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Civil Society.
A Concept for Comparative Historical Research

If one wants to write the history of the concept “civil society” during the last two hundred years, one has to take into account the historical differences of the societies in which the term appeared and on which their conceptual and linguistic resources to some extent depend. As Krishan Kumar has stated it:

“If we wish to continue to use the concept of civil society, we must situate it in some definite tradition of use that gives it a place and a meaning” (Kumar, 1993: 390)

This overview seeks to historicize and contextualize the different conceptualizations of “civil society” and compose four major historical periods of its development. After the historical overview the article presents a broad definition of the term “civil society,” which could be useful for analysis of modern civil societies in Eastern and Central Europe.

1. The History of a Concept: How the Concept Has Changed Over the Last Two Hundred Years

The history of the term “civil society” is older than the history of the modern world. Aristotle’s definition of the πολιτική χοιρωνία (koinonia politiké) is one of the most often quoted protagonists of an ancient conception of civil society. But this older use means political community by societas civilis and does not divide civil and political society – it combines public constitution and res publica (Aristotle, 1965; Cf. Riedel, 1979). During early modern history the term “civil society,” as Dominique Colas has shown, was closely connected to religious denomination and Protestant Reformation. For Jean Calvin, Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchton, “civil society” expressed civility, critical faculty and the art of differentiation – it was something like the counter principle to fanaticism and barbarism (Colas, 1997). According to John Pocock, during the Italian Renaissance some used the term civil society to express a republican understanding of positive freedom. Guicciardini, for example, talked about the animale politicum, which realized its nature through a vita activa and a vivere civile (Pocock, 1981). Civil society, as Shlomo Avineri has shown, was the creation of the communal movement of the Italian burghers of the late Middle Ages with its urban
corporations and communes (Avineri, 1968: 155-6).

The Modern Roots of the Concept: The 18th century

The modern conceptualization began with the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, especially Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith. During the 18th century the term civil society was very closely connected to the expressions “civil” and “civilizing” on the one hand, and to free, independent and self-reliant individuals on the other. The critical tradition of the term “civil society” is a heritage of this time, because it was often used against a system of government that ruled by despotic decree rather than by laws. Civil society was understood as a social order of citizenship that tended to be against the existing state. The separation between state and civil society was already formulated during this time, especially by Thomas Paine, but it was stronger on the European continent – thanks to the power of the absolutist state. The conditions in France, for example, with its tradition of centralizing monarchs and a powerful state, stimulated notions of community and intermediate organizations. Baron de Montesquieu argued in this direction (Baron de Montesquieu, 1989: 1779, 7275; Ehrenberg, 1999: 145-149).

For John Locke civil society was defined by a social contract beyond the “state of nature”: “Those who are united into one Body,” he wrote in 1690, “and have a common establish’d Law and Judicature to appeal to, with Authority to decide Controversies between them, and punish Offenders are in Civil Society one with another.” (Locke, 1960: 324, Cf. Dunn, 2001)

Civil society was a term accorded to a legitimate political order. For David Hume and especially for Adam Smith, civil society and commerce were closely connected. Smith understood civil society as a market-organized network of mutual dependence and reciprocal interactions. His essential claim was that people get assistance from others on the basis of mutual self-interest:

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.” (Smith, 1993: 22)

Smith’s “invisible hand” linked private advantage to public welfare; for him economic liberty and markets summarized private vices as public virtues. For Adam Ferguson, by contrast, civil society was a moralist rebellion against the logic of individual interest, accumulation of property,
corruption and venality (Ferguson, 1995; Smith, 1993). The conceptualization of civil society as “civilization” with a progressive development of human capacities and “manners” emerged during the 18th century. And for many of the Scottish and French enlightened thinkers commercial society was the realm of private friendship and free interpersonal connections, of morals, affections, and sentiments (Rothschild, 2001; Hirschman, 1977).

German thinkers reconceptualized civil society in light of the French Revolution. For Immanuel Kant “civil” meant a political project of emancipation against the absolutist state, that is, the education of disciplined, cultivated and moral human beings – not mere conditioning or mechanical training, but true education towards free and enlightened thought. Also for Moses Mendelssohn civilizing was primarily connected with the idea of Bildung (education). The public sphere – organized around the universal and public use of reason – lies at the heart of Kant’s civil society (Kant, 1904. 99-222).

