Understanding civil society before and after 1989

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Resumen

Atrapados en las ambigüedades de la *Realpolitik* del sistema de Yalta, las sociedades del Centro y Este de Europa han tenido que proceder a un largo camino de aprendizaje a fin de encontrar formas correctas de autoorganización y la articulación de la defensa de sus valores e identidades *vis-à-vis* con una dictadura y una administración autoritaria. Estas amargas lecciones contribuyeron a la emergencia de una nueva «estrategia», una nueva visión materializada en la emergente filosofía política y la práctica social y política de la sociedad civil. Este desarrollo no hubiera sido posible sin el gradual y fundamental cambio en el pensamiento político y el establecimiento de metas, expresadas en el desarrollo de un nuevo concepto de sociedad civil.

Palabras clave: sociedad civil global, Europa Central del Este, Democracia, ONG.

Abstract

Entrapped in the ambiguities of the Realpolitik of the Yalta system, East and Central European societies had to proceed on a long path of learning in order to find the right modes of self-organization and articulation to defend their values and identities vis-à-vis dictatorship and authoritarian rule. These bitter lessons contributed to the emergence of a new «strategy», a new vision which materialized in the emerging political philosophy and the political and social practice of civil society. This development would not have been possible without a gradual and fundamental change in political thinking and goal-setting, expressed in the development of a new concept of civil society.

Key words: global civil society, East Central Europe, Democracy, NGO.

Most authors agree that the meaning of the term «civil society» has significantly changed since the end of the Cold War. According to Mary Kaldor, the core of what is new in the concept since 1989 is globalization. The prerequisite social contract between civil society and the state is seen in the constitution of «a global system of rules, underpinned by overlapping inter-governmental, governmental and global authorities» (Kaldor, 2003: 2). The fact that no concensus can be reached on the definition of civil society, its inherent ambiguity, says Kaldor, reveals one of its attractions.

Civil society can express itself in a large variety of forms, from individual initiatives through social movements, clubs, associations, societies and other organizations. It is never, however, a mechanical sum total of existing or potential formations. To quote Fowler (1996: 25), «civil society is the location from where legitimacy must be obtained if one is to talk of a democratic political system». Civil society in this sense is more a philosophical concept than a set of organizations.

It is the terrain of self-reflection, self-articulation and autonomy which inherently presupposes and necessitates a self-organizing public arena, where the critique, the control and containment of existing and prevailing power-monopolies (i.e., the state, the army, the police, multinational companies, intergovernmental institutions) can be practiced. Civil society has to be seen as a potential, *ad hoc* melting pot and battleground of diverse interests and actors, ranging from public individuals to international NGOs. This public arena is not homogenous; it is constituted rather as a permanent regrouping and renegotiating process between and among new and old actors. Its non-constant social fabric and catalyzed interdependencies are built on the autonomous and voluntary will of the individual who actively takes part in social and political affairs. The uninterrupted social need for civil society stems from democracy's deficiencies. This special social space or public arena assumes citizen participation in social processes as well as a strong consciousness of being a citizen. This interrelatedness is correctly emphasized in recent literature on civil society and NGOs.

Lars Jorgensen, for example, envisions civil society as a «meeting place for debate and common endeavour», acknowledging that «the right of each individual to participate in the workings of society, and the recognition that periodical elections and referendums […] are not sufficient» (Jorgensen, 1996: 36). Mary Kaldor suggests that «the advantage of the language of civil society is precisely its political content, its implications for participation and citizenship» (Kaldor, 1997: 23). In other words, there is nothing stable or mechanistic about civil society, especially not as far as «institutions» are concerned.

Those who do take up the challenge of reframing the conceptual discourse are conscious of the dangers of the lack of self-reflection on the part of NGOs and the lack of conceptual clarity on the part of intellectuals which has lead to confusion in practice.

Jenny Pearce (1993: 14) articulates the crucial consequences of the lack of debate on fundamental issues:

> There is no «correct» view of civil society, but there is an essential point to make about the way the concept is used. The use of the term as a normative concept, i.e. what we would *like* civil society to be or what we think it *ought* to be, is often confused with an empirical description [...] the constant slippage between the two in the development literature and in the practice of multilateral agencies, governments, and NGOs has contributed to a technical and depoliticising approach to the strengthening of civil society which ultimately has had political implications. It has, for instance, mostly privileged the vision of Western donor agencies and turned «civil society» into a project rather than a process. In other words, by assuming that there is no debate around what we would like «civil society» to be, assuming it is an unproblematic and empirically observable given whose purpose is unquestionably to build democracy and foster development, the vision of powerful and well-resourced donors predominates. Failure to clarify their own position means that many NGOs end up simply implementing that vision on the donors' behalf. If doing so coincides with their own objectives, there is no problem; but if it is an unintended outcome of lack of reflection, there is.

