A Pragmatic Approach to the Tobin Tax Campaign: The Politics of Sentimental Education

James Brassett

European Journal of International Relations 2009; 15; 447
DOI: 10.1177/1354066109338241

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ejt.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/15/3/447

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Standing Group on International Relations of the ECPR

Additional services and information for European Journal of International Relations can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ejt.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ejt.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://ejt.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/15/3/447
The article provides a critical analysis of the campaign for a Tobin Tax. A popular view that global civil society can act as an agent for ethics is interrogated by appeal to the dilemmas and political contests which pervade the campaign. Problems with financial and institutional universalism undermine any unambiguous ethical appeal in the Tobin Tax by imposing a set of limits on thinkable avenues of reform. However, and drawing on the philosophical pragmatism of Richard Rorty, it is argued that the campaign can be celebrated for its role in ongoing practices of ‘sentimental education’. By illustrating the harm that financial markets cause, the Tobin Tax involves larger, more diverse, audiences in a conversation about global finance; technical and sentimental discourses blur. Moreover, those very contests that pervade the campaign can act to interrupt the totalizing aspects of the proposal, thus making alternatives thinkable. Engaging the ‘politics of sentimental education’, in this way, allows a contingent celebration of what is ethically useful in the Tobin Tax, while leaving an area of contest that is potentially antithetical. Rather than plump for an either/or position, the difficult, but ethical, challenge is to do both-and. The article concludes by suggesting how this ‘politics of sentimental education’ might bear upon existing knowledge about the theory and practice of global civil society.

**KEY WORDS** ♦ global civil society ♦ pragmatism ♦ sentimental education ♦ Tobin Tax

The ethical and normative possibilities closely associated with the idea of global civil society provide a potentially powerful lever for those trying to understand, and intervene within, struggles over global social order. It is therefore the
responsibility of social scientists to subject this idea to rigorous critical scrutiny from as broad an array of intellectual sources as possible. (Germain and Kenny, 2005: 15)

For over two decades I have been writing about necessary limits to state action and the importance of civil society. I see my work as part of a larger effort to rethink social democracy, preserving its focus on liberty and social justice, while remaining flexible about the instruments to achieve these values. (Held, 2004)

Both the proponents of social science and the ethically-minded political philosopher advocate an approach which misses the same point. The issue is not solely methodological, nor even primarily ethical in character, but substantive; that is, it concerns the status of politics and the political. (Wolin, 2004: 258)

**Introduction**

Global civil society is understood by many as a key source of ethical agency. This holds across a range of perspectives, including cosmopolitanism (Bohman, 1999; Cochran, 2002; Kaldor, 2003), communitarianism (Etzioni, 2002; Walzer, 1997), neo-Gramscian approaches (Cox, 1999; Gill, 2000), as well as more eclectic positions (Baker, 2002; Keane, 2003; Scholte, 2004). Equally, global civil society is invoked across policy circles as a potentially representative agent of democracy and justice in the face of what many regard as the largely unaccountable institutions of global governance (Commission on Global Governance, 1995).

Of course, ‘global civil society’ is not without its detractors. Numerous critiques question the effectiveness and representative qualities of global civil society (Brown, 2002: 235–8; Devetak and Higgott, 1999: 494–5; Lipschutz, 2005). Further, more critical positions emphasize the performative role of the signifier ‘global civil society’, which evokes the ideal of ethical agency, without questioning the constitutive powers belied (Amoore and Langley, 2004; Bartelson, 2006; Bleiker, 2000). However, and despite this critical theoretical climate, comparatively few studies have analysed the ethical possibilities (and limits) of global civil society in the **substantive** context of a specific campaign.2

This article therefore proposes to interrogate the ethics of global civil society via an analysis of the campaign for a Tobin Tax. In short, what can the Tobin Tax campaign tell us about the (politics of) ethics of global civil society? A number of reasons make this a suitable case study. The Tobin Tax is now a well-known proposal to place a small tax on foreign currency transactions. As the campaign has developed, its mandate has expanded to include overtly political issues (Singh, 2000: 200), the possibility of global
redistributive justice, as a result of the potentially vast revenues (Kaul and Langmore, 1996; Spahn, 1995), and, in some articulations, it underpins a ‘logic’ of emancipation via the construction of global democratic institutions (Patomäki, 1999, 2001). Moreover, the proposal was at the heart of early initiatives to reform the global financial architecture, and it has figured in diverse attempts to lobby global institutions (Porter, 2005: 146). The Tobin Tax campaign, therefore, provides an important reference point for examining the ethics of global civil society in contested political circumstances.

The argument proceeds in four sections. After reflecting how civil society campaigners portray the Tobin Tax as a practical embodiment of global justice, the first section finds several reasons to question the ethics of the Tobin Tax, with reference to debates and contests within the campaign. It is argued that a requirement for capital account convertibility and a (predominantly) cash-based approach to global justice imply a problematic financial universalism. On this view, the Tobin Tax can reify the financial system as a singular, unitary whole, which ‘we’ must react to, failing to explore alternatives that may arise in partially or non-developed financial systems, for instance. Moreover, those global democratic arguments that seek to incorporate or build around the Tobin Tax are found to (re)produce a set of exclusionary, state-centric logics of representation.

However, while recognizing such ambiguities, the second section moves on to develop a pragmatic approach, to situate within and play upon them. Drawing on Richard Rorty’s (1998b) account of human rights, it is suggested that the Tobin Tax can be redescribed as a tool of ‘sentimental education’. The Tobin Tax provides an easily understood heuristic device for explaining and critiquing globalization, while offering a way to change it. This has led it to occupy and retain a central role in global civil society, and it is repeatedly included in the agenda of the World Social Forum, despite the sometimes radical opposition to it there. The third section builds on these points by developing a narrative of the campaign as sentimental education. It draws on empirical knowledge of the global campaign for a Tobin Tax, in general, and the British campaign, by the NGO War on Want, more specifically.

Finally, the fourth section argues that many of the ethical ambiguities of the Tobin Tax — financial/institutional universalism, state-centrism, etc. — are actually highlighted within the campaign itself. Returning to Rorty, this indeterminacy, this politics of sentimental education, means that, at the same time as the campaign produces a sentimental narrative of global ethical futures, it runs (headlong) into its own limits. From a pragmatic perspective, no easy resolution is sought. Rather, it is suggested that by engaging with such limits, new alternatives can be made thinkable.

The central argument is engaged and reformist. In social forum discussions, in public meetings of NGOs and (even) the stylized narratives of charities,
the opacity and technicality of finance is denaturalized, and alternative futures are made thinkable. Simply stated, it is a good thing that larger and more diverse audiences are involved in a conversation about the suffering caused by global financial crises and the undemocratic nature of technocratic global financial governance. Public education on such issues is seriously lacking (Scholte, 2002: 20). But, from a pragmatic perspective, and developing upon ‘the politics of sentimental education’, a key task is to engage with such debates in order to identify their constitutive ambiguities and internal contradictions, not as an exercise in critique for its own sake, but as an opportunity to identify alternative possibilities. A number of examples, including de-linking, interest-free money, Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) and a single world currency, are drawn from campaign and scholarly debates to illustrate such alternatives.