During the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century “civil society” was a concept critical of the state, with an anti-absolutist thrust that was an important promise during the Enlightenment. It was closely connected to a realm of freedom, an expression of the self-confidence of a well-educated and relatively small elite. The freemasons are a good example of this time: socially the members – noblemen, bourgeois and professors, army officers and civil servants – represented only a small elite, and they shut themselves away from the public. On the one hand only men with high economic, cultural and social capital were members in the exclusive and secret clubs. On the other the freemasons stood up for the values of the civil society, for a liberal and universal humanism, for the international community of cosmopolitans. They were the seed of a civil society in the time of absolutism (Hoffmann, 2000).

The Development of the Concept: The First Half of the 19th Century:

It was Hegel who defined the term early in the 19th century (1821) as distinct from the family and from the state as well. Hegel was also the first who defined civil society according to a logic of spheres. But he also combined this approach with a logic of action that was based on the educative force of the institutions of civil society: “The history of civil society is the history of the education of […] private judgment.” For Hegel it was the sphere of civil society where the individual learns the value of group action, social solidarity and the dependence of his welfare on others. This educates him for

citizenship and prepares him for participation in the political arena of the state. That is why Hegel saw the state as a true realm of reason and universality (Hegel, 1942: 353-4365; Cf. Honneth, 2001).

Alexis de Tocqueville was not so much interested in the distinction as in the connection between civil and political society. In his study on “Democracy in America” (1835-1840), associations were “great free schools to which all citizens come to be taught the general theory of association.” The “art of association” meant that “civil associations pave the way for political associations.” Civil associations like churches, literary and scientific societies, newspapers or organizations for leisure and recreation educated citizens for politics and were “nurseries of democracy” because the experience of equal, reciprocal relations within an association spills over into attitudes toward society at large; the experience tempers the individual’s passions and balances private self-interest. It is highly debatable if there is a positive correlation between the density of associations, social trust, and democracy and if the self-governing world of associations generates civility (de Tocqueville, 1988: 244, 515, 517, 521-22).

During the 19th century the circle of people who fight for freedom, education and self-organization is becoming wider, from political groupings and interest groups in the early 19th century to the numerous leisure clubs and lifestyle societies in the middle and late 19th century. A flourishing landscape of voluntary associations was born before political democracy was fully established. Between the 1820s and 1840s the association was seen as a place for convivial gatherings, serving the refinement of the self. Especially in the 1860s and 1870s contemporaries spoke of a mania for associations – which influenced the mutual aid and cooperative movements that made a mark almost everywhere on the European continent. At the end of the 19th century the spreading mobilization of the countryside began, and the Catholic Church played the catalyst’s part during the entrance of peasants into public life. But nevertheless much of the European countryside still remained untouched by this development (Bermeo/Nord, 2000; Trentmann, 2001; Hoffmann, 2001).

Some differences between Eastern and Western Europe can be observed. In Western Europe the rise of civil society was linked to the middle classes, whereas in Eastern Europe the nobility was more important as an element in the social base of civil society – although it was not absent in Western Europe (e.g., English gentry or urban cultures in northern Italy). Ethnic differentiation and the churches had a much stronger influence in the structuring of civil society in Eastern and Southern Europe than in the western part of Europe. The associations in the multi-ethnic monarchy under Habsburg rule served as vehicles for the Czechs, Germans, Slovaks and Hungarians to affirm their national identity. As far as Russia is concerned the absence of a tradition of law (the first law was promulgated by Peter the

3 For a critique see: Reichardt (2003) and Bunce (2000).
Great), rational bureaucracy and private property are traditional distinctions from the West European civil societies. In the West, political society grew out of civil society and in the East, political society predated civil society.\(^4\)

Especially in Poland the lower nobility (szlachta) – during the 19\(^{th}\) century roughly eight percent of the Polish population – with its culture and democratic aspirations was the social stratum that supported Polish civil society. Jenő Szücs pointed out that in a land with underdeveloped middle classes and an illiterate peasantry “the Polish nobility […] established a kind of noble res publica entirely unprecedented in Europe.”\(^5\)\(^6\) As a result of the national division, the rich and developed associational life in Poland was aided by the churches and closely connected to the national movement. The importance of these structures was even noticeable during the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century, where the church was a shelter for the dissident movement and defended Christian values of freedom, social justice, and human dignity against the socialist state.

