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Die Interkulturalitäts-
debatte – Leit- und
Streitbegriffe

Intercultural
Discourse – Key and
Contested Concepts

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Civil Society

Having been dormant as a social science concept for most of the 19th and 20th century, the term "civil society" emerged in the 1990s as almost as fashionable a buzzword as "globalization". Yet there is nothing even resembling a commonly agreed definition of the concept. The following cautiously worded "initial working definition", collectively arrived at by scholars at the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, sketches some of the contours of civil society, as well as its contested aspects:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.¹

This article will trace the genealogy of the concept of civil society and its recent resurgence; discuss the problematic conceptualization of the "civility" of civil society; briefly relate civil society to democracy and democratization as well as to capitalism; and end with a reflection on the debates relating to the existence and nature of a global civil society.

History of the civil society concept

The term civil society has a direct equivalent in Latin (*societas civilis*), and a close equivalent in ancient Greek (*politike koinona*). These terms denoted the polity, with active citizens shaping its institutions and po-

licies (Cohen/Arato 1992: 84–85).² They were unequivocally bounded concepts, implying exclusion of non-citizens. As such, translated as *société civile* or commonwealth, they were attractive to the contractarian thinkers who sought to explain and justify the emergence of modern nation-states in the 17th and 18th century. Their preoccupations ranged from the bleak requirement of complete subjection of Thomas Hobbes, to the liberal individualism of John Locke, to the equivocation over the benefits of “nature” vs. “civilization” in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to the emphasis on civic virtue by Adam Ferguson. But for all of them, civil society denoted the social contract between citizens, providing for a non-violent social space that facilitated the development of commercial, civic and political activity by the (male, white, propertied) contracting citizens.

Ferguson was widely translated, and Kant and Hegel were among his readers (*ibid.*: 92).³ Kant holds a special place in the genealogy of civil society since he was the first to posit it as unbounded, and realizable only in a universal (one would now say “global”) form (Kaldor 2003: 36–37).⁴ Hegel’s conception of civil society is not easily penetrable, and impossible to summarize, but one key aspect was that he saw civil society as something separate from, although symbiotic with, the state.⁵ Civil society for him concerned men trading and interacting socially, but was separate from government and purely public activity. In Marx, civil society, in its German translation *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, is narrowed to only economic life, in which everyone pursues his own selfish interests and becomes alienated from his own human potential and his fellow people (Seligman *ibid.*: 52–57).⁶

At the same time as Marx was developing this bleak interpretation of Hegel’s concept, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville became the first theoretical proponent of “associationalism”. During his extensive visit to America (1831–1833), he was struck by the American habit of founding associations for all manner of political and public purposes, and came to the conclusion that this was the foundation stone for the successful functioning of democracy in America (Kaldor *ibid.*: 19–20).⁷

In the early 20th century, Antonio Gramsci, general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, was grappling with a theoretical question of vital practical concern: why, under what Marx had identified as ideal conditions (advanced industrialization, frequent economic and political crises) was the revolution not occurring in Italy? Going back from Marx to Hegel, he then divorced the notion of civil society, as cultural

superstructure, from economic interactions as its material base, founding a long line of scholarship on the manufacture of consent for practices of domination. This consent is generated in the institutions of civil society, notably the church, but also in schools, associations, trade unions, media and other cultural institutions. Gramsci primarily emphasized how it was through this cultural superstructure that the bourgeois class imposed its hegemony, weathering even economic and political crises. However, he has been widely read as implying that civil society is therefore also the site where a counter-hegemony can be built, as a kind of wedge between the state and the class-structured economy, which has the revolutionary potential of dislodging the bourgeoisie (Cohen/Arato *ibid.*: 142–159).⁸

After Gramsci, the term, and indeed the concept of civil society, very nearly died out in Western political thought. When the term resurfaced, it was with dissidents against the authoritarian state both in Latin-America and Eastern Europe. Latin American thinkers, first of all in Brazil, appear to have been attracted to the idea of civil society because it was a term that could unify entrepreneurs, church groups and labor movements in their opposition to the regime, because as a force in society it could be distinguished from political parties, which many felt had been discredited, as well as from the kind of populist mobilization that had been endemic in various Latin American countries, and most importantly because it was associated with non-violence (*ibid.*: 48–58).⁹ In the Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe, where the distinction between the interests of the people and the interests of the state is categorically denied (hence people's republics), dissidents also began to believe that conceiving a "civil society", as an association between people away from the tentacles of the state, was the way to begin resisting the state (*ibid.*: 31–36; Kaldor *ibid.*: 53–59).¹⁰ Intellectuals in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, such as Adam Michnik, Gyorgi Konrad and Vaclav Havel revived the term to mean autonomous spaces independent of the state.