The article concludes by suggesting how this discussion bears upon existing knowledge about global civil society. Global civil society, it is proposed, should be understood less as a conduit, an agent that does, or does not, act as a ‘vanguard’ for global ethics. Rather, the ongoing discussions and debates within global civil society should be seen as a substantive element, indeed a constitutive space, for thinking (the politics of) global ethics.

**The Ethical Limits of the Tobin Tax Campaign**

There are no morally relevant arguments against the Tobin Tax. In many respects the campaign for a Tobin Tax is a paradigm case of the ethics of global civil society. The proposal contests an area of technocratic economic policy-making: exchange rate policy. It identifies the potential for domination and harm via global currency markets, which can seriously affect individual capabilities while providing scant recourse to contest the governance of such markets. And, on more radical readings, it provides a normative critique of the distributive effects of deregulated capital markets, while proposing a redistributive solution. Representations of the tax would seem to confirm its status as an ethical goal. Desir and Ford (2000) suggests that the Tobin Tax is a ‘question of World Economic Justice’. And, Heikki Patomäki (2001: xix) connects the proposal directly with the political theory of justice:

> Justice as fairness would dictate, as a bare minimum, that, if someone accepts the benefits of a practice, he should not refuse to do his part in maintaining it. The current system of individual profits, socialised risks, fails to meet even this minimalist criterion of justice. The Tobin tax is a way to make participants pay their fair share in maintaining the global financial system.
However, this section identifies three broad reasons to be critical of the association between the Tobin Tax and global ethics: these are the potential for financial universalism, northern centrisim and state-centrisim within the Tobin Tax (see also Brassett, 2008a, 2008b).

First, there is an inferred level of financial universalism at the heart of the Tobin Tax proposal, which creates certain questions. For many, the attractiveness of the Tobin Tax is how it speaks to current practices of global finance in a tone of moderate reformism (Kapoor, 2003). It is understood as a ‘feasible’ mechanism, a first step, for introducing an ethical dimension to globalization. As Robin Round argues:

... I agree with those who say that the Tobin Tax is not a panacea for our development ills and our financial woes. But it is one aspect of what must be a fundamentally reformed global financial system. The guiding principles of this system should be human rights over investors’ rights, people before markets, the equitable re-distribution of wealth, and democratization of economic decision-making. (Desir and Ford, 2000: 103)

However, the ‘moderate reformism’ of the Tobin Tax proposal, which seeks a ‘feasible’ halfway point between full insulation of the domestic economy and full openness (Tobin, 1978; Ul Haq et al., 1996), may itself risk a potential closure to financial alternatives. Critically speaking, the structure of knowledge that permits and encourages capital account convertibility is left largely intact. Capital account convertibility is not unproblematic for developing states. As one campaigner asserts:

The hierarchies that are part of the financial markets, and the tendency of this system to produce a concentration of wealth, inequality, poverty, capital flight and capital theft leads to the breakdown of our systems of social protection. In developing countries the breakdown of societies robs them of the chance to keep the wealth that is produced in those locations for national development either through national use of resources or through effective taxation of income, natural resource extraction and profits. (Kohonen, 2005)

A tendency amongst campaigners to celebrate ‘feasibility’ therefore forgoes a deeper critique of finance. In this context, the campaign and mainstream discourses can coincide over the Tobin Tax. The Global Policy Forum has published IMF working papers on the Tobin Tax that support this general proposition:

... the main risks a country faces when it liberalizes its capital account are primarily associated with unpredictable and potentially large capital inflows and outflows — most notably sudden and significant reversals in capital inflows — that may have little to do with the soundness (or lack thereof) of its own economic policies. Since private sector speculators do not internalize the

451
destabilizing impact on the country of such capital flows in their investment
decisions, their actions generate a negative externality — as viewed from
the perspective of the country in question — in the classic sense, and would
thus call for an equally classic economic remedy, i.e., a Pigouvian tax on the
externality-generating activity which, in this case, would be a tax on capital
flows into or out of the country, or both. (Zee, 2000)

The argument being made here is not that, pace a Marxist critique, the
campaign for global justice has been co-opted by the bourgeois ideology of
the IMF. Rather, it is to question why opening up to foreign capital is not
the first question. The risk is not that the Tobin Tax is not radical enough —
where radical is understood as forming a suitably strong resistance to the
dominant power of neo-liberalism — but rather that the potential alter-
 natives may get silenced. As Yong Chul Kim argues:

… the Tobin tax needs capital liberalization as a condition to apply it. The
Tax is meaningful only when capital moves freely across national borders…. China and Malaysia employ domestic measures of capital control, successful
in arresting speculation and volatility of capital flows through domestic policy
tools and, consequently, are in no need of the global scale scheme of the
Tobin tax. UNCTAD’s chief economist Yilmaz Akyuz says ‘Malaysia’s capital
controls are now widely accepted as a success’ and make it possible to have a
fundamental reorientation of an economy toward a more self-reliant pattern of
growth. China has also been strongly opposed to efforts of western countries
and international bodies to speed up financial liberalization of developing
countries, arguing that it is necessary to strictly separate trade and investment
liberalization from financial liberalization. These countries do not find any
motivation to join the global design to control the free movements of capital.
(2003: 148)

On this view, the Tobin Tax proposal is parasitic upon opening up to foreign
capital. As a response to globalization, then, it (re)produces many of the
contingent and contested aspects of global finance, which many of those
attracted to the campaign would wish to question. The ethical edge of the
Tobin Tax is therefore blunted by a straightforward narrative of financial
universalism as something to which we must respond. In this way, ethical alter-
 natives may be silenced or, even worse, rendered unthinkable.4

Second, and developing from the first point, there are some questions
about the ‘northern’ interpretation of global ethics within the campaign
proposal. At one level, and as intimated, there is a slight contradiction with
advocating the Tobin Tax in partially or non-developed financial systems
since it requires capital account liberalization as a condition to apply it.
Surely this is not the primary objective of those attracted to the campaign? At
another level, on any articulation, it is clear from all estimates that the major
part of the revenue of the Tobin Tax would be levied in developed financial
markets. Global justice would consist, therefore, of a cash redistribution from North to South. As one African Forum and Network on Debt and Development (AFRODAD) survey found:

There was general agreement from the reports that a Tobin Tax alone would not be sufficient to address Africa’s key problems of slow development, high indebtedness and endemic poverty. The tax is unlikely to yield sufficient revenue within the continent to be directed towards solving these problems. However, levying the tax in developed markets and channeling proceeds to developing countries through various mechanisms and programs will change the nature and impact of international financial flows to and from developing countries. (AFRODAD, 2000: 6)

This projection of the Tax, as a cash-based approach to global justice, creates further dilemmas. Principally, it risks producing an ethical limit — underdeveloped countries are reduced to being mere recipients of cash. More fundamentally, there is within the campaign an element of Northern NGOs who regard the Tobin Tax almost as a form of salvation. For instance, when the British NGO War on Want refers to the Tobin Tax as ‘The Robin Hood Tax’, it potentially alienates large sections of the Southern campaign who might otherwise be sympathetic:

... the Tobin tax is viewed as a game between North and South, with some advocates simply motivated by ethical and humanitarian claims. But, speculative money gave people in East Asian countries ‘real’ shocks and the impact of the Tobin tax would be much more pronounced to ‘emerging’ markets than any other countries. They find themselves distanced by the way Westerners deal with the issue of the Tobin tax. (Kim, 2003: 147–8)

Indeed, this problem can be seen as a specific manifestation of the kinds of socio-cultural power dynamics within global civil society that Jan Art Scholte (2001: 21), in particular, highlights:

For all that such campaigners might criticise prevailing conditions of global governance, they have stronger cultural affinities with global managers than with local communities. Thus NGOs and their professionalised civil society bodies may — perhaps quite unintentionally — marginalise grassroots circles that could give better voice to the diverse life-worlds that global governance affects.

