Civil Society from Historical to Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract

Many scholars think that because of its ambiguous nature the definition of the civil society concept sometimes is meaningless. Civil society belongs to a group of sociological and political theory concepts such as freedom, justice, equality and democracy that are not clearly demarcated. At least two specific dimensions of the civil society concept are distinguishable: the theoretical and the normative role. In the context of theoretical role the concept of civil society analyzes dimensions of social life and social values, with citizens and civil organizations as key actors. The normative role serves to motivate and mobilize citizens and other social actors for the establishment and development of various contents and forms of civil activities. The normative function is mostly manifested during periods of transition from less to more democratic societies. Both dimensions of the civil society concept have played significant roles, especially in countries where the position of civil society has traditionally played a marginal role. Discussing the concept of civil society is quite fashionable today. Civil society is a popular term with politicians, academics and international agencies. We frequently hear politicians talk about the needs of the state and the market for a civil society. As a result, a number of authors and social and political theorists have stressed its critical importance in the processes of democratic change. The concept of civil society has been defended in various ways by a variety of political and social theorists. Today's content of civil society does not result with a commonly accepted definition of the term, but focuses on whether the term should be a normative or non-normative tool of social science, and whether economic, religious and family relations should be considered as part of it. This paper will focus on the various meanings of civil society; a tentative definition on civil society will be introduced as well as various existing discourses of civil society.

Keywords: Civil Society, Theoretical, Normative, Democratic Functions, Democratic Citizenship

1. Introduction

There is no commonly agreed definition of civil society. 'A survey of available literature on this subject makes it clear that civil society as a concept contains elements that are diverse, complex, and above all, contentious' (Spurk, 2010). Some of the literature considers whether it is this very fuzziness that explains the present popularity of civil society in that "it can be all things to all people" (Glasius 2004, 3).

Civil society provides an intermediate layer of governance between the citizens and the state that is capable of resolving problems without public coercion. The idea of civil society within the context of modern history offers perspectives on state-society relations. Within these perspectives, the state should be differentiated from civil society as a binding or organizing principal of political order. In this analysis, individuals and different organizations are part of the political order to the extent that they seek to participate in those processes. The core idea of civil society embodies an ethical ideal of the social order, one that harmonizes the conflicting demands of individual interests and social good (Seligman, 1995).

In this paper I will try to clarify civil society's historical roots and introduce a tentative definition for civil society from both of its theoretical and normative dimensions before we see how the concept came to be understood in different contexts. The idea of civil society from its normative to functional definition will be discussed, as well as the relationship between civil society and democracy and some of the major democratic functions through which it contributes to strengthen democracy.

2. Origins and history of civil society

Although it now relates to societies of different civilizations, civil society roots lie mainly in the West. Romans spoke for the first time of "societas civilis", a term introduced by Cicero. Socrates supported the idea that conflicts within society should be resolved through public debates, and Plato saw the ideal state as a society in which people dedicate themselves to the common good, while Aristotle saw the 'polis' as an 'association', that enabled citizens to share in the virtuous task of ruling

and being ruled (O'Brien, 1999). Nevertheless, neither Greece nor Rome distinguished between state and society. After the Thirty Years' War ended, the Treaty of Westphalia endorsed states as political units having their territory and sovereignty. The monarchs were able to form national armies, which enabled them to control public life. Consequently, before the Enlightenment period absolutism was the hallmark of Europe and civil society was not discussed until the eighteenth-century by liberals attacking absolutism (Edwards, 2004).

The medieval idea of differentiating between state and society was lost in the work of Hobbes, who in religion found only potential for conflicts. He wrote that if a society is to be held together at all, it must be through the power of the sovereign. But Locke, in 'Two Treatises of Government' (1963) provided a distinctively modern form of differentiation by combining the concept with that of voluntary association. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke believed in a peaceful coexistence between human beings through social contracts and pacts (Warren, 1996). Locke and Hobbes did not hold that civil society was a separate realm from the state. It is society that created political institutions to protect it, and so can change them whenever it wishes to do so. In this context, Hobbes refused strict separation of state and society (Thomas Hobbes, 1960).

John Locke was the first one that distinguished between state and society. For him the state was a part of "civil society", but he distinguished the political order from "the community" placing the moral basis of the political order on the consent of the "community", that is, on society. Adam Ferguson developed the concept of civil society as a moral sphere in which human interactions can be protected from the state (O'Brien, 1999). On the other side, Tocqueville presented civil society as a network of non-political social organizations that strengthen democracy. Thus, he introduced the notion of subsidiary, which allows civil society to be involved in governance by limiting the power of the state whilst ensuring that the creative energy of society remains outside of the state and remains within civic activism of associations (Tocqueville 1969).. While Locke, Ferguson, and Tocqueville base their concepts of civil society on a distinction between state and society Adam Smith focused on the difference between society and markets.