Although the density of clubs and societies declined from the West to the East, the similarities in the types of associations and the motives of its founders in the 1860s are surprising. In Bohemia, for example, economic life was supported by a dense network of self-help organizations that were institutionalized in savings banks and cooperatives. Numerous cultural organizations, professional associations and interest groups were founded in the late 19\(^{th}\) century. This societal network was a counterbalance to the Czech political party system in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, which was pillarized and divided along national, ethnic and religious lines. Maybe it was the bridging social capital of the associations that hampered the rise of fascist movements in the Czech Republic (Křen, 2000: 180-2, 184, 194-5).

Sometimes there is a temptation to draw the period of the early 19\(^{th}\) century as a heroic picture of associations with its individualization, decorporation and emancipation. This progressive narrative becomes more problematic if one analyses the modes of inclusion and exclusion of these voluntary associations, for example, the distinction between an association’s internal practices with crypto-democratic constitutions and its external relation to society with hero worship of militarists and violence. Or take the distinction between universalistic claims of some associations that are in reality socially exclusive - the bulk of the associations of the 19\(^{th}\) century were open only to educated and propertied middle-class men.\(^5\)

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4 Cf. Hildermeier/Kocka/Conrad (2000); Kocka (2002); Banti (2000); Bunce (2000). Bunce defines five guiding principles for civil and political societies: nation-state, individual freedom, societal autonomy, regime accountability, and competition among interests. Political society “refers to the organized activity of citizens […] and influencing the agenda and the decision of the rulers” (Bunce, 2000: 213-214).

The Concept in Crises: From the Second Half of the 19th Century Until the Early 20th Century

Tocqueville as well as Hegel gave special importance to autonomous economic entities within civil society. This view paved the way for seeing the term more critically (third period) in the second half of the 19th century, as was especially done by Hegel’s follower Karl Marx.

In relation to industrialization, civil society was seen as connected with the sphere of needs and labor, including the economy and excluding the state. Civil society stopped being a central concept. The normative project of enlightenment was seen more critically because its talk of universal rights remained oblivious to inequalities in gender, race and class. Karl Marx and others criticized the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* very sharply:

“Civil society (= *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure, has, however, always been designated by the same name.” (Marx, 1975: 89)

For Marx civil society was a sphere that was neither autonomous, nor independent nor a distinctive realm of the social. Civil society was constituted by production, class, and their attendant social and political relations. The state, too, could not be conceptualized apart from economic processes (Cf. Ehrenberg, 1999: 132-43).

In the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the debate on the definition of “civil society” was relatively calm. Civil society was criticized as a utopian wish that blurred reality. The ambivalences of the project became central. During the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the extraordinarily vigorous associational life provided new channels for participation in public life, but it also threatened to break apart into isolated milieu. Associational activity occurred within rather than across group lines — be they ethnic, class, gender or political. Under these circumstances, associational life did not serve to integrate citizens into the political system.

On the one hand, the Italian as well as the German societies were highly active, mobilized publics and witnessed feverish associational activity at practically every level. On the other side, the making of different socio-moral milieu fragmented the highly organized interwar societies. Weimar’s rich associational life provided, as Sheri Berman wrote, “a critical training ground for eventual Nazi cadres and a base from which the NSDAP could launch its *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power).” (Berman, 1997: 402) It was the cross-affiliations of the Nazi members in sports clubs, student associations, shooting clubs, paramilitary organizations, singing clubs, or agricultural

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organizations that formed the backbone of the Nazis’ grassroots movement. The dense network of civic engagement provided the Nazis with cadres of activists. It was from the base of bourgeois civil society that the fascist movement launched its rise. This shows, as Berman has formulated, that associationism is “neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but rather dependent for its effects on the wider political context.” (Berman, 1997: 427)