And third, there is a level of state-centrism in the Tobin Tax campaign. On one level, this is clear across all articulations of the Tobin Tax which seek to exploit the trade in ‘national currencies’ by levying a tax via state bureaucracies. We might therefore question again the global basis of a proposal that locks in the separation/competition between states via currency. On another level, this state-centrism is also evident in those more transformative proposals to build a global democratic architecture around the Tobin Tax.
Heikki Patomäki has argued that the Tobin Tax presents the possibility of developing a new and democratic institution of democratic global governance: the Tobin Tax Organisation (TTO). The TTO would be established in two phases, the first aimed at establishing initial agreement between a small number of states for a low-level tax, the second geared towards the establishment of a ‘universal and uniform Tobin Tax’ (Patomäki, 2001: 157). The process is geared towards achieving the democratic possibilities of global governance with a proper acceptance of the power political dimensions of existing structures. He argues that ‘all states should be invited to join the TTO. Despite obvious deficiencies in the legitimacy of some states, it should be assumed that they represent their populations and weigh the decision making accordingly’ (Patomäki, 2001: 202). He continues:

The TTO could have two main bodies: the Council of Ministers and the House of Democracy. The House of Democracy should comprise only representatives from those national parliaments whose members are appointed by multiparty elections, and a sample of civil society actors, picked through a screening procedure and lottery. The House of Democracy would thus be the more direct pillar of the system. (2001: 202)

In addition, the proposal echoes much in the broader Tobin Tax campaign by combining democratic ideals, incrementally, with existing sovereign practices: ‘Even though the inclusionary, state-centric Council of Ministers would have a stronger say in decision making, the House of Democracy should be fully empowered to set motions and have a limited control over the budget’ (2001: 203). While clearly democratic in construction, the state-centrism of this approach remains on analytical and historical terms. In analytical terms, it is the (states within the) Council of Ministers that would have a ‘stronger say in decision making’. Further, the objective of this two-phase model remains, ultimately, a ‘universal and uniform Tobin Tax’ (Patomäki, 2001: 157), albeit democratically controlled. As stated, this project would cement both assumptions about financial universality and the ongoing trade in currencies, which should perhaps be the central question.

The Tobin Tax is designed to be levied on national currencies. On one level, this acts to legitimize — and shore up — a system whereby financial players effectively bet large on small margins with little benefit for the real economy. In particularly dramatic incidences, this involves widespread and often coordinated speculation against a single currency. On another level, the Tobin Tax leaves unquestioned the very notion of nationally demarcated currencies. This is ethically questionable because currency has such a large impact on the welfare possibilities of individuals. If you are born into a country with a strong currency there is a greater chance of achieving financial credibility. Certainly, the welfare possibilities for states in strong and stable
currency zones are far greater than for those in weak and unstable zones. Likewise, being born into a country with a weak currency increases the likelihood of suffering a financial crisis or experiencing a weak welfare state because any available funds are invested in foreign currency reserves.

While this critique may be seen as quite profound, and it may seem unfair to criticize the Tobin Tax for reifying structures so large and entrenched as to be almost unchangeable, it nevertheless points to a weakness in the ethical case for a Tobin Tax. What starts out as a seemingly quite large critical weapon against global finance, turns out on closer examination to be something which actually entrenches that system. Even the institutional architecture, as envisaged by Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD), would leave states at the crucial nexus of decision-making. For all the critical worth of Patomäki's arguments then, it seems that the edge is blunted by an institutional proposal where the 'state-centric Council of Ministers would have a stronger say in decision-making'.

In historical terms, there is an attempt to play out, on a global scale, a set of democratic ideas that rest on certain specific contingencies. As Winfried Thaa (2001: 504; emphasis in original) argues, global democratic agendas ‘tend to overlook that political deliberation, agency and practice presuppose commonalities such as historic experience, communication based on everyday language, and commonly accepted institutions’. This raises the question of the historically and culturally specific set of social relations which underpin the (post-Keynesian idea of the) Tobin Tax. Democratic deliberation about the Tobin Tax may be difficult to grasp for anyone who was not directly involved with such relations. More problematically, there is a possible imperialism of European welfarism being constituted by such ‘blueprints’. For instance, there could be resistance to the perceived euro-centrism of what Walden Bello (2005) refers to as the ‘Back to Bretton Woods Project’, i.e. those northern, white, well-educated economists and policy-makers who ‘tinker’ at re-embedding globalization. On this view, a key limit of the Tobin Tax campaign is that it assumes trust, trust that large governmental institutions ‘can’ solve major societal problems. For people whose welfare systems have provided healthcare, education, defence and a sound infrastructure, the Tobin Tax may well be an entirely conceivable extension of social democracy. However, for those who live in countries where the welfare state has provided little, taxed a lot, but spent the majority of its finances on repaying debt, buying foreign bonds, or sending its elites to private universities, the idea may not be unambiguously attractive.

Having mapped out three interrelated ethical ambiguities in the Tobin Tax campaign, the next section will move on to question whether there is anything that can be salvaged in the proposal. This question is explored via an analysis of the philosophical pragmatism of Richard Rorty. It suggests
that his concept of sentimental education may speak to such problems
by emphasizing the ethical consequences of the campaign, rather than its
financial or democratic foundations.

The Tobin Tax and Sentimental Education

Richard Rorty spent his life attempting to show, first, how philosophical
ideas are actually socially embedded ‘practices’, ways of talking with practical
implications for how we live in the world, and then, second, to set about
distinguishing ‘between less useful and more useful ways of talking’ (Rorty,
1998a: 1). For Rorty, ethics could not be adjudicated by some Kantian
‘tribunal of pure reason’, on the one hand, or satisfactorily connected up
with ‘real’ politics, if understood as Derridean ‘deconstruction’, on the
other. Instead, once we give up on something large called Truth, which
stands outside of time and place, the (hard) task is to engage in an ongoing
‘conversation’ about how to construct institutions that are less cruel and
realize new possibilities for freedom; possibilities that are perhaps, as yet,
imagined (Rorty, 1979, 1989).

Drawing from this position then, while the Tobin Tax may carry certain
ethical ambiguities, we should also question the consequences of the cam-

aign per se: what is the nature of, and how should we engage, the ethical
conversation it has opened?

