



# Civil Society

Michael Edwards

# CIVIL SOCIETY

*Michael Edwards*

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# Civil Society

*For Cora*  
*My own 'civil society'*

# Preface

Is civil society the 'big idea' for the twenty-first century, or will the idea of civil society – confused, corrupted or captured by elites – prove another false horizon in the search for a better world? By illuminating the uses and abuses of different civil society theories, I hope this book will help readers of different persuasions to answer this question for themselves.

Civil society has become a notoriously slippery concept, used to justify radically different ideological agendas, supported by deeply ambiguous evidence, and suffused with many questionable assumptions. Faced by these ambiguities, it is tempting to dismiss this concept as hopelessly compromised, but I will argue the opposite case: when subjected to a rigorous critique, the idea of civil society re-emerges to offer significant emancipatory potential, explanatory power, and practical support to problem solving in both established and emerging democracies. However, this positive conclusion holds only when we abandon the search for theoretical consensus and embrace the fact that civil society does indeed mean different things to different people, plays different roles at different times, and constitutes both problem and solution. What is important about the civil society debate is not that one school of thought is proved correct and others

exposed as false, but the extent to which different frameworks can generate insights that lead to more effective action. Recognizing that civil society is contested territory – in both theory and reality – is the first step in rescuing a potentially powerful set of ideas from the conceptual confusion that threatens to submerge them.

My aim in this book is to encourage readers to come to a more informed and nuanced set of judgements about the civil society debate, and the first steps in that process are to clarify the origins of different contemporary understandings of this concept and explain why one in particular has risen in popularity so quickly since the fall of the Berlin Wall. These questions are covered in chapter 1, which concludes by highlighting some of the exaggerated claims that have created a backlash against the idea of civil society, and the specific deficiencies of civil society organizations, in academia, journalism, labour unions and government. This backlash may provide a useful corrective in the civil society debate, but taken too far, it threatens to ‘throw the baby out with the bath water’ to the detriment of progressive social goals and the lives of millions of people across the globe for whom civil society provides a compelling vision in their struggles for a better world. The stakes are very high.

The next step in the argument is to clarify what civil society means in different traditions – there being no interpretation that commands universal assent. The next three chapters explore three different theoretical positions, each useful and legitimate but also incomplete: analytical models of civil society (the forms of associational life, in chapter 2); normative models of civil society (the kind of society they are supposed to generate, in chapter 3); and civil society as the ‘public sphere’ in chapter 4. The first of these models see civil society as a *part* of society distinct from states and markets, formed for the purposes of advancing common interests and facilitating collective action. Most commonly referred to as the ‘third sector’, civil society in this sense contains all associations and networks between the family and the state, except firms. However, there is no assumption that

these diverse forms of associational life share a normative consensus or a common political agenda – a crucial point in relation to the argument that follows.

The second set of theories define civil society in normative terms – as the realm of service rather than self-interest, and a breeding ground for the ‘habits of the heart’ – attitudes and values like cooperation, trust, tolerance and non-violence. In this sense, civil society means a *type* of society that is motivated by a different way of being and living in the world, or a different rationality, identified as ‘civil’. Although it is often conflated with the first set of theories in circular arguments about ‘forms and norms’, this model must be seen as separate, for two, interrelated, reasons: first, associations have different normative agendas, and second, the same normative agendas are shaped by different sets of institutions – government and the market as well as voluntary associations.

My third school of thought sees civil society as an arena for public deliberation, rational dialogue and the exercise of ‘active citizenship’ in pursuit of the common interest – in other words, as the ‘public sphere’. Though often ignored in the policy and practice of governments, international agencies and even parts of academia, no understanding of civil society can be complete without a full appreciation of the role played by the public sphere in democracy and development.

Having clarified the differences between these three models of civil society, are we forced to choose between them, or can they be seen as complementary? Chapter 5 argues that elements from each can be combined together into a mutually supportive framework that strengthens the utility of civil society both as an idea and a framework for action. How does a ‘strong civil society’ in the analytical sense lead to a ‘society that is strong and civil’ in the normative sense, and what role is played by the public sphere in promoting both? This is the single most important question in the civil society debate, and also the most neglected. Chapter 5 sheds new light on these questions by showing that civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means



to achieve it and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means.

Finally, what does an integrated approach like this have to say about public policy and the practice of citizen action? The book concludes that there are no solutions to social, economic and political problems in the twenty-first century that do not involve civil society in one or more of its three disguises, and chapter 6 lays out an agenda for nurturing the connections between them that ranges far beyond the anaemic shopping list of community service, non-governmental organization (NGO) capacity building, and a return to some imaginary past that dominates the current civil society discourse in the USA and elsewhere. These orthodox suggestions ignore the structural factors that undermine the health of civil society in each of its manifestations. Much deeper action is required in politics, economics and social life if civil society is to be an effective vehicle for change.

To qualify as a 'big idea' in the century to come, civil society must be able to be described and understood in terms accessible to the sceptic, tested rigorously and successfully against the available empirical evidence, and converted into practical measures that can be deployed in real-world contexts. Thankfully, none of these criteria requires that we accept a single, universal interpretation of civil society in every circumstance, but all of them demand a level of openness and objectivity that has been lacking in much of the discussion to date. I hope that this book, and others, will help to redress that balance.

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The first three chapters of the book were written at my parents' home in the English Lake District, and my thanks go to them for surrendering their precious privacy during the Christmas of 2002 and the new year of 2003. The rest of the book was written in upstate New York, where my wife Cora sacrificed many weekends together so that I could complete the book more or less on schedule. As my own 'civil society', this book is dedicated to her.

