Power to the People?

(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Introduction

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Late anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss famously suggested that human thinking works through what he calls binary opposition, such as day-night, heaven-earth, up-down, raw-cooked or civilised-savage. In the light of this, one could assume that when we think about or search for ‘civil society’, we simultaneously also call upon or postulate the existence of the opposite, something that we for the sake of argument can call ‘the uncivil’. When, for example, it is claimed that a strong civil society is a pre-requisite for democratic development, ‘the uncivil’ would be the dark counter force, holding back society or preventing such development from happening. It is this ever-present ‘shadow’ that we are concerned with in this session. Civil society is thus taken to represent desired societal qualities, something that apparently is regarded as missing in many parts of the world.

Following this, three interrelated questions seem pertinent: Is civil society a useful scholarly concept, if we find that many of the societies we try to understand are seemingly lacking it? What do societies with a weak or absent civil society have instead? Do we have a better or a more universally applicable term to point to a sphere of society that is neither state nor market, a space between family and state?

‘Civil society’ – a policy driven concept

The emergence of civil society as a concept and a policy concern during the past two decades or so obviously partakes in a political project that seeks to circumvent the state and push for neo-liberal social reform; the assumption being that governance no longer is or should be the privilege of the state. Civil society actors – read NGOs – are called in to take over many of the functions earlier considered the responsibilities of the state and government. This has been the policy advice not least in the post-communist so-called transition countries.
What I thus suggest is that civil society along with a number of similar or ‘like-minded’ terms, such as ‘social capital’ and ‘governance’ index a neoliberal political project. This is not a new argument, but one that is worth re-stating. As scholars, we always need to handle our concepts and analytical frameworks with care. It is through language that we bring aspects of the human condition to the fore or, to put it more strongly, that we make certain things thinkable. To uncritically adopt concepts that carry normative social projects or a policy driven discourse is simply bad scholarship.

Different – or lacking?
As an anthropologist, I always reach for the guns when I hear someone saying that there is no civil society or that civil society is absent in such and such a place. And indeed, this is heard over and again. Africa seems to be lacking it, as well as the post-communist countries. It is not held that civil society might look different or be of a different kind in such places. No, what is argued is that it is missing or lacking. There are, of course, a number of social features missing in many places; for example, there is not much of a clan system in Sweden. But again, this is usually not considered alarming or in need of intervention. I say this not to be polemic, but to state the obvious: that the civil society discourse pushes us to look at societies in a particular way, and hence to aspire for a particular type of society. In doing so, it arguably makes us less attentive to what is actually there or going on in these other societies; to understand how they are being organised and what values, norms or world-views sustain them.

In other words, civil society might be useful in policy thinking where the stated aim is to bring about certain desired changes, for example, to promote democracy, human rights or gender equality. But certainly, this is quite a different project than to understand or explain what people are up to in a particular place or part of the world.

In the world of development
Let me just give a small example from my present life as an accompanying spouse to a development practitioner; my wife works for Sida in southern Caucasus, mainly in charge of civil society issues. As a coping strategy,
I soon realised that I had better study what all these people in development aspire for, and I have on and off for the last soon four years been interviewing professionals that work for various international aid organisations, as well as taken part in meetings, conferences and workshops dealing with issues like domestic violence, rural development, election monitoring and IDP policies. But above all, by just being a member of the development ex-patriate community, I have been made to listen to the pros and cons of all kinds of schemes to improve life in Georgia. A very common statement or identified problem is exactly the lack of formal civil society organisations, and subsequently a lot of Western support to Georgia goes into the strengthening of civil society.

During the Eduard Shevardnadze era in the 1990s, the United States put a lot of their aid money into this, that is, to build another structure of governance in what increasingly was perceived as a ‘failed state’. With the Rose Revolution in November 2003 that brought the present Western friendly, US educated and ultra-neo-liberal government in place, the US policy – and along with it that of many other Western donors – changed to direct support to the government and its reform efforts. George W Bush’s famous visit to Tbilisi in 2005, speaking about Georgia as a friend and a beacon of liberty, was the salutary event of the new government under Mikheil Saakashvili.

But things did not turn out the way many expected it to, and the Saakashvili government started to show authoritarian tendencies and, eventually, in late 2007 sent police to brutally attack a demonstration organised by the political opposition. The August 2008 war with Russia – that Georgia apparently started – further stained the regime’s reputation in the West. Interestingly enough, the main frenzy within the international aid community during the last months has been the announcement of a larger US project on civil society.

Earlier experience of much civil society support has been that it created a sphere of urban-based elite NGOs with difficulties to sustain their activities on their own. When funds dried up, their engagements ended. There was no lasting impact – other than the skilled new class of NGO workers, many of whom ended up working for the Saakashvili government. A Georgia-based foreign researcher explained this missing
impact as a consequence of a deep distrust of the state among Georgians after the fall of the Soviet system and subsequent years of government misrule. People have come to trust no one but close friends and relatives. Being active in voluntary organisations or programs organised by NGOs is simply not considered a useful investment of time. To attend a funeral, however, is.

To me, this last point is significant. It is here that we encounter the left-over sphere we call ‘uncivil society’ or ‘uncivil attachments’. Such attachments to family and friends are rarely something international development experts take note of or develop an interest in. They continue instead to put their money on what is not there, the absent civil society.

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