Perhaps Rorty’s key intervention on international ethics, and certainly the
one which has occupied IR scholars the most, is ‘Human Rights, Rationality
and Sentimentality’ (1998b) (see Brassett and Higgott, 2003; Brown, 1999;
Cochran, 1996; Parker and Brassett, 2005). In that article, Rorty qualifies
the growing interest in human rights discourse by arguing that it should be
seen as a culture: a culture we should fully support and seek to expand. He
therefore undermines the universalism of human rights. But he also seeks to
show how by dropping epistemology there might be a growing willingness
to overlook the question ‘What is our nature?’ and instead to substitute the
question ‘What can we make of ourselves?’ (1998b: 168). Against those who
would argue that we need a deeper sense of moral knowledge, of a truth
that can answer problematic questions (in any set of circumstances), Rorty
argues:

We pragmatists argue from the fact that the emergence of a human rights
culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything
to hearing sad and sentimental stories, to the conclusion that there is probably
no knowledge of the sort Plato envisaged.…

In short, my doubts about the effectiveness of appeals to moral knowledge are
doubts about causal efficacy, not about epistemic status. (1998b: 172)
Crucially, it is this possibility of weaving narratives of suffering with discourses of human rights that allows us to expand the moral community beyond our family, circle of friends, tribe, etc. (see Rorty, 2007a).

Rorty’s practical rendering of human rights suggests that a key moment of ethical growth occurs when we become aware of the suffering of others as morally relevant. Extending this line of thought to the ethics of the Tobin Tax campaign, its importance may be less in a capacity to produce credible and realistic social democratic approaches to global financial governance than in its imaginative suggestion of alternative global futures and — in some readings — the connection of global finance with suffering. As will be discussed below, a strategy for many campaigners is to draw a line between financial activities (especially speculation and crisis) and ‘everyday life’. In this way, the Tobin Tax campaign may have an important role to play in ‘sentimental education’.

Of course, the value of this argument, for mediating some of the more intractable dilemmas of global ethics, has been noted previously (Brown, 1999; Cochran, 1999). However, few studies have chosen to operationalize sentimental education, looking to both uncover empirically the ongoing practices of sentimental education in the global polity and, when necessary, engage with the more contestable aspects of those practices. At first glance, sentimental education may appear as something of a panacea, a typically playful move by Rorty to circumvent some tough philosophical questions. However, this would understate the political dilemmas it raises, as well as Rorty’s own willingness to engage them:

... we have to overcome our sense that sentiment is too weak a force and that something stronger is required. This idea that reason is ‘stronger’ than sentiment, that only insistence on the unconditionality of moral obligation has the power to change human beings for the better, is very persistent. I think that this persistence is due mainly to a semiconscious realization that if we hand our hopes for moral progress over to sentiment, we are in effect handing them over to condescension. For we shall be relying on those who have the power to change things — people like the rich New England abolitionists or rich bleeding hearts like Robert Owen and Friedrich Engels — rather than something that has power over them. (Rorty, 1998b: 181)

On this view, sentimental education is not some easy resolution of the debate on human rights, or global ethics more broadly. It requires us to give up on a universal response, the search for a knock-down argument for ethics. Instead, we are forced to confront the more messy, trial-and-error process of engaged reformism (Brassett and Higgott, 2003). The politics of sentimental education is therefore far more contested, far more contestable, than may at first appear. And this idea is not simply a practical notion, one of ‘getting our
hands dirty’, but it speaks to a very live understanding of ethics within Rorty, and within pragmatism more generally. As Rorty argued:

The Platonist tradition insists that collisions of good with good are always illusory, because there is always one right thing to do. Pieces of the puzzle that obstinately refuse to fit are discarded as mere appearance. But for pragmatists intellectual and moral conflict is typically a matter of beliefs that have been acquired in the attempt to serve one good purpose getting in the way of beliefs that were developed in the course of serving another good purpose…. Since pragmatists agree with James that the true is the good in the way of belief, and since they take the conflict of good with good as inevitable, they do not think that universalist grandeur and finality will ever be attained. Ingenious compromises between old goods will produce new sets of aspirations and new projects, and new collisions between those aspirations and projects forever. We shall never escape what Hegel called ‘the struggle and labor of the negative,’ but that is merely to say that we shall remain finite creatures of specific times and places. (2007b: 81–2)

In this vein, there is an important sentimental aspect to the Tobin Tax campaign, which tells ‘sad’ and ‘sentimental’ stories about the harm done by financial markets, but which must face up to the deep ethical ambiguities raised by issues of financial and institutional universalism. It is therefore argued that the Tobin Tax can be productively redescribed as a tool of sentimental education. This argument is developed in two stages.

First, the Tobin Tax proposal can be understood as a ‘conversation opener’: it provides an easily understood route into globalization debates and suggests alternative pathways. This may be especially important in the context of widespread ignorance as to what finance ‘is’, or how it affects everyday politics (Scholte, 2002: 20). And second, the malleability of the idea (that can be rendered as a moderate tool, an instrument of global justice, the foundation of a global democratic system, etc.) means that, as with human rights, it can be used in diverse ways for different purposes: critical, reformist and/or educational. And it is in this second move that sentimental education becomes more than platitude.

Redescribing the Tobin Tax as a tool of sentimental education allows us to engage with the ethical ambiguities, which the proposal (re)produces, via open democratic discussion. Importantly, the democracy that Rorty envisaged was not some programmatic extension of civic rights. Rather, it was the trial-and-error process of debate and contest, indeterminacy and the imagination of alternatives:

… democratic politics should leave truth alone, as a sublimely undiscussable topic, and instead turn to the question of how to persuade people to broaden the size of the audience they take to be competent, to increase the size of the
relevant community of justification. The latter project is not only relevant to
democratic politics, it pretty much is democratic politics. (2000: 9; emphasis
in original)

In many ways, this is the democracy of the social forum and the political
campaign meeting. It is also a crucial part of the politics of global civil
society: to expand the scope of ethical conversation. A pragmatic approach
to the Tobin Tax campaign therefore addresses itself to substantive political
consequences. This could be in the way it fosters an expansion of sympathy
for those affected by the violence of global finance, the thousands of Thai
women who turned to prostitution after the East Asian financial crisis, for
instance. Or else, it might be in the way the ethical ambiguities of the Tobin
Tax are openly debated, confronted and alternative suggestions sought in the
context of global civil society discussion.

Having outlined the contours of a pragmatic approach to the Tobin Tax,
the next section will elaborate this idea of sentimental education via a
narrative of the global campaign, in general, and the UK campaign, more
specifically.

The Tobin Tax as a Conversation Opener

Most people in a general audience would not be expected to understand the
financial arguments, although very many would certainly respond to the obvi-
ous social justice principles under-girding such proposals. Staying within this
campaign construct, the Tobin tax has wide appeal because both the problem
and the solution are easy to grasp, and the usual audience will rarely ever have
to pay that tax. This campaign-ability of the Tobin tax issue is responsible in
part for the political momentum the issue currently enjoys in several countries.
The campaigners’ audiences are the committed and the principled general
public. (Griesgraber, 2003: 152)

This section will address the first way in which the Tobin Tax acts as a tool
of sentimental education: through providing campaigners with a simple heur-
istic device, that re-presents global finance as ‘controllable’, and ‘changeable’,
and that is easily understood. The aim is to illustrate how the Tobin Tax
is an effective tool for educating general audiences about the arcane world
of global finance. It draws on principles underlying the tax, documentary
sources on how different groups campaign for the Tobin Tax, as well as parti-
cipant observation of public discussions in social forum meetings in London
and Paris, 2003, as well as Mumbai, 2004.7

The Tobin Tax is now part of a campaign, and as such no discussion of
the ethics of the proposal can afford to overlook the practical exigencies
of global civil society. Strategies of communication are fundamental to the
success or failure of campaigns, and this section thus pays close attention to
the different mechanisms of sentimental education employed, be it through film, aesthetics or metaphor. It provides a narrative of the campaign, how it has developed within global civil society generally, and via the UK NGO War on Want’s campaign, in particular.

