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Civil society

Neera Chandhoke

The idea of civil society has proved very elusive, escaping conceptual grasps and evading sure-footed negotiation of the concept itself. Resurrected in a very definite historical setting, that of authoritarian states, the concept of civil society came to signify a set of social and political practices that sought to engage with state power. The close connection with the re-emergence of the concept and the collapse of dictatorial states made civil society attractive to a variety of political agents pursuing different agendas: expanding the market at the expense of the state, transiting from mass politics to single-issue and localised campaigns, undermining confidence in accepted modes of representation such as political parties, and in general shrinking the domain of the state and that of accepted modes of politics. That the concept of civil society could suit such a variety of different political projects is cause for some alarm, for it might well mean that civil society has come to mean everything to everyone remotely interested in it.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil Society; Central and Eastern Europe and CIS; SE Asia

Introduction

The concept of civil society was rediscovered and accorded pre-eminence in political practices in a very definite political context: in Stalinist states in Eastern and Central Europe, which had denied their citizens' basic rights, and in Latin America, where military regimes had managed to survive by employment of the same methods. In the context of autocratic states, the concept quickly acquired a subversive edge. It was in civil society that individuals and groups set out to challenge unresponsive and authoritarian states through peaceful and non-violent methods: strikes, protest marches, demonstrations, dissemination of information through informal networks, and the formation of associational life through the setting up of reading clubs and discussion forums. The net effect of mobilisation in civil society is well known: some very powerful states collapsed, in the face of mass protests, like the proverbial house of cards.

In retrospect, two aspects of the argument on civil society appear tremendously significant. The first aspect was the sustained demand for political rights, and more particularly civil rights: the right to freedom of all kinds, from freedom of expression to freedom to form associations. The second aspect was signified by complete disenchantment with vocabularies that spoke of taking over state power through revolutionary means, smashing the state, or transforming the state. Born into a world disenchanted with overbearing states, with political parties that preferred to follow the impulse to power rather than representing their constituencies, and

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with trade unions which had become bureaucratic and unrepresentative, the concept of civil society highlighted one basic precondition of democracy: state power has to be monitored, engaged with, and rendered accountable through intentional and engaged citizen action.

It is clear that civil societies have won their most momentous victories against authoritarian states. That is why civil society, as the antonym of authoritarianism, is on everyone's lips – government officials, journalists, funding agencies, writers, and academics, not to mention the millions of people across the globe who find it an inspiration in their struggles for a better world. Cited as a solution to social, economic, and political dilemmas by politicians and thinkers from left, right, and all perspectives in between, civil society is claimed by every part of the ideological spectrum as its own. But what exactly is it?[1]

From contested concept to consensual 'hurrah word'

There was a time when civil society was interesting, even riveting, for political theorists, simply because rival and often acrimonious interpretations, formulations, and theorisations jostled with each other to impart meaning to the concept. There was a time, in other words, when civil society was an 'essentially contested' concept. Today it has become a consensual concept, a 'hurrah word', and a matter of tiresomely unanimous acclaim. In the process, civil society has been flattened out.

The reasons for this flattening out are the following. Firstly, the close connection between the 'civil society' argument and the demise of authoritarian regimes came to be perceived by many multilateral and donor agencies as a sure recipe for democracy. Secondly, the generalised discontent that political parties and trade unions as agents of representation had become bureaucratic, unresponsive, and concerned more with the pursuit of power than with representation of their constituencies led scholars and activists to look to other agents in civil society to deepen democracy. In the process, civil society came to be interpreted as an alternative to the formal sphere of party politics. Thirdly, in the wake of the post-Washington Consensus forged by the World Bank, the state was brought 'back in': it was expected that the state would share its functions with civil-society organisations. In other words, the state came to be pluralised, and a number of NGOs emerged to perform the many tasks heaped upon the shoulders of civil society.

