‘Civil Society’ and the Limits of Democratic Assistance

THE CONCEPT OF ‘CIVIL SOCIETY’ HAS BEEN EASTERN EUROPE’S MOST successful intellectual export. Like Japanese manufacturers who once adapted Western technology and know-how to flood Western markets with cheap sturdy products, in the 1980s East European intellectuals borrowed a Western idea, redesigned it, and released a stripped-down version for global consumption. In recent years, this intellectual product has been eagerly embraced by Western academics, social activists, funding agencies and governments. According to some reports, the term has now become a veritable cliché, a must for any serious funding proposal addressed to Western donor agencies.2 It has also become a cornerstone of Western efforts to strengthen democracy in troubled regions, figuring prominently in the funding priorities of USAID, the EU’s PHARE program, the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe and the agendas of funding agencies like the World Bank, of private donor organizations, etc.3

This strange permutation may partly stem from some basic misunderstandings of the nature of the phenomenon labelled ‘civil society’ and of its social and political role – misinterpretations which

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have informed dubious policy rationales. Much of the scholarly literature, as well as policy papers and grant proposals, posit a strong correlation between the strength of civil society and democratization. Such findings are assumed to imply a causal relationship between civil society and democracy. Building a robust civil society is therefore postulated as a precondition for democratization and democratic consolidation. In fact, the correlation between ‘civil society’ and democracy may be spurious, both phenomena being shaped by deeper social processes related to modernization and individualization.

In the absence of such profound changes, the development or promotion of an active civil society, particularly one defined as narrowly as the invention described above, will not necessarily result in democratization and democratic consolidation. Such efforts can in fact facilitate the proliferation of clientelistic NGO-based networks without significant offsetting benefits. Even in cases where ‘civil society organizations’ have not spun such networks, they can hardly generate healthy civic impulses with a ripple effect throughout their societies. Moreover, even the cleanest organizations play a questionable structural role by helping to stimulate and legitimize economic and social processes that have entailed the marginalization of large masses of people.

In this context, an excessive focus on ‘civil society assistance’ may paradoxically hamper the deeper, longer-term social processes necessary for the development of a vigorous associational life and of democratic representation of differentiated social interests. Until these processes have gathered momentum, it may be more prudent to focus democratic assistance on the establishment of stable and efficient social and political institutions, and on the maintenance of key social infrastructures that have become crucial to the legitimacy of any contemporary system of government.

THE EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT

The concept of ‘civil society’ has some affinity to terminology used by ancient philosophers contemplating the complexities of a virtuous civic life. Its more recent pedigree, though, is usually traced to the writings of a few early modern political thinkers. Among those, John Locke’s tale of a self-constituting pre-political society, inhabited
by autonomous individuals pursuing mundane goals, was particularly significant.\(^4\) Later, representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment, like Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, elaborated even more relevant accounts emphasizing the role of free citizens’ associations, alongside free markets and inviolable property rights, in limiting the natural tendency of governments to expand the scope of their authority.\(^5\) They also posited a specific constellation of moral dispositions as a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of public institutions. In his praise of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville penned a particularly enthusiastic endorsement of the myriad voluntary associations formed by free citizens pursuing common purposes independent of the US government.\(^6\)

The concept of ‘civil society’ was also reworked in a less liberal vein by Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci. Then, for several decades the idiom largely fell into disuse, until in the 1980s it was resuscitated by dissident East European intellectuals. Some of them attempted to win recognition for the term in public discourse, emphasizing the Marxist side of its lineage. More uncompromising critics of Communism like Vaclav Havel, Jacek Kuron, and György Konrad, however, espoused strong liberal-individualist values and adopted an idealized vision of civil society as a collection of civic groups combating the encroachments of a totalitarian state.\(^7\)

In the hands of such radical opponents of East European communism, the term underwent a remarkable transformation. In the writings of earlier theorists, civil society had been inseparable from ‘political’ and ‘economic’ society. The ‘totalitarian’ Communist regime, though, had attempted to colonize all political and almost all economic space. ‘Civil society’, therefore, came to be conceptualized as existing outside those spheres. It was reduced to an array of civic associations operating in the social space between the family and


the state (outside the economy), united in their opposition to the Communist state.

This picture of a united, self-organizing society resisting a state and party apparatus manned by a relatively small Communist nomenklatura was bound to generate much sympathy in Western intellectual and political circles. Following the abrupt collapse of the Communist bloc in 1989, this image was taken up by many scholars as a substantive concept offering an insight into the ultimate delegitimization of Communist regimes. It also chimed well with major intellectual and political currents within Western societies, particularly in the United States. It was embraced both by conservatives advocating the creation of a self-organizing social system based on market principles, and by leftists eager to welcome a credible participatory alternative to Soviet-style ‘socialism’.

