Power to the People?

(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Introduction

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Civil society is essentially contested, both as social terrain and as theoretical concept. Civil society comprises a myriad of active groups and individuals, and conflicts between the various groups can be as intense as those between civil society and the state. The opposition movement experience in Eastern Europe in the early 1980s proved that civil society could be used as an arena in the democratic struggle. It also showed that an open, not state-controlled, space for voices was vital for any serious resistance (Arato and Cohen 1994; Smolar 1996). The civil society concept was later adopted in studies of stable liberal democracies as well, and the debate on its role in the popular struggle for democratisation in the third world has recently witnessed a significant growth. While the usefulness of the concept is highly debated, there seems to be at least a general consensus on how to define it: a realm or arena situated outside the private sphere, but also outside the immediate reach of the state.

The liberal civil society

Drawing on its supposed autonomy from the state, civil society, according to liberal theory, promotes democracy by constituting an arena in which individual citizens as well as various groups and associations can meet and express themselves. Proponents of the theory argue that it is within this arena that the values and implicit laws of a democratic society are instituted and maintained, and they follow the arguments developed by Tocqueville in his study of American democracy: a strong civil society is necessary in order to counter the state’s ambition to dominate, and in order to strengthen the feeling of civic solidarity amongst citizens. In his very influential article Toward Democratic Consolidation from 1994, Larry Diamond argues that civil society is conducive for democracy because it opens up a space for interaction between citizens and associations, interactions that help to create a feeling of ‘civicness’, including the respect
for democracy, and cut across various cleavages in society. A strong civil society further increases citizens’ possibility of political participation, as it provides an alternative channel for interest articulation, outside of the political parties. The importance of civil society has also been emphasised in recent programmes established by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), not as much for its role in the democratisation process, as for its ability to off-load the state within the areas of social services, health and education.

The Marxist and feminist critique
A major critique has been directed against liberal civil society theory by Marxists, post-Marxists and others who reject this definition of politics as well as that of civil society. They argue that civil society should not be seen as a separate sphere, as it is dominated by power relations in other existing spheres, such as the economy and the family. For Marxists and feminists, the unequal relations between workers and capitalists, as well as between women and men, are mirrored also in civil society, making it less relevant in the explanation of the consolidation of democracy (Phillips 2002). Further critique has been delivered against the state/civil society dichotomy for being too simplistic and, in many empirical cases, proven wrong. While recognising the need for an independent sphere, developments within the state have often contributed to the consolidation of democracy. Already in the writings of Hobbes and Locke, rule of law is presented as a necessity for any civil life: the state guarantees law and order and therefore contributes to the development of a civil society.

The liberal definition favours associations that are internally democratic, open to all citizens, and where goals and activities are in line with the core values of liberal democracy (Diamond 1994). Groups that mobilise in a cross-cutting manner, bridging ethnic, religious and class-based cleavages, are therefore seen as more valuable and to contribute more to the strengthening of civil society. A parallel definition is found in the debate on social capital, where cross-cutting ‘bridging’ social capital is defined as more conducive to democracy than ‘bonding’ social capital, often found in closed or semi-closed organisations (Putnam 2000; Leonard 2004; Rydin and Holman 2004). The problem with this argument is that if you
apply a strict definition, including internal democracy and a propensity for bridging social cleavages, you run the risk of excluding many of civil society’s most important associations. These may not live up to the liberal definition, but may nevertheless be crucial for mobilising the citizens and act as a counter weight to an oppressive state. In the third world this is especially important, since the fight against perceived injustices is often fought on the basis of race or ethnicity.

A possible synthesis

A more open approach, bridging the liberal and the Marxist/feminist perspectives, would be to define civil society as a public arena outside the immediate control of the state, including links between individual citizens as well as formal and informal associations of citizens, also including associations formed on the basis of primordial identities, such as religion, caste and ethnicity. Furthermore, we must recognise that many of civil society’s political demands are not directed to the state. As the political power lies with the state, various associations will put pressure on the state, but their demands often challenge other sections of civil society. For example, the demands for group rights, based on religion, ethnicity, language or gender, may clash with the interests of other groups, turning civil society into a battle field rather than a secluded sphere of peaceful interaction. This is further complicated when the state takes sides in these battles, as is often the case in many third world countries – and when this is not done through the proper constitutional process, but rather as an attempt from the state to ally itself with specific sections of civil society.

An alternative to the liberal definition emerges, in which power structures and forms of domination within civil society are identified, while the importance of the interaction within civil society is recognised. In a third world context, we have seen successful challenges against authoritarian regimes and oppressive social structures developed within civil society, and the decisive factor in these successes have not always been the level of autonomy from the state. The various actors of civil society may strengthen their positions through cooperation with the state or through distancing themselves from it, all depending on their strategies and calculations. While discarding any simple links between civil society
and democracy, we should treat civil society theory as an important part of the complex puzzle of democratisation and open up for empirical studies of how this sphere has contributed.

References


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