There is certainly not one model and one discourse for civil society. The concept does not allow for one definition. Its very essence lies in its diversity, difference and pluralism. Hence, the effort to meet Mr/Ms Civil Society to begin a polished dialogue, often expressed by governments and politicians, will never be possible. This is what distinguishes the Citizen (and its public space), to use Marc Nerfin's metaphor, from the Merchant and the Prince. Civil society is multilingual and cannot be taught one exclusive and particular language.

The compulsion of institutions is to what some term «colonize» the language of civil society - to objectify, normatively define and compartmentalize the concept, whereas civil society actors often see themselves and their activities rather as a dynamic and fluid process. In fact, as we try to demonstrate in this report, much of the critique from international institutions, like the WTO and IMF, relates to the limitations of «dialogue» (more prescriptively «monologue») with/about civil society is focussed on their perception of the problem with civil society being non-static, ungraspable and ultimately undefineable. Where is Mr/Ms Civil Society they ask? Since no one seems to sign up, governments and politicians constantly strive to carry out their own «civil society», expressed by employing their own language of civil society.

One can differentiate according to the user's attitude quite a few languages of civil society. Some of the most outstanding are:

The «Innovative»: The best example of this category is probably Anthony Judge, an unnoticed language virtuoso. Other examples include John Keane, Jan Aart Scholte, Marc Nerfin, Ronnie Lipschutz, Manuel Castells, etc.

The «Patronizing»: Most of the great intergovernmental organizations «civil society language» belongs to this category. An outstanding example is the IMF-initiated newsletter «Dear Friend…,» and the entire process of «accrediting» civil society organizations as partners in dialogue. Guy Verhofstadt's open letter is another good example. (Verhoftstadt, 2001).

The «Radical»: Those who refuse the patronizing language and demand real participation in dialogues and decision-making at the global level. The best examples are the movements and networks categorized as «absolutists» by Multi-Lateral Economic Institutions (MEIS), such as *50 Years was Enough*, *Greenpeace*, *Jubilee 2000*, *Ruckus Society*, etc.

The «Global Enthusiasts»: Those who speak the «pozzy» language of Anthony Judge. Edward Comor's «global civil society progressives»; John Keane's «civil society purists». There are too many to name them all.

«Civil Society Fakers»: A lucrative job for benefactors of former authoritarian regimes who have the skills and networks to create fake coalitions that they represent at national, European or global fora. This is particularly evident in post-communist, feckless democracies.

The «Practical Practitioners» of the «Third Sector»: They rarely talk civil society explicitely and show little enthusiasm for theoretical debates.

«Theoreticians of Civil Society»: Academics who do the opposite of the practical practitioners.

The «Totalizing»: From Aristotle to Alan Greenspan, «the whole world is civil society», including, of course uncivil society!

The «Empiricist»: «Statistics Please!». Only measurable NGOs count. The rest is fantasy. Representatives of Americanized mainstream social sciences literature.

«Neggies» in Anthony Judge's classification are those who are always sceptical. They help detect the mistakes and shortcomings of others in the civil society literature.

There are obviously many overlaps between the users of these ways of speaking and these categories can, of course, be extended. The different languages used by rather influential representatives of the above-mentioned categories are reflections of the significance of this peculiar term and the new social, political and economic terrains it occupies.

Definitions and the language of civil society

Vaclav Havel understands civil society as the universality of human rights that allow us to fulfill our potential in all of our roles: as members of our nation, our family, our region, our church, our community, profession, political party, and so on. In other words, by becoming citizens «in the broadest and deepest sense of the word» (Dahrendorf, 1997: 58). Civil society, and the organically related concept of citizenship therefore provide a protective umbrella, a guarantee of security, an experience of belonging, of home. Jeffrey Alexander (1998: 58) voices a similar idea:

> Civil society should be conceived as a solidarity sphere in which a certain kind of universalising community exists, it is exhibited by «public opinion», possesses its own cultural codes and narratives in a democratic idiom, is patterned by a set of peculiar institutions, most notably legal and journalistic ones, and is visible in historically distinctive sets of interactional practices like civility, equality, criticism, and respect. This kind of civil community can never exist as such; it can exist only «to one degree or another».

The key actor of civil society is the sovereign individual who possesses rights and responsibilities and is ready to accept the rules of cooperation for the good of him/herself and the community, in this way sacrificing a part of his/her own sovereignty. However, there is no complete, strong and efficient civil society without the universal status of citizenship. It is the set of rights and capacities related to citizenship that guarantees a defence against *anomie* and protects against an over-indulgent market of turbo-capitalism.

Dahrendorf (1997: 60) characterises citizenship as the epitome of freedom, and civil society as the medium through which this freedom is projected, boosted and dispersed. It thus constitutes the home of the citizen.

> But citizenship and civil society go one important step further than elections and markets. They are goals to strive for rather than dangers to avoid. In this sense they are moral objectives […]

Alexander calls our attention to the fact that although civil society is dependent on other spheres, the sphere of solidarity still enjoys relative autonomy (and as such should be studied independently). He emphasizes that civil society cannot be reduced to the realm of institutions. The world of civil society is also the world of structured, socially constructed conscience, «[…] a network of understandings that operates beneath and above explicit institutions […]» (Dahrendorf, 1997: 97).

