Civil Society and Public Relations: Not So Civil After All
Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman

Available online: 19 Nov 2009
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Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman
Department of Communication
Purdue University

Recent articles appearing in communication outlets such as Human Communication Research and Public Relations Review celebrate the emancipatory power of civil society projects as the solution to the primitive forms of totalitarian governance in Third World nations, suggesting the central role of public relations scholars and practitioners in development communication. Having embraced the mantra of civil society, these public relations scholars suggest that the concept of civil society offers a paradigm shift in the field of development communication by facilitating “true” participatory communication. This article takes a critical approach to the rhetoric of civil society and points out that the civil society trope is not a novel innovation in the field of development communication. Using the narratives of the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua, it is demonstrated that civil society serves the goals of the transnational elite and actively participates in the marginalization of the Third World participant; the subaltern subject in the Third World exists outside the realm of civil society in its cracks and fissures. The author takes a political economic approach to problematize civil society efforts and draw out the linkages among civil society, colonialism, and transnational market hegemony. Finally, subaltern studies are offered as an alternative point for communication scholars interested in understanding the communicative practices in the marginalized spaces of the world.

Recent years have witnessed a surge in public relations scholarship on civil society (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2000). Celebrated as the ultimate expression of “civilization,” civil society is a social order of citizenship in which actively engaged citizens manage their relationships and settle their disputes according to the codes of a legal system (Kumar, 1993). Set
in opposition to the uncivilized condition of primitive states, it is characterized by “private and public associations and organizations, all forms of cooperative social relationships that create bonds of trust, public opinion, legal rights and institutions and political parties that voice public opinion and call for action” (Alexander, 1998, p. 3). Public relations scholars studying the concept have discussed the development of communication skills and macro-level systems for the building of civil society (Kraidy, 1998; Taylor, 2000a, 2000b). In this body of scholarship, civil society is a critical element of nation-building efforts that fall under the rubric of development communication, primarily sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in war-torn nations such as Croatia, Kosovo, and Iraq (Kraidy, 1998; Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). The skills-based approach to civil society argues that public relations scholars and practitioners could contribute their skills in the creation of media systems and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that would serve as the conduits of civil society by encouraging participation and dialogue among citizens (Jacobson & Jang, 2002; Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). Taken for granted in these communicative articulations of civil society are ethical questions about what embodies civil society. Also absent from the discussions are the inherent Eurocentric biases in dominant articulations and categorizations of civil and uncivil societies, and the link between civil society and colonialism (Escobar, 1995).

These gaps in the public relations literature on civil society are problematic because the vision of building civil societies is used as a justification for imperialist invasions of Third World1 nations, as witnessed in the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Whereas some of these invasions are overtly implemented, others are covertly carried out through persuasive strategies such as grant programs, foreign assistance programs, and democracy promotion initiatives (Escobar, 1995). Based on a practical-critical approach that focuses on criticizing the praxis of public relations, in this article I offer an interrogation of the concept of civil society (Craig, 1989; Woodward, 2003). I first review the literature in public relations on civil society and then present a cultural criticism of the concept based on case studies of the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua. Next, I suggest subaltern studies as an alternative discursive space for understanding participatory communication and marginalization practices in the Third World. Drawing on Said’s (1979) criticism of the Eurocentric bias in the academy, subaltern studies reflect a disciplinary approach of knowledge construction from the bottom (Guha, 1984, Spivak, 1988). The goal of the subaltern studies project is to include the voices of marginalized

1Throughout this article, I use the phrase Third World to refer to the part of the world that typically is the receiver of public relations programs. Also, I use the phrase the West to refer to the part of the world at the center that typically sends out the public relations messages.
people that have traditionally been silenced in the academy and to foreground the positions that are typically erased from the dominant epistemic structures. In the final section of this article, I offer theoretical and pragmatic suggestions for the incorporation of subaltern studies into public relations.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

As I pointed out in the beginning of this article, public relations scholarship on the concept of civil society begins with the notion that civil society is the elixir to the problems of the Third World and therefore can play a key role in development communication (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2000). Taylor (2000b) posited that the breakdown of civil societies during human crises in nation–states has paved the way for civil society building initiatives launched by international organizations and governments as a part of their humanitarian efforts. The role of public relations in civil society building is primarily conceptualized in the realm of media development (Jacobson & Jang, 2002; Taylor, 2000a, 2000b) and interorganizational relationship building (Taylor, 2000a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003).

Drawings on Habermas’s (1981, 1989) theory of communicative action, proponents of civil society articulate the important role of the public sphere in promoting democracies. Public relations scholars investigating the role of the media in civil societies argue that the development of free media spaces independent of the state is essential to the participation of individuals in civil society (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b). The public sphere in civil society is essential for communication among citizens about their ideas, concerns, and opinions (Jacobson & Jang, 2002; Taylor, 2000a, 2000b). Jacobson and Jang pointed out the importance of communication skills in the development of free media and argued that communication scholars need to put forth normative theories of the press informed by the commitment to global civil society. In the prescriptive recipe put forth by Jacobson and Jang, the role of media scholars is critical in the development of free media. These scholars proposed a global civil society in which media can be evaluated in the backdrop of globally applicable universal criteria, informed by the goal of propelling global democracy (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). Studies on the relationship between the media and civil society have empirically documented the role of the media in civil societies, have described the relationships among the media and other organizations in civil societies, and have participated in the tasks of media relations to build independent media in Third World nations (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003).

Recent work in public relations also has investigated the relationship-building role in creating intra- and interorganizational relationships in civil societies (Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). Civil societies are founded on the existence of independent
organizational units that mediate the relationship between the state and the public. Such units are typically the NGOs; according to the proponents of civil society, the NGOs provide the participative forums for the public. Taylor and Doerfel (2003) outlined the networks in interorganizational relationships in a civil society project in Bosnia. Other research includes evaluation of mechanisms for fostering and nurturing the relationships between organizations. The skill-based approach to public relations enacted in civil society efforts places the values, outcomes, and feasibility of the concept of civil society outside the discursive realm. The critical analysis offered in the next section is an attempt to bring back these values underlying civil society into the discursive space.

