compelling grounds: first, by the claims of many post-authoritarian states, particularly in the Global South, like South Africa, the Philippines, Nicaragua, to name only a few, where the “historically relevant emancipatory forces” have been associated with institutions oriented around “civil society” that, given a global polity committed to neoliberalism, the role of the state and its apparatuses in defining the present and shaping the future ought not to be ignored; and second, by the justified insistence, precisely of these “historically relevant emancipatory forces” that, given the democratic deficits and infirmities of the present global polity, including the UN system and the NGOs that surround and accompany it, the question of access, voice, and decision-making need to be unconditionally extended to those who have been historically excluded from the conversation.

Still, It is difficult to arrive at a substantive consensus at the theoretical level, let alone the political, as to what, for example, the shape of this collaboration between “state” and “civil society” can or ought to be. Where CoNGO and other NGOs are concerned, the question may be stated thus: What should the primary mission of these institutions ought to be, or the role, which they should play both within the UN system and in global governance? Should CoNGO, for example, continue to focus on facilitating the access of NGOs at the UN in order “to speak their voice and meaningfully exercise their crucial role as stakeholders in global governance and as one of the pillars of the international system”? Or should NGOs at the UN focus their resources on building competencies, skill sets, or sensitivities *beyond the knowledge and information that they so ably provide*, and making them available to UN member states who may need them, but which they do not receive from the UN system itself? Can we assume that access, speaking one’s voice, and meaningfully exercising stakeholder prerogative, assure UN reform, if not global transformation? Does access guarantee transformation? In what ways are NGOs empirically the pillars of the international system?

In addition, the notion of community which is central to the language and experience of NGOs, and on which many ground their *raison d'être* has raised more questions than it has provided answers. While globalizing identities and communities continue to emerge, and while we may yet in our lifetime see the institutionalizing of a global civilization mediated through a planetary cyberspace, both hyperrealist identities, structures and patterns of actually-existing communities, tied to territorial claims, particularly of the state and/or of ethnic groups, still remain and continue to hold sway. The reigning definition of “community” still appears to be articulated along dichotomous, if not divisive lines—the civilized versus the barbarian, the inside versus outside, the friend versus enemy, the domestic versus the international, the resource-rich versus the resource-deprived. Despite the linguistic and documentary victories regarding normative foundations noted previously, this reigning definition of “community” is oriented towards their perceived, if not recognized, stakeholders: ethnic and/or racial, gender, class, age, and sexual preference, as well as academic or professional disciplines, and, religious communities along with the imagined or real asymmetries of power, position, and privilege that often accompany these asymmetries.

In the third place, it is still difficult to speak about universally applicable normative foundations for shared NGO work given what for a long time now has been called the “unevenness of development.” Historically, this unevenness has been articulated as the difference between “core and periphery,” “North-South,” “First World-Third World,” and “Global South-Global North.” Often the unevenness is legitimated by practices rooted in assertions of gender, class, and racial superiority—despite a growing pessimism about the capacity of existing superiorities to deliver the planet from ecological disasters and fundamentalist invasions. This problem of unevenness lies not only in the vastly different theoretical and practical contexts in which NGOs have come to be situated in the present—contexts which themselves are undergoing profound changes, not least of all in the epistemological and political domains. Nor does the problem of unevenness emerge only as a question of redistribution of resources—political, economic, and cultural. In fact, there are very real and principled differences, both inter-and intra institutionally, in the ways NGOs are organized, supported, and developed, which profoundly shape the nature and character of each institution, their work, and engagement with others.

The conflicts arising from these differences cannot simply be resolved by appealing to some universal political role which institutions that self-identify with “global civil society” are said to play in the world. What is often overlooked is that the problem of unevenness also raises critical questions about commensurability, applicability, and translatability. I have grave doubts that this epistemic dilemma can be resolved at the theoretical/conceptual level alone. Such unevenness can only be addressed, if not overcome, by intentionally providing contexts and opportunities for encountering, engaging with, the historical Others who continually *displace* or *rèplace* our best intentions and desires for peace and security, social justice, economic well-being, ecological sustainability, and, positive identity.

ORIENTATIONS:

“SHAPING THE FUTURE—MAKING THE PRESENT AMENABLE TO TRANSFORMATION

I wish to conclude my presentation this morning by turning my attention to the second part of the theme of this assembly: “Shaping the future.”

I must confess that I have a practical, and therefore, philosophical, problem with the formulation of the proposition, “shaping the future.” Borrowing from Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese-American poet, philosopher, and writer, how can we shape something that “dwell[s] in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams?” Methodologically, the “future” has been associated with, if not deployed, in a number of ways

including as a normative framework, or as a projection of a “preferred world,” or as a compass, or as a destination. The future, in fact, is not unlike a vast horizon that orients the present by virtue of its always-receding temporal distance and consistent spatial emptiness. Transformation, it seems, requires that a “clearing” in the present be created in order to allow the fundamentally new and better to emerge. In this sense, the future is not a culminating point in the long march of history set apart from the past and the present; rather it is a moment of time and space that makes the present amenable to transformation.

I invite, us then, to consider how we can help in making this shared, deeply troubled, present of ours amenable to transformation.

Earlier in this presentation I asked whether we have the grace and the courage to hold up a mirror, not only to the UN, the NGOs that surround and accompany it, including their apparatuses, and discursive formations, and to global civil society, but also to ourselves in order to determine whether we are truly bearers of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better, or whether we have wittingly or unwittingly played into the hands of the “iron cage of bureaucracy” or worse, mistaken it for the promised land. I raise it here again, still not as critique but as invitation, as part of the complex task of making the present amenable to transformation.

In this spirit of shared responsibility, transparency, and accountability I leave with you several straightforward questions without further elaboration from the podium which I would pose—not as interrogation but as preparation—to our normative foundations, institutional priorities and programs, organizational strategies, administrative practices, and, personal sensitivities. Questions, in this context, have a three-fold significance for me: first, they are *performative*; second, they *pre-figure the normative*; and, third, they are *suggestive of human capacities and competencies*. Thus, Rainer Maria Rilke, in “Letter Four” of his *Letters to a Young Poet*, can be understood as asking of us today, “to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. And the point,” Rilke adds, “is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

Many of the questions I will leave with you, I am sure you have already asked of yourselves; so this is nothing new. But, it may well be, that at this Convocation of 24th General Assembly of your organization, when you return again to your founding principles, asking these questions one more time, it might provide additional “clearing”—Martin Heidegger referred to it as *Lichtung*—so that the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better which I believe all of us desire, might give of itself to our deeply troubled and threatened world through us.

Are our normative foundations, institutional priorities and programs, organizational strategies, administrative practices, and, personal sensitivities—

...“green,” (ecologically) efficient, and “sustainable”?

Are they personally and institutionally “strategic”?

Do they build appropriate, innovative, and useful competencies?

Do they build collegiality, diversity, and transformative leadership?

Do they build networks of solidarity across the contested terrains of global civil society?

Are they personally, professionally and institutionally, “dialogical”?

Are they missionally, substantively, and procedurally “honorable”?

Are they genuinely hospitable?

Are they “beautiful”?

Are they “truthful”?

Do they create and nurture mindfulness and receptiveness to self, other, and world?

Thank you for your hospitality and willingness to engage in dialogue.