Alexander points out that the world created by the discourse is polarized. It offers the image of open society in contrast to the model of a closed, secret, conspiratorial world. The symbolic characteristics on the positive side guarantee the preservation of society; the networks of solidarity on the negative side serve the purpose of undermining mutual respect and destroying social integration.

Language, therefore, he argues, carries with it the danger of polarization and the creation of enemies. The questions are always the same: Who is it that speaks in the name of civil society? Who delineates the «insiders» and the «outsiders»? Who has access to the necessary resources to sustain civil society?

In societies that are in the early stages of democratic development, the danger of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the language of civil society is especially great. On the one hand, adversaries are created through the use of language and, on the other hand, the discourse of civil and open democratic society is kidnapped in a way that is not civil, not open, and not democratic.

The renaissance of civil society in East Central Europe

The great emancipatory powers of East and Central Europe needed new ways and forms for self-expression. Michnik's «New Evolution» and the new language arose from strong needs that could not find proper channels for expression. Entrapped in the ambiguities of the *Realpolitik* of the Yalta system, East and Central European societies had to proceed on a long path of learning in order to find the right language and modes of self-organization and articulation to defend their values and identities *vis-à-vis* dictatorship and authoritarian rule. Revolts and revolutions of workers and intellectuals during the 1950s, and the more peaceful but radical reforms «from above» that culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968, were heroic; but as far as their immediate aims are concerned they were ineffective experiments.[1] At the same time, these bitter lessons most likely contributed a great deal to the emergence of a new «strategy», a new vision which has materialzed in the emerging political philosophy and the political and social practice of civil society. This development would not have been possible without a rather gradual but

1 They all assumed a rapid and fundamental political change: the reclaiming of national independence and the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

nonetheless fundamental change in political thinking and goal-setting expressed in the development of the new language of civil society.[2]

It is quite revealing that at another periphery, Latin America, discussions around the same kinds of ideas were taking place simultaneous with developments in East and Central Europe. According to Fernando Cardoso, «In Brazilian political language, everything which was an organized fragment was being designated civil society. Not rigorously, but effectively, the whole opposition […] was being described as if it were the movement of Civil Society» (Kaldor, 2003:75).

Although no direct link can be found between intellectuals in the two peripheries, Kaldor admits, «the term came to reflect an emerging reality (in Latin America), which was reminiscent of the way it was used in Central Europe». Certainly, the crossborder, transnational, European and even global dimensions of the emerging actors who define themselves as civil society can be traced from the beginning.

The Message of Solidarnosc and the Proliferation of the Language of Civil Society

The lessons of the early attempts at liberation taught independent-minded East Europeans to look for alternative methods to democratize their regimes and increase autonomy and political, social and cultural freedom within the stable framework of the bipolar world order. The first alternative was the introduction of economic reforms and a cautious, state-controlled opening towards the world economy coupled with the attempt to avoid political change in the 1960s in Hungary. The internal contradictions of this reform experiment reached a climax in the early 1980s and led to the end of the unwritten compromise between state and society. The artificially maintained image of the country as an economic success story became untenable. This was the historic turning point for Hungarian society that then started to rid itself of political paralysis and social muteness.

Self-mobilization from below, in different grassroots activities, gradually emerged. With increasing recognition of the evolving political and economic crises, the culture of silence was step-by-step replaced with more open dialogue among formerly isolated circles of

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2 Obviously, these «changes» occured in close connection and interaction with each other.

independent-minded citizens. Cautiously, the media became involved in the new critical discourse. The long list of taboo themes began to shrink. In other words, a new public arena emerged to openly and critically discuss social, environmental, cultural and, in a restricted way, political issues. In the 1980s, a modern critical discourse of dialogue was born in Hungary.

In Poland, *Solidarnosc*, quickly became a nationwide, self-supporting political, cultural, social and economic network and a metaphor for an emerging civil society. The political philosophers behind the movement deliberately built their strategy on non-violence, involving the party-state and local authorities in a dialogue with the representatives of the officially unrecognized movement. The enforcement of dialogue, in the form of radical demands and systematic negotiations, was tempered with the readiness to compromise. Non-violence and strong solidarity characterized this unique East Central European social movement. As part of a new logic of association, expressed by a new, emerging discourse, the adjective «civil» was reborn and referred to those characteristics. «Civil», in everyday parlance, also meant autonomous, independent, non-military, non-violent and non-official.