During this time only few authors published on the topic civil society, and their publications were not “rediscovered” until the second half of the 20th century. Antonio Gramsci was one of them. For him civil society was the sphere of culture in the broadest sense “between the economic structure and the state.” It was concerned with the manners and mores of society, with the way people live. For Gramsci civil society was a space that had to be colonized by social classes. The central role of civil society was in the manufacture and maintenance of cultural hegemony. Gramsci wrote this during the 1930s when he was arrested by the fascists. Amazing for him was the consensus that the fascist regime achieved in the so-called anni del consenso even though the economic circumstances for many proletarians were getting worse. That is why he was interested in how values and meanings were established and how language and language users constituted a society’s control. The “so-called private institutions, like the Church, trade unions, the schools” were part of that which tended to produce a cultural consensus. Civil society was understood as a space for the struggle of cultural hegemony, which was, in contrast with Marx’s view, relatively independent from the state and the economy. Civil society was ambivalent because it was a sphere of repression as well as a sphere of revolution and liberation (Gramsci, 1971: 208-9; Cf. Femia, 2001; Cohen/Arato, 1992: 142-59).

Michel Foucault continued this thought by describing civil society as a “technology of government.” Civil society for him was a social government “which can elicit for itself, amid the contending forces of modernity, a vocation and functionality anchored in the troubled element of the social.” (Gordon, 1991: 23)

The Revival of the Concept: Late 20th Century

The renaissance of the concept in the 20th century began in the 1970s and 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. Again, as in the 18th century, the concept it expressed was targeted against the state, expressing freedom and the wish for self-organization beyond the totalitarian or dictatorial state. Some of the central figures who defined the Central and

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7 Cf. Reichardt (2003); Sabetti (1996); Reichardt (2002); Fritzsche (1990); Koshar (1986).
Eastern European understanding of civil society were European dissidents like Václav Havel, György Konrád or Adam Michnik. For Havel, civil society was a call for “living within the truth” with oneself and with tolerance towards others: a vision of society that was not just independent from the state but actually opposed to it. For Konrad “antipolitics” was the “ethos of civil society, and civil society is the antithesis of military society.” Civil society meant a self-defense and island of utopia against a greedy socialist state; it was a political and not a scientific concept. For Konrad it was a term that circumscribed a certain style of living and was deeply entangled in the everyday life of the Eastern European dissident. John Ehrenberg succinctly summarized the debate when he wrote: “A humanistic ‘antistatism’ remained central to much of Eastern Europe’s oppositional ‘civil society’.” Other common features were the strong emphasis of social-ethnic imperative of actions with its values of tolerance, pluralism, autonomy, dignity, subtle irony and self-development (Havel, 1985; Konrad, 1984; Ehrenberg, 1999: 194-5; Keane, 2000).

This was much more the case in Central and Eastern Europe, whereas it was weaker in Southeastern Europe, although on the other hand the debate in Central and Eastern Europe did not attribute as central a role to the market and economic affairs for civil society. Economic matters were mostly left aside. But even the development in Central and Eastern Europe was not consistent. Although the Polish experience was a model for the Hungarian dissidents, the historical parallels between both civil societies weakened in the 1950s. Hungarian economic development was much stronger; the protests diminished and were not comparably supported by the church. The Polish development, however, was characterized by permanent protest circles involving massive mobilizations and aided by the Catholic Church (Mansfeldová/Szabó, 2000; Ekiert/Kubik, 1999: 21-46).

Recently in the Western world, new social movements have adopted the term “civil society” in the field of practical politics, frequently employing it as an expression against an overbearing capitalism. The “anti-globalization movement” with organizations like “attac,” for example, demonstrates that the logic of the market with its orientation towards individual profit, competition and struggle is not completely compatible with the logic of civil society and its principles of cooperation and conflict, discourse and arguing. On the other hand banks and corporations try to revitalize community life, voluntary associations and civic education projects and in doing so they use the language of civil society. It is a highly debated question whether the overbearing logic of the commodity form threatens to fuse public and private and to destroy the moral basis of modern societies.

In Latin America too the term has been used since the early 1970s, linked with political struggle against military dictatorships. For the Brazilians, sociedade civil primarily conveyed the idea of a non-military
world – in the words of Francisco Weffort: “We want a civil society, we need it to defend ourselves from the monstrous State in front of us.” (Weffort, 1989: 349) The interpretation in Latin America was based mainly on Gramsci’s model of civil society and combined with social movements aimed at transforming capitalist class conditions. The term is still, even today, connected with decoupling from the state and a critical view of state politics (Leiva/Pagden, 2001; Costa, 1997; Reiss, 1999; Stephan, 1985).