**CRITIQUING CIVIL SOCIETY**

Commenting on the universalizing discourse of civil society, Eade (2000) pointed out that “civil society could do no wrong and there was nothing it could not do” (p. 11). The universalization of civil society is achieved through its dissociation from the modernist trope in development communication; in some instances, it is even suggested as an alternative to the one-way flow of modernization projects (Jacobson & Jang, 2002; Taylor, 2000a, 2000b). Although Taylor (2000a, 2000b) adopted the universalist discourse, arguing that the civil society project is an alternative to the traditional one-way projects of modernization imposed by the West on the Third World, further interrogation points otherwise. Postcolonial scholars point out that civil society is very much located within the realm of modernity and modernization projects (Beverly, 1999; Chatterjee, 1993; Dussel, 1995). Critiquing the modernist basis of civil society, Chatterjee (1993) argued that

> the invocation of state/civil society opposition in the struggle against socialist-bureaucratic regimes in eastern Europe or in other Soviet republics or, for that matter, in China, will not produce anything other than strategies seeking to replicate the history of Western Europe. (p. 238)

Analyzing Chatterjee’s (1993) observation about the modernization roots of the idea of civil society, Beverly (1999) referred to

> the fact that the concept of civil society is tied up with the normative sense of modernity and civic participation, which by virtue of its own requirements (literacy, nuclear family units, attention to formal politics and business news, property or a stable income source) excludes significant sectors of the sector from full citizenship. (p. 120)

This rhetoric of modernity continues to exist at the core of colonial intervention in Third World spaces, reflecting the missionary ideology that drove much of the early work in development, modernization, and Westernization projects (Escobar, 1995).
Given the central role played by public relations scholars in carrying out the modernist project of civil society, a critical interrogation is essential. Professionals in the field ought to engage in the fundamental debates about the basic nature of civil society because (a) communicative practices are inherent in the process of definition and implementation of civil society projects, (b) communication is central to the relationship between the core and periphery nations in the transmission of civil societies and the enactment of colonialism through civil society projects, (c) prominent public relations scholars working in the area have adopted the concept and declared the close linkage between civil society and participatory communication, claiming to give participatory voice to Third World subjects through civil society projects, and (d) a philosophical and ethical examination of the concept should serve as a precursor to the vocationally oriented skills application for the development of civil society interventions as suggested by some scholars working in this area. The criticism offered in the next few sections draws on the concepts of the Third World “savage,” individualistic orientation, democracy promotion, and capitalism.

The Third World “Savage”

To set up democratic processes in the Third World, and to create the milieu for citizen participation, nation–states need to be invaded, and existing political systems in these nation–states need to be taken down and reshaped (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). As a modernist intervention in the Third World, the concept of civil society draws its justification from the construction of the Third World as a primitive and undeveloped space in need of the intervention. The embracing of civil society as the solution to traditionally authoritarian (primitive) practices is epitomized in the following articulation of Taylor and Doerfel (2003):

Nations throughout Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America are currently experiencing important social and political changes. Today, where dictators and totalitarian parties once directed the actions of entire nations, there now stand democratically elected governments. What we see happening in many nations is the emergence of civil society. (p. 153)

Note the “then” and “now” construction in the justification; the totalitarian (= primitive) nation–states of the Third World have been replaced with democratically elected (= modern) governments. Absent from the discursive space is an acknowledgment of the active support of the totalitarian regimes by the dominant nations (primarily the United States) that are currently espousing the values of civil society (Robinson, 1996a). Evident in the modernization rhetoric around civil society is the application of universal criteria in the backdrop of which societies can be deciphered as civil or uncivil. In the landscape of categorizing nation–states, dominant/Western criteria are applied to construct cultures as uncivilized and to subsequently penetrate them. Therefore, whereas the West
continuously emerges as the civilized world in this discursive framework, Third World nations continue to be imbued with characteristics of the uncivilized savage who needs to be proselytized (Escobar, 1995).

An interesting paradox worth noting is that the dominant/Western nations that use the rhetoric of civil society to invade Third World nations and rebuild them fundamentally violate the criteria of civility in their choice to intervene in other nations. Instead of pursuing democratic processes and channels for the generation of dialogue and participation among the nations, core Western nations continue to use the pretext of civil society and nation-building to penetrate Third World cultures such that nation-building efforts can be put into place (see, e.g., Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2000). The use of force in the formulation of nation building is an uncivil choice, disrupting all expectations of democratic participation in international communication and revealing the hypocrisy of the civil society rhetoric.

Individualistic Roots of Civil Society

The public relations literature celebrating the universal value of civil society largely ignores the culturally informed nature of the concept (see, e.g., Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). That civil society is a Eurocentric construct loaded with the individualistic biases of European thought is evident in the depiction of civil society as a conglomeration of cooperative relationships among individuals (Jacobson & Jang, 2002). Capturing the individualistic essence of civil society, Neocloeus (1995) pointed out that the “new sphere of civil society is essentially bourgeois—it is a sphere of atomized self-seeking individuals” (p. 396). These self-seeking individuals offer the substratum of civil society. Referring to the Lockean notion of civil society, Jacobson and Jang (2002) pointed out that civil society is “a society of property-bearing citizens whose association is free from the control of the state” (p. 3444). It is therefore the property-bearing individual who chooses to participate in civil society and forms associations through active participation; often, the goals of this individual are driven by a commitment to advancing the condition of the self. Participation in associations is generated as a result of the individual’s commitment to self-development and self-growth. The famous philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville noted this linkage between individual needs and communitarian participation, suggesting that American participation in the community is driven by self-interest.