The pervasive success of *Solidarnosc* proved throughout the region of the Eastern bloc that there was a chance to peacefully challenge the authoritarian and dictatorial Soviet-type regimes and their apparatus from below. Naturally, the forms of organizing civil movements differed from country to country according to historical traditions, the nature of the dictatorship, political culture and social structure. A wide variety of civil initiatives, movements and associations emerged at the beginning of the 1980s in Hungary in the absence of a large and strong independent moral authority like the Catholic Church in Poland which functioned as an umbrella. At an early stage, there was a strong tendency for cooperation and solidarity among these civil groups called «alternative social movements» or «civil initiatives». There was a unifying and consciously shared concept of civil society that had its origin in Hungarian political thought. István Bibó, a prominent and independent historian and political writer, introduced the metaphor «small circles of freedom» in one of his essays written after World War II (WWII). This concept was then used and developed further by the emerging student movement, the environmental and peace groups and other civil initiatives - from populist writers to the first independent trade union.

The vision commonly shared by the alternative movements and new civil organizations was the natural growth of these «small circles of freedom» into interdependent networks and alliances. They gradually

emerged during the second half of the 1980s.[3] Rivalry among these groups remained secondary to the unifying force of challenging the authorities of the party-state.

The ideas of 1989: the origins of the concept of global civil society

Differing views of civil society in the East and Central European Context can be summarized in the words of some of its main proponents:

According to Michael Bernhard, civil society is «a public space […] located between official public and private life» composed of «autonomous organizations» separated from the state by law. Bernhard, (1996: 309). For Butterfield and Weigle «expanding independent activism increasingly contradicted the legitimacy and power base of the single ruling party, leading to the end of Communist rule» (Butterfield and Weigle, 1992: 1-2). Similarly, Cohen and Arato believe that «groups, associations, and indeed movements outside the official institutions would have the primary task of pushing the reforms through» (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 64). In Tismaneanu's interpretation the «nuclei of autonomous social and cultural initiative contributed sufficiently to the 'smooth, non-violent change' in 1989» (Tismaneau, 1992).

More recent evaluations of the «alternative movements» and their civil society discourse during the 1980s provide different interpretations. Glenn (2001: 24) talks about the «monocausal logic and conceptual imprecision of the above mentioned interpretations»:

> They obscure the impact of the Leninist regimes as repressive agents and negotiating partners in the reconstruction of the states. These regimes were not simply overcome by political protest led by independent groups but shaped the patterns of reconstruction independently of the efforts of the movements. They cannot explain the reconstruction of the state because they lack a model to explain the interaction between states and movements that created the political institutions of post-communist states […] They misunderstand the strategic nature of the discourse of civil society and the conditional nature of public support for the civic movements.

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3 Besides single issue movements, a whole set of colourful initiatives oriented more directly towards actual social and political issues also came into existence. By the mid-1980s, discussion and study circles known as the «Club Movement» and the «Movement of University Colleges» emerged around the country. Communication and «networking» among these new groups occured naturally and created a special spirit for civil society and dialogue. A strong feeling of solidarity and the new experience of increasing freedom of expression released creative energies and blurred or hid political, cultural and ideological differences between them.

Glenn's conclusion is that we need to reconceptualize civil society «as a master frame with which civic movements across Eastern Europe sought to mobilize public support in light of changing political opportunities» (Glenn, 2001: 26-27). Glenn tends to accept Staniszkis' evaluation that stresses continuity in East Central European societies after 1989 and sees the self-limiting strategy of social movements as rather defensive, and not suited to fundamental social change. As Staniszkis says (1991: 181):

> It seems that from the perspective of the society the aspect of continuity is more strongly experienced than the sense of change, and this perception itself […] may take on the features of a self-fulfilling prophecy, inducing social apathy and feelings of revolution for the elite only.

The literature on civil society first concentrated on the democratic opposition movements during the Cold War, usually taking *Solidarnosc* as a model and outstanding example of social self-reliance and political resistance. But soon the concept was used for the analysis of fundamentally different societies from the United States via the former Soviet Union to Africa and the Far East.

Muetzelfeldt and Smith in a recent comprehensive analysis of the different species of civil society theories have shown the one-sideness of most of the earlier civil society approaches. Instead of biased approaches which either over-emphasize the importance of the state or of civil society, Muetzelfeldt and Smith (2002: 58) suggest a more balanced view:

> In contrast to those who give primacy to either civil society or institutions of governance at the global level, we emphasize their mutually emergent features, and recognize the importance of the two-way interaction between global civil society and governance. This mutually emergent approach emphasizes the reciprocal constitution of a strong facilitating state and a strong civil society […].

This approach follows Kumar's (1994: 127-130) and Walzer's (1995) train of thought. They stress that «Only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society: only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state» (Walzer, 1995: 170).

Muetzelfeldt and Smith (2002: 59) rightly emphasize that what they call the «mutually emergent approach» offers a more complex understanding of the relationship between states and civil societies.

> States are not homogenous, and have contradictory features because of their contradictory position in relationship to capital and civil society. […] This approach

provides an analytical framework that allows for reciprocal socio-political reproduction between state and civil society. This in turn opens the possibility for developing models for action that build civil society and good governance through virtuous cycles of effective active citizenship.