Closely allied as they are to the agendas of the donor agencies, contemporary versions of civil society have drastically emptied the sphere of any other agency, such as social movements or political struggles. Civil society consists only of voluntary agencies, and what is euphemistically termed the 'third sector'. Witness the tragedy that has befallen the proponents of the concept: people struggling against authoritarian regimes had demanded civil society; what they got instead was NGOs! In the process of being presented as an alternative to the formal sphere of politics, the state driven by the logic of power, and also the market driven by the logic of profit, the concept has been abstracted from all debates and contestations over its meaning, stripped of its ambiguities, its dark areas, and its oppressions, and presented to us as a sphere of solidarity, self-help, and goodwill.

The idea that civil society can provide an alternative to the state and to the market helps funding organisations to bypass the 'Third World' state and disburse aid directly to organisations in civil society. The sovereignty of the 'Third World state' has been compromised by this fact alone. However, the very idea that civil society can be protected from the reach of the state is astounding, when the essential conditions of civil society – for instance, the rule of law, which regulates the public sphere and guarantees the rights of its inhabitants – are institutionalised by the state. The belief that civil society can give us an alternative both to the state

and to the market is utopian at best and dangerous at worst, for it simply messes up our comprehension of what the sphere is about.

Nowhere in the history of civil society has it been conceptualised as an alternative to or as independent of the state. For de Tocqueville (1835, 1840), civil society limits the state; for Hegel (1821), civil society is a necessary stage in the formation of the state; for Marx, civil society is the source of the power of the state; and for Gramsci (1929–1935), civil society is the space where the state constructs its hegemony in alliance with the dominant classes. Not only are the state and civil society a precondition each for the other, but the logic of one actually constitutes the other. Today, however, the two have been uncoupled. Whatever the reason for this uncoupling, the moment that we think of civil society as a welcome alternative to the state, we conveniently forget that the concept has always been problematic for political theory. Anxious questions about the sphere have almost always outstripped the answers to these questions. Today, however, civil society is readily and smoothly presented as an answer to the malaise of the contemporary world.

If civil society is hailed by almost everyone, from trade unions, social movements, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NGOs, lending agencies, and borrowing agencies to states – both chauvinistic and democratic – as the ideal elixir to counter the ills of the contemporary world, there must be something wrong. To put it bluntly, if the concept of civil society can be used by groups of every ideological stripe and hue with equal dexterity and presumably much profit, civil society must surely prove advantageous for all. Why? Because it has ceased to mean anything? Because it has been reduced to a project that Western funding agencies seek for their own reasons to promote in other parts of the world? Because it has been watered down? Or because this understanding of the concept excludes much more than it includes? The emergence on our theoretical horizon of a truncated, flattened out, jaded avatar of civil society, stripped of all contradictions and tensions, may justifiably give us cause for thought.

The ubiquity of a concept, we can conclude somewhat regretfully, may prove ultimately to be its undoing. For if it comes on to everyone's lips with a fair amount of readiness, it must have lost both shape and content. Amid all this acclaim, ritual invocations of civil society as a panacea for the ills of the modern world simply sound insipid and dreary. Where in all of this are the grey areas of civil society that Hegel spoke of? Where are the exploitations and the oppressions of civil society that Marx passionately castigated? Where is the state-inspired project of hegemony that Gramsci unearthed so brilliantly and perceptively? What we are left with is a one-dimensional, watered-down concept that has ceased to have any meaning, least of all for those who are supposed to benefit from it.

Tracing the emergence of 'civil society'

The concept of civil society swept into prominence in the 1980s for reasons that are by now well known. Intellectuals in Eastern Europe began to realise that the two options that had been historically available to people struggling to emancipate themselves from unbearable political situations were no longer accessible to them. The first option was reform of state power from above. The second was that of revolution from below. Both had been ruled out by the Brezhnev doctrine, namely that the (former) Soviet Union would not hesitate to intervene in the affairs of Eastern European states, wherever and whenever the need arose.

Reeling under obdurate state power and imperious bureaucracies, people found the lack of civil and political liberties, state monopoly over economic and social transactions, and absence of participative citizenship or representativeness both claustrophobic and intolerable. Some remedy had to be found. The only option that presented itself as credible in this

context was to carve out a 'free zone' within the existing system. Here people could associate and express their sentiments without fear amid warm networks of solidarity. The Eastern Europeans called this free zone, peopled by social associations, self-help and self-management organisations, and characterised by mutual solidarity, *'civil society'*.