_A Simple Idea with a Large Impact: Tobin, ATTAC and the WSF_

... many ... have said there are two good reasons to be in favour of the Tobin Tax, firstly to slow down and reduce speculation and secondly, to increase revenue indispensable to the poorer countries. I would like to add a third reason which is to develop grass-roots organisations and a movement in this direction. (Aguiton, cited in Desir and Ford, 2000: 17)

Traditional engagements with the Tobin Tax have attempted to supplant it with a logic (economic, political or ethical) which is used to explain its role in something ‘larger’. For some, the Tobin Tax can be part of a Polanyian ‘second-movement’ (Helleiner, 2001). On this view, globalization is a shift towards market liberalization and Tobin gave us an effective spur to re-regulate, that might create ‘a new stage in the politics of globalisation’ (Patomäki, 2000). More critical approaches then tell a story about how the progenitors of this second-movement are the organic intellectuals at the helm of some historical watershed. For instance, in a study of Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC), Vicki Birchfield and Annette Freyberg-Inan (2005: 161) argue that the network ‘contains elements of organic intellectualism’ and the call for a Tobin Tax is, in fact, a ‘clever discursive move’ (2005: 161) allowing ATTAC to fulfil a deeper logic of resistance:

... the emergence of ATTAC seems theoretically congruent with a Gramscian framework in that it can be seen as a response to the ideational and material forces of the latest phase of global capitalist instability. Linking the structural crisis of global capitalism to the local realities of everyday life of ordinary citizens and wage-earners is an important step in establishing connections between the material power of capital and its ideological influence on the state ...

The current approach differs in two important respects. First, globalization is not understood as reducible to any fundamental market–society split. Such dichotomies act to curtail potential avenues of resistance, rendering the contestation of something ‘large’ called ‘global capitalism’, the endless and debilitating burden of some equally ‘large’ concept/group of organic intellectuals. On the argument developed here, globalization is perhaps better understood as a multidimensional (economic, social, political, psychological) and multi-level (individual, local, national, regional, global) set of contingent social processes that encompasses a re-spatialization of life (Scholte, 2005: 121–54).
In this context, knowledge about globalization is a crucial part of the politics of global space. And second, in a related point, attempts to tie the Tobin Tax into a ‘critical education’ project, which somehow identifies the ‘true reality’ of globalization, and a way to resist it, if only we all understand and agree, are difficult to accept. Crucially, this is not because neo-Gramscians have got it ‘wrong’. Rather, for pragmatists:

We think that there are many ways to talk about what is going on, and that none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other. We have no idea what ‘in itself’ is supposed to mean in the phrase ‘reality as it is in itself’. So we suggest that the appearance–reality distinction is dropped in favour of a distinction between less useful and more useful ways of talking.

(Rorty, 1998a: 1)

This is not simply an intellectual doubt then. It opens space for thinking new forms of resistance, by detracting from the debilitating binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘workers’ and ‘capital’. Instead, the narrative developed here presents a less ‘theorized’ version of events.

Simply stated, the campaign can be valued for its ability to involve more, and more diverse, groups of people in a discussion of global financial governance, about which they previously may not have heard. It does not need to be tied to anything larger. As a tool of sentimental education, the Tobin Tax is a simple idea with a large impact. As founder member Bernard Cassen recounts:

Since Tobin was an establishment economist, a Nobel Prize-winner in economics from the United States at that, his proposal possessed a certain automatic initial legitimacy, serving to highlight the scandalous character of the flows of global speculation today. So for the purposes of agitation, it makes an excellent weapon. But, of course, we never for a second thought that the Tobin tax was the one solution to the dictatorship of financial markets. It was just one point of entry to attack them. (Cassen, 2003: 43)

Such strategic thinking does not fit so easily within the discourse of ‘second-movements’ or ‘vanguard’ elements. Instead, it depicts an honest appreciation of the limitations of the tax, as well as a celebration of its capacity to open up the opaque nature of financial markets to a larger audience. Indeed, the role of the Tobin Tax in the story of ATTAC is now a ‘legend’ of global civil society.

Founded in France, in 1998, after the Asian financial crisis, ATTAC was set up with a proposal to tax financial markets as its central mandate (Ancelovici, 2002; Birchfield and Freyberg-Inan, 2005; Cassen, 2003). Very quickly the membership of ATTAC grew to around 60,000 and it formed affiliate groups across the world in some 40 countries. It drew on the French tradition of popular education, and public discussion became the modus
Membership is largely middle class, educated and white. It includes journalists, academics, doctors and teachers among others (Cassen, 2003). In small public meetings held in schools and cinemas, experts are invited to talk on subjects like the Tobin Tax in an effort to make globalization comprehensible, a technique sometimes known by the French term *sensibilisation*: ‘to make sensitive to’.

ATTAC has been able to form links with NGOs and trade unions across the world; and was strongly involved with the establishment of the World Social Forum (WSF), as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos (Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004). And within this political mobilization the Tobin Tax has been a significant and changing policy symbol. As Cassen argues:

> The Tobin Tax is above all a symbol — a first attempt — … to affect a finance system that too often places itself above or outside of the law as in the case of fiscal havens. It is this symbolism, more than its content or cost, which profoundly irritates those in the financial sector and which above all pleases citizens. That is why this measure is present in all international movements and why it is here to stay. (Cited in Desir and Ford, 2000: 17)

However, within this symbolism, neither the Tobin Tax idea nor the groups which advocate it remain fixed or clearly demarcated quantities that can be said to fulfil a ‘role’. Groups like ATTAC, War on Want, NIGD, World Economy Ecology and Development (WEED), and the Halifax Initiative have contributed to thinking about global taxation in a political context — i.e. the need to secure funding, influence institutions, gain membership, form linkages with like-minded organizations, etc. Beyond the ‘legend’ of ATTAC, there is much to be gained in terms of an understanding of the ethics of global civil society via an analysis of the politics of this campaign. One recent, and rather notable, development in the global campaign has been the growth of influence of the War on Want campaign, which will be the subject of the next part.

**Sentimental Education in Practice: War on Want and the ‘Charity Discourse’**

War on Want is a development NGO founded in 1951, based in south London, with ties to the Labour Party and the *Guardian* newspaper. It enjoys links with Christian groups and charities, sourcing considerable funding from such groups. While its campaign objectives are wide, including the promotion of human rights, trade justice, tax justice and development, it has consistently targeted poverty as an overriding concern: ‘War on Want knows that poverty is political. The decisions of politicians in rich countries can
mean life or death for people in developing countries. We have the power to reshape the global landscape — to ensure that people across the world can live in justice and peace (www.waronwant.org).

