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Introduction

Uncivil society (or the ungainly "uncivil civil society," the terms are used interchangeably) is a surprisingly under-theorized concept. The academic uses of the term will be elaborated below, but it must also be noted that it is freely used on the Internet by actors on different points of the political spectrum to describe manifestations of civil society with values different from their own. Thus,

for instance, an enthusiast for market-led technological advances writing for the Cato Institute attacks civil society groups opposing big dams and genetic modification in an article titled "The Uncivil Civil Society." Conservative pundit Henry Lamb uses the term in a WorldNet Daily article to criticize gay rights activists for shouting down a Christian demonstration against gay marriage in San Francisco. Conversely, a few global social justice activists have adopted the term as a badge of pride, arguing that uncivil society encompasses "any group that threatens the status quo"(see Kopecky & Mudde, 2003, 10).

Most often, both in academic literature and in general use, the term has come to be used for manifestations of civil society that challenge liberal democratic values. Violence is most often singled out as its characteristic, but as discussed below, exclusivist or dogmatic ideologies, predatory practices, and general rule-breaking are also mentioned. Academic debates are centered on whether the use of the category itself is unacceptably western-centric and on whether uncivil society should be considered as part of a wider category of civil society, or as conceptually distinct, as its evil twin. Those who argue that the distinction is difficult or impossible to make go on to critique the mutually beneficial relation between civil society and democracy as discerned by Putnam. Less crystallized in the literature, but also apparent here and there, are reflections on the "uncivil" aspect of civil society in relation to capitalism. Finally, a few authors discern a (complex) relation between globalization and the emergence of transnational forms of uncivil society.

The use of the term uncivil society is not confined to any particular region. Scholarly articles apply the term to civil society manifestations in Africa (Fatton, 1995); Eastern Europe (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003); Western Europe (Pedahzur & Weinberg, 2001); the Arab world (Abdel Rahman, 2002); Latin America (Avritzer, 2004), as well as globally (Kaldor & Muro, 2003).

Definition

Those authors who give attention to definitional matters are remarkably hesitant to give a definition of "uncivil society."

Rumford defines uncivil society as "a catch-all term for a wide range of disruptive, unwelcome, and threatening elements deemed to have emerged in the spaces between the individual and the state" (2001), but he does so precisely in order to argue that the term is overly simplistic and unhelpful, for instance in explaining the motivations of the 9/11 bombers.

Kopecky and Mudde (2003), while giving their edited book the title "uncivil society," refuse to give a definition, arguing that for a number of reasons (see below) the distinction between the civil and the uncivil is unhelpful. Kaldor and Muro focus their attention on "extreme" religious and nationalist groups, which are violent and/or exclusivist and/or fundamentalist, but echo Kopecky and Mudde in not making "an arbitrary distinction between the civil and the uncivil" (2003, 151–152).

Pedahzur and Weinberg list similar characteristics, but they are less hesitant to apply the label "uncivil society" to the extreme right groups they have studied: "we can define right-wing 'uncivil society' almost as extreme right-wing parties are defined – by their ideological concerns – i.e., nationalism, racism, antidemocracy, xenophobia, and the belief in the need for a strong state" (2001, 61–62).

Historical Background

In Enlightenment thought, civilization was understood as a gradual process through which interpersonal relations within society became less violent and more polite. Most European societies were considered to be civil societies, whereas barbarous or despotic societies, closer to the state of nature, lay beyond (Keane, 1998, 115–120). As various authors have pointed out, this internal civilization process had a necessary corollary in war, or at least the threat of war, with others (Keane, 1998; Kaldor & Muro, 2003, 151). From Napoleonic times onwards, colonial projects were increasingly justified in terms of "civilizing" the natives, even as the methods of subjugation were allowed to be uncivil because the population in question was not yet within the "civil" realm of those who can be expected to understand and respect the modern rule of law (Mamdani, 1996; Turner, 1999).

Although it is difficult to trace its first use, the term "uncivil society" appears to have entered the political lexicon a few years after the enthusiastic acclamation of "civil society" associated with the democratic revolutions of Latin American and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Stewart (1997) uses the term as a title for an article deploring the NGO-isation of Africa, while Kofi Annan (1998) warns, in a speech extolling the cooperative potential between the United Nations and NGOs, against the forces of uncivil society exemplified by "drug-traffickers, gun-runners, money-launderers, and exploiters of young people for prostitution." What these very different accounts have in common is that they both consider uncivil society as a transnational phenomenon somehow connected to globalization. While Stewart uses the term in

relation to NGO-isation as a part of the neoliberal consensus on pruning back the state, after 9/11 the term has been used increasingly (but without much in-depth analysis) to denote "illiberal" reactions to neoliberal globalization, such as the Al-Qaeda network (see Rumford, 2001; Kaldor & Muro, 2003).