Theorised as a metaphorical space between the household and the state, the call to civil society served to repopulate the public sphere, which had been disastrously emptied out by regimes intent on monopolising the nooks and crannies of social and political life. The slogan of civil society naturally appeared attractive to people who for long had inhabited politically arid, remorseless, and desolate political spaces. It offered the promise that a rather tormenting deficit in the lives of people would be filled up by warm and personalised social interaction, even as these very people turned their back on the state.

Forged as it was in the historical context of Eastern Europe, three features of the civil-society argument stand out as significant. First, it announced the determination of people who had been banished from the political arena to insert themselves into the political discourse on their own terms. The invocation to civil society conveyed a statement of intent: that ordinary people have the capability to fashion their own lives. Second, the argument asserted that the nurturing of self-help and solidarity through thick and overlapping associations – reading clubs, discussion societies, trade unions, self-education groups – was a good thing in itself, for it provided a counterpoint both to the state and to the atomism of individual life.

Civil society emerged in Eastern Europe as the site where people, organised into groups, could make and pursue democratic projects of all kinds in freedom from bureaucratic state power. Third, then, the argument sought to institutionalise state–society relationships, even as it asserted that procedures such as the rule of law, institutionalisation of political and civil rights, and accountability should be codified in order to limit the power of the state over all areas of social life. In the process, the historical pairing of state and civil society was uncoupled.

The end of politics as social transformation

The argument developed rapidly into a polemical slogan that counter-posed the sphere of voluntary and purposive collective action to dictatorial state power. Matters did not rest here, for an activity that had initially concentrated on carving out a free zone within existing state power was to develop into a powerful political movement, albeit one that was haphazard, spontaneous, and unorganised. In 1989, we were to witness the awesome spectacle of so many powerful states in Eastern Europe literally collapsing before agitating and agitated crowds assembled in the streets.

Even as a purportedly self-limiting social revolution transformed itself into a highly charged political revolution, a fourth dimension was added to the civil-society argument. The civil public, which had initially turned its back on the state, had dramatically transformed itself into the political public, concerned with the form and content of power. The 'civil' in 'civil society' no longer signified non-political; it meant that people inhabiting the sphere outside the state had the right to debate about the nature of the state and the politics that it pursued.

In retrospect, two aspects of the civil-society argument in Eastern Europe give us cause for thought. First, if we look closely at the details of the argument – the demand for civil liberties, especially the right to freedom of expression and the right to associate, rule of law, limited state power, political accountability and the freeing of the market – it is clear that the Eastern Europeans were practically re-enacting the bourgeois revolution that had taken place in England in the seventeenth century against absolutist state power. John Locke, the quintessential liberal thinker, may well have authored the civil-society script for and in Eastern Europe in the 1980s.

Secondly, the message conveyed by the experience of Eastern Europe was to validate precisely what Antonio Gramsci had conceptualised in the 1930s: that wherever and whenever states – whether absolutist or socialist – deny their people political and civil rights, we can expect the eruption of discontent against exclusions from structures of citizenship and representation. Gramsci's dictum that states that do not possess civil societies are more vulnerable than those that do possess them was to prove more than prescient in this case. The tragedy here was that because people in Eastern Europe were deprived of civil rights, and because the civil-society argument concentrated on resuscitating those rights, the Eastern Europeans, through and by the civil-society argument, proclaimed a final end to the revolutionary imagination. The argument effectively killed off the idea of politics as social transformation. From the 1980s onwards, civil society replaced revolution as the prime locus of passions and imaginations. It is not surprising that scholars and political commentators wedded to bourgeois liberalism hastened in the aftermath of the velvet revolutions to proclaim an end to ideology and an end to history.

The rise of the civil-society argument in development

The civil-society argument, fashioned in the historical context of Eastern Europe, was to have a powerful influence on the way that scholars and activists conceptualised the human condition in other parts of the world. It was to prove extraordinarily influential. The reasons had partly to do with the bourgeois liberal acclaim of the end of ideology, its insistence on the bankruptcy of the socialist tradition, and its emphasis on the viability of liberal democracy as the sole option for politics. The attraction of civil society in such instances had less to do with the intrinsic value of the concept and more to do with its ideological association with the end of socialist societies. It was this sentiment that was hijacked by donor agencies, which sought to posit the construction or expansion of civil society as the answer to all kinds of historically specific problems.

