

9-19-2012

Civil Society

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< Civil society



Civil society according to one widely used definition "is the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as tax-exempt public charities, foundations, development non-governmental organizations, community and grassroots organizations, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups."^[1]

Origin

Most authorities trace the concept of civil society to Aristotle originally. Sievers (2010) links the idea to developments in the 17th century Dutch Republic.^[2] The English-language term originated with Frances Hutcheson but is most often associated with Adam Ferguson. Both were 18th-century Scottish social philosophers identified with the Scottish Enlightenment (a group which also included Adam Smith, , David Hume and other major figures). Ferguson saw development of a commercial state as a way to change what the Protestant Scots saw as the

corrupt feudal order and strengthen the liberty of the individual.^[3] One of the impacts of his work was to provide a distinction of modern civil society and the medieval sacred society of Christendom. Jean Jacques Rousseau was among the continental thinkers who took up the concept. "For Rousseau, civil society is in effect citizen society; political freedom means participation of free and equal members in ruling and being ruled."^[4]

While Ferguson did not draw a line between state and society, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the 19th century German philosopher, made this distinction in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Recht (Elements of the Philosophy of Right)*.^[5] Hegel used the term "bürgerliche Gesellschaft" . The German *Zivilgesellschaft*

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emphasizes a more inclusive community than the state. Hegel viewed civil society dialectically along with the state and the family or household (sometimes broadened today as the intimate sphere). This Hegelian trichotomy is echoed in contemporary calls for a Third Way as well as contemporary conceptions of the third sector. Subsequent interpretations of civil society by left- and right-Hegelians differed substantially. Karl Marx's critique of bourgeois society rendered the term a weapon in the Marxist critique of all non-state aspects of society, economy and polity.^[6] (See also the discussion on state and civil society for more on this issue.) On the other side, civil society in combination with a neo-Tocquevillian view of voluntary associations became the basis of contemporary conceptions of a third sector between market and state. Geo-political events, including the decline of military dictatorships in Latin America and the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Europe are usually credited with a tremendous increase of interest in civil society in the 1990s.

The shifting fortunes of civil society

Published work on civil society since the 18th century has been characterized by several periods of great interest interspersed with periods of relatively little interest. Since the late 1980s there has been a worldwide upsurge of interest in the idea among researchers, theorists, governments, civil society organizations and many other avenues. Indeed, it requires a substantial network of related pages associated with this entry merely to introduce all of the basic concepts, ideas and activities now associated with this provocative notion.

The early years following publication of Ferguson's work (1767) were characterized by much interest in Great Britain, continental Europe and the colonial Americas and the new United States. There were, however, few memorable additions or extensions of Ferguson until Hegel (1827). Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1845) is today widely cited in connection with civil society, despite no mention of civil society in that work. The indexes of the 1945 Bradley, Reeve and Bowen translation most readers are likely to recognize and the more recent Mansfield translation contain mention of the term. Tocqueville expanded considerably on numerous themes of civil society with no explicit reference to the concept itself or to Ferguson or Hegel. In Europe, as well, there are works by a host of scholars including Karl Marx (who largely rejected the idea of civil society independent of the state as part of his departure from Hegel), Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies and a great many others. Nineteenth and early 20th century scholars did much to elaborate the concept of society as an autonomous sphere of activity, albeit with little explicit emphasis on the civil. (A great deal of work in historical sociology as well elaborates on these themes.)

Edmund Burke was another important nineteenth century contributor to civil society thought, particularly through his jurisprudential writings and discussions of legal order. James Todd (2008) argues that the positive aspect of Burke's writing on civil society stressed the importance of maintaining social harmony, while the negative aspect sought to resist the application of philosophical dogma and ideology through applications of power.^[7]

One of the more distinctive perspectives on the idea of civil society come from the Italian communist theorist Antonio Gramsci.^[8] David Forgacs (2000) summarizes Gramsci's perspective:

Gramsci uses the term to designate 'the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private". that is to say the sum of social activities and institutions which are not directly part of the government, the judiciary or the repressive bodies (police, armed forces). Trade unions and other voluntary

associations, as well as the church organizations and political parties, when the latter do not form part of the government, are all part of civil society. Civil Society is the sphere in which a dominant social group organizes consent and hegemony, as opposed to political society, where it rules by coercion and direct domination. It is also a sphere where the dominated groups may organize their opposition and where an alternative hegemony may be constructed.

Michael Edwards points up the reason for the sudden rise of interest in civil society in Ferguson's time: "Between 1750 and 1850, ideas about civil society took a new and fundamental turn in response to a perceived crisis in the ruling social order. The crisis was motivated by the rise of the market economy and the increasing differentiation of interests it provoked, as 'communities of strangers' replaced 'communities of neighbors'; and by the breakdown of traditional paradigms of authority as a consequence of the French and American revolutions." [9]

Another major new departure arose in the emerging behavioral political science of the 1950s. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) [10] set forth the concept of civic culture, measurable in terms of a cluster of related political and social attitudes in five democracies. As part of this work, Almond and Verba developed a major statement of the perspective of civic organizations as incubators of democracy and good citizenship.

