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Civil Society, Definitions and Approaches

JOHN KEANE

The University of Westminster, W1T 3UW, London, UK

Introduction

For nearly a century after 1850, the language of civil society virtually disappeared from intellectual and political life and, as recently as 2 decades ago, the term itself remained strange sounding and unfashionable, or was greeted in some circles by cynicism and hostility. Since then, around the world, the term civil society has become both a master category in the human sciences and a key phrase often used by politicians, corporate executives, journalists, charitable foundations, human rights organizations, and citizens.

Definition

The renaissance of interest in civil society draws strength from its European roots, which are traceable to the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century development of the distinction between civil society and the state (Keane, 1998). During the revolutionary period 1750–1850, the traditional language of civil society (*societas civilis*), which had until then referred to a peaceful political order governed by law, underwent a profound transformation. Contrasted with government, civil society meant a realm of social life – market exchanges, charitable groups, clubs and voluntary associations, independent churches and publishing houses – institutionally separated from territorial state institutions. This is the sense in which civil society is still understood today: it is a term that both describes and anticipates a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected nongovernmental institutions that tend to be nonviolent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension, both with each other and with the governmental institutions that “frame,” constrict and enable their activities.

In the contemporary period, the term civil society has proved useful in many fields of research, including

the analysis of past phenomena, such as the uneven geographic distribution of absolutist states (Szücs, 1988), or the emergence of modern forms of exclusion of women from public life (Pateman, 1988), or the “civilising” of European manners (Elias, 1978). The originally eighteenth century term has also been used to make new and different sense of contemporary social and political developments. In Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and elsewhere, the language of civil society was a vital ingredient in the resistance to totalitarian regimes after the crushing of the Prague Spring; and it has featured in most political efforts to push back or overthrow dictatorship, whether in Taiwan, Brazil, South Africa, or Iran. In most regions of the world, the language of civil society has also been applied to such disparate political phenomena as the decline and restructuring of welfare states, the rise of “free market” economic strategies, and the growth of social movements (Melucci, 1988).

Key Issues

Various philosophical and political arguments have also been mustered against the suspicion that the term civil society is obsolete. The case *for* civil society has been wide ranging. It has included the observation that a civil society gives preferential treatment to individuals’ daily freedom from violence and other incivilities (Keane, 2004); claims concerning the importance of enabling groups and individuals freely within the law to define and express their various social identities, as equals who have feelings for others and, thus, the capacity for trust and solidarity (Alexander, 2006; Habermas, 1982). There is also the argument that freedom of communication is impossible without networks of variously-sized non-state communication media (Keane, 1990); and the insistence that politically regulated and socially constrained markets are superior devices for eliminating all those factors of production that fail to perform according to current standards of efficiency.

In recent years, there have also been efforts to counter the suspicion that civil society is an *idée passée* by thinking unconventionally and constructively about the optimal conditions under which democratic institutions can survive and flourish globally, especially after a century plagued



by revolutionary upheavals, total war, totalitarianism, dictatorship, and state *dirigisme* marked by dysfunctions caused by “the overreach of the state” (Chandhoke, 1995). For the first time in their history, the political languages of democracy and civil society have become conjoined. Democracy has come to mean a special type of political system and way of life in which civil society and government tend to function as two necessary moments, separate but contiguous, distinct but interdependent, internal articulations of a system in which the exercise of power, whether in the spheres of civil society or government, is subject to public monitoring, compromise, and agreement (Keane, 1988a, 1998). Seen in this novel way, democratization is defined as neither the extension of state power into the non-state sphere of civil society nor the abolition of government and the building of spontaneous agreement among citizens living within civil society. The unending quest for democracy, so it is claimed, must instead steer a course between these two unworkable and undesirable extremes. Democracy is seen as a never-ending process of apportioning and publicly monitoring the exercise of power by citizens within polities marked by the institutionally distinct – but always mediated – realms of civil society and government institutions.