By locating the individual at the core of civil society, the proponents of the concept reflect an individualistic orientation that is critically Eurocentric and ignore other forms of community participation that are driven by the greater commitment to the needs of one’s in-group (Hofstede, 1984). Individual rights and individual choices shape the formulation of civil societies, concepts that are driven by a gross attachment to the individual and his or her individualistic needs (Hofstede, 1984).
This attachment to the individual and his or her rights is so strong that the advocates of civil society fail to see the role of the collective in shaping the values of the social system, a phenomenon quite common in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1984). Not captured in traditionally Western articulations of self-serving civil societies are concepts such as selfless participation or commitment to the goals of the broader collective as driving forces behind cohesive social systems (Gandhi, 1958; Hofstede, 1984). In proposing a social system that promotes a single-minded commitment to the individual, scholars of civil society put forth a culturally biased concept of what constitutes civil society; furthermore, in their myopic discussions of the glorious achievements of civil societies in the West, they fail to discuss other models of collectivistic cultures that are abound with examples of highly successful communities and social movements driven by the collectivistic attachment to the goals of the community (Chatterjee, 1984; Gandhi, 1958; Guha, 1984). Alternative theorization of social systems needs to conceptualize the role of the collective in shaping the system rather than privileging the role of the individual (Chatterjee, 1984).

These biases inherent in the conceptualization of civil society are particularly worth investigating because of their ability to demonstrate that ideas such as civil society are not universal ideals of humanity that should mark the aspirations of the human race but rather are culture bound (Hofstede, 1984). By demonstrating that concepts such as civil society are culturally loaded, one can argue that attempts at building global civil societies are value-laden attempts at essentializing and pro-creating Western spaces elsewhere in the world; civil society no longer remains a commonsensical/universal end goal for the human race; instead, it emerges as a way of understanding Western concepts of the social system. What then determines the wide circulation and usage of civil society is political access to power (Escobar, 1995; Guha, 1984). These questions of power, hegemony, and access need to be continuously asked in order to guide future scholarship on civil society (Escobar, 1995). A critical component of civil society is its democratic governance, a form of political organization promoted in nation-building efforts (Diamond, 1994; Neoclooeus, 1995). In the next section I present an interrogation of the concept of democratic governance.

**Democracy**

Summarizing the historical foundations of democracy, Kelsen (1955) pointed out that the term democracy was coined in ancient Greece to capture a form of government that is run by the people. Kelsen argued that “the essence of the political phenomenon designated by the term was the participation of the governed in the government, the principle of freedom in the sense of political self-determination” (p. 2). The linkage between democracy and modernization efforts of the United States may be traced back to the incorporation of democ-
racy as a rhetorical trope for intervening in the political processes of the Third World and bombarding Third World spaces with modernist messages of the United States and its allies (Goldman & Douglas, 1988; Robinson, 1996a, 1996b); instead of supporting authoritarian regimes, American policymakers thought it beneficial to turn their attention to democracy and promote it. This was termed democracy promotion, and U.S. foreign efforts focused on building democratic processes in the Third World (Goldman & Douglas, 1988; Muravchik, 1992; Robinson, 1996a). Much of the academic literature that discussed democracy promotion in the Third World adopted the rhetoric of participatory communication, arguing that democracy is the universal end-point for national governance in Third World spaces that allows for the participation of citizens. The universalization of democracy, in turn, legitimizes and essentializes the concept, making it an effective veneer for hiding the colonialist and imperialist goals of the Western powers.

Public relations scholars (Taylor, 2000a, 200b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003) working on democracy promotion efforts construct civil society as a participatory solution to erstwhile dictatorships in Third World countries. Such co-optation of the participatory rhetoric steals the participatory voice of Third World citizens, assimilating it under the rubric of civil society building (I demonstrate this later through case studies of the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua). Meaningful participation of subaltern groups targeting redistributive justice and system-wide change is channelized into meaningless drum-beating for the United States and its allies and the opening of the nation to global trade (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). Civil society, particularly democracy, becomes the Westerner’s rhetorical tool for subverting Third World populations under the façade of participation. People’s voices are adopted and assimilated into bourgeoisie elite organizations that collude with the United States in propagating the dominance of transnational hegemony (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). That democracy promotion embodied in the civil society rhetoric is pivotal to the colonization of Third World spaces is well illustrated in the case studies of democracy promotion efforts in Third World nations such as the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua. The choice of these three countries as case studies was dictated by the direct U.S. involvement in civil society promotion in these countries and the extensive published scholarship on U.S. foreign policy in the three countries.

**The Philippines.** When the United States won the 1898–1902 war with Spain, it continued the reign of colonial control established by Spain in the Philippines (Robinson, 1996a). After the Philippines gained independence in 1946, it was governed by the Philippine upper class, which had been trained, nurtured, and supported by the machineries of U.S. and Spanish colonialism; these ruling elite had strong alliances with the United States and were instrumental to opening up the Philippines to foreign corporations and foreign investment. Pointing to the Philippine economy in
the face of the growing foreign investment, Robinson (1996a) argued that the economy “grew to the benefit of foreign capital and the Philippine elite simultaneous to the impoverishment of the majority and deep social polarization” (p. 645). The Philippine population was growing increasingly disheartened with the Philippine elite that governed the country. This led to a popular movement that threatened to overthrow the elite rule (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). With the overt support of the United States, martial law was declared in the Philippines by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972 to effectively annihilate the rebellion that threatened the status quo there. Robinson (1996a) eloquently articulated that “the post-colonial order thus rested on an ‘effective affinity’ between increasingly internationalized capital operating in Philippines and authoritarian internal political system” (p. 645).