The Central European and the Latin American thinkers had several things in common. They emphasized the values of solidarity, public truth-telling, ideological plurality and non-violence as characteristics of civil society (see Glasius 2011 for a more extensive discussion on the Latin American and East European rediscovery of civil society).¹¹ Their conception of civil society did not constitute a means to achieve the overthrow of the regime in which they lived. They were more

interested in "reclaiming" space that the authoritarian state had encroached upon than in taking over the reigns of power. This space had to be kept open and alive as a necessary complement to a healthy democracy, an antidote to narrow party politics and a bulwark against future threats to democracy. Based on the insight that modern authoritarianism requires ostensible adherence to legal norms, they made much use of appeals to "the law", whether it be national law or international human rights standards, as a strategy of legitimate resistance. Finally, while demonstrating a vivid awareness of the world beyond their state, they firmly believed that democratization must come from within.

Also in the 1990s, Robert Putnam published his influential work on Italy, inspired by the more Tocquevillean tradition of civil society as associationalism, accumulating social capital in communities, and buttressing the functioning of democracy.¹²

From then on, the civil society idea caught on like wildfire. It was apparently considered useful by pro-democracy activists in the Philippines, South Korea and South Africa. But it also got a new lease of life, both in political theory and in policy practice, in entrenched democracies in Western Europe and North America as well as India. This related both to concern over the erosion of democracy through the apathy and disillusionment of the electorate, and to the end of the grand ideologies. The civil society idea was seen as a way of revitalizing democracy when both the socialist great hopes of the all-powerful, all-providing state, and the neoliberal belief that market logic delivers benefits to all, had lost appeal. For the developing world, there is also a rather more cynical explanation for its sudden and ubiquitous popularity: since donors adopted the dogma that strengthening civil society was good for democracy and development, using the language of civil society was good for funding applications.

In these usages, there was a tendency to conflation between Enlightenment, Gramscian and Tocquevillean meanings of civil society as well as conflation of an empirical category, which is often referred to as NGOs, or the non-profit or voluntary sector, with various political projects of liberalization, democratization, or resistance (Howell/Pearce 2002).¹³

The "civility" of civil society

As seen above, the Enlightenment concept of civil society is deeply imbued with a sense of the superior "civility" of European polities. While not very precisely defined, civility appears associated with non-violence, good manners, and at a stretch tolerance for "others" within one's own society. But this internal civilization process had a necessary corollary in war, or at least the threat of war, with others. Moreover, 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. This historical baggage renders any reflection on the meaning of the "civil" in "civil society", and what might constitute uncivility, politically loaded. Some authors reject any substantive use of "civil" as having racist connotations (Comaroff/Comaroff 1999).¹⁴

Nonetheless, the disillusionment following earlier expectations of civil society's contribution to a liberal-democratic end of history has spawned recent debates about "uncivil society". 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 exclusivist or dogmatic ideologies, predatory practices and general rule-breaking are also mentioned. 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, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, the Arab world and Latin America, as well as globally. After 9/11 the term has been used increasingly to denote "illiberal" reactions to neo-liberal globalization, such as the Al-Qaeda network.¹⁵

The main academic argument in relation to "uncivil society" turns on whether uncivil society should be included in or excluded from a definition of "civil society". Some political theorists exclude the uncivil: they insist on acting within the rules, respect for others, or willingness to compromise as elements of civil society. 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. Kopecky/Mudde (2003: 10–15) give the most extensive attention to this issue, adducing no less than five interrelated arguments

for eschewing the exclusion of uncivil society from civil society.¹⁶ 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 non-democratic 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'.¹⁷ Inclusion is therefore necessary to progress in empirical knowledge.

Civil society and democracy

Much of the civil society literature of the last decade is devoted to critiques of the idea, so dominant in policy-making in the 1990s, namely 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 numerous empirical studies from a variety of regions, make four counter-points:

- 1) Having a vibrant civil society is not to be conflated with having a "civil" civil society (see above). This argument is most persuasively pursued in a historical article by Sheri 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".¹⁸