The concept experienced a revival during the 1980s and 1990s in the post-industrialized and democratic Western societies, with four different and sometimes interrelated variants becoming established.

The first variant is a communitarian model placing voluntary associations, with their function of socializing and building solidarity, at the heart of a civil society where the formal legal principles upon which these associations and communities rest are of less interest than the notions of the “good life” anchored in their lifeworlds. The wide-ranging polymorphic group of researchers supporting this view extends from Alasdair MacIntyre via Michael Walzer and Amitai Etzioni to Robert Putnam; however, nearly all of these communitarians can be understood as neo-Tocquevellians. All of them are interested in the socializing effects of associations and how social networks produce social capital and trust (Cf. Edwards/Foley/Diani, 2001; Wolin, 2001). In a programmatic essay on civil society, Michael Walzer calls for people to associate voluntarily, communicate with one another and, for the sake of sociability, form and re-form all sorts of groups. Human beings are social beings, he argues, and a “good life” involves creating a “setting of settings” that can make a creative and self-determined life possible (Walzer, 1991: 298; Cf. Reese-Schäfer, 1991; Honneth, 1993; Zahlmann, 1991).

There are obvious implications from this communitarian demand for teamwork and communication, for willingness to take on commitment and responsibility, in a modernity that is individualized and atomized by mobility. On the one hand, broad-based civic participation in politics prevents political decision-making from being restricted to a professional or semi-professional elite. It is a culture of personal responsibility for society, achieved by the largest possible degree of political participation and community formation. On the other hand, the communitarian appeal does not allow particular types of community formation to be either justifiably excluded or described as alien to civil society. As Michael Walzer put it:

“‘Join the associations of your choice’ is not a slogan to rally political militants. And yet that is what civil society requires: men and women actively engaged.” (Walzer, 1991: 303)

But voluntary engagement alone can hardly be a guarantee of civilized behavior. A civil society constructed of networked associations, in Walzer’s sense, is not automatically one where, as he puts it, “the stakes are lower, where, in principle at least, coercion is used only to keep the peace.” (Walzer, 1991: 300). Voluntary associations are not necessarily “schools of
democracy” or synonymous with civil integration and the capacity to compromise and civil integration.8

The second, closely related version of civil society focuses on the differentiations in democratic theory associated with the notion of civil society. Civil society, in this view, is a concept that “generates reflection” for the liberal democracies (Schmalz-Bruns, 1994; 1995; Dubiel, 1994; Klein, 2001: 359-76). Civil society as a “radical democratic concept” (Rödel/Frankenberg/Dubiel, 1989) refers to the project of an autonomous society of citizens, organizing itself and constituting itself, with all its members participating equally in power. Benjamin Barber’s (1984) concept “strong democracy” creates a model for active participatory politics, in which the participation of “the Other” determines the identity of the democratic citizens. In contrast to the liberal conception of civil society, the accent here lies less on negative freedom – constitutionally fostered and protected opportunities for development – than on active participation by citizens through grassroots democracy. A crucial aspect is the critique of democratic deficits in the procedures of representative democracy. “Elitist democracy” has, claim the critics, become bloodless, implausible, and bureaucratically petrified, and the law is insufficiently mediated by the idea of democratic self-determination. In this perspective, more effective opportunities to participate can be expected from civil society’s “expansion of democratic participatory rights” and the “radicalization of participatory democracy.” Democracy thus requires different forums, ones that can take on the societal functions of signaling, problematizing and thematizing (Schmalz-Bruns, 1994: 26, 28). The problem here is how a democratically expanded model of civil society can achieve a balance between the normative orientations and the greatest possible degree of democratic participation.