This more sophisticated, complex and balanced approach was elaborated in the civil society literature by Martin Krygier (1997: 59):

> Poland has a special and far-reaching significance for my themes. For it was there, more than anywhere else, remarkably resilient, and was ultimately successful beyond anyone's imaginings. […] Much can be learned about civil society from the manifestos, struggles, ambitions, and fate of *Solidarnosc*, from what it understood civil society to be, and from what it failed or was uninterested to understand about the concept […]

Krygier (1997: 64) detects the important difference between civil society in *statu nascendi* and a well-established and functioning civil society.

> Civil societies depend upon distinctive configurations of economic life, civility among acquaintances and strangers, and tolerant pluralism. These in turn depend upon particular configurations of state and law, and gain support from particular sorts of politics. In each of these domains, civil society has […] elements that *Solidarnosc* did not have […]. Moreover, the elements interrelate. A truly civil society has a strong - though not despotically strong - political and legal infrastructure and liberal democratic politics.

The problem is that we don't know where to find a «truly» civil society. Real civil societies, as suggested by Alexander, might and should have ideals and therefore the foundation of an ideal-type can be useful. Real civil societies may even be measured against them, and they would certainly feed further academic debate. Jadwiga Staniszkis (1991: 26) pulls us back to the soil of Eastern European realities.

> […] the creation of a civil society is a much more complex process than mere political liberalization: it demands both property rights reform and deep cultural change. It is painful, just as is the creation of new politics occurring now in the Eastern bloc. Not only the old, facade institutions are activated (thus is usually the first step, before new institutions are created and oppositions recognized) but both the old and the new elites have to resist the temptations of unlimited power. The evolution from the situation when only society (not the ruling elite) is bound by rules to the legal structure limiting all actors is not completed yet in the Eastern bloc; oppositional reformers as well as «revolutionaries from above» of the old establishment demonstrate temptation to use techniques (and philosophy) of the prerogative state in the name of reform.

Understanding 1989

For some Western authors such as Francois Furet, Timothy Garton Ash, and Jürgen Habermas 1989's main characteristic was its complete lack of innovation. Mary Kaldor agrees that the velvet revolutions of 1989 did not produce new policies or strategies for governments, but she argues correctly, that the period of the 1980s, preceding the velvet or negotiated revolutions, was foment with ideas.

Indeed, thanks to the movements and networking of the pre-1989 period, a new understanding of citizenship and civil society as well as «transnationalism» was born. Kaldor claims that «the notion of European or global civil society, which could be said to have emerged during this period, in some sense encompassed or encapsulated this strand of thinking» (Kaldor, 2003: 50).

As suggested earlier, East Central European dissidents and independent intellectuals and activists digested the lessons of 1956 and drew new conclusions by the late 1970s and early 1980s. The new way of thinking in East Central Europe represented by Michnik, Kuron, Konrad, Havel, among others, regarding the relationship between an oppressive authoritarian state on the one hand, and society on the other, contributed greatly to political and theoretical conceptualization.

From the outbreak of the 1956 revolution onwards, there was permanent tension between the non-acceptance of Soviet domination and the logic of the bipolar world system throughout the region. Original and effective ways were found to democratize and support the building of a new relationship with the political ruling class. After the failures of 1956 and 1968, *Solidarnosc* proved efficient and victorious. It revitalized and reformulated the concept of civil society.

On the other hand, the change in thinking and acting in civil society was supported by powerful «external» international trends as well. The 1975 Helsinki Accord's third basket on Human Rights helped Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia, KOR in Poland, and the democratic opposition in Hungary to act more openly not only within their societies, but also with each other.

At the core of these ideas and analyses, there was a strong belief that events could proceed in new, historically unprecedented ways. Terms and phrases of a new language, like «parallel polis» and the «power of the powerless», surfaced in the new discourse of Charta 77. This new vocabulary expressed a new way of thinking, and a new attitude towards the weakening authoritarian regimes. Vaclav Benda emphasized that the «parallel polis» does not compete with power, and accordingly Charta 77

was seen not as a political movement, but as a «civic initiative». In short, the new language signalled a new type of politics from below.

The birth of the new language and new thinking was primarily restricted to the national level, but there were also promising crossborder civil initiatives. There was regular cooperation between East Central European opposition groups and alternative movements in order to strengthen each others' cases and support each others' activities. (Kaldor, 1997: 8). This risky and unprecedented enterprise produced a growing regional, i.e., Central European, awareness of a shared and common identity that strengthened solidarity. There was not only cooperation among the main democratic oppositional movements, but also among smaller movements and groups, like environmentalists, peace activists and professional circles. In order to protect the emerging civil society and its new social movements throughout East Central Europe, Vaclav Havel, suggested to establish an alternative European Parliament for social movements which became the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly.[4]

Kaldor draws our attention to the fact that the emergence of social movements and citizen groups was global. The «growth of small circles of freedom» (*Solidarnosc*, Charta 77, Swords into Ploughshares (GDR), the Dialogue Groups, *Wolnosc i Pokuj*, the Danube Circle, Fidesz, etc.) did not occur in isolation. The 1980s also saw the re-emergence of strong and dynamic social movements in the West. This was an expression of the need to radicalize democracy and of the emergence of a new public sphere. Together with the birth of a new language, East-West dialogue began in Europe and reflected a hitherto unprecedented global consciousness and responsibility. In 1985, Havel (1990) wrote:

> It seems to be that all of us, East and West, face one fundamental task from which all else will follow. That task is one of resisting vigilantly, […] but at the same time with total dedication, […] the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal and inhuman power – the power of ideologies, systems, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans.

