

An aerial photograph of a massive crowd of people, seen from above, arranged in a large cross shape on a white, reflective surface. The crowd is composed of many individuals, some standing in lines, others in smaller groups, creating a complex pattern of human movement. The perspective is from directly above, looking down at the assembly.

**THIRD
EDITION**

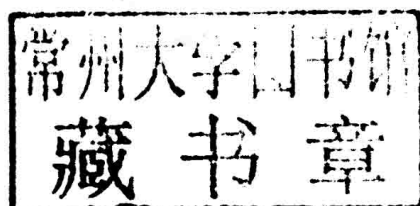
CIVIL SOCIETY

MICHAEL EDWARDS

CIVIL SOCIETY

Third Edition

Michael Edwards



polity

Copyright © Michael Edwards 2014

The right of Michael Edwards to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First edition published in 2004 by Polity Press

Second edition published in 2009 by Polity Press

This third edition first published in 2014 by Polity Press

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

350 Main Street

Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7935-8

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7936-5 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Berling

by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

Printed and bound in Great Britain by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Civil Society

Third Edition

For Cora
My own "civil society"

Preface

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2004, the number of searches for “civil society” recorded by Google each year has fallen by 70 percent¹ – not a particularly rigorous indicator of interest and support perhaps, but surprising to those like me who once saw civil society as “the big idea for the century to come,” as I put it in my original Preface. Of course, people still organize themselves for voluntary, collective action, and episodes like the “Arab Spring” continue to hit the headlines, only to subside into less intense activity once the streets and squares have been cleared of protestors and police. Perhaps this is inevitable given that such bursts of civic energy are difficult to sustain after their immediate causes have been addressed, and in the face of widespread repression and insecurity. As I write this Preface the same script is being re-enacted in Istanbul’s Taksim Square and across the cities of Brazil – met, as usual, by tear gas and batons rather than by greater openness to reforms. Even the few positive attempts by politicians to nurture civic action have receded, with Britain’s “Big Society” getting smaller by the day, and little sign that widespread grassroots participation in Barack Obama’s re-election campaign has had any impact on the willingness of his government to pursue a more radical agenda in the USA.

To me, however, these facts change little about the significance of civil society in the long-term evolution of politics and culture. The reality of activism in most settings has always been less glamorous than the headlines may suggest, and strong social movements are comparatively rare. The power that people have to shape their societies is usually channeled through their day-to-day participation in voluntary associations and communities; churches, mosques and synagogues; labor unions, political parties and other expressions of "normal" civic life. In chapter 2, I use the metaphor of civil society as an iceberg with its peaks above the waterline in the form of high-profile organizations and events, and the great mass of civic interaction hidden underneath. Examples like the Arab Spring are significant in and of themselves, but perhaps of longer-term importance is what is happening below the surface. Since the early 2000s there is increasing evidence that much of the "ice" is melting as face-to-face civic interaction becomes less popular or more difficult to sustain. Or perhaps the "iceberg" is simply reshaping itself under the influence of new developments in technology, social media and the market, with consequences for civil society that may be positive, negative, or somewhere in between. It is these longer-term, subterranean developments that are the focus of the third edition of this book.

One of the benefits of revising a manuscript at regular intervals is that new ideas and interpretations can be added along the way. I have received a good deal of critical feedback from readers who have used this book in academic courses, commissions of inquiry, policy-making processes, public education, and strategic planning for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations and other donor agencies. So in this revision I have added two new sections on subjects that have developed rapidly since the second edition was produced in 2009. The first concerns the overlaps between civil society and the market that are producing an interesting breed of hybrid institution variously known as social enterprises or social entrepreneurs, backed up by "venture philanthropy," "impact investing" and other forms of financing that

are heavily influenced by business thinking. These issues are treated in chapter 3 as a potentially important shift in the ways in which we understand the constitution of the good society.