The authoritarian regime of Marcos continued to receive U.S. support throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s. In the meantime, Marcos and his family continued to monopolize the loot of international trade and foreign investment, leading the intra-elite consensus to rupture (Robinson, 1996a). The crackdown on the popular movement accompanied by the increasing authoritarianism of the Marcos regime galvanized “a powerful and well-organized opposition movement of popular and leftist forces” (Robinson, 1996a, p. 645). The intra-elite split and the growing popular movement threatened the status quo; debates ensued in Washington about redirecting the anti-dictatorial struggle in the Philippines (Bonner, 1987; Robinson, 1996a, 1996b).

By 1983, the democratic movement in Philippines had become so strong that it was obvious to social critics and political observers throughout the world that the days of the Marcos regime were numbered (Bonner, 1987; Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). The United States had to make strategic decisions about its foreign policy with the Philippines; it was critical to reposition the American stance with respect to the Philippines to keep the nation under U.S. control and prevent it from slipping away into the hands of the leftist and popular influences (Robinson, 1996b). American policymakers in Washington debated about the possible strategies in the Philippines and decided to support the removal of Marcos by investing in the anti-Marcos elite and making sure that the elite gained “hegemony over the antidicatorial struggle” (Robinson, 1996a, p. 646). Robinson (1996a) aptly captured the strategic U.S. intervention in Philippines:

Faced with this mass, popular uprising, U.S. actions sought to control its development and minimize its effects. U.S. officials sought to assure an important role for the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP). Key AFP officers, in consultation with U.S. military advisors and diplomats, led a revolt against Marcos’s attempt to steal the elections, an event that, coupled with U.S. diplomatic pressure, convinced Marcos to step down and leave the country. The military revolt assured the preservation of the repressive forces and left Aquino [who became the president of the country] more indebted to, and dependent on, the conservative military than to the popular movement. The preservation of the coercive apparatus during the transition period, and the active role
played by the “armor of coercion” during and after the transition, placed clear limits on social transformation and demand for equity in the post-Marcos period. (p. 647)

The U.S. intervention made sure that the status quo was left in its place. The power remained in the hands of the national elite that colluded with the United States in the subsequent restructuring and transnational economy building within the Philippines. Civic and political institutions within the Philippines that would play a positive role in ushering in transnational capital flow were supported and nurtured. Robinson (1996a, 1996b) has argued that the United States was able to channel the anti-Marcos movement into a less threatening outcome by accelerating the removal of Marcos, maintaining the political control of the military, retaining power in the hands of the Philippine elite, and by funding conservative sectors of the Philippine society through programs of democracy-building and civil society development. Under the façade of its attempts at civil society building in the Philippines, the U.S. government donated $21 million to organizations such as the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, Philippine “youth clubs,” and the National Movement for Free Elections, organizations that would propel the participation of the Philippines in the free market economy and would counteract the powerful left and populist forces that had developed within the Philippines (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b).

The example of the Philippines points out the collusion between the United States and the Philippine national elite in retaining a form of governance in the Philippines that serves the interests of the national elite, the United States, and transnational corporations. What was couched as U.S. support for democracy-building and civil society development was a mechanism to maintain elite control and prevent broad-based democracy in Philippines in which the people could actively participate in the governance of the nation. The United States’ aid to the Philippines in the name of civil society-building was targeted at mitigating the powerful populist forces that were developing within the nation. Instead of catalyzing the participation of the people in a government of the people, for the people, by the people, the United States was more interested in sabotaging such a movement because it threatened the pro-U.S. status quo and the stability of elite rule. The paradox of the civil society and democracy-building stance lies in its very commitment to undermine true democracy and participation in the Third World and instead foster the rule of political elites who would buy the neoliberal transnational agenda of the United States.

Chile. The involvement of the United States in Chilean governance is well documented; the United States played a key role in the overthrow of the Allende government and supported the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (Caviedes, 1991; Drake & Jaksic, 1991; Robinson, 1996a). Indebted to and nurtured by the United States, the Pinochet dictatorship began a campaign of decimat-
ing the people’s movements with the goal of creating an environment in Chile that was favorable for its participation in transnational hegemony (Caviedes, 1991; Drake & Jaksic, 1991; Robinson, 1996a). The Chilean economy was restructured with the goal of inserting Chile into the international global economy. However, the popular movement against the Pinochet dictatorship gained momentum in 1983, creating a large political base against the dictatorship (Caviedes, 1991; Drake & Jaksic, 1991; Robinson, 1996a). Much like the case of the Philippines, this growth in the popular movement led to the re-alignment of U.S. foreign policy toward the Pinochet dictatorship. Realizing the potential of the popular movement in overthrowing Pinochet, the United States decided to support the elite opposition and consolidate the splintered elite (Caviedes, 1991; Drake & Jaksic, 1991). This shift in strategy would ultimately ensure the location of power in the status quo and guarantee the realization of the project of neoliberal restructuring of Chile. Democracy promotion programs put in place since 1985 applied pressures on the Pinochet dictatorship on the one hand, and helped organize the elite coalition against Pinochet through political aid programs of AID and National Endowment for Democracy on the other hand (Robinson, 1996a). Thus, the United States ensured the elite hegemony over the antidictatorial movement and achieved its objectives of restructuring Chile and integrating it into the global economy. This happened at the cost of diverting the meaningful participation of the people of Chile in achieving social change (Robinson, 1996a).