At the heart of the third variant, the liberal version, of civil society, according to Ralf Dahrendorf, stands liberty and the “existence of autonomous, that is, not state or otherwise centrally-managed organizations,” (Dahrendorf, 1991: 262) which safeguard the diversity, autonomy, civil rights, and publicity of civil society. This version of coexistence in civil society, however, also accentuates individual citizens’ reason, their social and moral competence, which, above and beyond the state’s coercive integration, independently contributes – even if it is out of pure self-interest – to the underlying conditions for the existence of community (Dahrendorf, 1994; Münkler, 1993).9 Liberalism presents – similarly to Kant two hundred


9 Cf. also Hettling/Hoffmann (2000); Joas (1999); Hettling (2000); Hirschmann (1994).
years before – the central elements of a civil society as upbringing and education, together with the provision of public forums and arenas for the diversity of opinions and interests. However, a basically moral attitude, an appropriate sense of reality, the peaceable habitus and the citizen’s civility are not free from social preconditions; they cannot be viewed in purely individual terms but always have a social trajectory. Civil society thus needs institutions that can provide socially marginalized groups with a minimum degree of economic and cultural integration. Furthermore, the limits to the call for tolerance are found at the point where the proponent of an opposing opinion is regarded as an enemy. The end of the line is reached where tolerance itself endangers tolerance: “Tolerance does not have to tolerate intolerance – in fact it must not do so.” (Splett, 1990: 107) Here, the values of freedom furnish their own limitations, a process not free of contradiction. There are problems raised by a notion that people can be educated for peacefulness and civic courage (Nothelle-Wildfeuer, 1999; Münkler, 1993). For one thing, it is unclear what form such an education might take. The more the discourse of virtue takes flight into an imprecise formula of commitment to an unspecified “common good,” the more inevitable will be the call for politics to intervene in individual life plans. And once that border is crossed, as Max Horkheimer showed as early as 1936, such appeals can tip over into the suppression of wishes for freedom and emancipatory needs (Horkheimer, 1968).

Finally, in Jürgen Habermas’s discourse-theory approach, civil society is the social space in which communicative action takes its most distinct shape. Noncoercive discourse and open debate form the core of Habermas’s notion of civil society. A key role is played by associations that arise relatively spontaneously and work within the institutional order of the public sphere. Communicative action and rational argument inside interlinked and competing public spheres generate civil society – a civil society here understood as a pluralist and free community of communication. The lifeworld not yet systemically integrated is structured as civil society, with the institutions of civil society indirectly contributing to the solution of problems of general interest in a way that is not “power-ridden” (vermachtet) but operates through observation and reflection. In Habermas’s view, civil society does not coalesce into a central authority that controls and regulates all the social spheres. Instead, it is a deliberative, “bargaining” society, combining the liberal view of the legal protection of free citizens with the republican view of active participation in the mediated shaping of institutions and laws. The close ties between lifeworld and public sphere are central to this concept of civil society. The communicative network is intrinsic to a view of civil society as self-reflective and tied to communicative processes (Habermas, 1996: 366; Cf. Habermas, 1987). For Habermas, civil society’s
unity and cohesion is generated via controversy and understanding-oriented action. Civil society consists of spontaneously arising, intermediate, autonomous and voluntary associations that are allowed entry into the lifeworld, turning to the political public sphere in egalitarian and open organizational forms and amplifying its volume. In Habermas’s opinion, it is only in a free political culture, an already rationalized lifeworld where civil society’s actors struggle for influence but not for political control, that we can genuinely speak of civil society. This view prompts some questions: Does communicative action with its highly conditioned premises – the absence of power, domination, unreason and time pressure – constitute an analytically fruitful definition of the space of civil society? And since civil society is intimately connected to the mass-mediated public sphere, will this not, in fact, turn out to exert a stronger influence on the logic of civil society (Habermas, 1987: 369-452)?

Some Conclusions From the Historical Overview

The history of the concept “civil society” shows how this prismatic and polymorphic term reflects a wide variety of historical societies and how the term’s meaning is embedded in historical developments. Instead of a static concept, “civil society” should be seen as a concept in flux with changing meanings, actors and adversaries. The empirical historical studies can serve as a determination of different types and degrees of civil societies. Six systematic conclusions can be drawn from a historical overview of the term civil society.