- 2) Religious or nationalist movements often have a democratic base, and sometimes seek the overthrow of a non-democratic 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.
- 3) Democracy in western nations developed in the context of a global system that exploited and repressed other parts of the world. It is not surprising, therefore, if populations and civil society actors in these other parts sometimes have a more cynical, even hostile conception of the liberal democracy they see as being offered or even forced upon them by western institutions in a continuing context of inequality.
- 4) The quality of civil society and the quality of the state and market are interdependent. Hence, civil society can only be as civil as the circumstances allow. Leonardo Avritzer, for instance, develops "uncivil society", as the prototype of civil society most likely to emerge when the state is too weak to guarantee either physical or material security; the market economy exists only in clientelist form; and political society is non-existent or fragmented to the point of destruction.¹⁹ 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' (Avritzer 2004: 49).²⁰

Civil society and capitalism

The classical theorists 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 *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* – what we would nowadays call 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 so-

ciety 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, non-market" realm of society. However, capitalism is now generally accepted as the global "background setting" in which civil society operates. Recent work has begun to take into account the problematic relationship between civil society and capitalism both at the national level and globally, but this relation is as yet much less theorized than that between civil society and democracy.

Transnational or global civil society

While until recently, civil society was primarily thought of as a national concept, there is, of course, a historic reality of cross-border networking of non-profit associations and social movements, ranging from the Catholic Church and organized Islam to the 19th century spawning of peace movements, anti-slavery campaigns, women's suffrage and international trade unions. In the last two decades, however, the intensity, extensity and velocity with which people network and link up across borders has exploded. In their discourses and identities, too, civil society actors have become more transnational and even global. Human rights defenders use a legal universalist frame to combat national injustices; peace groups challenge national security policies with concepts of solidarity across conflict divides; and environmentalists initiated talk of "one world" and "global solutions". More recently, normative cosmopolitan concepts of global civil society have been opposed to ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism, as well as a counterforce against predatory globalization (Kaldor *ibid.*).²¹ At the same time, some of the most common forms of "uncivil society" in the 21st century may be based on what Manuel Castells (1997: 8) has called a 'resistance identity', based solely on being against various (perceived) aspects of globalization rather than on a positive project for society.²²

Civil society cannot be artificially insulated from money, violence, or existing power structures, but what sets civil society apart is that it operates on a different logic than money or force: the logic of persuasion. Global civil society can finally be considered as an ideational

realm, in which ideological master frames such as human rights, social justice, environmentalism or religiously-informed frames such as the "Umma" are both in competition and in dialogue.

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Annotations

- ¹ The LSE's Centre for Civil Society is now defunct, but the definition has been widely adopted by different persons and institutions, including for instance the Director of Stanford University Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society Studies and the South Asian Disaster Network.
- ² J. L. Cohen/A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA 1992.
- ³ Cohen/Arato, *Civil Society*.
- ⁴ M. Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, Cambridge 2003.
- ⁵ For an extensive treatment see Cohen/Arato, *Civil Society*, pp. 91–117 and A. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, Princeton 1995, pp. 44–51.
- ⁶ Seligman, *The Idea*.
- ⁷ Kaldor, *Global Civil*.
- ⁸ Cohen/Arato, *Civil Society*.
- ⁹ Cohen/Arato, *Civil Society*.
- ¹⁰ Cohen/Arato, *Civil Society*; Kaldor, *Global Civil*.
- ¹¹ See M. Glasius, 'Dissident Writings as Political Theory on Civil Society and Democracy', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2011, pp. 1–22.
- ¹² R. Putnam/R. Leonardi/R. Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, N.J. 1993.
- ¹³ J. Howell/J. Pearce, *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration*, Boulder 2002.
- ¹⁴ J. L. Comaroff/J. Comaroff (eds.), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*, Chicago 1999.
- ¹⁵ C. Rumford, 'Confronting "Uncivil Society" and the "Dark Side of Globalization": Are Sociological Concepts up to the Task?', from: <http://www.socres-online.org.uk/6/3/10060ad.html>, 2001 [last accessed on 27 February 2012]; M. Kaldor/D. Muro, 'Religious and Nationalist Militant Groups', in: M. Kaldor/H. Anheier/M. Glasius (eds.), *Global Civil Society 2003*, Oxford 2003, pp. 151–184.
- ¹⁶ P. Kopecky/C. Mudde (eds.) *Uncivil Society?: Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, London 2003.
- ¹⁷ Kopecky/Mudde, *Uncivil Society*, p. 13.
- ¹⁸ S. Berman 'Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic', *World Politics*, 1997, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 401–429.
- ¹⁹ L. Avritzer, 'Civil Society in Latin America: Uncivil, Liberal and Participatory Models', in: M. Glasius/D. Lewis/H. Seckineln, *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, London 2004, pp. 47–53.
- ²⁰ Avritzer, 'Civil Society'.
- ²¹ Kaldor, *Global Civil*.
- ²² M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, London 1997.