East-West dialogue certainly expanded the space for a new European and global public for East and Central European movements, which successfully filled up the new public space. The artificial division of Europe, its military and bureaucracy became unacceptable to younger generations

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4 The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA), established in 1990 in Prague, is the only international and institutional offspring of efforts to create civil networks across borders in the 1980s. It reveals a significant continuity in the protection of human rights and support for local grassroots initiatives.

that had not witnessed the terror of the 1950s. For them, the new language and thinking was a natural given. Suddenly a new *Zeitgeist*, a new «feeling», began to dominate the discourse of the 1980s. The attitude: «I have the right to make my voice heard» characterized not only the rather weak peace movement in East Central Europe but also clubs, student organizations and environmental groups. It was exactly this common feeling that bound them together and created a common language for civil society.

This corresponds with Marc Nerfin's prediction about the growing importance of the citizen and the general mood of protest in other parts of the world. Despite widely different political and cultural contexts, there was a fundamental consensus among the participants of the East-West dialogue that one could no longer remain silent on fundamental political, social and ecological issues. The new language became the common denominator for all of these public concerns and provided the loose, rather psychological connections among members of independent civil movements and initiatives.

Kaldor also argues that the Western peace movement contributed «transnationalism in practice» to the new discourse of the emerging Central European civil world. END and the European Network of East-West Dialogue demonstrated that networks can be effective and that crossborder networking is not only possible but fruitful in terms of protest, defense of human rights and the elaboration of new concepts and ideas. It is also remarkable that concepts such as empowerment, participation, deliberation, transnational and European public sphere, or global civil society were born in the mid-1980s. All these concepts, ideas and phrases then became objects of academic research and a new language of power in the 1990s. Curiously enough, there is very little investigation of and interest in their recent origin (Kaldor, 1991) (Muetzenfeldt and Smith, 2002).

After 1989: institutionalized democracy and the linguistic turn in the civil society discourse

The rapid establishment of new institutions of representative democracy radically changed the dynamics of civil society. An overwhelming majority of former civil society activists became members of the new political elite and occupied the highest positions of leadership in the new institutions and political parties. Accordingly, their perception of civil society versus state relations changed dramatically. The leaders and the ideologues of the new political elite claimed that the time for social movements was over. They stated that grassroots mobilization was unnecessary, if not down right

dangerous for new democracies. Political parties provided an efficient arena for the competition of ideas, ideologies and social-political alternatives. According to this neo-liberal and at the same time etatist credo, the everyday political participation of citizens is unnecessary. Their role should be restricted to maintaining the new institutions and to legitimizing the political regime by voting every four years in «fair and unharrassed elections».

Alan Fowler (1996) identifies civil society as the place where interest groups turn themselves into political parties, competing to become the ruling regime. In the case of East Central European countries, one has to alter this general truth according to the special socio-economic and historic context. A gap developed historically between the rulers and the ruled due to the lack of a strong middle class who, after the phase of saturation of wealth, would act as donors and support the social and cultural sphere. In the absence of a strong democratic culture, the values of solidarity, social responsibility and citizenship could not develop. Citizens view themselves and were indoctrinated to view themselves as helpless, exposed subjects at the mercy of the state and its authorities. For good historical reasons, citizens (who are still called «state-burghers» after the German *Staatsbürger*) and official authorities were – and in many transition countries still are – mutually suspicious of each other. This special relationship between the rulers and the ruled is important to recognize in order to form a realistic picture of the present state of civil society in East Central Europe.

Although this attitude towards power started to change in the transition period, the survival of paternalistic and authoritarian elements are significant determinants of the relationship between civil society and the political elite. The attitude that «it was always like this and will always remain this way – so what can I do?» which characterized post-WW II East Central European societies was challenged by the new social movements of the 1980s. But after the first democratic elections in 1990, the new government and the political elite, did their best to restore old clichés and attitudes. Continuity is strong in public institutional life. The restoration of authoritarian patterns of behaviour, between citizens and their institutions, remains tenacious.

The NGO world and NGO language

The breakdown of the communist party-states in East Central Europe, coupled with the retreat of the welfare states in the West, naturally gave birth to NGOs both in theory and practice. The negative definition of NGOs, similar to terms like «post-communism» or «post-Cold War» refers to the lack

of something, to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the transitory epoch. This situation is naturally comprised of positive tendencies as well like the further articulation of the need for social democratization and participation of citizens in decision-making by civil societies. NGOS could play a vital role in buttressing and facilitating social democratization and citizen participation. This is far from guaranteed, however. In many cases, NGOS are not genuine agents of authentic civil society. In weak and feckless democracies they are often creatures of governments, politics or individuals who employ them to enhance their power, prestige and material interests (Jensen and Miszlivetz, 1998).