The second set of developments revolve around social media and the increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in civic interaction – probably the most talked-about phenomenon in the civil society debate in recent years. Such technologies, and the shifts in communication they facilitate, have the potential to greatly expand at least some parts of the public sphere, and so they are dealt with in chapter 4. Both these trends have implications for civil society that are thoroughly ambiguous, and healthily contested. In addition, new material has been added to the geographical essays in chapter 2, and I have tried to answer some well-targeted criticisms that my original treatment of civil society in the Middle East and Africa was too reliant on a limited understanding of ascriptive versus cross-cutting associations and relationships. New social movements or bursts of movement activity among both progressive and conservative forces are also covered in chapter 2, while chapter 4 explores in more detail emerging forms of participatory democracy, in which civil society has a central role to play. Finally, I have updated the case studies, data, examples and references used throughout.

As this book has evolved since the early 2000s I have come to appreciate two longer-term trends that underpin all the different revisions, and that now run more clearly throughout the text. The first is the absolute necessity of building, sustaining and revitalizing the infrastructure of citizen action at the grassroots level, without which civil society cannot function in any of its guises. If it is worth telling, the story of civil society has to be written not by bureaucrats or billionaires, but by millions of ordinary people who wish to rearrange the “geometry of human relationships” in ways that speak to their visions of the good society.² The creation of civil society is a human drama, not a technical exercise in government planning or a supply chain in a business in which inputs and

outputs can be manipulated and controlled. Otherwise there is little hope that citizens will be able to hold power to account from a position of independence, or come together to determine their own futures other than as recipients of top-down direction and the incentives of the market.

It is particularly important those most affected by poverty and discrimination are able to express themselves directly in civil society action so that voluntary associations, political participation, and public debates are not dominated by groups claiming to act on their behalf. And that means protecting and enhancing the self-governing organizations that have always formed the core of civic interaction, through which the mass of the population can activate their energies as creative citizens. The homogenizing of civil society ecosystems discussed in chapters 2, 3 and 5 – variously described in terms of corporatization, NGO-ization and greater bureaucracy – poses a special threat to the collective action capacities of low-income and other marginalized communities, as exemplified by the attempted destruction of the labor movement in the USA, for example, or the dramatic decline in support for community organizing among philanthropic foundations. Yet it is precisely this hard, basic, civic or public work that is most under threat today from a combination of widespread economic insecurity, rising individualism and inequality in every sphere of life, political repression and increasing government surveillance, and the popularity of celebrity humanitarians, billionaire philanthropists and the hype-merchants of social media and the market, who apply a sheen that gilds the surface of civil society in many countries but who do little to build it at its core. Unglamorous, unheralded and often unsupported, this is the civil society we simply cannot afford to lose, since we cannot achieve anything that is of real value to all of us by working as individuals, however successful, but only through collective action, like an orchestra instead of a brilliant soloist or a tapestry instead of a few rich threads.

Second, every generation faces the challenge of nurturing civil society against the background of a new set of

circumstances and supplied with a different set of tools. Ideally, it should be possible to take advantage of new tools like social markets and social media without disavowing what is valuable from the past – like the value of face-to-face interaction and democratic governance. But in reality this seems difficult to accomplish, perhaps because we are constantly searching for new magic bullets that can resolve the problems of declining civic participation and engagement, or because we over-estimate the benefits of anything that is new when there are reputations and fortunes to be made. During the same nine-year period in which Google searches for “civil society” fell by 70 percent, searches for “social media”³ and “social entrepreneurs”⁴ rose by 90 percent and 40 percent respectively, a clear indicator of changing fashions.

There is no doubt that these developments open up important opportunities to strengthen associational life and the health of the public sphere, or that they could help to achieve a better synthesis of online and offline organizing, bonding and bridging social ties, and self-funding and commercial revenue generation for non-profits. But as later chapters make clear, there are also many conflicts and trade-offs involved in the adoption of these new ideas which must be carefully interrogated, free from the exaggeration of their enthusiasts and the nostalgia of their critics. I suspect that face-to-face public work is always going to be more powerful than social media or market opportunities in pursuing civil society’s core functions, and that new moral revolutions will continue to be organized in the flesh, whichever tools we use to communicate with each other and raise funds to do our work.

