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Trajectory of the Concept of Civil society in classical social theory: A Theoretical Discourse

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Abstract

Civil society is a powerful but often misunderstood idea. It represents the vital space where we come together in associations, NGOs, and community groups, independent of government and the market, to shape our shared world. From the local parent-teacher association to global human rights movements, this is where public life is built from the ground up. While celebrated as a cornerstone of democracy, its very strength, its diversity is also its greatest challenge. Under its broad umbrella, groups with opposing ideologies all claim to represent "civil society," using it to advance their own, sometimes conflicting, visions for society.

This concept is not new. Its meaning has evolved dramatically through history. Ancient thinkers like Aristotle saw it as the entire political community. Later, Enlightenment philosophers like Ferguson and Smith wove in the dynamic forces of the market. Hegel and Marx then framed it as a distinct realm, separate from the family and the state, often driven by economic interests. Today, this rich history means the term can be confusing, used to describe everything from a neighbourhood watch to a national political movement. Ultimately, understanding civil society requires appreciating its evolution and its core role as the essential, if sometimes chaotic, arena of public action that both supports and challenges the modern democratic state.

Key words: Civil Society, Democracy, Public Sphere, Associations, State and Society, Civic Engagement

Introduction

The contemporary political modernity is engulfed in the central fundamental concept of civil society in both contemporary as well as classical social theory (Alexander 2006; Parsons 1971; Somers 2008; Taylor 1990) Many ideological groups, from the left to the right, have embraced the idea of civil society as an useful framework to further their individual agendas in contemporary societies. As a result of different social actors, including NGOs, enterprises, the

media, and religions, identifying with this idea and its related structures, strategies, and objectives, civil society has in certain cases even evolved into a political programme. The expansion of civil society is now recognised by development initiatives around the world as an essential component of success, just as crucial as political, economic, and environmental growth. The advancement of civil society is a goal of both international and domestic public and private help organisations. Despite the fact that civil society is important to democratic countries, it can also have negative effects on robust and well-functioning democratic regimes.

Civil society is confronted with the task of cultivating attributes that enable it to serve as a robust supporter of democracy. It has come to represent a political desire for greater civility in social encounters during a time of escalating political antagonisms and hostility (Havel,1992) Different individuals and ideological groups that may have once been at odds with one another have found common ground in civil society. For instance, liberal and conservative groups may each view civil society as a means of advancing their own principles and objectives, such as defending individual liberties or upholding traditional values. Under the umbrella of civil society, individuals, corporations, and religious institutions may also group together to work towards shared objectives like advancing social justice or environmental conservation. As a result, the idea of civil society has expanded to serve as a large tent under which a variety of actors and ideological viewpoints can converge, but they may have different ideas about what civil society involves and what it should focus on. It is a key topic in the examination of civil society since social movement and economic sociology studies have provided fresh perspectives on the many and hybrid institutional arrangements and tactics that civil society actors employ to accomplish their objectives. (Fligstein and McAdam 2011; King and Pearce 2010; McAdam and Scott 2006; King and Soule 2015; Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000; Campbell 2005; Clemens and Minkoff 2004).

The concept of civil society; A Historical Perspective.

The concept of civil society is both descriptive term and a normative idea (Marada 1997). Empirically, civil society refers to the realm of associations, organizations, and individuals that are independent of the state and the market. Normatively, civil society is recognised as a space for unrestricted and independent social action, where shared goals, expression of dissent, and participatory public life is pursued by individuals and groups. The normative aspect of civil society implies certain values such as democracy, human rights, and social justice, and

emphasizes the importance of civic engagement and public deliberation in creating a more just and equitable society. The socio-analytical definitions of civic society into three broad categories were systematically stated by Victor Pérez-Dáz, A first group of authors use it to describe a comprehensive social and political structure (Pérez-Díaz 1998)

Civil society as a cohesive socio-political structure

Aristotle: 'polis is a union'

Aristotle (384–322 BC), who used the Greek term koinonia politikè (political community), attributed the concept of civil society to the existence of several social realms in which people of various social classes resided. He recognised that plurality served as the basis for unity, which is why he favoured a mixed constitution. A state with a structure that considered subordinate sectors, in his opinion, would improve the deliberative life of citizenship as it affected life in subordinate domains. He popularised the idea in political philosophy, believed that law, as the formalised expression of a widely held morality governing individuals' interactions and their participation in public affairs, was a key institution defining a civil society. According to Aristotle, relationships between equal and free citizens that were founded on the rule of law were distinct from those that each citizen maintained with their own household and were based on force. The list of organisations that make up a civil society has evolved over time. The system-level view of civil society as a group of free and equal people persisted throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages. However, arguments that Koinonia politikè, as defined by Aristotle, didn't mean civil society and are different from the contemporary sense and the idea of "civil society" and "koinonia politikè" from Aristotle are only tangentially related(Buijs,2003; Colas 1997, Hudson,2003) The Roman assertion that a global empire could transcend Greek parochialism was strengthened by the gradual fall and eventual oblivion of the separate city-states that had fostered Plato and Aristotle. The late Stoic vision of a universal civic society governed by reason was inspired by an integrated conception of a global community (Etrenberg,2011). Cicero attempted to save civic virtue by enshrining justice in a vision of a law-governed nature at a time when constant upheaval and instability marked the transition to empire.