First: From the very start, civil society was a normative concept with universalistic claims and an exclusive reality (social, ethnic or gender). To understand the attractiveness of the concept it is crucial to know against whom or what it was vectored – whether against fanaticism and barbarism, a profit-oriented economy, a clientelistic private sphere, or a power-ridden state. Today the term is often connected with political programs: against individualization and atomization (communitarians), against an international turbo-capitalism (anti-globalization movement), against a too provident and strong welfare state (neo-liberals), against the petrification of parliamentary organizations (democrats), against a hypertrophy of the state and uncontrolled market competition (social democrats), against the totalitarian state (East European dissidents) or against corrupt states (parts of East Asia and Latin America). The historical overview reveals how the contra-terms against the civil society project have changed over time and space and how they are embedded in specific historical constellations.

Second: Civil societies must be able to pursue a variety of interests and,
furthermore, there is no such thing as a civil society without some conflict and inequality. Here, the logic of consensus and unity is less important than the regulation of conflicts through an orientation to compromise and negotiation on the part of civil society actors. The civil society approach is sensitive to questions of culture and can show – in the words of Randall Collins – how “stratification and organization are grounded in the interaction of everyday life.” Research on civil society implies a study of those rituals that explain stratification and conflict as well as cultural and social integration. Rituals of interaction and their allocation in time and space are of special importance for our knowledge about different kinds and qualities of civil societies.\footnote{Collins (1990: 72); Collins (1975); Coser (1956); Coser/Larsen (1976); Oberschall (1973). Cf. also: Rössel (1999); Senghaas (1995); Kneer (1997: 248-249).}

Third: The question of the circumstances under which civil mobilization fosters a more or less democratic outcome is still unresolved. On the one hand a vital civil society is a precondition of effective democratic government, yet, on the other, a flourishing associational life does not necessarily provide support for democracy. Energies generated by civic activism do not of necessity feed into a politics of toleration and inclusion but may just as well be utilized for repressive ends. Civic mobilization is also capable of fragmenting societies into different pillars or milieus.

Fourth: Civil societies need a free, pluralistic and democratic press and a media system that is relatively independent from commercial interests and state censorship (Keane, 1998). One of the most important fields in historical research explores the communicative nature and the publicness of civil society, asking, for example: Is it a warning system for the democratic process? Is it characterized by discursive communication? How did the idea of “public reason” develop (Cf. Trentmann, 2001: 24-28)?

Fifth: Every civil society is grounded in a certain degree of self-government, discipline and communication. Instead of a naïve understanding of civil society as a highly normative utopia, it should be seen as a sphere or realm with power relations. Civil society links power, communication and governmental virtues in a certain way – it is the space where societal norms were formed, educated and cultivated. It is the space for the negotiation and struggle of societal consensus and the construction of responsible social beings. Civil society means governing by community, and this is not possible without permanent conditioning, power strategies and informal governance structures (Dean, 1991; Burchell/Gordon/Mitchell, 1991).

Sixth: Nearly all writers on this concept accentuate the opposition between state and civil society. The worldwide celebration of civil society today is a predictable by-product of the widespread disenchantment with the state in the West and the fight against corrupt and authoritarian states in East Asia and Latin America. Civil society is an expression of the liberal
skepticism about an all-powerful and morally indifferent bureaucracy, which regulates societies along the line of self-oriented and autistic orderliness. Although totalitarian states destroy civil societies, civil societies nevertheless need formal and legal guarantees or at least state toleration. Civil societies prosper best when they are connected with a protective, redistributive and conflict-mediating democratic state under the rule of law.

2. A preliminary circumscription of the concept “civil society”

The concept of civil society has been used to describe the relationship of individual autonomy with communal solidarity, with a view to the common good. Many scholars have characterized civil societies as free, autonomous citizens who are politically and socially engaged and come together voluntarily in associations located between the state, the market and the private sphere. From the perspective of civil society, a social space of agents with their own partial public spheres and types of community formation exists as an autonomous sphere of political and social action. The idea of civil society raises fundamental questions about social and political responsibility, legitimation and integration.

The notion of civil society often refers to a political pledge with normative ideas of freedom, civility, individual and collective commitment to the common good, tolerance and peacefulness. In many of its versions, the thrust of the concept fluctuates between political demand and societal analysis; as a 1995 dictionary of politics notes, it is “a variously defined term from political philosophy to describe both actual and desirable states of the order of political rule (Schmidt, 1995: 1096; Dubiel, 1994: 67).