In the early 1990s, ‘civil society’ was usually equated with voluntary associational life. This trend was best represented by the writings of Robert Putnam, who argued that the ‘social capital’ of mutual trust and solidarity generated by active associational life is likely to have a spillover effect, not only facilitating the development of democratic institutions but also oiling business relations and thus spurring economic growth. Along these lines, some scholars even heralded the advent of a new ‘global civil society’ capable of extending the scope of effective citizen action on major issues across state borders. Within a few years, though, most scholars as well as Western governments and institutions adopted a conceptualization of ‘civil society’ that in effect reduced it to networks of NGOs pursuing strings of specific projects. Echoing the ideas of East European intellectuals, the Western scholars presented constellations of NGOs as key agents of political and economic change, capable of mobilizing pressure on government public policy, disseminating democratic values, and efficiently providing much-needed public services.

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10 For example, the UNDP report on human development in Bosnia-Herzegovina proclaims the paramount significance of the ‘strengthening of civil society, notably
late 1990s saw the advent of an even narrower interpretation of ‘civil society’, focusing on pro-democracy advocacy NGOs, and those started to receive the lion’s share of democratic assistance disbursed by USAID and other key donors.¹¹

The practical work of NGOs, though, has come under intense scrutiny even in some influential mainstream publications. Studies have revealed some serious lapses: clientelistic practices, dependence on state institutions (including a revolving-door exchange of personnel), involvement in questionable practices which sometimes prolong intercommunal conflicts, affinity with business operations, weakening of the public sector through offerings of more lucrative job opportunities, etc.¹² In addition to these worries, the very reduction of ‘civil society’ to the NGO sector, and in some cases to groups of advocacy NGOs, can also be seen as rather problematic. It is linked to an overall common-sense individualistic/utilitarian vision of the basis of social order, community and solidarity. While in Western societies, and particularly in the United States, such a vision probably has some basis in the current social ‘reality’ that has generated it, its applicability to non-Western societies with very different histories and traditions seems highly questionable.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

At least since the seventeenth century, Western social and political thought has been pervaded by descriptions of society as a collection of disengaged, only accidentally associated individuals forced to collaborate in their pursuit of natural goals like personal security, prosperity and power. In this view, individuals have come together to obtain through common actions benefits they could not secure separately.
They are not bound, however, by a higher common purpose supersed-
ing their individual goals and endeavours. The institutional structures
they have established, therefore, have to be understood as mere col-
lective instruments for securing individual interests.

This outlook found its first forceful expression in Hobbes’s
*Leviathan* and Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*. After them
Hume, writing on the novel concept of ‘national character’, reiter-
ated the same notion when he described nations as mere aggrega-
tions of individuals.\(^\text{13}\) Many other thinkers have since shared the view
that it is the attitudes and actions of pragmatic, utility-maximizing
individuals that form the basis of all social values, purposes and institu-
tions – an assumption known since Max Weber as ‘methodological
individualism’. This outlook has hardly been shaken by the argu-
ments of thinkers like Marx, Freud, and various shades of ‘post-
modernists’ who have presented individuality as an epiphenomenon
of pre-personal (social or psychic) forces and pointed or alluded to
the dangers of confusing conventional rationalizations with real
human motivations.

The conceptualization of society as a voluntary compact of
autonomous individuals has not remained limited within intellectual
circles. As Charles Taylor has observed, recent centuries have seen
the general spread of common-sense understandings based on strong
atomistic prejudices.\(^\text{14}\) As a political philosopher, Taylor attributes the
growth of this mass individualist bias to the diffusion of the ideas of
the great political thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth cen-
turies. Their innovative conceptualization of human nature and
political association, however, can be perhaps more appropriately
seen as consistently argued, lucid articulations of a set of widely
shared background understandings.\(^\text{15}\) These have evolved with the
overall transformation of society that started in Western Europe in
the late Middle Ages and has come to be known as ‘modernization’.

The dynamics of this social transformation are still far from
fully understood, but some of its consequences are clearer: the

\(^{13}\) David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, Oxford, Oxford University

\(^{14}\) Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University

\(^{15}\) See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind
undermining of the earlier profound belief in a higher spiritual order predetermining the station of each individual in life (with the obligations and rights this station naturally carries), increased social differentiation and the concomitant destruction of the corporate communities and folk traditions that used to provide more mundane anchoring to personal existence.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, individuals have been thrown back on themselves and forced to seek uplifting support for their existence only in their own individual purposes, life choices and efforts.