The group adopted the Tobin Tax campaign at the end of the 1990s, first under the direction of Steve Tibbett and then David Hillman. It embraced the campaign more comprehensively in 2002, when it established the Tobin Tax Network: a grouping of over 50 campaign agencies, charities, faith groups and trade unions, and organizations such as Oxfam, Christian Aid, Unison and the United Reform Church. And it has linked up with the Make Poverty History Campaign under the title ‘Stamp Out Poverty’ (http://www.tobintax.org.uk/). War on Want has used the Tobin Tax as a campaign tool to lobby the Treasury and Department for International Development (DFID), as well as creating awareness at social forums and other public discussions. Importantly, in a number of policy documents it has actively contributed to the intellectual development of the Tobin Tax.

The Tobin Tax Network has focused on the revenue-raising potential of the Tobin Tax, what David Hillman describes as the ‘discourse of social justice’. In a number of policy briefs, they have funded experts to produce detailed studies of how revenues could be leveraged in a way acceptable to governments and business (Kapoor, 2003; Spratt, 2005; War on Want, 2002a, 2002b). In particular the key campaigners — David Hillman, Sony Kapoor, Avinash Persaud — have taken on a strategic edge, attempting to leave behind their self-professed incarnation as the ‘sandal wearing brigade’ to promote a more hard-nosed and economically credible version of the Tobin Tax. Therefore the version of the Tobin Tax promoted by War on Want has changed markedly over the course of the campaign. Under different campaign leaders the group has shifted its focus from a universal Tobin Tax at 0.1% (War on Want, 2002a) through a Currency Transactions Tax (Kapoor, 2003), to a unilateral ‘Stamp Duty’ on Sterling at 0.005% (Spratt, 2005).

Despite these discursive shifts the *modus operandi* of the campaign has remained consistent throughout. The aim is to set up a simple narrative. *Bankers make vast amounts of money by betting on currency. This exacerbates poverty and there exists a simple solution — the Tobin Tax — to both calm speculation and raise funds for poverty.* This narrative is often augmented with various strategic touches. For instance, War on Want is adept at securing famous endorsements like Jon Snow and Baroness Shirley Williams, who participated in the making of the Tobin Tax film (see below). They use academic economists like Rodney Schmidt and financial market players like Jim O’Neill to add technical credibility to their proposal. But throughout, the narrative remains: an easily communicated account of what globalization is, followed by the Tobin Tax as a way to change it.
In this way, War on Want uses the Tobin Tax as a form of sentimental education about the suffering caused by global finance and the ethical possibilities that exist. A clear example of such sentimental education can be found in the ‘Earth to the Moon’ leaflet distributed at social forums and campaign presentations across the world. The cover of the leaflet shows a faceless man in a suit carrying a stack of £50 notes that stretches to the moon above with the phrase: ‘Imagine a stack of £50 notes reaching from the Earth to the Moon …’ Inside the cover there are three sides of text and a cut-out postcard intended for the reader to sign and send to Gordon Brown. The text reads: ‘Incredible as it may seem, a pile of 50 pound notes stretching from the earth to the moon truly illustrates the astronomical size of the money market each year.’ The proposition gives a direct and quantifiable image of the ‘problem of globalization’ and continues the narrative outlined:

Millions upon millions of dollars, euros, pounds and yen are traded every day — mainly by banks. Imagine now, adding together everything that is bought and sold in the world — like all food, housing and transport. The money trade is worth more than 50 times the value of all these other markets combined. It is the richest by far, yet amazingly, this trade is not subject to any specific tax at all. Even a tiny tax on this enormous pile of money could bring millions of the world’s poorest people out of poverty.

Importantly, the leaflet also deals with some of the more arcane problems of finance under the heading ‘Financial Shocks’: ‘An extremely unpleasant dimension of this huge money trade is that the economies of vulnerable countries can be ruined, as powerful financial actors target certain currencies to make vast profits.’ The aim is to persuade the reader to send a postcard to the Treasury and then when enough postcards are received, the Treasury will arrange a meeting with War on Want. On this view, sentimental education is used. The practice of sentimental education is instrumentally tied to the discourse of charity espoused by War on Want.

Playing on the same narrative, War on Want launches many of its public presentations with a campaign video. The video is narrated by Jon Snow and tells a similar story about greedy bankers who are exploiting helpless and vulnerable financial systems in developing countries. The visual narrative switches between large, frantic trading rooms and images of starving poverty-stricken people. One banker refers to the moment of a currency crisis as one in which, like sharks, traders ‘smell the blood’ of their prey. But, with appropriately optimistic music, the viewer is told that there is a solution to all this, in the form of the Tobin Tax. And, importantly for this discussion, the video ends with Steve Tibbet’s comment that there are no ‘morally relevant arguments against the Tobin Tax’.

464
To be sure, there are clear limitations with this version of the tax. It is a charity discourse, and more focused on elite lobbying than issues of broad-based public democracy. Indeed, the aesthetics of the campaign are sometimes particularly problematic. Its publications portray a stark dichotomy between rich, suit-wearing ‘bankers’ and poor, starving ‘black’ people. In one particularly ironic inversion, at a ‘Progress and Action’ meeting of Stamp Out Poverty, the power-point projection system reverted to a default picture of a ‘starving black woman’, in between power-point presentations by suit-wearing campaigners. However, there is also a political adaptability in the way the campaign has developed. David Hillman has been able to target different audiences – civil society, Treasury, DFID – with a similar, sentimental message. In this way, a conversation on global justice is opened. The final section will discuss how the tensions in this conversation can be engaged.

Engaging the Politics of Sentimental Education

Politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. In contrast, the political is episodic, rare. (Wolin, 1994: 11)

From the above analysis, critics could be forgiven for wishing to dispense with the War on Want campaign. Not only is implementation of the Tobin Tax (arguably) unlikely, but the campaign is generating a potentially jaundiced picture of the nexus between global justice and financial reform. However, from a pragmatic perspective, the tensions which pervade the campaign are understood as, themselves, capable of producing new possibilities.

To this end, the War on Want campaign should be engaged via the conversation it develops. Campaigners interact and form linkages to publicize and refine the Tobin Tax proposal, as well as identify alternatives, like the recent adoption by Stamp Out Poverty of the Air Ticket Levy. Such campaign politics is continuous. But, this final section identifies a number of episodic, rare moments where ‘the political’ nature of knowledge about the Tobin Tax is raised and debated. The ‘politics of sentimental education’ is therefore more than the ‘to and fro’ of campaign strategy and alliances.

Many panel discussions at the World Social Forum are co-sponsored, meaning that conservative approaches, like that of War on Want, are juxtaposed with the radical democratic agendas of ATTAC and NIGD. In addition, there are clear splits between different groups. Two leading campaigners, Heikki Patomäki and Sony Kapoor, regularly engage in keynote debates. And finally, but perhaps most importantly, the structure of the public discussions in European and World Social Forums, means that the audience are readily involved, criticizing the agenda and suggesting alternatives. In social forum
discussions, in technical reports and in campaign meetings the limitations and ethical ambiguities of the Tobin Tax are therefore exposed. While such exposure is often conflictive, critical space is also opened for considering alternative possible futures for finance.