Finally, in the years to come I have no doubt that civil society will be repressed or weakened in many places, just as it will be celebrated and strengthened in many others. This is the reality of punch and counter-punch wherever power relations are contested and remade. Collective action is in our DNA as social beings, and there is never a shortage of causes and opportunities to put our collective energies into practice. Intense mobilizations will continue to flame up in

response to authoritarian regimes, rising inequality and injustice, but the real task is to sustain them over time – to sustain the preconditions for people to shape civil society for themselves, as I put in it in chapter 6. Only then will a strong civil society become the norm rather than the exception. People will adjust the tools and techniques they use to do these things as circumstances change, and they may have to relearn or re-adapt some of the skills of collective action for the contexts that lie ahead. Will the patterns of civic engagement that emerge from this process be very different, and will those differences prove significant for the larger questions of democracy and freedom in “societies that are civil”? That is the question I hope this book will help you to understand and answer.

Acknowledgments

My thanks go to all those who have provided feedback on the second edition of *Civil Society* since its publication in 2009, and who have supplied me with a rich array of additional references, case studies and other source material. Naturally, responsibility for all errors and omissions in the book remains mine alone. I have received excellent support and guidance from Jonathan Skerrett and Elen Griffiths at Polity Press in Cambridge. The revisions for this book were completed at our home in upstate New York, where my wife Cora is blazing a trail for true democracy and decency in government. As my own “civil society,” this book continues to be dedicated to her.

Michael Edwards
Swan Hill
June 2013

Contents

Preface	vi
Acknowledgments	xii
1 Introduction – What’s the Big Idea?	1
2 Civil Society as Associational Life	18
3 Civil Society as the Good Society	43
4 Civil Society as the Public Sphere	66
5 Synthesis – Unraveling the Civil Society Puzzle	89
6 So What’s to be Done?	114
Notes	133
References and Bibliography	143
Index	167

1

Introduction – What's the Big Idea?

Set into the wall of the Church of the Ascension on London's Blackheath is a small metal plaque. "Fellowship is life," it reads, "and lack of fellowship is death, but in hell there is no brotherhood but every man for himself." John Ball, the leader of the Peasants' Revolt who spoke these words nearby in 1381, would not have thought of himself as part of "civil society," but his sentiments have been echoed down the centuries by anyone who has ever joined a group, formed an association or volunteered to defend or advance the causes they believe in. Collective action in search of the good society is a universal part of human experience, though manifested in a million different ways across time, space and culture. In Sullivan County, New York, where I live, I am surrounded by contemporary examples of the same phenomenon – the volunteer fire service, the free give-away of hay to those who can't afford to buy it for their pets, the music sale by Radio W-JEFF ("America's only hydro-powered public radio station"), the Eileen Haworth Weil Scholarship Fund celebrating local activists, and a myriad of other groups catering to every affinity and interest. Yet Sullivan County remains economically depressed and politically dysfunctional, one more set of communities on the margins of a nation that is increasingly violent, unequal and apparently incapable of

resolving its own pressing social problems. A strong civil society, it seems, is no guarantee that society will be strong and civil.

Concepts of civil society have a rich history, but it is only since the early 1980s that they have moved to the center of the international stage. There are a number of reasons for this development – the fall of communism and the democratic openings that followed, disenchantment with the economic and political models of the past, a yearning for togetherness in a world that seems ever-more insecure, and the rapid rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the global stage. Today, civil society is a little less popular as a generalized “solution” to these problems, but it remains high on the agendas of government officials, journalists, funding agencies, writers and academics, not to mention the millions of people across the globe who see it as an inspiration in their struggles for a better world. Cited as a key element of social progress by politicians and thinkers from left, right and all perspectives in between, civil society is claimed by every part of the ideological spectrum as its own, but what exactly is it?