Key Issues

Euro-Centricity

The historical baggage described above makes any reflection on the meaning of the "civil" in "civil society," and hence also on what might constitute uncivility, politically loaded. Some authors, such as Chabal and Daloz (1999), who are skeptical of civil society as a concept anyway, reject any substantive use of "civil" as having racist connotations: "Does it connote a certain idea of 'civility', an identifiable arrangement of social activities that make for a more ordered society? If that is the case, might it not imply a given type of societal evolution, which would come dangerously close to an argument about the comparative merits of more 'advanced' societies where there is indeed a 'civic' civil society?" (1999, 19).

Similarly, Turner (1999) calls attention to the "uncivil basis of settler society" in New Zealand, with an argument that could equally well be applied to many other postcolonial societies. According to him, the historical construct of a "civil" society being brought to "savage" Maori stands in the way of white New Zealanders understanding historical violence and current disruptive ("uncivil") behavior on the part of Maori as collective responses to the brutal imposition of early capitalist modernity, which robbed them of their land and transgressed against their customs.

A Totality or a Part of the Whole

When not rejected, the term "uncivil society" is used in two ways. The first, as for instance in the quote from Keane in the next section, applies to a society that is, in its totality, "uncivil," juxtaposed to a society that is, in its totality, civil. These entire societies are then taken as being coterminous with state boundaries. The second meaning applies to those groups, values, etc. within a wider society that are by some measure uncivil. The first use usually comes with the article: "an uncivil society," whereas the second does not, it is just "uncivil society."

Characteristics of Uncivil Society

The most frequently mentioned characteristic of uncivil society is the use of violence. While not all forms of violence are necessarily considered uncivil, there is a general presumption on the part of most authors that violent means are a hallmark of uncivil society. However, Pedahzur and Weinberg (2001) as well as Kaldor and Muro (2003) emphasize that there are elements other than violence that render groups and movements potentially uncivil.

Kaldor and Muro mention exclusivism, particularly of an ethnic or religious nature, and fundamentalism: an attempt to impose inflexible doctrines not only on those who willingly adhere to them but on a wider group (2003, 152). The first element, ethnic or religious exclusivism, chimes with the extreme right groups studied by Pedahzur and Weinberg (2001) and many of the movements discussed in Kopecky and Mudde (2003). It also figures largely in the literature on African civil society, which emphasizes the pervasiveness of ethnic divisions (see for instance, Fatton, 1995, 73).

The element of inflexible doctrines does not appear to be widely shared, although as discussed below, Whitehead (1997) and Shils (1992) insist on the association of civility with tolerance, and would thus seem to imply that uncivility equates with intolerance, which might relate both to exclusivism and to inflexibility. More than the exclusivist element, a dogmatic element of uncivil society begs the question who decides what constitutes inflexibility. Kaldor and Muro (2003) write that it could apply not just to religion and nationalism, but also to "secular ideologies like Stalinism or extreme forms of neoliberalism." They do not, however, give examples of groups which ought to be considered uncivil on this basis. Abdel Rahman on the other hand does include secular-modern groups in her indictment of Egyptian civil society as uncivil, precisely on this basis of wanting to impose inflexible doctrines on others (Abdel Rahman, 2002, 29–30).

Fatton discusses the uncivil manipulation of premodern traditions (1995, 73–76), and Kaldor and Muro make a wider point about the antimodernism of many religious and nationalist militant groups (2003, 165–166). However, although both note that this often goes hand in hand with misogyny, neither wants to suggest that antimodernism is in itself uncivil.

Fatton also includes the tendency to perpetuate social inequality, "to privilege the privileged and marginalize the marginalized" in his discussion of the uncivil characteristics of civil society. As discussed above, loose allusions to the mafia apart, other authors have focused less on the economic aspect of uncivil society.