This increased centring of human life on the self-sufficient, pragmatic self as ‘the ultimate focus of salvation’\textsuperscript{17} has been experienced both as a radical liberation of the individual and as a loss of ‘something important along with the larger social and cosmic horizons of action’.\textsuperscript{18} This creeping ambivalent egocentrism has become the central predicament of Western modernization. It has found expression both in grand theorizing and in less prominent but almost universally held, largely unexamined common-sense assumptions.\textsuperscript{19}

In recent decades Western societies have seen even more rapid and unsettling changes. Economic pressures, (sub)urbanization and the introduction of new forms of social control have enfeebled further the extended family and other small-scale communities. Even more profoundly, economic deregulation and the growth of a consumer society have entailed the further weakening of social bonds and the development of consumer attitudes to all aspects of life, including human relationships.\textsuperscript{20} A rapid proliferation of mutually incoherent and disconnected experiences, relationships and social roles has opened up what Kenneth Gergen calls ‘a cacophony of potentials’ for self-fulfilment.\textsuperscript{21} As a result of these processes,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} It is therefore difficult to draw a clear line between theoretical elaborations and policy prescriptions, since both groups of conceptualizations are based on the same set of fundamental assumptions concerning human agency and association.
individuals have experienced a deeply-felt loss of shared meanings and existential security, a profound alienation from others and self, social disorientation, even self-fragmentation into ‘a multiplicity of self-investments’. These shifts have engendered a kind of ‘post-modern personality’ which can be seen as having a fluid identity whose constant flux is a function of the social interactions and networks in which it is engaged.

Mainstream scholarly, bureaucratic, journalistic and ‘folk’ accounts of politics embedded within such an extremely individualized social ‘reality’ tend to present politics as a complex contest for the control of state institutions. This prize is pursued by political parties and pressure groups that aggregate the interests of individuals from various social strata. Such a picture presumes a somewhat simplistic notion of political power as a clash or a lower-intensity conflict between political bodies pushing in different directions, to the partial neglect of social context. In such a political world, the tendency of some political institutions to expand their authority can be checked only by counter-pressure from other political institutions. This is the main idea behind the US constitutional design aimed at avoiding the threat of a tyrannical centralization of power through a comprehensive system of checks and balances.

This system of checks and balances within US governmental institutions, later imitated to various degrees by many other division-of-powers constitutional arrangements, has been praised by numerous observers. Tocqueville, however, added a key emphasis. He also stressed the USA’s vigorous civic life embodied by countless associations engaged in various public works. Their far-reaching activities seemed to implant into citizens the attitudes needed for healthy civic engagement and to offer indispensable additional guarantees against the potential encroachment of governmental institutions on the daily lives of freedom-loving and public-spirited individuals.


23 In politics, this tendency is perhaps exemplified by the emergence of populist politicians like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, sometimes criticized for being all spin, without much political substance.

This emphasis on the key influence of civic associations in the smooth functioning of democratic institutions was later challenged by Marxist and quasi-Marxist accounts, but was eventually revived by the visions of East European intellectuals. They emphasized the key role of ‘civil society’ in resisting the totalitarian expansion of a Communist state lacking any instincts or mechanisms of self-limitation. By analogy, and in recognition of the presumed role of some civic associations in the erosion of Communist domination, in the early 1990s an array of NGOs embodying civil society came to be seen as networks of robust grassroots action. As such, the NGOs were expected to set off a multiplying effect spurring profound social, political and economic change.

This multifaceted project may partly rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of the workings of social cohesion and political institutions within Western societies, compounded by an unwarranted extrapolation of such questionable conceptualizations to non-Western societies. The consolidation of liberal democracy within Western societies over several centuries cannot be explained primarily by the direct conflict between different interest groups and the resulting institutionalizations of certain legal rules and social norms. Rather, it is related to major transformations in the nature of political authority and, as already indicated, of basic social and personality structures.

THE TRIALS OF MODERNIZATION

The best-known conceptualization of the political transformation associated with social modernization belongs to Max Weber. He wrote about a transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘legal-rational’ authority, an authority based on the uniform application of abstract rules to individuals enjoying legal equality.25 This qualitative shift cannot be explained only by the diffusion of innovative political ideas or the mechanics of political contestation. It is primarily linked to the gradual disembedding of individuals from seemingly immutable social and ontological contexts, and the increasing centring of

human life and aspirations on the individual ‘self’, a prolonged process at the basis of social modernization.26

This intricate process has gone hand in hand with incremental yet fundamental changes in the very structure of human personality and everyday life – a ‘civilizing process’ that, according to Norbert Elias, once laid the ground for the modern Western societies of the twentieth century.27 Without following any preceding grand design, this process has mainly involved the internalization of various restraints on sensual human drives, yet has been intimately tied up with the existential distancing of new elites from the ‘masses’ and the consolidation of powerful centralized states.