Using then-new survey research techniques, Almond and Verba employed a common modern interpretation of two chapters in Tocqueville [11] to argue that the political function of many community organizations is to foster better awareness and more informed citizens who will then make better voting choices and hold government more accountable. They also drew a link between organizational bylaws and political constitutions of democratic governments, suggesting that these organizational micro-constitutions serve to socialize participants to the process of democratic decision making. (Both of these views are now routinely projected back upon Tocqueville by many authors.)

Another line of writing about civil society arose within nascent conservatism in the U.S., as small government conservatives and antigovernment libertarians sought alternatives to the growth of "big government" after World War II. In 1965, Richard Cornuelle, a corporate executive and independent scholar, published a call for protection and encouragement of a sector of civic space completely independent of government. [12] The term, if not the underlying theory, became the basis of a well known Washington DC organization Independent Sector (<http://www.independentsector.org>).

Three conceptions

Writing in 2005, Michael Edwards saw three distinct conceptions of civil society in the post-1989 international scene: Civil society as associational life; civil society as the good society; and civil society as the public sphere. "Each of these three schools of thought has a respectable intellectual history" he noted, "and is visible in the discourse of scholars, politicians, foundations and international agencies, but it is the first -civil society as associational life - that is dominant. It is Alexis de Tocqueville's ghost that wanders through the corridors of the World Bank, not that of Habermas or Hegel. Indeed, the first two schools of thought are regularly conflated - it being assumed that a healthy associational life contributes to, or even produces, the good society in predictable ways - while the public sphere is usually ignored." [13]

And two contrasts

A few years earlier and responding specifically to the contrast of civil society with the collapsed regimes of the Soviet Empire, Ernest Gellner defined civil society in contrast to centralized autocracies and what he termed "segmentary communities". Civil society, Gellner stated "is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role as keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomizing the rest of society." [14] Traditional man, Gellner noted, "can sometimes escape the tyranny of kings, but only at the cost of falling under the tyranny of cousins, and of ritual." [15] The real situation with civil society, he goes on, is at least triangular. "(T)here are the segmentary communities, cousin-ridden and ritual-ridden, free perhaps from central tyranny, but not really free in a sense that would satisfy us; there is centralization which grinds into the dust all subsidiary institutions and sub-communities, whether ritually stifling or not;" and thirdly, there is civil society. "Civil society," he continues, "has at the least two contrasts, and so its essence cannot be seized with the help of a merely bi-polar opposition between pluralism and monocentrism....We can only identify it through characterizing the full variety of its historical contrasts." [16]

Civil society and the state

The interest of Hegel and others in civil society was aroused in part by the Jacobin response of the French Revolution. Members of the radical Jacobin Club or faction who dominated the most extreme phase of the revolution vehemently opposed attempts to establish a decentralized, autonomous sphere for civil society and sought to eliminate any "intermediary bodies" between the individual and the state. After 1789 in France all such mediating institutions were banned to prevent minority interests from imposing their will in place of the general will. "There is no longer any corporation within the state. Henceforth, there is only the particular interest of each individual and the general interest," according to René Guy Le Chapelier, who sponsored the law in the French National Assembly. By 1810 the Napoleonic Penal Code banned all unauthorized meetings of more than 20 people, and trade unions in France were not legalized until late in the 19th century. Full freedom of association in France was not established until 1901. [17]

Following the French revolutionary example, a wide variety of subsequent revolutionary, totalitarian and dictatorial regimes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to ban or eliminate the "intermediary institutions" of civil society - including not only outlawing private associations but also a number of efforts to replace the "bourgeois family" with state-run child rearing. It was, in fact, the simultaneous ending of several such systems - notably the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the decline of a number of Latin American military dictatorships - that occasioned the worldwide rise of interest in restoring civil society in the 1990s.

Marxist theorists and practitioners have generally been divided on the question of the relation of civil society and the state. The Russian, Chinese, East German, North Korean, Vietnamese and other communist states all banned private associations (as did the Nazis and Fascists, often in the name of anti-communism). Some followers of Antonio Gramsci, reject the distinction between the state and civil society altogether, insisting that civil society is simply one aspect of the state. In the same vein, followers of Louis Althusser, maintain that

important civil society organizations are part of an 'ideological state apparatus'. In contemporary discussions, both of these perspectives relate in differing ways to the world-wide phenomenon of "devolution" and state or government contracting with nonprofit and other organizations of civil society.

Civil society and the voluntary spirit

Well before the revolutions of 1989-91, there were remarkable and unprecedented changes in a variety of related civil society phenomena beginning in the 1960s. The number of nonprofit organizations, the number and size of foundations, the total assets of nonprofit total annual donations and several other key indicators all increased dramatically. Beginning in the 1980s, investigators in a variety of basic and applied social sciences and such diverse fields as accounting, began to investigate all of this. One of the first questions was what to call all of this and another was how to account for it. Brian O'Connell, then President of Independent Sector (<http://www.independentsector.org/>), brought together several emerging threads of the Tocquevillian view of civil society in a reader published in 1983.^[18] O'Connell used the term voluntary spirit as a summary notion, but usage very quickly coalesced around the term nonprofit sector, which is still in widespread use in the U.S. two decades later.