Nicaragua. Similar to the transitions from the support for dictatorship to democracy promotion efforts seen in Chile and the Philippines, the political stance of the United States toward Nicaragua demonstrates an overt shift from the 1970s to the 1990s (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b; Walker, 1987). In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States supported the dictatorship of the Somoza family, generating the flow of foreign capital into Nicaragua and the active participation of the country in the global economy (Walker, 1987). This integration into the global economy happened at the cost of the Nicaraguan people, laying the foundation for social unrests. In 1979, a nationwide revolution led to the formation of the Sandinista government (Walker, 1987). However, the Sandinista government, a government of the people, was the target of U.S.-led destabilization campaigns (Walker, 1987). In the early to mid-1980s, the United States actively supported externally based counterrevolutionary movements with the objectives of overthrowing the Sandinista government and restoring the authoritarian government (Walker, 1987). However, the U.S. strategy toward Nicaragua changed around 1987, shifting to democracy-promotion efforts. The goal was to create an internal moderate opposition to the Sandinista government, drawing on elite groups that had opposed the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970s but were not able to gain hegemony over the antidictatorial movement. Large-scale U.S. political aid and democracy-promotion programs organized, trained, and supported an elite opposition that operated through noncoercive means
in civil society to overthrow the Sandinista government (Robinson, 1996a). The 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas ensured once again the U.S. hold over Nicaragua through its democracy-promotion efforts, and Nicaragua was once again cast into the web of the global economy, marked by large-scale and far-reaching efforts of neoliberal restructuring of the nation (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b; Walker, 1987).

The examples of the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua point out that the rhetoric of participatory communication and democracy promotion serve a strategically critical function for the colonialist interests of the United States, preventing people’s participation in the governance of Third World nations and nurturing a political elite that actively engages in opening up the national market to transnational corporations and foreign investment (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b; Walker, 1987). It is also important to note that the key actor in the democracy promotion efforts in the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua was USAID, the donor organization that currently supports much of the public relations work on civil society-building cited in this article. Explaining the shift from dictatorial support to democracy promotion efforts, Robinson (1996a) summarized:

At the level of theoretical generalization, this shift may be conceived, in the Gramscian sense, as indicating new forms of transnational control accompanying the rise of global capitalism. Specifically, behind this shift is an effort to replace coercive means of social control with consensual ones in the South within a highly stratified international system, in which the United States plays a leadership role on behalf of an emergent transnational hegemonic configuration. (p. 616)

Democracy promotion and civil society efforts, as documented by the evidence presented in this section, paradoxically act to minimize the participation of people in Third World nations and to marginalize them. The United States’ efforts at nation-building are marginalizing practices that are directly interested in maintaining the status quo elite rule in Third World nations to maintain the leadership role of the United States in the “transnational hegemonic configuration” (Robinson, 1996a, p. 616).

Capitalism

Central to the formulation of civil society is its reliance on and commitment to capitalism (Neocleous, 1995). That capitalism lies at the core of civil society was demonstrated in the last section, where I pointed out that the primary objective of democracy-promotion efforts was the creation of economies that would participate in the transnational free market and open the doors of Third World nations to foreign capital and goods. The interlinkage among civil society, capitalism, and colonialism was aptly captured by Hegel (1952, as cited in Beverly, 1999), one of the earliest thinkers of civil society:
Through a dialectical impulse to transcend itself that is proper to it, such a [capitalist market society] is, in the first place, driven to seek outside itself new consumers. For this reason it seeks to find ways to move about among other peoples that are inferior to it with respect to the resources it has in abundance, or in general its industry. … The development of relations offers also the means of colonization towards which, in either an accidental or systematic way, a completed civil society is impelled. (p. 121)

At the heart of civil society is its attachment with the market and its consensual relationship with the flow of capital (Marx, 1970, 1975). Bureaucratic organizations such NGOs in a civil society are driven by their demand for capital; in fact, in civil societies it is fundamentally the capital that drives social organizations such as welfare agencies, NGOs, hospitals, and churches (Neocloeus, 1995). In return for the capital supplied to them by the United States and other core nations, such bourgeoisie bureaucracies run by the elites of Third World nations collude in the opening up of the economy to foreign investment and global corporations (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). It is only by participating in the generation of greater capital for the United States that NGOs generate the capital for their survival. Therefore, corporations, both local and transnational, are essential ingredients of a civil society. Referring to the capitalist logic underlying civil society and the critical absence of this logic from current academic discourse surrounding the term, Neocloeus (1995) directs us to Hegel and Marx, its key scholars in the past:

Certainly one of the aspects that is strongest in the account given by Hegel and Marx is precisely the capitalist nature of civil society and all that this entails. What is significant about so many current arguments concerning civil society is that their attempt to be socialist without being anti-capitalist results in the capitalist nature of civil society being conceptualized away. (p. 397)

This erasure of the link between capitalism and civil society is systematically evident in the published public relations scholarship (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). Because civil society serves the global market economy, it thrives at the cost of the people it exploits (Marx, 1970, 1975). These bodies provide the mass and the market that the market economy needs to run itself (Marx, 1970, 1975). Therefore, poverty is a product of civil society and is essentially linked to the existence of civil society (Gandhi, 1958; Marx, 1970, 1975). Neocloeus (1995) argued that, for Marx (1970, 1975), the location of the working class was outside the realm of civil society; the working class stood in contradiction to civil society. It existed in the cracks and crevices, laying down its body for the civil society machinery. Marx (1975) suggested that the working class bears the burdens of the civil society but none of its advantages; therefore, for Marx (1975), the emancipation of the working class lies in regaining its lost citizenship through a radical rejection of civil society. Neocloeus (1995) sum-
marized the revolutionary politics of Marx that call for a radical metamorphosis of the idea of citizenship:

For Marx, it is the very nature of civil society that is the problem, its essence, its form as much as its content; hence *burgerliche Gesellschaft*. The intention then is not to alter the content, in the sense of a “socialist civil society,” but of transforming that form. (p. 405)