In Western societies, all these processes of human individualization and social restructurings have gradually created a new breed of individuals who have come to see themselves and others largely as social atoms whose purposes and interests owe little to their involvement in larger social entities. To such individuals, the imperatives of traditional social norms and rules of behaviour have come to ring increasingly hollow. They have needed new understandings of the very bases of social and political order, codified by theories of ‘social contract’ and ‘popular sovereignty’. Meanwhile, their estrangement from concrete communities has made them receptive to new forms of social organization and control – ones based on the uniform application of abstract norms and rules to legally equal citizens within or by impersonal institutions.28 The internalization of these rules has in time produced masses of self-disciplined individuals who habitually observe impersonal norms and expect the same from others.29 This gradual shift from 1) submission to actual or potential arbitrary rule to 2) mostly voluntary, yet adequately policed, compliance with abstract, rationally justified rules by most individuals most of the time, forms the essence of Weber’s transition to a ‘legal-rational’ type of authority.


The process of extracting abstract, self-contained and self-disciplined individuals from previously concrete, naturally endowed and socially bound selves has also necessitated new bases for collective action. Increasingly detached from extended kinship networks and any other ‘organic’ bonds of human solidarity, largely estranged from each other and less capable of forming networks of intimate friendships and contextualized mutual trust, yet more trusting of ‘strangers’, individuals have engaged in social and political action mostly as members of formal organizations (except for occasional anti-systemic outbursts and other forms of social resistance). These organizations have included political institutions, parties and pressure groups; limited liability companies, stock exchanges and other economic entities – and the myriad civic associations so admired by Tocqueville.

The relatively efficient functioning of political and economic institutions and mechanisms within Western societies, therefore, may not be a result primarily of the vigorous activities of dense networks of voluntary associations based on formal membership and written statutes. Rather, institutions and civic networks can both be seen as epiphenomenal, deriving their existence and vigour from more fundamental transformations of human association and personality. These changes have unfolded over many centuries in a largely unplanned way, spurred by technological and market imperatives, the disciplining effects of international power struggles and more obscure force fields yet little understood. Over a long period of time, they have slowly shaped a brave new social world within which a relative flattening of human existence and acceleration of social activities have brought a previously unknown social dynamism resulting in unprecedented economic growth and the establishment of liberal democracy. These economic and political developments have correlated with, but have been only marginally conditioned by, the growth of a vigorous associational life.

suggests that this internalization has probably entailed major changes in brain structure, wiring and functions within individuals; see Elkhonon Goldberg, *The Executive Brain: Frontal Lobes and the Civilized Mind*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.


31 See Schmookler, *Parable of the Tribes*. 
Of course, this is partly a caricature of the growth of Western ‘bourgeois society’, a rendering of the German *bürgliche Gesellschaft* that may be more telling than ‘civil society’\(^{32}\) – with an emphasis on qualitative transformations of social and political life far beyond the mutual impact of political bodies and associations aggregating individual interests and priorities. The whole story may be somewhat simplistic, but it does point to some fundamental characteristics of ‘modern’ Western societies that underlie the apparent neo-liberal, ‘end-of-history’ nirvana they seemed to have achieved before the 11 September terrorist attacks (despite the electoral successes of ‘new left’ parties and political leaders in the 1990s).

Within Western societies, complex processes of social modernization have gradually produced aggregations of disembedded, largely atomistic individuals. The unique social dynamism of these societies has been premised on the collaboration and contestation of masses of such individuals. Being largely strangers to each other, the individuals have typically lost faith in ‘traditional’ social prescriptions, have voluntarily submitted to a new form of social organization and control based on the uniform application of abstract rules, have learned to differentiate sufficiently between their personal relationships and professional functions and have organized to pursue their priorities through various formal associations.

Such changes in social, economic, political and personality structures have gone together and have mutually reinforced each other. Overall, this process has not been entirely benign and smooth. As commonly acknowledged, it has involved much human misery and has been interrupted by devastating wars and revolutions.\(^{33}\) Recently, the change has entailed processes of social and cultural fragmentation, growing existential insecurity, the creation of a permanent underclass and the impoverishment of public life that came to be decried by Putnam.\(^{34}\) Yet, it has eventually produced a dynamic and


affluent socio-economic model held up as a paradigm for emulation and an aim for comprehensive reform throughout the world.