A public meeting co-sponsored by ATTAC and War on Want at the European Social Forum, 2003, was attended by approximately 200 people. The presentations and discussion were simultaneously translated. They began with a presentation of the War on Want video about the Tobin Tax and a discussion led by David Hillman. Bruno Jetin followed with a discussion of the technical aspects of the tax. And the conversation was then opened to the floor. Parts of the discussion centred on the question of feasibility. But a clear ethical ambiguity arose when one delegate took issue with the principle of speculation that arguably persists within the logic of the Tobin Tax. Following Tibbet’s comment in the video that ‘there are no morally relevant arguments against the Tobin Tax’, and against Jetin’s advocacy of the Tobin Tax to curb global financial speculation, one delegate criticized such ventures because they ‘legitimise the right of investors to speculate against a currency, a country, the producers, the workers and its people’. This raises a central question for any attempt to ‘moderate’ or ‘calm’ financial speculation, which is that it effectively condones a certain level of speculative activity and the profits (and levies) that flow from it.

Following on from this, ATTAC Finland has published multiple perspective collections that critique any easy claims to morality in the Tobin Tax proposal. Indeed, in one such collection, Heikki Patomäki (2005: 17) argues that the War on Want version of the tax is about ‘charity’: ‘The aim is to get the rich countries, and the UK in particular, to establish a tax on currency transactions, the revenues of which they can use also as ODA (Overseas Development Aid), on their own terms and subject to their assessment of the need.’ The War on Want campaign is ‘uncritical about the current practices of the ODA, assuming that it suffices to give money through the traditional channels of bi- and multilateral aid, i.e. that ODA is the way to eradicate poverty’. And he suggests (2005: 19) that such models are complicit with the current financial system by accepting ‘the neo-classical idea that liquidity trading is rational and will therefore enhance the efficiency of the markets’.

A sophisticated discussion of global finance is, therefore, emergent. While we might perhaps question the attempt to resolve these indeterminacies via multilateral consensus in Patomäki’s other work (1999, 2001), the fact that such ideas are part of the mainstream of debate suggests that a rich ethical conversation is in train.

At a ‘Progress and Action’ meeting of Stamp Out Poverty, David Hillman billed the main point of the day: to break the ‘stereotype that NGOs are big on sympathy and empathy but low on hard headed realism’. While
the meeting was effectively a campaign-oriented day designed to focus on past successes and future challenges, critical questions began to arise when questions were opened to the floor. One delegate asked what the precise connection was between the Stamp Duty on Sterling and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): ‘Why would the UK spend the levy on MDGs instead of say, poverty in this country?’ Avinash Persaud responded that it would be ‘hard to persuade them’. But David Hillman said the money must be ring-fenced for International Development as it is ‘historically tied to ODA’ or else, he threatened, the NGO coalition would ‘go public’. But a further question from the audience attacked the idea, more fundamentally:

The problem with the Tobin Tax — which says it’s going to solve all our problems — is that it doesn’t question anything. It doesn’t question the system. Money is created out of nothing. Why do we pay interest on money? Stop tinkering with Tobin Tax and address the fundamental issues.17

Such questions can be seen as going right to the heart of the issue of financial universalism. By undermining the foundations of global finance, particularly the idea of charging interest, it could be suggested that this view is too radical, too transformative to even get consideration. Perhaps so, especially in the context of the ‘Progress and Action’ meeting which returned very quickly to the narrative of providing a ‘credible’, reformist response to globalization, which business and government can swallow. But, nevertheless, the articulation of such ideas is an important moment in the conversation, suggesting the possibility, at least, for thinking alternatives. These alternatives might be in terms of the eradication of interest on money via Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) (De Goede, 2005b: 165–6) or via the elimination of currency speculation per se, with the creation of a single world currency (Frankman, 2002).

Taking the politics of sentimental education seriously means giving up on final answers, and instead engaging in the sometimes messy and unstable moments of ‘the political’ in campaign meetings and research. Deep critical questioning of the foundations of ethics/finance/the Tobin Tax may not, of itself, give a clear direction. But, I would argue that it is precisely in the context of attempts to undermine the limit of financial universalism that ethical alternatives become thinkable. For instance, in a less combative, but no less critical, consideration of the limited applicability of the Tobin Tax in Africa, one report lists potential alternatives, including:

(1) Halting financial liberalization … (2) Imposing feasible capital and exchange controls at the earliest opportunity … (3) Distinguishing between inflows of hot money and production oriented foreign direct investment (FDI) … (4) Revisiting current and capital accounts including imports and foreign liability structures with a view to reducing current and capital account vulnerabilities.
Redirecting financial resources into productive purposes, including meeting human needs, away from largely speculative and unproductive outlets. (AFRODAD, 2000: 6–7)

In this way, a sophisticated discussion of global finance can be seen to emerge from the very limits of the campaign. Understanding the Tobin Tax campaign in terms of the politics of sentimental education allows us to engage the limits of global financial knowledge, educating our sentiments about the ethical possibilities of global finance and, where necessary, undermining existing knowledge.

**Conclusion: The Politics of Global Civil Society?**

In summary, the article has addressed the ethics of global civil society via a specific study of the campaign for a Tobin Tax. While the Tobin Tax is seen by many as an embodiment of global justice, through its alleged capacity to calm financial markets and provide vast revenues for redistribution, three ambiguities were identified. A requirement for capital account convertibility, a cash-based approach to global justice and proposals for state-centric world authority to administer the Tobin Tax infer that the proposal would entrench many of the logics its supporters might oppose. In response to these ethical ambiguities, the article developed a pragmatic approach to the Tobin Tax campaign.

A pragmatic approach acknowledges the historical and cultural contingency of knowledge, but questions how the ambiguities and tensions that pervade global ethics might be engaged. In this sense, and developing Rorty’s concept of sentimental education, it was argued that the Tobin Tax campaign has generated a broad-based public conversation about global ethics, increasing sensitivity to the suffering caused by global finance, and some of the ways in which it might be changed. While such conversation may not solve all the dilemmas identified, it does allow for increased awareness of the ambiguity of ethics. The final section therefore pointed to a number of instances in the campaign where the ethical limits of the Tobin Tax have been questioned and alternative practices suggested. A pragmatic approach to the Tobin Tax campaign therefore situates within the extant dilemmas and indeterminacies of global ethics/global civil society, looking to imagine alternatives where possible.

The broader implication of this argument is to question current interest in, and critical debates about, global civil society. As the introduction suggested, numerous theories of global ethics suggest that global civil society can act as an agent for ethical goals. Common critiques of this approach take one of three possible lines: (1) global civil society is too weak an agent in the face...
of existing global power structures, (2) global civil society is too internally contested to form a coherent voice in matters of global political deliberation or (3), more critically, when global civil society does have an impact, it is usually to confirm some hegemonic practice of global governance, be it market-, state- or euro-centrism. Indeed, as one of the most sophisticated balancers of critical insight with engaged political reformism, Jan Art Scholte, suggests:

If global civil society is fully to realize its promises then all interested parties must have access and probably equal opportunities to participate. Otherwise civil society can reproduce or even enlarge structural inequalities and arbitrary privileges connected with class, gender, nationality, race, religion, urban versus rural location, and so on. (Scholte, 2001: 21)

While sympathetic to these critical positions, the manner in which such debates are framed misses the importance of global civil society campaigns as process. The focus on agency (or lack thereof) downplays the significance of drawing larger and more diverse audiences into an evolving, if albeit limited, discussion of global governance. On this view, global civil society is of importance as an ethico-political space per se, where the quality and contested nature of discourse is, itself, a central question. In particular, while Scholte recognizes the possibility of structural inequalities working their way through global civil society, the political challenge is presented as one of straightforwardly levelling ‘access and … opportunities to participate’. But if, as this article has argued, the (ethical) discourse at the heart of a particular campaign is itself a site for the (re)production of structural inequalities, then any such levelling of opportunities of access misses many of the political problems and possibilities at stake. As Louise Amoore and Paul Langley (2004: 105–6) argue:

... within a named and assumed civil society grouping there are tensions surrounding ‘who’ is being empowered, or ‘what’ is being resisted. To deny these tensions in a search for a single galvanising manifesto or agenda is to miss the very heart of the politics of transformation.