The economic project of “neoliberalism” promoted by civil society seeks to achieve complete mobility of capital beyond and across national boundaries. To ensure the complete flow of capital, then, civil society projects have to ensure that Third World nations participate in the market economy and open their economies to foreign investment and trade (Robinson, 1996a; Sunkel & Fuenzalida, 1977). The goal of the civil society project is to minimize government intervention in the economy and to eliminate state regulation over the economic activity in their territories (Robinson, 1996a). Robinson (1996a) pointed out that

the neo-liberal structural adjustment programs currently sweeping the South seek macroeconomic stability (price and exchange-rate stability etc.) as an essential requisite for the activity of transnational capital, which must harmonize a wide range of fiscal, monetary, and industrial policies among multiple nations. (p. 634)

Civil society then is inherently problematic because its capitalistic machinery systematically works to exclude the subaltern; in a global landscape, the erection of civil societies provides the scenario for the oppression of marginalized voices and further suppression of these voices through the facilitation of the operation of global corporations and multinationals. Civil society facilitates the penetration of the transnational capitalistic order in the Third World. Instead of creating a conduit for native expression through its participatory channels, as suggested by Taylor (2000b), civil society becomes an oppressive system. By opening up indigenous spaces to large Western corporations, civil societies become participants in the marginalization of the poor, systematically excluding them from participatory governance. At its heart, civil society serves as the channel through which the core exercises its power on peripheral actors and exercises its imperialist and capitalist goals under the chador of democracy promotion. The overtly imperialistic invasions are replaced by more subtle forms of repression that are masqueraded as generous acts of the West. Robinson (1996b) pointed out that

Unlike earlier U.S. interventionism, the new intervention focuses much more intensely on civil society itself, in contrast to formal government structures, in intervened countries. The purpose of “democracy promotion” is not to suppress but to penetrate and conquer civil society in intervened countries, that is, the complex of “private” organizations such as political parties, trade unions, the media, and so forth,
and from therein, integrate subordinate classes and national groups into a larger hegemonic social order. (p. 29)

A SUBALTERN ALTERNATIVE: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The question of civil society is particularly one of voice. Scholars of the concept articulate that civil society provides the platform for these voices to be articulated, catalyzing the participation of citizens (Taylor, 2000a, 200b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). However, as I have demonstrated in this article, dominant understandings of what constitutes civil society do not take into account the marginalization of voices that is accomplished through the capitalist machinery that embodies civil society (Beverly, 1999; Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). These mainstream articulations of civil society do not account for the fact that the market-driven civil society consistently needs new markets to support itself and hence is fundamentally intertwined with colonialist goals (Beverly, 1999; Chatterjee, 1993; Gandhi, 1958). The invasion of nation-states for the purposes of building civil society demonstrates the inherent paradox of the participatory rhetoric. How, then, could public relations scholars participate in the conceptualization of a social system that embraces participation and offers a space for the alternative voices from marginalized spaces? What alternative lens is available through which to truly understand the participatory power of “Third World” peoples beyond the realm of the dominant civil society that positions itself to subsume the power of the people within its participatory rhetoric?

The subaltern studies project provides the foundation for such alternative theorization by focusing on the narratives of marginalized people, by offering histories from below, histories of people from inferior ranks (Beverly, 1999; Guha, 1982, 1988a, 1988b; Guha & Spivak, 1988). Writing against colonialist and nationalist–bourgeoisie histories that privilege elite actors, the subaltern studies project seeks to insert peasant consciousness and the agency of subaltern classes into the discursive space (Guha, 1982, 1988a, 1988b; Guha & Spivak, 1988). The subaltern perspective needs to be incorporated into the discursive space of civil society projects enacted by public relations scholars to (a) shed light on the marginalizing practices of the initiatives of civil society development and nation-building; (b) expose and problematize the relationship among the national bourgeoisie, the transnational global corporations, and the U.S. government; (c) understand the struggles of the millions of dispossessed and marginalized people in the world; and (d) begin constructing and understanding alternative forms of communication (e.g., participation) and approaches to them.

Beverly (1999) argued that “subaltern studies is about power, who has it and who doesn’t, who is gaining it and who is losing it” (p. 1). The position of
subalternity is defined by the basic lack of access to power, the lack of access to constructing the narrative of oneself and one’s own people (Beverly, 1999; Guha, 1984; Spivak, 1988). The subaltern, by virtue of his or her lack of access, exists beyond the realm of civil society; his or her needs are in essence diametrically different from the needs of the bourgeoisie civil society and are repressed to serve the civil society of the elite classes (Marx, 1970, 1975). Whereas the national elite become an integral part of the transnational civil society and shares its loots, the subaltern finds his or her existence outside the spaces of civil society. Chatterjee (1993, as cited in Beverly, 1999) eloquently drew this distinction:

[The colonized] construct national identities within a different narrative [than that of civil society], that of community. They do not have the option of doing this within the domain of bourgeois civil-society institutions. They create, consequently, a very different domain—a cultural domain—marked by the distinctions of the material and the spiritual, the outer and the inner. (p. 120)

More specifically with respect to civil society projects, a subaltern approach fundamentally questions the logic of materialism that drives civil society initiatives founded on the concept of property bearing self-serving citizens (Gandhi, 1958). Where civil society pursues political and economic systems that seek materialist goals, the subaltern approach provides an alternative point of entry for conceptualizing social, political, and economic systems, conceptualizing alternative ways of social organizing based on self-restraint and benevolence (Gandhi, 1958). The subaltern criticism of the solely economically driven Western civil society is aptly captured in Gandhi’s (1958) argument that the system of social production embodied in Western civil society is the primary source of modern imperialism. Pointing to the ever-increasing greed embedded in Western civil society that led to the expansion of the British empire, Gandhi (1958) wrote

Napoleon is said to have described the English as a nation of shopkeepers. It is a fitting description. They hold whatever dominions they have for the sake of their commerce. … Many problems can be solved by remembering that money is their God. … They wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods. … They will leave no stone unturned to reach the goal. (p. 23)