Most Western observers have tended to see their own societies as the ‘natural’ form of human association and have sought factors explaining the apparent aberrant development of other regions. Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Alisdair McIntyre and other ‘communitarian’ thinkers, however, have persistently argued that mainstream liberalism misrepresents the experiences and motivations of social actors even within the highly individualized Western societies of today. They have maintained that the liberal conception of citizens as detached individuals, unencumbered by any moral or civic ties antecedent to their voluntary choice, has remained a misguided and impractical ideal. Granting trans-cultural validity to such a voluntaristic conceptualization of social identity and agency, and seeking to apply it to regions with very different socio-political histories and prevailing social conditions may be even more problematic.

In non-Western regions like Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia post-colonial efforts to modernize and to emulate Western socio-economic and political achievements have often contributed to the corrosion of local cultural standards without replacing them with genuine Western-style ones—a process reminiscent of the overall social malaise suffered by the indigenous population in most European colonies, as described by Karl Polanyi. Over the decades, failed efforts at social modernization and the creation of Western-style nation-states (or federations) and intercommunal conflicts have paradoxically produced a partial ‘retraditionalization’ of social life expressed in the reinvigoration of kinship and ethnic/tribal bonds.


36 Polanyi, Great Transformation.

Under these circumstances, large-scale social dislocations over many decades have not yet entailed the destruction of ethnic/tribal communities, extended families and folk traditions typical of North-Western Europe and, especially, the United States. As a result, processes of human individualization and social differentiation have made much smaller headway: individuals have remained much more intimately embedded in their social and communal settings. Consequently, they are still defined (and most often define themselves) first and foremost as members of kinship or fictive-kinship (ethnic/tribal) groups and links in generational chains, and/or of larger religious communities premised on social redemption.

In these social settings, most individuals have retained a ‘natural’ inclination to pursue their social, economic, and political priorities through face-to-face networks of mutual trust and solidarity, and have remained rather sceptical of impersonal institutions and contractual associations bringing together strangers. Such networks are often based on notions of fictive kinship and thus exclude members of other ethnic or cultural groups. In areas like South-Eastern Europe, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and much of Asia they have remained so robust that for many decades visions of political community spanning private interests and ethnic/tribal divides have remained illusive. As a result, beneath successive social and political changes, societies have remained dominated by tightly-knit ‘mafias’ pursuing narrow agendas. Political institutions and various associations have been pervaded by clientelistic networks and by concomitant arbitrary interpretations of formal rules and norms, and sometimes states have been explicitly defined as exclusive expressions of the political sovereignty of majority ethnic groups.


In most non-Western countries these tendencies have remained quite strong. They may have even been reinforced by the turmoil created by unsuccessful reform programmes. The NGO sector has hardly remained immune from such trends, and has therefore attracted much criticism concerning the clientelistic and parasitic nature of many civic associations. These weaknesses, though, have hardly been accidental aberrations. The traits have resulted from fundamental aspects of contemporary non-Western societies. These have evolved over a very long period of time beneath more superficial efforts at social reform, and have recently been reinforced by key features of the evolving global context.

‘CIVIL SOCIETY’ IN ‘TRANSITIONAL’ CONTEXTS

Under such conditions, attempts to promote democratization in the aftermath of Communist and authoritarian regimes (or after armed conflict) through NGO-building and the diffusion of democratic values can produce only limited results. Efforts to build ganglia of civic associations in key areas (mostly with Western financial backing) have logically spun dense clientelistic networks. Among these NGOs ‘think-tanks’ and advocacy organizations aimed at spurring democratization and influencing public policy have occupied a particularly prominent space. Some of them have been very successful in concentrating in their hands significant Western funding, and have provided groups of intellectuals and professionals with opportunities for converting their otherwise useless ‘cultural capital’ into economic benefits. Meanwhile, some NGOs providing social services have worked hard to offer valuable support to the members of disadvantaged social groups.

Both groups of NGOs have brought tangible benefits to many individuals (despite problems related to clientelism and lack of accountability, especially in the work of the wealthiest NGOs), but they have been generally unable to exercise the multiplying effect often expected from them. The NGOs have partly been parasitic on the overall crisis of public institutions, and can hardly be seen as a powerful corrective to the ineffective functioning of the latter. The mushrooming of the NGO sector in recent years can in fact be related to efforts to reduce complex political and social problems with profound long-term consequences to technical issues subject to pragmatic fixes through limited programmes and projects.\textsuperscript{42} Seen in this light, the growth of various NGOs can hardly be expected to spur deep social and psychological changes analogous to the ones accompanying democratization and the growth of market relations within Western societies. The springs of such changes are much deeper and still little understood.