The civil-society argument was also enthusiastically embraced by activists and scholars, for reasons that were relatively independent of the 'end of ideology' thesis. These had largely to do with the failure of the state, especially in developing countries, to deliver a minimum standard of life to its people. Powerful bureaucracies and political elites, consolidating their power in the interstices of post-independence states, had simply turned their backs on the very same masses who had put them there in the first place. Scholars in India were to speak of corrupt bureaucracies and of even more amoral and power-hungry political leaders, who were completely impervious to the fact that state-led development had failed miserably. These scholars were to castigate the bankruptcy of the political vision; they were to bemoan the loss of hope, and express a lack of confidence in the capacity, or indeed the willingness, of the state to be responsive to the needs of the people.

It is not as if authoritarian state policies had not been resisted earlier. Since the late 1960s, militant struggles against state power had been launched by the Naxalite movement. The early 1970s saw the formation and consolidation of a number of social movements challenging the agenda of the state, such as the anti-caste movement, the farmers' movement, and the women's movement. After the lifting of the Emergency in 1977, two of the most important movements in contemporary India in the 1980s – the civil liberties movement and the environmental movement – appeared as dominant actors on the political scene. The public sphere of India's civil society became noisy, untidy, vibrant, and creative.

Still, what was needed was a concept, a vocabulary, and an agenda that would (a) locate these struggles; (b) emphasise the legitimate rights of a people in a democracy to make demands on the state; (c) insist on state accountability; and (d) stress the importance of an

autonomous site where people could engage in democratic projects for their own sake. This vocabulary and this concept were found in civil society. Oddly enough, the language of civil society, which, as the product of specific historical processes in England and France, is arguably an alien import, proved peculiarly apt for societies that were struggling to consolidate fledgling democracies.

It was in the midst of disenchantment with the overreach of the state – in Africa as well as Asia – that the concept of civil society took hold of the imaginations of both the left and the right. It promised an exit from bureaucratic inefficiency and political indifference. The state could no longer be relied upon; it had failed miserably, despite having exercised untrammelled power for decades. People looked for an alternative to state-led projects and state-inspired developments. The wave of protest movements that overtook Africa in the early 1990s, movements that were popularly hailed as the second liberation of the continent, were accordingly conceptualised as civil society *versus* the state.

The inhabitants of Western European societies were to make roughly the same complaint: that of the unresponsiveness of the state and the indifference of the bureaucracy. If socialism had failed in the eastern part of Europe, liberal democracy was not doing too well in the western part of the continent. Civil societies had been rendered passive and quiescent, even as state-dominated strategies had colonised what Habermas (1987) felicitously termed the 'life world'. In the USA, theorists complained about the disappearance of civic virtue among the inhabitants of civil society. Robert Putnam (1994, 2000) remonstrated about the lack of associational life, and Francis Fukuyama (1995) complained about the absence of what he called 'trust'. A vibrant and politicised civil society, as the Eastern European case had shown, promised the rebuilding of both political activism and civic virtue.

Civil society as a project

The moment we perceive civil society from the vantage point of marginalised groups, we may be forced to accept that there is a deep and perhaps irresolvable tension between the acknowledged virtues of the sphere and its actual functioning. Yet social movements can, through struggle, expand and even transform the sphere of civil society. They can do this by demanding that civil society deliver what it promises in theory: freedom from domination, freedom to achieve self-realisation, freedom to assert selfhood. Far from being a given, civil society is a project whereby individuals can realise their self through engagement, contestation, and affirmation.