At the heart of Gandhi’s (1958) argument was the rejection of Western civil society as a model for India because it was based on selfishness as opposed to the traditional Indian values of self-control and benevolence. Gandhi criticized Western civil society for its greedy obsession with the accumulation of material wealth. Discarding the techno-materialistic obsession of the West, Gandhi suggested the notion of giving up industrialism altogether because the “defects are germane to the very fundamentals of the modern state of production” (p. 159). Gandhi ex-
explored alternative possibilities, arguing that the obsession with modernization and industrialization will lead to a dead end:

A certain degree of physical harmony and comfort is necessary, but above a certain level it becomes a hindrance instead of help. Therefore the ideal of creating an unlimited number of wants and satisfying them seems to be a delusion and a snare. The satisfaction of one’s physical needs, even the intellectual needs of one’s narrow self, must meet at certain point a dead stop, before it degenerates into physical and intellectual voluptuousness. (p. 241)

On the basis of his critique of the greed embodied in the production-based modern civil society that conceptualized human beings as limitless consumers (greedy and selfish), Gandhi (1958) argued for the adoption of *khadi* (homespun cotton textiles) as the only sound economic proposition for India based on the traditional Indian value of benevolence (Chatterjee, 1984). The adoption of *khadi*, Gandhi argued, not only would create self-sufficiency and supply work and adequate wages for the villagers but also would embody a simpler way of life in accordance with the traditional values of Indian civilization, rejecting luxuries and self-indulgence, the sources of unchecked competition that in turn breed poverty, disease, war, and suffering (Gandhi, 1958). Gandhian conceptualization of civil society demonstrated that the presentation of the subaltern perspective can lead to discursive spaces that have not been typically explored in the dominant paradigm, leading to alternative ways of looking at societies and opening up a wide range of new possibilities and interpretations.

The subaltern, however, engages in active resistance to the dominant public sphere (Beverly, 1999; Guha, 1984). Addressing questions of voice and access to spaces in which the voices may be articulated, subaltern studies scholars are committed to understanding and deliberating on the participation of peasants and the dispossessed in their day-to-day struggles (Beverly, 1999; Guha, 1984). A large number of essays within the subaltern studies project have documented resistance and political participation in peasant societies in India (Guha, 1984). By documenting the active participation of peasants, subaltern studies offer a critique of dominant conceptualizations of participation that render subaltern people invisible and subaltern movements spontaneous; instead they theorize about the consciousness and agency of subaltern classes (Guha, 1984, 1988a, 1988b). An interrogation of participatory communication in peasant societies provides an alternative to the traditional conceptualization of participation under the umbrella of civil society. Multiple counter-public spheres emerge in the discursive space; these spheres typically exist in opposition to the dominant public sphere conceptualized by civil society (Guha, 1984). Resistance, therefore, emerges as a key concept in the study of civil societies, existing in a dialectical tension with the dominant public sphere of civil society (Guha, 1984, 1988a, 1988b).
In summary, subaltern studies offer multiple points of alternative entries into the civil society discourse (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). First, it challenges the materialistic basis of this discourse. Second, it opens possibilities of participation of peasants and subaltern classes in discursive spaces, as opposed to the silencing and co-optation of subaltern participation achieved through civil society projects. Third, it locates agency in the subaltern subject, demonstrating that participation in social movements and acts of resistance have been an integral element of peasant struggles long before the emancipatory conceptualizations of civil society were put forth in the West and suggesting the dialectical relationship between civil society and resistance. In the concluding section of the article, I take a practical–critical approach (Craig, 1989; Woodward, 2003) to offer specific suggestions for developing the subaltern perspective in public relations as an alternative to the dominant models of civil society currently circulating in public relations scholarship.

Theoretical Implications

The subaltern concerns him- or herself with the unspoken; the subaltern scholar explores answers in the crevices and gaps of civil societies to reveal the structures that lie beneath the colonialist voice (Beverly, 1999; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Guha, 1984, 1988a, 1988b). Being informed by a subaltern perspective allows public relations scholars to take a critical stance, introducing the questions that typically get left out of the discursive space in public relations exercises of the USAID. The subaltern studies perspective equips critical scholars to theorize about power in development public relations and construct possibilities for social change (Woodward, 2003). I specifically examine the three realms of NGOs, policy, and media organizations in building the theoretical implications.

That NGOs are not apolitical and neutral organizations is an important point in the study of civil society efforts. Most U.S.-led civil society efforts sponsor NGOs that are supportive of U.S. expansion in the Third World. Informed by a subaltern perspective, critical theoretical insights may be built on questions such as: What are the organizations that are offered financial support by civil society efforts sponsored by the United States? What is the political orientation of these organizations? Future scholarship in critical public relations ought to theorize the location of power in the context of subaltern sectors of the population, NGOs, transnational corporations, and funding agencies. The ultimate irony of the project of civil society is the way in which the project pushes a dominant public sphere that serves the interests of the transnational hegemony and co-opts the participatory power of subaltern people. Therefore, participation needs to be retheorized through a critical lens and rearticulated in the context of its pragmatic implications for subaltern people. Also, subaltern participation and resistance in spaces outside the realm of
the dominant public sphere need to be theorized, further exploring the dialectical
tensions between civil society and subaltern public spheres.