It is tempting to assume that most post-Communist, post-authoritarian, or post-conflict ‘transitions’ are going to reproduce these changes in a time-compressed form – a replica of some old modernization theories. Although not an impossible feat, this is still a highly unlikely prospect. ‘Transitions’ are unfolding in the context of larger processes related to the establishment of a global free market of goods, services and capital, or what is now commonly called ‘globalization’. These are processes that involve the wholesale deregulation of economic activities, reduction of budget allocations and privatization of state-owned assets and of public services. Such changes have been systematically promoted by the IMF, the World Bank, USAID and other funding agencies.

The proclaimed aim of these transition processes has been to encourage ‘good governance’, i.e. to produce leaner but more efficient state administrations that do not have much economic oversight and are receptive to policy inputs from ‘civil society’ – a shift expected to decrease opportunities for corruption, stabilize state finances, create entrepreneurial opportunities, attract foreign investment, increase public participation and ultimately foster political

stability and sustainable economic growth. To be successful, this transformation needs to be supplemented by the growth of voluntary associations which can not only channel public participation, but also assume some of the tasks once performed by state agencies. What has happened in most cases, though, is a far cry from these promises.

Privatization has fatally weakened the tax base of most ‘transition’ states. It has transferred economic assets and the provision of many public services into the hands of entrepreneurs with little sense of public obligation, within a very weak institutional and normative environment – a marked departure from the preconditions for a successful market economy once posited by Smith. The resulting permanent budget crisis has depressed wages in public administration and law enforcement and thus increased incentives for corruption among state officials. It has also undermined the financing of basic public sectors like education, health care and provision for retirees and the families of economically displaced individuals. The deterioration of such basic services has produced an acute health, demographic and social crisis that has demoralized large sections of the population.

Meanwhile, the opening of once relatively sheltered, unbalanced and inefficient economies to global trade has produced huge economic and social dislocations. These have resulted in the marginalization of large sections of the population, widespread public disillusionment and a growing cynicism towards public institutions and the new ‘political class’ managing the whole reform process. The resulting profound social crisis has entailed a further ‘retraditionalization’ of social bonds amidst a Hobbesian scramble for public resources, without a central authority capable of enforcing rules and contracts, arbitrating conflicts or offering a degree of protection to the weak. These trends have engendered growing public scepticism toward public institutions and civic participation.

Again, these may appear to be unfortunate but temporary problems and thus an unavoidable social price for the overall victory of the free market and democracy. The problem is that such processes of social and political disintegration come in the wake of previous failed modernizations and unfold in the context of a vigorous push to impose global free trade and capital mobility: a giant social

43 Smith, Theory of Moral Sentiments.
experiment that seems to put the working of ‘democracy’ even in Western countries under severe strain. Disintegrative processes within non-Western societies thus reinforce a deep, long-term social malaise marked by profound public cynicism. Such a social environment can hardly provide fertile soil for vigorous civic activity beyond the targeted ‘projects’ of NGOs relying mostly on foreign donors; even if most of these projects are executed more cleanly and efficiently they are unlikely to produce the avalanche of political, social and economic improvements on which they are most often premised.

In this context, some radical critics have tried to expose the use of ‘civil society’ as an ideological formula justifying a neo-liberal agenda of creeping privatization and commodification of the provision of public goods and of all social relations, as well as a new social stratification among and within world regions which does not imply much social obligation on the part of ever-wealthier Western elites. These allegations have been indirectly confirmed by some conservative authors who have argued that the reinvigoration of civil society offers a unique opportunity for putting the ideal of a minimal state into practice – a vision evident in USAID documents advocating the development of ‘public–private partnerships’ as a bulwark against corruption. Incidentally, this is a vision of a ‘civil society’ free of social tensions of oppressive inequalities. Such uses of the concept of ‘civil society’ highlight the dubious structural role of NGOs in the implementation and legitimization of a larger social ‘project’ with deeply problematic social implications.

45 See Hann, ‘Political Society and Civil Anthropology’; Mark Duffield, ‘Lunching with Killers: Aid, Security and the Balkan Crisis’, in Schierup, *Scramble for the Balkans*; Feldman, ‘NGOs and Civil Society’. Julie Hearn has even argued that civil society assistance aims to neutralize potential opposition within educated non-Western elites; see Hearn, ‘Aiding Democracy?’.
LESSONS FOR DEMOCRATIC ASSISTANCE