One of the main problems with the new NGOS, in East and Central Europe and other «underdeveloped» parts of the world, is their lack of legitimacy in the local societies. The legitimacy problem stems from the scarcity of resources and local donors. NGOS either turn to the state, automatically loosing their independence, or look for external resources. In both cases accountability and transparency become questionable. It is also very often the case that western (mostly American) donors, sometimes with the best motives, have not analyzed local, social, political and cultural conditions and are therefore unable to select the most appropriate civil society partners. In many cases those who receive internal financial support are those who are already in the external circle of a global NGO elite. They possess not only the necessary language, internet and application-writing skills, but are able to «talk civil society» fluently using the most trendy and exclusive pseudo-professional and fashionable buzzwords (ONGOS, DONGOS, PONGOS, etc.)

On the other hand, East Central European NGO and CSO (Civil Society Organization) development reveals a consciousness about their role in strengthening democratic values, mobilizing society for participation, and contributing to a new civil culture of decision-making and dialogue. This is required to strengthen the bargaining capacity with authorities on local, national and international levels, but this is also not a given. Lars Jorgensen (1996: 36) formulated this precisely:

> There are some risks in taking on civil society. It is of course perfectly legitimate for NGOS not to be openly political or to take sides in whatever constellation of parties or factions which is forming at a given moment, but they must recognize that their work has political aspects and relate to the authority of the state and to the political development of their society.

An unbalanced and undemocratic relationship, based on a new dependency between western donors and eastern NGOS can seriously undermine and bias this potential. Therefore, a critical assessment of their

relationship and its development during the transition period is of crucial importance. Sometimes well-intentioned donors superimpose their values or policies on recipients who then act rather as dependent agents than genuine actors of their local civil sphere. The scarcity of domestic resources, a growing dependency on state support and an uneven, dependent relationship with western donors, combined with a growing rivalry rather than solidarity among NGOs, has seriously undermined the spirit of an independent civil society in transition countries. This tendency is reinforced by the emergence of a global and local NGO elite with high technical skills and «networking capital» that contributes to the fake image of a civil society constructed from above, a frequent characteristic of feckless democracies.

From Dialogue to Cooptation

Civil society, with its proliferating interfaces, provides a remarkable asset for the global, regional and domestic representatives and configurations of the new postmodern Prince and Merchant to approve and demonstrate their «good intentions». With the help of this newspeak, «talking civil society» and nominating and signifying «civil society» they themselves become part of civil society: «We are working towards the same goals, but with different means». The slippery language and the new praxis of «dialogue with civil society organizations» initiated by non-CSOs (from above or from the outside) dissolves sharp contradictions and antagonisms. Civil society speak can smoothly annihilate diametrically opposing interests and provide results for «mutual satisfaction». This process we call the «cooptation of civil society», a danger and tendency Marc Nerfin has also referred to.

«Talking civil society» provides the common denominator for western donors, the new NGO-elite, and national governments who want to coopt them. It can be lucrative to display the «right» liberal democratic values and at the same time avoid the uncomfortable consequences of strong and genuine civil societies. Coopting and overtaking means surpassing and weakening. A new network of dependent NGOs undermines not serves the interest of genuine civil society.

However important and inevitable the institutionalization of civil society is, we can only move beyond the practical and theoretical impass if we assume that civil society is not equivalent to the sum total of NGOs. The permanent slipping between the terms «civil society» and «NGO» is a source of theoretical inconsistency, practical misunderstanding and political or ideological manipulation.

The lack of trust: weak civil societies in feckless democracies

If we accept Jeffrey Alexander's conceptualisation, that civil society can be viewed as the universal expression of social solidarity, we might also say that without trust there is no civil society. In East Central Europe, illusions rapidly vanished at the beginning of the 1990s. The central values of civil society were quickly marginalized. In an unpublished manuscript, Alexander (1998: 1-2) observed the following:

> Just when intellectuals in Poland and Hungary were celebrating the return of civil society as an idea […] they are not at all sure they want it […] The practical task of social reconstruction makes these social ideals difficult for the intellectuals to sustain.

Amidst the joy of bringing down the communist state everything indeed seemed «civil». Numerous institutions and movements took up the adjective «civil». Borislaw Geremek said in August of 1989: «we don't need to define civil society, we see it and feel it» (Smolar, 1996: 24). Jiri Dienstbier's famous formulation, that «civil society is in power» quickly became ironic. The former spokesman for Charta 77 was certainly correct in observing the great stream of former «dissidents» towards positions of power.