Civil society can be conceptualized in two ways. The first – with reference to Hegel – focuses on its spatial representation: here civil society is an intermediate social space between the state, the economy and the private sphere. Linked to these three spheres by manifold relationships and interactions, it can still be distinguished as a relatively independent space (Kocka, 2000). Certainly, civil society’s space is not empty of relations of power and domination; it is confronted with processes of capitalization and commercialization, and is densely enmeshed with the private sphere (for example, through the family). Nevertheless, the space of civil society is characterized by a particularly high degree of self-organization that is not profit-oriented and addresses itself to the public sphere. The voluntary political engagement and self-government of civil society actors are of particular relevance here.

The second approach to the concept of civil society focuses on action,
applying the term “civil society” to a pattern of collective action and behavior. This is the independent action of historical actors oriented towards the public sphere, reciprocal “recognition of the other” (Honneth, 1992) and a willingness to take on broader responsibility over and above particularist interests. Central to this view is the “civility” of such action, understood as communicative orientation, nonviolence and tolerance and the “self-discipline” and “self-government” of the modern Self. In the course of history, a variety of adjectives, such as “courteous”, “decent” or “orderly,” were assigned to these dialogical virtues, naming both the value horizon of the historical actors and the necessary resources of their behavior. Examples of the latter might be relative freedom from social ties and societal constraints, or social discipline and self-management. This author calls this conceptualization of civil society “Zivilgesellschaftlichkeit,” which is characterized by a particular way of dealing with difference and distinction, where the identity of civil society’s actors lies along a sliding scale of inclusion and exclusion. Zivilgesellschaftlichkeit implies the experience of the other, an experience regarded as a challenge to learn. This embraces a way of dealing with conflicts that is reasonable and with willingness to compromise, but does not imply a blanket requirement of consensus that prevents affiliations of interest and readiness for conflict.

It has sometimes been suggested that the dimension based on the logic of action and that based on the logic of spheres should be interrelated, drawing out a tension between the norms of civil society and the history of the social space of “real civil societies” (Jeffrey Alexander). According to Alexander, the “relative autonomy that exists between civil society and other kinds of social spheres,” on the one hand, and the “historically distinctive sets of interpersonal practices like civility, equality, criticism, and respect” of civil society as a “solitary sphere,” on the other hand, must both be recognized. One way to connect both approaches is to analyze the “symbolic codes” of the historical actors of the civil society (Alexander, 1998: 7, 12). This kind of dual conception is also proposed by Helmut Dubiel, who undertakes to measure the distance between civil society’s repertoire of norms and the “institutional reality” of historical civil societies. The historian Frank Trentmann, in turn, suggests that the “procedural nature of civil society” throughout history should be studied.

Several empirical studies have taken up this topic of ambivalence, and have related normative postulations to the formally defined social space of civil society. Here, the ways people behave towards each other raise...
questions of social space, of where such forms of behavior are located and to what they refer, i.e., which concrete social fields. Posing these questions entails defining and classifying civil societies according to their historical relationship with the practice of violence and the degree of their compliance with normative horizons. Civil society should be understood as the sphere where unequal historical actors negotiate and struggle about societal norms and hegemonic values, where they talk about conditions and limits of solidarity and identity.

Civil societies have to deal with a multiplicity of conflicts, opposing life plans, diverging interests, and contested viewpoints. Often, the thinking on civil society overemphasizes discursive and associative elements. Instead of unnecessarily stressing those forms of action that are understanding-oriented and cooperative, civil society should be understood rather as a conflictual arena for the self-organization and articulation of social groups. Following Lewis A. Coser, the integrative and stabilizing effects of social conflicts, as well as the opportunities available for a civilized handling of conflict, should be considered. Here, the logic of consensus and unity is less important than the regulation of conflicts through first, an orientation to compromise, second, negotiation on the part of civil society actors, and third – if the self-government of the modern and disciplined Self is not hermetically sealed – the connection with a protective (violence), redistributive (social inequality) and conflict-mediating democratic state under the rule of law.

Suggested Readings


References

Civil Society. A Concept for Comparative Historical Research


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