In Hegel's analysis of society, the economy is a part of civil society, which is identified with market relations. He understood the distinction between market and state. Marx argued that civil society was strongly shaped by class antagonism and Rousseau thought that of the society where state should be absorbed into civil society. Civil society, as Rousseau describes it, serves two purposes: to provide peace for everyone and to ensure the right to property (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1950). On the other hand, Gramsci developed a concept of civil society that differentiated it both from the economy and the state, although he had a difficult time expressing the independent role of civil society without it being an instrument of state politics.

3. Definition and concept of civil society: Theoretical and normative dimensions

Walzer has defined civil society as the space of (politically) un-coerced human association and also the set of relational networks-formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology. Civil society is also seen as a sphere of social interaction between economy and state (Cohen and Arato, 1992). If we refer to these definitions then the question is whether this includes economic interest not organized to pursue public ends.

The Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences uses a working definition that includes four model sectors, adding family as an additional one: 'Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, 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 registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups' (Centre for Civil Society, 2006). This definition describes civil society as part of the society, but not directly part of the state, consisting of different organizations, which operate in the interest of the common good.

In order to overcome social and economic problems other ideas were suggested, including a partnership involving the public, private and civil sectors working together. Edwards notes that civil society as an associational life should be central to the workings of this joint project, which will address the effects of too much state intervention and consequences of

human over-reliance on the market. This project, as a new way of achieving social progress, became identified as building 'societies that are civil' (Edwards, 2004).

Another significant functional goal of civil society is to act as a force maintaining liberal freedom. This key function is a set of diverse non-governmental institutions, which are strong enough to counterbalance the state. Civil society is: 'a society in which polity and economy are distinct, where polity is instrumental but can and does check extremes of individual interest, but where the state is in turn checked by institutions with an economic base; it relies on economic growth which, by requiring cognitive growth, makes ideological monopoly impossible' (Gellner, 1994).

a. The idea of civil society: From normative to functional definition of civil society

Civil society's existence as independent from the state is a very important aspect. As we saw from the historical perspectives, the concept of civil society was defined differently by a range of German, French and Scottish Enlightenment figures, but common to all attempts was the articulation of the civil society's main problem: the relation between the private and public, the individual and social, and between individual desire and public concerns.

In this context, civil society could be seen as autonomous sphere and independent from the state, but regulated by the state (Shills, 1991). This idea of civil society is not the focus of power balances between the state and civil society, but their inter-independence.

Civil society should be considered as the location of independent thought. As a result, a functional definition of civil society could replace the predominant normative definition: 'that civil society should not be defined negatively as opposition to the state, but positively, in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life' (Shills, 1991).

4. Civil society and democracy

Citizen participation in processes of public decision-making is an essential part of the democracy. Through its social and political activism, civil society gives voice to groups of citizens that don't feel represented in democracy. Amongst other potentials, civil society organizations have expert knowledge in many areas of concern, and so are able to serve governments as counselors.

Participating in the system can be a good experience for citizens, allowing for a positive identification with their political system. This is how civil society can help strengthen some of the weaknesses in democracy and lower citizen dissatisfaction.

But not always civil society organizations have identical interests. Civil society is not always homogeneous. In essence there are many organizations within civil society that are undemocratic in their platform. Some of them imply violent and in some cases illegal strategies and activities which in essence are non democratic. These aspects can directly threaten the maintenance of democratic regimes. It would therefore be misleading to conclude that all civil society organizations are interested in making democracy a reality.

Civil society in the context of communist regimes had a different meaning compared to the meaning of civil society in the context of contemporary democracies. Because of the limited freedom of expression in communist regimes, civil society existed in someone's living room, in churches or in cafes (Brinton, 1990). Under the communist regimes independent civil society usually took on the form of small groups of citizen activism. Both representatives of independent and of the broad civil society contributed with different means and forms to overthrow communist regimes and the following transition toward democracy (Skovajska, 2008).

a. Democratic functions of civil society

As outlined above, at its best civil society can make a positive contribution to democracy, but at its worst may undermine democratic regimes. Consequently, there are some major functions through which civil society contributes to strengthening democracy: 'The Lockean Function: Control of State Power, The Hegelian Function: Interest Mediation, The Pluralist

Function: Social Integration, The Non-Profit Function: Service Provision and The Tocquevillean Function: Political Socialization' (Forbrig, 2002).