A final, problematic, aspect of uncivil society is that of "not abiding by the rules" (see Whitehead, 1997, 100). As Kopecky has pointed out, if these rules are to be taken to

refer to national legal rules, then the relation to civility is often tenuous and sometimes antithetical. International legal rules, particularly adherence to human rights, might be a better guide. A characterization of uncivil society as violating human rights might make sense, but has as yet no basis in the literature. One problem with it is that human rights norms were originally devised for states; another that they relate to policies and activities rather than ideologies, which are precisely the realm of civil and uncivil society. Whitehead (1997) has tried to take the requirement of "rules" beyond the legal realm by trying to define a norm of civility. Such a norm would take the discussion back to the issues of exclusivism and inflexibility, and problems of subjectivity, the lack of a common global normative framework, and indeed the contested desirability of such a framework.

Uncivil Society as Part of Civil Society?

The main academic argument in relation to "uncivil society" turns not on whether the use of the concept is historically problematic, or whether it describes society as a whole, but on whether uncivil society should be included in or excluded from the definition of "civil society."

John Keane has argued that "all known forms of civil society are plagued by endogenous sources of incivility," but nonetheless distinguishes between a civil and an uncivil society, differentiated by a tipping point in the use of violence: "a highly developed civil society can and normally does contain within itself violent tendencies, that is, patterns of incivility or behavior prone to violence that can and do threaten to accumulate synergetically to the point where the occasional violence of some against some within a civil society degenerates into the constant violence of all against all of an uncivil society" (Keane, 1998, 135–136; 140–141).

Philippe Schmitter too formulates a definition that excludes the uncivil: the final of his four conditions for groups to be considered as part of civil society is that they "do agree to act within preestablished rules of a 'civil' or legal nature" (quoted in Whitehead, 1997, 100). Whitehead insists that in addition, there must be an element of respect for others to meet the requirement of civility (Whitehead, 1997, 100–101). Shils is even more demanding in his definition of the "civility" that must characterize civil society: "Civility is an attitude and a mode of action which attempts to strike a balance between conflicting demands and conflicting interests" (Shils, 1992, 6).

A majority of the literature takes the opposite view, however, insisting on an empirical definition of civil society that includes "uncivil society" as a tendency within it (Abdel Rahman, 2002; Berman, 1997; Fatton, 1995; Kaldor & Muro, 2003; Kopecky & Mudde, 2003).

Kopecky (2003, 12–13) gives the most extensive attention to this issue, adducing no less than five interrelated arguments for eschewing the exclusion of uncivil society from civil society. In summary:

1. To some extent, all civil society manifestations are exclusivist in that they claim the moral high ground for their own position in opposition to all others.
2. Civility towards the "uncivil" has historically been limited and hypocritical (see above).
3. Adherence to liberal democratic goals does not necessarily equate with internal democracy, or vice versa. Uncivil movements may have civil outcomes and vice versa.
4. Adherence to legal or even societal norms is far from desirable in nondemocratic societies and proscribes challenges to the status quo even in democratic ones.
5. Finally, narrow conceptions of civil society screen off potentially vital ingredients of associational life and democratic politics. Inclusion is therefore necessary to progress in empirical knowledge.

Uncivil Society and Democracy

Much of the literature that argues against the distinction is devoted to critiques of the idea so dominant in policy making in the 1990s, that strengthening civil society contributes to democratization. This idea, partly considered to have come out of the "1989 experience" in Eastern Europe, and partly attributed to Robert Putnam's influential work on Italy, requires civil society to be imbued with both democratic and liberal values, and for it to be easily distinguishable from "uncivil society" which lacks these values. The critiques of the "mutual strengthening theory," based on empirical studies from a variety of regions, make three counter-points:

1. Having a vibrant civil society is not to be conflated with having a "civil" civil society. This argument is most persuasively pursued in a historical article by Berman, which shows that Germans in the Weimar Republic, having lost confidence in the state, were "addicted to associating" in much the same way as Tocqueville observed of early Americans, but that these dense associational networks were rapidly and successfully infiltrated and captured by Nazi organizers, accelerating and buttressing the Nazi seizure of power "from below" (Berman, 1997).

2. Religious or nationalist movements often have a democratic base, and sometimes seek the overthrow of a nondemocratic government, but their values are not necessarily democratic and certainly not liberal. Segments of civil society imbued with liberal, "western" values on the other hand do not necessarily have democratic legitimacy in the form of a grassroots base (Abdel Rahman, 2002; this argument also comes up in the literature on civil society in Africa).