A strong emphasis on cultural difference between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ societies, as opposed to emphasizing more specific particularities and affinities, can be ideologically dangerous. For centuries, Western (and much of non-Western) social, economic and political thought has been dominated by a rigid evolutionary paradigm of social development. This model posits one single vector of ‘natural’ development for all societies, culminating in the social model incarnated by ‘modern’ Western ones. In recent decades, this paradigm has incorporated some partial revisions, and the crude modernization theories of the 1960s have been largely discredited. Still, beneath a veil of ‘political correctness’, the grip of evolutionary thinking has remained rather strong. Within such an intellectual framework, describing some societies as culturally different can easily imply essential social inferiority and, subsequently, political and economic domination – or possibly disengagement – by Western governments and other institutions. According to some critics, assertions of radical cultural difference can justify disengagement even without implying inferiority measured by some universal scale. Such concerns have prompted numerous admonitions regarding the ‘essentialization’ of cultural differences.

For me, these concerns are understandable but still largely irrelevant. Since the last century, the works of thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Berdiyev, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Arendt, Foucault and many others have stressed the high price ‘Western civilization’ – and other societies that were in its way – have paid for ‘progress’: reliance on oppressive forms of social control, propensity to large-scale violence (often mechanized and long-distance, and thus less obviously repugnant but nonetheless real), expansionist policies vis-à-vis other societies and nature justified within elaborate ideological horizons, as well as the high toll ‘progress’ can impose on the psychological health of individuals. Even a partial recognition of such concerns (hinging on basic knowledge of major ‘modern’ tragedies like the Holocaust, slavery,

colonialism, etc.) should make it easier to accept the different existential postures and concomitant symbolic forms underlying life experiences in more ‘backward’ societies. Intellectuals, activists and policy makers who still lack such basic awareness, on the other hand, will remain convinced in the overall superiority of Western societies, whose cultural pre-eminence they can easily sense – regardless of any arguments spun in a few scholarly texts.

In practical terms, the willingness and ability of Western states and international agencies to influence constructively the social, economic and political developments within key non-Western regions (like the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, or even sub-Saharan Africa) is, anyway, likely to acquire paramount importance. This importance arises in the face of mounting socio-political problems and the ultimate inability of social actors within most non-Western societies to extract their countries from the profound social malaise brought about by failed modernizations and precipitous marketization.50

These are profound difficulties which call for an overall re-evaluation of current models of economic and political development, and of rationales for democratic assistance. This re-evaluation can only be a long-term process, spurred perhaps by a prolonged global economic slump – one related to a crisis of confidence produced either by anxiety over an extended global ‘war on terrorism’, or by the series of Enron-style accounting scandals in the USA and elsewhere, which perhaps serve to demonstrate an inherent tendency of the market economy to corrode its own social foundations.51 Meanwhile, many impoverished non-Western states will remain dependent on foreign aid for their basic social reproduction, and much of this aid will continue to be channelled through foreign and local NGOs. Although this is not a policy paper, it cannot altogether avoid the practical side of such assistance.

So far, Western governments, donor agencies, foundations and NGOs, as well as international financial institutions, have attempted to exercise influence cheaply, by providing incentives to local elites to back Western-style reform programmes and to propagate liberal

50 See Polanyi, Great Transformation.
51 Ibid.; see also Susan Strange, Mad Money, Lansing, University of Michigan Press, p. 129.
values. Support for numerous NGOs by public and private Western funds has been a major part of these efforts. Such support has been justified by assertions that ‘history has shown how a few dedicated individuals can change the world’. From a more structuralist point of view, though, such an assumption can be rather problematic, especially with reference to less individualized social settings. Privileging limited groups of professionals and intellectuals can be seen as easily producing new clientelistic networks used to relieve groups of prospective ‘multipliers’ from the acute problems faced by most ordinary citizens. Such tendencies, however, can only deepen distrust and resentment among habitually sceptical publics, posing serious obstacles to deeper social reform.

These problems cannot be fixed through managerial adjustments and closer scrutiny of the work of local NGOs by Western donors (even if most Western donors do come to acknowledge a vital interest in establishing such oversight). Given some of the basic social and global trends described above, offering an alternative strategy for democratic assistance is a rather difficult task. Still, working through state and other public institutions (most vitally, educational and public health institutions), plus a highly selective support to a smaller number of NGOs providing some vital social services to marginal social groups, may be a preferable practical option.