Other authors see a variety of ''democratic functions" of civil society. 'Its first and most basic function is limiting state power, primarily accomplished by two linked efforts. Civil society must monitor the abuse of state power – such as corruption or vote fraud – and also mobilize society to protest such abuses, thereby undermining the legitimacy of undemocratic governments; second, civil society supplements the role of political parties in stimulating political participation. Third, civil society can develop attributes such as tolerance and moderation crucial to democratic development. Fourth, it creates channels other than political parties for 'the articulation, aggregation and representations of interests', not least at the local level. Fifth, voluntary associations can create interests that transcend the fault lines of region, religion, class, or ethnicity and the like. Sixth, voluntary associations recruit and train potential political leaders. Seventh, such organizations may help to build democracy in a variety of other ways, such as monitoring election procedures. Eighth, civil society can widely disseminate information useful to individuals in playing their roles as democratic citizens. Ninth, civil societies can help to achieve the economic reforms without which democracy is unlikely to take root. And tenth, the well-functioning of civil society may strengthen the emerging democratic state by pressuring it into patterns of behavior that enhance its legitimacy' (Diamond, 1994).

It is necessary to examine some of the key functions of civil society in regard to democracy, as they are important for its consolidation and maintenance. One of civil society's key tasks is to build a democratic culture in families, schools and communities. In this context integration of individuals and groups is very important. For instance, in today's world demographic changes within countries are constant. Thousands migrate from rural to urban areas looking for better employment opportunities. Children of these families find themselves relatively alone when they first arrive in their new locations. Social connections, such as family and school are weak in the beginning. Sociologists find that some of these individuals can easily come in contact with groups of organized crimes, narcotic substance abuse, suicide, and membership in violent, religious and ideological extremist groups. Civil society can play a crucial role in preventing some of these pathologies. Membership of individuals in different organizations such as labor unions, student unions, religious organizations, and professional associations gives opportunities for discussion of all levels of public issues. In this context civil society becomes mediator between the individual and the state.

Democratic citizenship is another aspect in which civil society can contribute. If democratic citizenship would be, for instance, only for simple procedures like voting, then democracy rests on shaky foundations. Democratic citizenship is about participation and social cohesion. Civil society can train each new generation in the practices of citizenship. This is possible through participating in meetings, organizing activities and public speaking in order to cultivate the arts of civic membership.

The ability to choose and be a member of different types of organizations is freedom itself. The plural loyalties in a liberal democratic state can liberate the individual, another advantage and benefit to the individual from participating in civil society. Liberty spontaneously gives rise to organized interests. 'The variety of independently organized interests and points of view fostered by fully developed civil society makes it less likely that any one group or interest will dominate society, abusing its power to the detriment of other groups' rights or the public good.' (Madison,1961). Finally the ability to disperse power is another essential function of civil society.

5. Conclusions

If we exclude the classical period, civil society meant every aspect of society that was not functionally and institutionally included within the State. The seventeenth and eighteenth century separation of state and society was a step of great significance. This later allowed theorists to conceive society as a social space in which the individual, alone or with others, could view the acts of society in order to oppose an oppressive state. While these were only a few of the formulations of civil society (some of them excluded familiar, religious, and economic realms) most of them shared the most common definition of the term: the 'separateness of civil society and the state.' As Shills stated 'civil society should not be defined negatively as opposition to the state, but positively, in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life'.

Consequently, we underlined that civil society can be viewed as a solution to many challenges in contemporary democracies. But not always the relationship between civil society and democracy is democratic itself. Consequently, not

always civil society organizations are homogeneous in their goals and democratic in their structure and platform. Through the employment of disruptive, violent, illegal or socially irresponsible strategies, civil society organizations accustom their members to behavioral patterns, which are diametrically opposed to those necessary for the smooth functioning of democratic regimes. Non-democratic goals and strategies of some civil society organizations may generate openly non-democratic views and forms of conduct at worst (Forbrig, 2002).

As discussed in this paper many authors give different meanings to the notion of civil society. Not everyone means the same thing when they discuss it. In general, civil society is seen more as a multifaceted concept, although it is noticeable that the differentiation between the state and civil society is mostly discussed. As we saw, although it is possible to identify some major functions through which civil society contributes to strengthening democracy, this doesn't necessarily mean that we do have a precise definition agreed from all authors for the concept of civil society.

Referring to the above discourses a tentative definition on civil society describes the concept of civil society as autonomous sphere and independent from the state, but regulated by a legal framework from the state. This is the concept of civil society that is not defined negatively as opposition to the state, but positively, in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust is established between the state institutions and civil society thus contributing to the democratization processes.

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