“Civil society,” says the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, DC, means “fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty.”¹ This will surprise those on the left who see it as the seedbed for radical social movements. The Advocacy Institute, one of Cato’s alter egos, calls civil society “the best way forward for politics in the post-Cold War world,” “a society that protects those who organize to challenge power” and “the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and the tyrannical market.”² Not to be outdone, those in the middle ground of politics claim that civil society – by gently correcting generations of state and market failure – could be the missing link in the success of social democracy. Meanwhile, back in academia, civil society has become the “chicken soup of the social sciences” – “the new analytic key that will unlock the mysteries of the social order.” The American writer Jeremy Rifkin calls civil society “our last, best hope”;

UK politicians of every stripe see it as central to holding society together against the onrush of globalizing markets; the United Nations and the World Bank see it as one of the keys to “good governance” and poverty-reducing growth; and – lest one sees this as a giant Western conspiracy – here is the autumn 2002 edition of China’s semi-official news magazine *Huasheng Shidian* plagiarizing the American scholar Lester Salamon: “the role of NGOs in the twenty-first century will be as significant as the role of the nation-state in the twentieth.” These are strange bedfellows with ambitious dreams, but can they all be right?

Such chameleon-like qualities are not unique to “civil society,” but when the same phrase is used to justify such radically different viewpoints it is certainly time to ask some deeper questions about what is going on. After all, an idea that means everything probably signifies nothing. At the very least, clarity about the different understandings in play is necessary if we are to have a sensible conversation, yet a glance through the civil society literature would leave most people thoroughly confused. Depending on whose version one follows, civil society is either a specific product of the nation-state and capitalism that arose spontaneously to mediate conflicts between social life and the market economy when the industrial revolution fractured traditional bonds of kin and community; or a universal expression of the collective life of individuals that is at work in all countries and stages of development, but one that is expressed in different ways according to history and culture. Since nation-states in much of the developing world are largely a colonial creation, civil societies in the South are bound to differ from those that emerged in the North.

Some see civil society as one of three sectors (along with the state and the market), separate from and independent of each other though sometimes overlapping in the middle. Others emphasize the “fuzzy” borders and interrelationships that exist between these sectors, increasingly characterized by hybrids of various kinds. Some claim that only certain associations are part of civil society – voluntary, democratic,

modern and civil according to some pre-defined set of normative criteria – while others insist that all associations qualify for membership, including “uncivil” society and traditional associations that are based on inherited characteristics such as ethnicity. Are families “in” or “out” of civil society, and what about the business sector? Is civil society a bulwark against the state, an indispensable support for government reformers, or dependent on state intervention for its existence? Is it the key to individual freedom through the guaranteed experience of pluralism or a threat to democracy through special-interest politics? Is it a noun (a part of society), an adjective (a kind of society), an arena for societal deliberation or a mixture of all three?

It is not difficult to find support for any of these positions, and we will hear much more about the different arguments later in the book. But what is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall? One response would be to ditch the concept completely, but this would be a mistake. Although the civil society debate is “riddled with ethnocentric assumptions developed in conditions that don't exist anywhere in the contemporary world,” is “no longer based on any coherent theory or principles,” has been reduced to “an ideological rendezvous for erstwhile antagonists,” and is therefore “ineffective as a model for social and political practice,” both the theory and practice of citizen action are alive and kicking in the worlds of politics, public policy, activism and foreign aid.³ Therefore, “the resultant intellectual confusion could well wreak havoc on the real world given the fact that civil societies have now been recognized as a legitimate area for external intervention.”⁴ Conceptual clarity, analytical rigor, empirical authenticity, policy relevance and emancipatory potential are all threatened when civil society becomes a slogan. But selective scorn, scholarly admonishment and attempts to enforce a universal consensus are unlikely to resolve this problem.

What, therefore, is the best way forward? I think it lies through greater clarity and rigor, so that different interpreta-