Civil society is a project in another sense. Theorists as eminent as Adam Smith (1776) and Georg Hegel (1821), who were to conceptualise civil society in the first instance, saw it as a deeply troublesome sphere. They were perfectly aware of the many incivilities that civil society was capable of; and for neither could the sphere reproduce itself without deliberate intervention to tame it. We only need to look at post-'velvet revolution' Eastern Europe in order to insert a word of caution into the celebratory notes on civil society: for, once civil society had been resurrected in this context, people found that they really did not want it. The dismantling of state institutions and the opening out of markets has inevitably led to uncompromising austerity, massive unemployment, discrimination against ethnic minorities, and resultant ethnic explosions. The rolling back of the state from any kind of responsibility for the people has left those who cannot fend for themselves at the mercy of those who are in a position to profit from new arrangements. People in this part of the world, it is obvious, have been as quickly disenchanted with civil society as they had been enchanted by the invocation of the concept.

Yet for all the hubris associated with civil society, it remains a valuable term. This is not because it is a precondition for democracy, or 'democratisation' as political conditionalities would have it, but because it is a site where various groups can engage with each other in projects of all kinds. Its absence would mean the absence of democracy, and of the freedom that is necessary for democratic engagement. By asserting civil society, people demand that regimes recognise the competence of the political public to chart out a discourse on the content and the limits of what is politically desirable and democratically permissible.

In the heady days when theorists brought 'Civil Society Back In', the domain came to be increasingly conceptualised without reference to the state. Now any self-respecting scholar knows that civil society can be conceptualised only in relation to the state, and *vice versa*. The de-linking of the state and civil society has greatly impoverished our understanding of both concepts. Those theorists who waxed eloquent on the need for people to connect were to stray away from the shadowy peripheries of actually existing civil societies and underplay the ambiguous relationship of this sphere with democracy. Such formulations obfuscate the conflict within, and the general incivility of much of civil society, because they are completely indifferent to the notion of power.

Taking a long hard look within civil society itself focuses our attention on power equations of all kinds: on material deprivation, unevenly shared conceptual understanding, dominant and marginal languages, and the many oppressions, the many incivilities, the many banishments of civil society. Some groups possess overlapping political, material, symbolic, and social power; others possess nothing, not even access to the means of life. The former find a space in civil society, and civil society finds a place for them; the latter are banished to the dark periphery of the sphere. The irony is that even though most countries of the developing world are primarily rural, it is the urban middle-class agenda that is best secured by the invocation of civil society. The agenda of oppressed and marginal peasants, or of the tribals who are struggling for freedom, remain unrepresented either in the theory or in the practice of civil society. Therefore, in order to find a voice, marginal groups may well have to storm the ramparts of civil society, to break down the gates, and make a forcible entry into the sphere.

Beyond normativity

Like other domains of collective interaction, civil society too is a contested site. That is why dreams of a democratic civil society are also a project of civil society. But for this, we have to accept that it is not enough that there be a civil society, or even a civil society that is independent of the state. It is not something that, once constructed, can be left to fend for itself; nor is it an institution. Civil societies are what their inhabitants make of them. They can easily become hostages to formal democracy at best, and undemocratic trends at worst. There is nothing in civil society that automatically ensures the victory of democratic projects. All that civil society does is to provide actors with the values, the space, and the inspiration to battle for democracy.

It is critical to go beyond the buzzword that 'civil society' has become if it is to regain the vitality that it once had as an essentially contested concept. In this article, I suggest that it is vital to disentangle normative expectations from the analysis of actually existing civil societies, and to see what civil society actually does or does not do for different people who inhabit the sphere. If we want to see what kind of civil society is feasible and possible for our historical agendas, then we cannot allow our political passions and normative concerns to obfuscate our understanding of this sphere.

Note

1. This article draws substantially on Chandhoke (2003).

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The author

Neera Chandhoke is Professor of Political Science, University of Delhi, and Director of the Developing Countries Research Centre, University of Delhi. Her most recent works include *The Conceits of Civil Society* (2003); *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities* (1999); and *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory* (1995); and the edited volumes *Mapping Histories* (2000), *Grass-Roots Politics and Social Transformation* (1999), and *Understanding The Post-Colonial World* (1995). She is currently writing up the findings of the first phase of the research project entitled 'Conflict and Institutional Change in India' in partnership with the Crisis States Programme of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Contact details: Department of Political Science Faculty of Arts University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007, India. <neera.chandhoke@gmail.com>