The work of most public institutions is also bound to be beset by numerous problems linked to clientelism and corruption, spurred by the inability and/or unwillingness of most social actors to overcome personal and factional loyalties for the sake of formal rules and a notion of the ‘common good’. Still, public institutions are subject to at least some degree of political accountability and remain the only social entities which can provide at least some semblance of fairness and social stability. Enhancing the capacity of such institutions to provide basic social services like health, education and security more

53 Ibid.
54 See Sampson, ‘Social Life of Projects’.

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efficiently is a formidable but indispensable task which cannot be replaced by any number of NGO projects. Moreover, NGOs cannot hold non-Western political leaders, who often rely on intricate networks of informal power and patronage, truly accountable for their actions. Such civic associations, therefore, cannot be expected to act as the primary vehicle for the creation of a ‘responsive, accountable, and transparent state structure’. Rather, they need such a structure in place for their own proper functioning.\(^56\)

With support and under monitoring from Western governments and organizations, public institutions are the only bodies capable of maintaining vital social infrastructures and services, and curbing, at least to some extent, a general scramble for ever scarcer public resources among various ‘mafias’ and clientelistic networks. The further weakening of these already feeble institutions, on the other hand, cannot be compensated by any amount of current or future societal self-organization, or of advocacy and pressure-group politics. Given the negative selection of new economic elites amidst a prolonged social, political and economic crisis (in the context of an apparent ‘secession’ of elites on a global scale\(^57\)), local philanthropy can hardly be expected to offer any long-term substitute for the basic services provided by starved public institutions.

While the conventional praise of civil society and NGOs stems from a general mistrust of any excessive concentration of power in the hands of governments, in our globalizing world the concentration of power and resources in private hands may be even more problematic. To the extent that ‘civil society’ has provided justification for merely supporting some elite groups in the scramble mentioned above,\(^58\) reducing complex political and social problems to technicalities and neglecting (or even abetting) far-reaching processes of political disintegration, it should probably be treated as a folk concept and an ideological slogan rather than as an analytical term.\(^59\)

\(^{56}\) Belloni, ‘Civil Society and Peacebuilding’, p. 178.

\(^{57}\) See Bauman, *Community Seeking Safety*.


Its uncritical use not only creates practical problems, but also reasserts the customary cultural hierarchies\(^\text{60}\) that some of its proponents ostensibly seek to undermine. Paradoxically, this trend unfolds at the very moment when the vigour of civic life within Western societies, and particularly the United States, has attracted intense questioning.\(^\text{61}\)

CONCLUSION

A correlation between ‘civil society’ and ‘democracy’ is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for inferring a causal link between the two phenomena.\(^\text{62}\) The data regarding sociopolitical variables is collected by non-experimental methods that make it impossible to exclude extraneous factors. Under such conditions, the assumption that correlation implies causation is always haunted by the possibility that a third factor, or group of factors, lurks beneath the surface of observable social phenomena and shapes both correlating variables. In the case of ‘civil society’ and ‘democracy’, such underlying factors have long been established by social and political theorists, but have not been sufficiently incorporated into the growing democratization literature and policy recipes.

These underlying factors surpass even the beneficial socializing influences often attributed to public institutions and/or civic associations. They are related mainly to the deep changes in social and personality structures brought about by modernization. Within Western societies, these changes have created masses of pragmatic yet self-disciplined individuals who habitually obey abstract rules and cooperate within formal associations and impersonal institutions. Within non-Western societies, most individuals have remained embedded within face-to-face and quasi-kinship networks and have tended to pursue social goals through informal associations based on personal or factional loyalties. So far efforts to help non-Western societies

\(^{60}\) See Sampson, ‘Social Life of Projects’, p. 142.

\(^{61}\) See n. 34 above.

\(^{62}\) Some scholars have recently questioned the very existence of such a link in democratizing societies; see Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord (eds), Civil Society before Democracy, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

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emulate Western socio-political patterns have remained rather problematic (with the partial exception of a few East Asian and Central European countries), and have even resulted in deep social crises and ‘retraditionalization’ backlashes.

The dynamics of such a profound social transformation are still poorly understood. NGOs within non-Western societies, however, are unlikely to fulfill the high hopes placed upon them by scholars, social activists and policy makers. For their proper functioning they require certain social preconditions that may be paradoxically undermined by an excessive focus on direct NGO assistance. These preconditions are also necessary for the proper functioning of democratic representation, despite recent efforts to reduce the latter to formal democracy.63 Until there is a better understanding of these relationships and dynamics, it probably makes sense to place greater emphasis on the maintenance of efficient political institutions and crucial social infrastructures. In the context of persisting personal and factional loyalties and a looming crisis of democratic representation linked to ‘globalization’, such efforts are also likely to face steep obstacles. Still, they could possibly give individuals within ‘transition’ societies time to adapt to seemingly overwhelming and disorienting social changes.64 In the absence of such assistance, formally democratic political institutions are likely to see a degree of social apprehension and delegitimization that no amount of targeted NGO activism and advocacy could offset.

64 See Polanyi, Great Transformation.