And it is in this context that the article has argued that the sentimental aspects of global civil society are of utmost importance for thinking through the limits and possibilities of global ethics. The emotional impact of verbal and non-verbal campaigning — be it pictorial, musical, narrative based, and so on — is becoming central to the substantive politics of global civil society. One need only consider the role of music, film and comedy in the recent Make Poverty History Campaign to emphasize this.

To put flesh on the bones of this argument, it will be necessary to address the ethical politics of global civil society in terms of specific campaigns. What
do campaigners argue for? What ethical discourses do they employ? How are
they contested? What are the consequences of these contests? In this sense,
and in pragmatic fashion, the task may be to drop grand theories of the
ethics of global civil society in favour of engaged ethico-political criticism.
While global ethics may be an important motivating force for campaigners,
global civil society campaigns are a poor source of straightforward lessons in
ethics. Rather than treat global civil society as an agent for ethics then, it is
perhaps better to think of it as a fulcrum, a constitutive space, for engaging
the politics of global ethics.

Notes

1. For helpful comments and critiques on previous articulations of this argument
the author is grateful to Dan Bulley, Richard Higgott, Tony McGrew, Nick
Rengger, Jan Aart Scholte, Nisha Shah, Will Smith and Matthew Watson. The
author is also grateful to four anonymous reviewers and the journal editors for
invaluable guidance on developing the argument of this article. The research
for, drafting and acceptance of this article for publication were all completed
before the sub-prime crisis and the ensuing dramatization of global finance that
now saturates our 24-hour media. The argument developed here is updated and
developed in relation to contemporary developments in Brassett (forthcoming).

2. This is, no doubt, a broad point, but one which bears a fair reflection of the
distribution of effort. The literature on global civil society has been dominated
by conceptual, theoretical and often overtly normative reflection. When empirical
approaches are developed they are usually designed to conform to a particular
theoretical approach (see for instance Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Perhaps the best
collection of critical approaches to global civil society, Louise Amoore’s The
Global Resistance Reader (2005b) presents some 37 chapters, of which only a
handful are focused specifically on the politics and ethics of a single campaign.
However, there are, of course, exceptions alongside which this article is placed.
Recent examples of campaign-oriented discussions of the ethics of global civil
society include Doty (2006) and Saguier (2007).

3. As Steve Tibbet, of the British NGO War on Want, argued in a campaign video,
The Tobin Tax.

4. As Marieke De Goede (2005b) argues, this is an issue with numerous discus-
sions of global financial reform. The ‘assumption that re-regulation of financial
markets on a global scale and through state co-operation is the only viable
response to liberalized finance is flawed, for three reasons’ (2005b: 147). First,
such regulation has the effect of depoliticizing financial practices by marking
out a realm of ‘normal finance’, that is somehow beyond politics. Second, and
following on from this, attempts to regulate global finance typically seek to
avoid crisis, thus constructing non-crisis periods as ‘normal’. And third, she
argues, there is a ‘degree of defeatism’ in attempts to reconstruct the Golden
Age of Bretton Woods. The very act of resisting a monolith like the ‘Global
Financial Architecture’, she argues, acts to reify the idea and, therefore, reduces possibilities for ‘effective’ resistance.

5. This approach develops upon critiques of Tobin’s original proposal for a universal and uniform tax on foreign currency transactions. In particular Paul Spahn (1995) made a strong case that a tax could be applied unilaterally, without real fear of ‘exit’ by market traders.

6. A further extension of Rorty’s work deployed his 1991b essay, ‘The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy’, to the subject of building democratic legitimacy for humanitarian interventions (Bellamy, 2002). While the argument developed here is not a critique of the existing work on the importance of Rorty for thinking about IR and global ethics, it obviously differs in certain ways. First, in terms of focus, previous attempts to deploy Rorty’s concept of sentimental education in IR have addressed some avowedly theoretical debates like the critique of universal human rights (Brown, 1999) and the cosmopolitan–communitarian ‘impasse’ (Cochran, 1999). This article extends this interest in sentimental education by thinking it through empirically and politically, perhaps animating some of the tensions within Rorty’s work in the process. The importance of this move is that the tensions in Rorty’s work speak to the tensions within liberal thought and global ethics more generally (see Brassett, 2009). Second, in terms of substance, Bellamy’s excellent contribution on humanitarian intervention also develops an empirical working through of Rorty, this time in relation to the subject of building solidaristic communities in international security. As well as being empirically extremely different subjects, it is perhaps possible to suggest that the focus here is more directly upon the *tensions* within Rorty’s work and what they can say on thinking about global ethics, rather than how one of his ‘resolutions’ of those tensions can instruct us to think about specific IR problems like the democratic legitimacy of intervention. A clear explanation for this difference of emphasis is the space for engaging ethical ambiguities of democracy within international security situations is, perhaps necessarily, far more circumscribed than within global civil society. Perhaps, more fundamentally, with a philosopher as rich in interest and argument as Rorty, and who was so avowedly against ‘Method’ or standards of correct thought, it is unsurprising that his work has been interpreted by different scholars for different subjects in different ways. Not that any one of them gets closer to the truth of what he was saying. Rather, in pragmatic style, they should be read as more and more ‘attempts’ to increase our sensitivity to suffering and propose mechanisms to alleviate such suffering. In Rorty’s own words, ‘A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures on the other. More important, it would regard the realization of utopias, as an endless process — an endless proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth.’ (Rorty, 1989)

7. This research was carried out during the period of my PhD Thesis entitled: ‘Cosmopolitan Ethics in Global Finance? A Pragmatic Approach to the Tobin
8. Interview with David Hillman, conducted July 2003, War on Want offices, Clapham.
13. www.tobintax.org.uk/?lid=10196
14. This discussion draws on Brassett (2008a).
17. Comments by delegate at the Stamp Out Poverty, Progress and Action meeting, 19 November 2005, Camden Town Hall.
18. For instance, in ‘Carnival of Money: Politics of Dissent in an Era of Globalizing Finance’, Marieke De Goede (2005a: 380) argues against the emerging view that effective resistance requires a singular programme, that ‘Carnival and laughter play a special role … laughing about financial practices is more than a helpless gesture in the face of financial power, but has the potential to challenge its rationality and expose its contingency … and create a space for imagining financial alternatives’. She therefore highlights the important role of irony in undermining the universalism of financial practices.
19. An interesting element of the Make Poverty History campaign was the way it openly satirized the potential self-indulgence of celebrity charity. Ricky Gervais was not the only, but probably the best, (self-)critic, involved: http://www.live8live.com/videos/index.shtml?clip=ricky1

References


Brassett: A Pragmatic Approach to the Tobin Tax Campaign