Michael Edwards  
Swan Hill  
April 2003

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# 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 spend my weekends, I am surrounded by contemporary examples of this 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 Interfaith Council Peace Vigil in nearby Liberty, the local HIV/Aids Taskforce and a myriad of groups catering to every conceivable affinity and interest. Yet Sullivan County remains economically depressed and politically forgotten, 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 in the last ten years that they have moved to the centre of the international stage. There are a number of reasons for this – the fall of Communism and the democratic openings that followed, disenchantment with the economic 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 seems to be the 'big idea' on everyone's lips – government officials, journalists, funding agencies, writers and academics, not to mention the millions of people across the globe who find it an inspiration in their struggles for a better world. Cited as a solution to social, economic and political dilemmas 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.'<sup>1</sup> Don Eberly, a leading conservative thinker, goes even further: 'As the twenty-first century draws near', he says, 'a new term has surfaced in American political debate, carrying with it all of the collective longing of a nation looking for a new direction. That term is civil society.' 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'.<sup>2</sup> Not to be outdone, 'third way' thinkers like Anthony Giddens and Benjamin Barber 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', and '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'; New Labour politicians in the UK see it as central to a new 'project' that will hold 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 American civil society 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. An idea that means everything probably means nothing, and when the idea of civil society goes on sale to the highest bidder, its worth as a political and intellectual currency is likely to be devalued over time. 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 rapidly and thoroughly confused. Depending on whose version one follows, civil society is either a specific product of the nation state and capitalism (arising 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, at work in all countries and stages of development but expressed in different ways according to history and context. Since nation states in the developing world are largely a colonial creation and the market economy has only a fragile hold, civil societies in the South are bound to differ from those 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 overlapping in the middle. Others emphasize the 'fuzzy' borders and interrelationships that exist between these sectors, characterized by hybrids, connections and overlaps between different institutions and their roles. 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. Others insist that all associations qualify for membership, including 'uncivil' society and traditional associations based on inherited characteristics like religion and ethnicity. Are families 'in' or 'out', and what about the business sector? Is civil society a bulwark against the state, an indispensable support or dependent on government intervention for its very 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, as recently recommended by John Grimond in *The Economist* magazine. 'Civil society' appears as one of five leading articles in its flagship publication *The World In 2002*, only to be dismissed as a smokescreen for the 'usual suspects' (meaning 'NGOs and their self-selected agendas') and a 'woolly expression for woolly-minded people' – except, Grimond adds in case his message appears too nuanced, that this 'would be too charitable'. Though tempting, this would be a serious mistake, since 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', the concept itself is very much alive and kicking in the worlds of politics, activism and foreign aid.<sup>3</sup> 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.'<sup>4</sup> Analytical rigour, conceptual clarity, 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, now that such ideas have developed a life of their own, backed by powerful interests.

What, therefore, is the best way forward? I think it lies through rigour, since rigour enables different interpretations to be debated on their merits and demerits in the court of public deliberation. Without clarity and rigour, theories of civil society will be a poor guide to public policy and citizen action, whatever the values and goals at stake. At the very least, rigour can expose dogma that masquerades as truth, and challenge policy makers who have an ideological axe to grind. And, as I try to show in the chapters that follow, ideas about civil society can survive and prosper in a rigorous critique so long as we are prepared to abandon false universals, magic bullets and painless panaceas. The goal of this book is not consensus (something that would be impossible to achieve in the civil society debate), but greater clarity. And greater clarity, I hope, can be the basis for a better conversation in the future.

### **Civil society: a very brief history of an idea**

The first step in achieving greater clarity is to identify the origins of different contemporary understandings of civil society in the history of political thought. This is not a theoretical book, nor a book about civil society theory, but to appreciate the ways in which theory has been muddled and misapplied in practice a quick tour through theory is essen-



tial. As Keynes's famous dictum reminds us, 'practical men in authority who think themselves immune from theoretical influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist', just as present-day 'civil-society builders' are motivated, consciously or not, by ideas that are deeply rooted in the past.

Fortunately, we are blessed with a number of books that already provide excellent and detailed accounts of the history of this idea.<sup>5</sup> They show how civil society has been a point of reference for philosophers since antiquity in their struggle to understand the great issues of the day: the nature of the good society, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the practice of politics and government, and, most especially, how to live together peacefully by reconciling our individual autonomy with our collective aspirations, balancing freedom and its boundaries, and marrying pluralism with conformity so that complex societies can function with both efficiency and justice. Such questions were difficult enough to resolve in small, homogenous communities where face-to-face social interaction built trust and reciprocity, but in an increasingly integrated world where none of these conditions apply they become hugely more demanding. Yet the discussions that took place in the ferment of eastern Europe in the 1980s would surely have been familiar to Aristotle, Hobbes, Ferguson, de Tocqueville, Gramsci and others in the long roster of civil society thinkers that stretches back two thousand years. Though the profile of these ideas has certainly waxed and waned, arguing about civil society has always been a part of political and philosophical debate.

In classical thought, civil society and the state were seen as indistinguishable, with both referring to a type of political association governing social conflict through the imposition of rules that restrained citizens from harming one another. Aristotle's *polis* was an 'association of associations' that enabled citizens (or those few individuals that qualified) to share in the virtuous tasks of ruling and being ruled. In this sense, the state represented the 'civil' form of society and 'civility' described the requirements of good citizenship. Late medieval thought continued this tradition by equating civil