3. The civility of civil society and the civility of the state and market are interdependent. Hence, civil society can only be as civil as the circumstances allow. Leonardo Avritzer (2004), for instance, develops "uncivil society," as the prototype of civil society most likely to emerge when (1) the state is too weak to guarantee either physical or material security, (2) the market economy exists only in clientelist form, and (3) political society is nonexistent or fragmented to the point of destruction. He cites Peru and Colombia as Latin American prototypes of this situation, whilst acknowledging that elements of it can be found in all Latin American countries. The challenge in these situations is "whether civil society can produce civility in spite of the state and the market."

Similarly, Whitehead theorizes the "social locations where civil society is weak or absent" by reversing the four conditions Schmitter requires for recognition as civil society: (1) encroachments on dual autonomy from the state and the market; (2) which subvert civil society's capacity for deliberation; (3) which may encourage usurpation of the state or the market; and (4) and incivility within, i.e., lack of respect for the rules and for others within civil society. He stresses that each society contains its own unique combination of these factors, and hence there is a great variety of uncivil societies, but he concludes, similarly to Avritzer, that civil society in the narrow, normative sense is "fragile and under siege from all sides," even in nominal democracies (1997, 110).

Abdel Rahman (2002) offers a rich illustration of these tendencies in her discussion of "uncivil" society in Egypt. She argues that both secularist and Islamist groups have been uncivil in their lack of tolerance for each other. Moreover, they have both been prepared to collude with the state against the other.

Uncivil Society and Capitalism

The classical theorists, it is well-known, made no distinction between civil society and the market. For Locke, the civility of civil society consisted precisely in providing sufficient physical security for the individual so that he could through his industry and ingenuity amass property. Hegel on the other hand has described particularly vividly the dynamic nature of what he called civil society – what would nowadays be called the capitalist system – but he did not at all believe it to be civil. Without checks and balances provided by the state, it neglects or exploits the poor who cannot help themselves. Similarly Marx thought of civil society as bourgeois society, a necessary stage in history, but inherently exploitative.

Since then, through the detour of Gramsci's insistence on dividing material base from cultural superstructure, civil society has come to mean the "non-state, nonmarket" realm of society. Yet while the distinction is made by most authors (but see Fatton, who emphatically includes the informal economy in his not so civil society in Africa), capitalism is now generally accepted as the global "background setting" in which civil society operates. This may be, as Edward Shils (1992) put it, because the alternative has proven even more uncivil, or it may just be because empirically, this is the background setting found in most parts of the world. Recent work has begun to take into account the problematic relationship between uncivil society and global capitalism, but this relation is as yet much less theorized than that between uncivil society and democracy.

Meanwhile it is interesting to note that the distinction between for-profit and nonprofit motives pertaining to most definitions of civil society is often left behind when discussing uncivil society, as for instance in Kofi Annan's quote above, which includes only uncivil for-profit activities. The mafia is, along with Al-Qaeda and the Ku Klux Klan, one of the most-cited examples of uncivil society. But while disentangling market from nonmarket activities may in practice be even more difficult in the "uncivil" realm then in the civil, conceptual clarity still demands a distinction between ideologically motivated incivility, such as terrorism or hate-speech, and profit-oriented criminality.

International Perspectives

Uncivil Society and Globalization

Pedahzur and Weinberg discuss the surprising "internationalism" of extreme rightwing groups, with skinheads active in 33 countries across all continents for instance (2001, 63). Kaldor and Muro take the transnational character of the religious and nationalist militants they investigate as their point of departure, and elaborate on the ambiguous relationship they have with both economic and cultural globalization: the insecurities generated by globalization are an important factor in the growth of these movements; they use the new media and

international funding networks; yet their ostensible aim is (often through the capture of state power) to roll back globalization in favor of religious or ethnic self-rule (2003, 182–183). Thus, one of the most common forms of uncivil society in the twenty-first century may be based on what Castells has called a "resistance identity," based more on what it is against than what it is for.

Cross-References

▶ Civility
▶ Civil Society and Democracy
▶ Civil Society and Social Inequality
▶ Civil Society Theory: Hegel
▶ Civil Society Theory: Gramsci
▶ Civil Society Theory: Marx
▶ Civil Society Theory: Shils
▶ Civil Society, Definitions and Approaches
▶ Civil Society, Violence and War
▶ Locke, John
▶ Putnam, Robert

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