With the formation of political parties, however, civil society really lost its moral constituting power. The new political elite believed that moral civil society, along with its movements, had fulfilled its destiny, and should now stop stirring-up the waters – some even stepped forward openly against the idea of civil society. Vaclav Klaus went so far as calling it a perverted idea, seeing in it the ideology of collectivism and an ambiguous third way.

In short, civil society went through a real metamorphosis after 1989. Certain parts of it disappeared altogether; others were transformed, several movements turned themselves into political parties; local initiatives either faded away, or were coopted by local politics, and many civil organisations were forced to sell themselves in a financial or political sense to survive. A desperate struggle awaited those who managed to preserve their identity: they needed time, willpower, money and expertise to continue to operate. In the meantime, a process of disintegration and atomization rather than civilization swept the region of East Central Europe. Elemér Hankiss, as Smolar (1996: 34) quotes, observes:

> Millions of people have lost, or fear that they may lose, their traditional roles and positions in the sphere of production and distribution. They have lost their way in the labyrinths of social and industrial relationships, which are in the midst of a chaotic

transformation. People no longer know what the rules of the new game are, what their
duties and rights are, what they have to do for what, what is the cost and reward of
what? There is no authority to tell them; there are no values to refer to.

During the last decade sociological literature - especially in Poland and
Hungary - has repeatedly called attention to the continuity in institutional
and social mentality. Aleksander Smolar speaks directly of a new «socialist
civil society». «Shadow society» is the term he uses to describe the
collection of informal social relations that were created by people in the
1970s and 1980s to defend themselves from the existing form of socialism
(Smolar, 1996: 35-38). These informal networks of social cooperation
contributed greatly to the acceptance of shock therapy and the initial
hardships of the transition. In time, however, as enthusiasm for «a return
to Europe» receded and the pain caused by the reforms intensified, the
emphasis shifted to the defence of material interests. The re-strengthening
of the antiliberal, etatist hierarchy of values came together with a
nostalgia for the socialist state that had offered a certain kind of
protection and security. The effects this had on Hungarian and Polish
political and social life are well-known. In societies that have uncertain
futures, democratic politics with half-established and not entirely
accepted rules and practices frequently deter or alienate rather than
attract the majority. Informality, a hotbed for corruption, e.g., the trust
invested in informal family relationships and close ties of friendships then
gain weight.

Smolar calls this phenomenon the irony of history that real socialism
found refuge precisely in the very world of civil society that it had
previously sought to strangle. Even though this phenomenon is not
characteristic of the ever-changing sphere of civil societies in East Central
Europe as a whole, it reveals a number of deep contradictions that
determine social values and personal life strategies. The presence of trust
at the social level provides the basis for order and dependability. After a
short-lived rise in social trust, cooperation and solidarity, the societies of
democratising East Central Europe are once again characterised by distrust
and a strong tendency towards atomization.

In the post-Cold War period the challenge for civil societies in East
Central European countries is twofold: globalization and European
integration. In order to address these challenges, local NGOs and CSOs have
to link their domestic activities to the global – or at least regional –
context. Escaping from their narrow and parochial framework and
political climate, they need to find donors who are able to cooperate as

partners and equals with commonly shared values and goals. Networking is already very much present, but its full potential has not been utilized.

In the second half of the 1980s, it did not seem illusory that East-West dialogue would lead to the sustained cooperation of civil society which would strengthen autonomous, democratic social space in the East and revitalize democracy in the West. After the 1989 transformations, however, the situation changed fundamentally. With the disappearance of the bipolar logic of the Yalta world order, the common foundation for wide social mobilisation also disappeared. Opinions on the unity of Europe were too divided. Once the main political and ideological barriers fell, economic, welfare and security concerns came to the forefront. In contrast to unconvincing rhetoric, the reality showed that the western half of Europe was turning its attention inwards. It cautiously closed itself off, while in the eastern half fragmentation and disintegration became the main features. The concept and language of civil society did not altogether disappear, but it went through a metamorphosis in comparison to the practice and visions of the 1980s (Jensen and Miszlivetz, 1998: 141-170).

Increasingly professionalized civil organizations and NGOs replaced bottom-up initiatives and movements. In places where the ethos and mentality of civil society was preserved from the 1980s, it was either incapacitated against nationalist tyranny (as in several republics of the former Yugoslavia), or it was pushed into the background as in Hungary, Poland and former Czechoslovakia.

A new world was created by the mid-1990s: the world of professional NGOs, civil organisations and foundations. Most of these NGOs took over some of the responsibilities of the state, and they do not have particularly warm feelings about the civil ethos or new forms of cooperation. Those civil organisations, however, who carry out their work in the fields of human rights, minority questions, education, culture and the protection of the environment, have every right to regard themselves as institutions of civil society. Most of these have integrated into international – predominantly Eastern or Western European – networks, as a result of which their weight and ability to survive have increased considerably. In the second half of the 1990s, the symptoms of fragmentation and inward-lookingness also seem to have diminished. The idea of regional cooperation may gain modest influence in the civil sphere, as we witness similar signs on the political stage.

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