Critical scholars have long argued that public relations practice has profound
impact on policy, often pushing the elite agenda (Gandy, 1992; L’Etang, 1996;
L’Etang & Pieczka, 1996a, 1996b). Informed by the subaltern perspective, public
relations scholars working in development communication also need to theo-
rize about issues of power played out by the foreign policies of the United States
(enacted via the public relations strategies of the USAID and other donor agen-
cies): What communicative practices are engaged in the policy constructions of
civil society? How is meaning constructed in rhetorically posing civil society as
the panacea to the Third World and in obscuring the civil society–colonialism
link from the academic landscape? How do academics participate in the con-
struction of the civil society trope, and what are the implications of this partici-
pation with respect to the colonialist agenda of the United States? Critical
interrogation of policy related to civil society, financial support of such initia-
tives, and academic involvement in civil society projects would push the field
forward by locating these elements in the domain of power. With every country
that the United States has penetrated (e.g., Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years),
more opportunities open for transnational corporations, universities, and public
relations scholars to participate in nation-building and civil society development
in the Third World. Drawing on Said’s (1979) theorization of the imperialist
goals of the academy, questions regarding the implicit motives of the academic
enterprise need to be raised because of the important implications of the linkages
among the academy, transnational capitalism, and colonialism (L’Etang, 1996;

In the realm of media ownership fostered through the projects of building me-
dia entities in other countries and media relations, public relations scholars need to
ask questions such as: Who are the owners of the private media fostered in Third
World countries by civil society projects, and what are the political positions of the
major media organizations promoted via civil society projects? What is the relation-
ship between critical media organizations fostered in Third World nations and
the transnational corporations that are promoted by civil society projects? Essen-
tial to the critical project is the articulation of the biases in media organizations in
“civil” societies (such as the United States), the existence of media organizations
in these societies as public relations tools of the elite, and the marginalization of
subaltern voices achieved through the media (Gandy, 1992; McNair, 1996). The
instances in which the media participate in the silencing of subaltern voices rather
than creating public spheres for dialogue need to be theorized (Gandy, 1992;
McNair, 1996). Power needs to be theorized at the center of projects of media-
building and needs to be intrinsically connected with the notion of the public
sphere. The neoliberal notion of a public sphere that allows for the marginalized
voices to be heard needs to be imbued with the concept of access. It is those who
have access (and, hence, power) to the dominant public sphere who get to define the discursive space in the public spheres of civil societies.

However, beyond the interrogation of the colonialist/imperialist motive of the civil society enterprise, what is needed is an examination of the communicative practices in subaltern participation in the Third World and in other marginalized spaces. The subaltern studies project provides ample evidence of participation and resistance in peasant societies that exist outside the dominant public sphere, fostering questions such as: What communicative practices are central to subaltern participation (in counter-public spheres) in the sociopolitical process? What is the communicative nature of subaltern movements seen across the Third World, and how are these movements (in counter-public spheres) different from movements articulated in civil societies? Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest among public relations scholars in understanding activist publics (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). Current understanding of activism is much likely to be enriched by the introduction of the subaltern discourse in theorization of activism, by looking at the processes and practices involved in participation of marginalized subjects in countercultural movements that exist outside the realm of the very public sphere conceptualized by civil society projects. Looking elsewhere beyond the dominant/Western subject will inform novel ways of understanding participatory communication, especially in marginalized contexts. Exploring alternative forms of participation would perhaps open the theoretical vista in conceptualizing public participation and in mobilizing it for achieving social change beyond the traditional realms of activism within the rubric of civil society narrowly constructed in the dominant public relations literature (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

Pragmatic Implications

Recent years have witnessed an exponential increase in the concept of dialogue as a theorizing tool in public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Pragmatic articulations of the relationship-building role of public relations have emphasized the central role of dialogue in the formation of relationships. In their discussion of the dialogic approach to public relations, Taylor and Kent (2002) explicated that dialogue is based on the facilitation of participation, acknowledgment of the diverse values of others, truthfulness, an emphasis on mutual benefit rather than exploitation, and a sincere effort at understanding the position of other participants. As this analysis of public relation efforts of civil society-building demonstrates, dialogue is absent from such efforts, although the rhetoric emphasizes participatory communication. A subaltern approach to public relations directs us to this inconsistency, demonstrating that programs of civil society sponsored by organizations such as USAID typically exploit and marginalize the subaltern instead of acknowledging the values of the subaltern, emphasizing mutual benefit, and making a sincere effort to understand the position of the subaltern partici-
The subaltern perspective informs us that the public sphere promoted by civil society efforts serves the elite and silences the poor. It informs us about the co-optation of subaltern participation achieved via nation-building efforts. This awareness is essential to the activist role that might be played by public relations scholars in development communication, guiding practitioners to hitherto-unexplored problems such as exploitation, silencing, and marginalization that are accomplished through dominant programs of public relations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). In essence, the subaltern perspective calls for public relations praxis that challenges the status quo in development communication (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Woodward, 2003).

Although suggested by the relationship-building approach to public relations, currently undertheorized in public relations is the critical role of listening to subaltern voices and narratives as entry points for praxis (Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Spivak, 1988). The goal of understanding should be central to the work of public relations scholars working in the area of development communication because such understanding could enrich the ways in which applications are developed. The subaltern studies perspective directs us to novel ways of applying public relations by documenting the possibilities opened up by historiography from below (Spivak, 1988). Scholarship in the area locates agency in the subaltern participant and narrates stories of resistance and sense-making actively engaged in by subaltern people. In doing so, the subaltern perspective calls for the activist role of public relations, not simply accepting the status quo (embodied in funding agencies such as USAID) but finding ways of challenging it via policy changes and participatory communication that involves subaltern voices in dialogue (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Woodward, 2003). In this approach, the problem is formulated not by the donor agencies but by the subaltern participants (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). The role of the public relations practitioner becomes one of facilitating the articulation of subaltern voices by listening to them and documenting them in policy-oriented forums. The process of engaging in dialogue with marginalized people brings forth the critical issues as defined by subaltern participants. The approach of listening to the subaltern voices fundamentally changes the way development communication is practiced; participation does not simply remain a means to achieving the ends pursued by donor agencies. Instead, participation becomes the core of praxis, drawing on the agency of subaltern participants in choosing their own destiny. In this approach, the public relations practitioner facilitates the expressions of marginalized voices and actively participates in resistance against acts of marginalization and silencing.

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