Meanwhile, almost at the exact time that the notion of a nonprofit sector was coming into wider use, larger geopolitical forces both nationally in the U.S. and internationally were destabilizing (or broadening?) the consensus view represented by O'Connell and Independent Sector. In 1976, the American Enterprise Institute had published *To Empower People* by Peter Berger, a sociologist and Richard John Neuhaus, a noted conservative author.^[19] Berger and Neuhaus popularized the neo-Tocquevillian notion of nonprofit and civil society organizations as intermediate social institutions whose function was to 'mediate' between citizens and government, or the political state.

In the late 1980's there were the multiple beginnings of a new groundswell of interest in the concept of civil society. Some of these occurred independent of the nonprofit sector focus in fields like political science, sociology and law. Much of this new interest was fueled by efforts to move beyond totalitarianism in the European states rendered newly independent in the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Soviet empire, and the transcendence of democracy over military dictatorships in Latin America.

Two interdisciplinary research organizations, founded in the late 1980s, in which issues of civil society still hold a great deal of interest are the International Society for Third Sector Research (<http://www.istr.org>) (ISTR, pronounced eye-star) and the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) (<http://www.arnova.org>).

Bowling alone and together

Since that time, several initiatives and developments brought civil society into the mainstreams of many social science disciplines.

In 1992, political philosophers Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato produced a large volume entitled *Civil Society* grounded in a major reconsideration of Hegel and setting forth a conception of civil society built around voluntary associations, communications media and social movements. [20]

Also beginning in the 1990s, a multi-national research effort spearheaded by Lester Salamon and the Center for Civil Society (<http://www.jhu.edu/~ccss/>) at Johns Hopkins University, began a massive research effort in two dozen countries that has produced an unprecedented amount of comparative information on the size, scale, employment and other factors associated with civil society organizations around the world.

In the new millennium, Robert Putnam [21] used the metaphoric comparison of bowling leagues in his childhood in contrast to people bowling alone in spare minutes today to frame a large body of national data suggesting declines in civic engagement and participation over recent decades. Putnam's book, along with a previously published essay and his comparative study of the civic traditions of northern and southern Italy [22] joined the many threads of the civil society conversation already noted to a number of entirely new and previously unrelated topics. His focus on social capital in the Italian study and *Bowling Alone* provoked a host of new research initiatives. His focus on the role of television in *Bowling Alone* book and essay points toward levels of cultural analysis that have yet to emerge.

Measuring civil society

There have been several attempts to empirically measure the concept of civil society. For example, Civicus, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation has established a survey instrument suitable for application to national societies. (See the [2] (<http://www.civicus.org/csi>) web page for more details.) Lester Salamon and S. Wojciech Sokolowski and their associates at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies (<http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/>) have also developed an instrument for this purpose as an outgrowth of the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project.

Civil society, anarchy, incivility and totalitarianism

One of the interesting questions about civil society is what may be its opposite or its negation? Non-civil society? Uncivil society? One of the most common answers to this question is anarchy - particularly in one of the two conventional meanings of this term: social disorganization, or the breakdown of law and order. Anarchy in this sense may be the dystopia of all civil society thought. This is the condition that Thomas Hobbes referred to as the "war of all against all". Using the English Civil War as his principal point of reference, Hobbes described life under conditions of anarchy as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The sociological concept of social problems as social disorganization also connects well with this conception of anarchy.

In another important sense pursued by a variety of modern anarchist and libertarian theorists, anarchy (literally organized society without a ruler) is something very close to the highest form of civil society. Employing concepts like spontaneous order, Friedrich von Hayek and other theorists in this area have developed extensive statements of extremely limited states (Robert Nozick), a large independent sector (Richard Cournelle), non-aggression and other notions. To some degree, anarchy in anarchist/libertarian thought offers a positive model of the phenomenon alluded to by Karl Marx - but never fully articulated - as the "withering away of the state".

Uncivil society also has a somewhat archaic set of social class-based connotations once summed up as the absence of polite society - a society characterized by manners, etiquette and rudeness. (To be rude in this sense is to display behavior associated with lower classes or orders or to show insufficient sensitivity to others, or both.)

Totalitarianism is also one of the opposites of civil society.^[23] We can observe this directly from the great emphasis and enthusiasm for civil society in all of the former Soviet satellite states following collapse of the Soviet Union. Restoration of civil society was a consistent factor in the wave of revolutions that began in the late 1980s and spread throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Likewise, enthusiasm for civil society as an alternative to military dictatorship in Latin America in this same period, suggests that what Harold Lasswell termed "the garrison state" is also a social model in opposition to civil society. Likewise, some authorities would also include Fascism, Collectivism, Autocracy and absolute monarchy in any list of opposites of civil society.

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- ↑ For more information, see [1] (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/>) A full text of this work is available online at G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right Hegel, 1827* (translated by Dyde, 1897) (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm>)
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