The revised understanding of democracy as more than simply government by means of periodic elections, party competition, majority rule, and the rule of law has had wide global appeal. Truly remarkable is the way the language of civil society has in recent decades traveled to virtually all regions of the globe. The global talk of civil society is evidently bound up with the dramatic growth, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, of nongovernmental business and civic organizations operating within and beyond the borders of territorial states. It is even possible that the global extension of the concept signals a first step in the long-term emergence of common frameworks of meaning and identity underneath and across state boundaries – a trend that resonates with, and practically reinforces, such trends as the globalization of communication media, the rebirth of international humanitarian law, and the growth of a shared (if diffuse) sense within nongovernmental organizations and publics at large that civilians have obligations to other civilians living beyond their borders, simply because they are civilians.

A measure of the “emigration” of the term from its European birthplace is the way that the contemporary renewal of interest in civil society first began during the second half of the 1960s in Japan (Uchida, 1967; Hirata, 1969). In Latin America, neo-Gramscian versions

of the concept of civil society were subsequently used as a theoretical weapon against dictatorship (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Scholarly studies of sub-Saharan Africa also emphasized how associational life – farmers’ organizations, lawyers’ and journalists’ associations, mineworkers’ unions, Christian churches and Islamic brotherhoods – are most likely to thrive in the presence of effective states; and how, paradoxically, weak states can become stronger – more effective at promoting the accumulation and better distribution of wealth, and improving their own legitimacy and power potential – by allowing a good measure of pluralism in associational life (Bratton, 1989). There have been as well many studies of Muslim-majority states guided by civil society perspectives (Norton, 1994 [1996]; Mardin, 1995).

International Perspectives

Important controversies have erupted concerning how to translate the originally European term civil society into local Asian languages. Some Chinese scholars, for instance, prefer the term “citizen society” (*gongmin shehui*), while others prefer to speak of “civilised society” (*wenming shehui*) or “urban society” (*shimin shehui*). And in the Korean peninsula, recent analyses have highlighted the contrasts between the totalitarian state of North Korea, whose rulers appear to have enjoyed firm control of an obedient population, and South Korea, in which the long and bloody transition from the authoritarian rule of Syngman Rhee, toppled by a student uprising in 1960, has been fuelled by the vigorous rebirth of civil society, whose roots are traceable to the struggle against Japanese colonization (1910–1945) and the massive peasant rebellions, called the Tonghak Uprisings, of the late nineteenth century (Koo, 1993).

The spreading popularity of the language of civil society, even the invention of the term “global civil society” (Anheier et al., 2001; Keane, 2003), has had many effects, including the multiplication of its different and sometimes conflicting meanings. The growing popularity of the term civil society has bred some confusion, and this implies the need for greater clarity and care in the way it is used. Three crisscrossing but different ways of wielding the category of civil society can be identified. Although these approaches sometimes overlap and complement each other, they also tend to produce divergent claims and should therefore be distinguished.

Some writers use the term “civil society” as an *idealtyp* to analyze and interpret the empirical contours of past, present, or emergent relationships between social and political forces and institutions. The immediate or avowed aim of such *empirical-analytic interpretations* of civil society is not to recommend courses of political



action or to form normative judgments. Rather, the language of civil society is used to develop an explanatory understanding of a complex sociopolitical reality by means of theoretical distinctions, empirical research and informed judgments about its origins, patterns of development and (unintended) consequences. Although empirical-analytic interpretations of civil society usually alter perceptions of what is or is not significant within any given reality, the term is mainly used for observational purposes: that is, to describe that reality, or criticize prevailing descriptions of it, in order better to clarify what is otherwise a potentially confusing and disorientating reality.

The language of civil society can also be used in “pragmatic” ways, as a guide to formulating a social and political strategy or action program for achieving a predefined or assumed political good. In contrast to empirical-analytic-interpretative approaches, which are concerned with such intellectual tasks as naming, categorizing, observing, theorizing, comparing, and understanding, *strategic usages* of the term have an eye for defining what must or must not be done so as to reach a given political goal. The term civil society is bound up with efforts to calculate the tactical *means* of achieving or preserving certain ends.

This pragmatic usage is traceable to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, to recommendations, like Thomas Paine’s revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), about how best to contest despotic power by establishing the earthworks of civil society. Recent comparative studies of the defeat of various forms of political despotism in southern Europe, Latin America and postcommunist countries develop this line of thinking (Linz and Stepan, 1996). They show the vital role played by civil society in the transition towards democracy, and its subsequent consolidation. A robust civil society can start transitions, help block reversals, generate political alternatives and keep post-authoritarian governments and states on their toes.

Still other scholars and activists view the term civil society from a *normative* standpoint – in order to highlight the ethical superiority of a politically guaranteed civil society compared with other types of government. Since the eighteenth century, disputes about the normative status of civil society have flourished. Some thinkers (Georg Forster, Thomas Jefferson) have considered civil society to be the earthly expression of God-given natural rights. Others interpret the concept from within the framework of a theory of history that supposes either that civil society is a moment in the actualization of the ethical idea, of mind (*Geist*) actively working its way into the existing world (Hegel); or that civil society is a passing moment

in the development and overcoming of modern, class-divided bourgeois society (as Marx and others within the communist tradition supposed). Other scholars have considered civil society as a spontaneous group-centered expression of “loving kindness and fraternity” (Durkheim, 1915). And there are thinkers (steeped in the originally conservative reverence for tradition) who interpret civil society as a customary, time-bound ensemble of precious institutions and practices that are confined to certain regions of the earth and perforce do not enjoy any meta-historical guarantee that they will flourish, let alone survive.

These are just samples of the bewildering plurality of normative justifications of civil society, but they illustrate why some critics have been tempted to draw the conclusion that civil society is a muddled, essentially contested ideal (Seligman, 1992). Their conclusion plausibly highlights the polysemic quality of the term civil society, but both the complaint and the conclusion arguably abandon, prematurely, the possibility of normatively justifying civil society in fresh, publicly relevant ways. In particular, these critics fail to see that the plural structures of a civil society are best expressed through *non-foundational* normative justifications that recognize, and actively muster support and respect for, a multiplicity of normative ways of life. This is to say that the term civil society is a signifier of plurality, the friend and guardian of dynamic difference.

Future Directions

Ethically speaking, civil society is not a First Principle; it is the precondition of freedom from any kind of First Principle. Attempts to build grand normative theories of civil society should therefore be doubted. For to speak of civil society is to warn against the harm caused by organized attempts to impose on others particular norms not of their choosing. When seen in this revised way, the civil society norm breaks with the bad monist habit of philosophically justifying ethical norms by referring back to a substantive grounding principle, such as the early modern notions of God-given justice, natural rights or the principle of utility, or more recent attempts to justify civil society according to such grounding principles as rational argumentation (Habermas) or knowledge of a “good which we can know in common” (Sandel).

From this revised perspective, normative support for civil society has no need of so-called Absolutes. To the contrary: the choice to favor civil society implies suspicion of the moralizing faith in Grand Ideals such as the State, Nation, Progress, Socialism, Free Markets, God, Truth, or Ethics. Positively speaking, support for civil society implies the duty of citizens and policy makers



to defend greater pluralism – to cast serious doubt on dogmatic, falsely universal norms by giving greater emphasis to the recognition of institutional complexity and public accountability as vital barriers against dangerous accumulations of power, whenever and wherever they develop. To speak favorably of civil society is not to plummet into so-called relativism, with its self-contradictory insistence that there are no certain or preferable guidelines in life. It is rather to be committed everywhere to the construction, preservation, and development of a legally protected nongovernmental order, whose diverse identities, mediated by representative mechanisms such as political parties and independent communication media, together ensure that hierarchies and abuses of power are checkable. The converse equally applies: anyone who does not recognize and respect the need for the institutions of civil society, government and their intermediaries, or who works actively against them, even to destroy them, is no friend of pluralism – and perhaps even its dangerous foe. Civil society, in short, is an actual or anticipated *condition of possibility* of the ongoing struggle for egalitarian diversity. Those who practically deny civil society in this normative sense are probably arrogant monists – and most likely manipulators, bullies, tyrants, or totalitarians.

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