Civil society: An organization of public power

Cicero (106-43 BC) introduced the terms "societas civilis" and "communitas civilis" into the vocabulary of European political thought as an assembly (of men) united by a common acceptance of right and by a community of interests is referred to as civil society, also known as the commonwealth (McLoy,1987). In order to restore civic virtue, Cicero rooted justice in the idea of a law-governed natural world. He sought to establish a defence of civil society grounded in natural law, which influenced the concept of res publica, or "the people's ownership." His stance was equally critical of both corrupt aristocratic practices and opportunistic popular movements. Justice served as the guiding principle of civil society, an organisation of public power that enabled civilisation. The goal was to limit the disintegrative tendencies of the private sphere and to foster a sense of shared purpose and commitment to the common good. Cicero's concept of the common good and his advocacy for a mixed constitution had a significant impact on medieval constitutional thought and the Enlightenment's notions of civil society. In the immediate context, his vision of the common good was embodied in a civil society that depended on peasant-soldiers to protect the republic from both internal and external dangers. The concept of res privata emerged in Roman society as a counterpart to the idea of res publica. Res privata refers to a private realm where individual interests and personal relationships are paramount, and is typically defined by family and property. Roman private law played a key role in regulating these private relationships and ensuring the protection of individual rights. The Roman concept of civil society highlighted the significance of property, reason, justice, and privacy, while simultaneously pursuing a universal and public interpretation of citizenship. This framework acknowledged the strong influence of private interests. The differentiation between private individuals and public citizens formed the foundation for the belief that Roman law ceased at the entrance of the home. Nevertheless, the principles of civil society aimed to elevate humanity from barbarism and ensure the advantages of a politically structured civilization, despite the empire's inability to safeguard Rome.

Subsequently, this concept was interpreted by various scholars through different terminology, such as "communitas" and "communicatio civilis" introduced by William of Moerbeke in the 13th century, as well as "societas civilis" and "societas politica" articulated by Leonardo Bruni in the 15th century. By the 17th century, the terms societas civilis, société civile, and società civile had become firmly entrenched in political theory. It's important to note that the original Latin words for "societas" and "communitas" were later joined by the terms "civilis" and "politicus," which foreshadowed today's distinctions between "civil" and "political," "society"

and "state," and "society" and "community." Thought leaders made an effort to preserve civil society's identity and connection to the larger social and political structure despite the shifting historical environment, even as the vocabulary grew more and more out of date (Forbrig, 2004). Due to a number of noteworthy historical events, the term "civil society" was used in a variety of contexts over the time span from Greek antiquity to early modernity. The fall of the Greek city-states, the emergence and decline of the Roman republic, the introduction of Christianity, the creation of the mediaeval Ständestaat system, and the advent of absolutism all brought about significant changes. A separation between civil society and the transcendent divine realm, for instance, was made with the arrival of Christianity. Civil society included the different pillars of authority, including feudal lords, free cities, guilds, and the Church. The rise of the absolutist state as a serious challenge to the perspective of civil society led to the development of natural law theory as a means of comprehending and defending the basis of the state. However, the nomenclature did not alter; civil society was still referred to as the state or political society, which contrasted with the state of nature. The primary institution delineating this civic condition was any sovereign authority centre, whether an assembly or an individual.

Civil society: Embracing the market

Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) and his contemporary Adam Smith (1723–1790), prominent figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, are widely recognized as principal architects of the modern conception of civil society. Although they declared an innovation in the previous ideas of the absolutist state, they maintained the reference to the entire social and political system. This was accomplished by adding a limited and accountable government based on rule of law along with free market economy to the list of institutions that make a society civil. This inclusion in the concept of civil society emphasized that the economic sphere is a crucial part of social life and stress that the institutions of civil society should be planned to facilitate economic growth and prosperity, while also protecting individual rights and freedoms. A free-market economy was added by the Scottish Enlightenment to the list of traditional institutions that make a society civil, such as the rule of law and limited government. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was the final significant person in this classical and early modern form of human society and a strong supporter of the natural law tradition. This change in focus is demonstrated by his assertion that, when viewed from completely different perspectives, the relationship

between the civil society and the state is not the same. The Scottish Enlightenment and Kant, in contrast to older natural law theorists who completely subjugated the person to the sovereign, gave both the individual and the state competencies a more balanced relationship. This is reflected in the Scottish Enlightenment's support of the concept of private property and Kant's view of the citizen as possessing equal and fundamental rights. According to him, the state and the civil society "similar relationship viewed from opposing points of view." This means that civil society and the state have a complementary relationship and are mutually dependent on each other. According to Kant, civil society serves as the foundation for the state and provides the necessary framework for the development of a moral community. The state, on the other hand, protects civil society and ensures that it functions in the interests of the common good.

The idea of the division of private and public spheres became a central feature of modernity, and was institutionalized by eighteenth-century political thought. The need to control larger-scale social and political entities, the waning of traditional social bonds, and the growing emphasis on individualism all contributed to this division. Many intellectuals tried to preserve civil society's identity within this framework, which resulted in the division between the civil society and the state. Immanuel Kant and the Scottish philosophers, for instance, recognised the necessity of a distinct state apparatus to control and rule society as a whole while attempting to maintain the analytical core of the classical and early modern conception of civil society.

Civil Society: The Separation of State

An Intermediary Agency

The domain of social life and associations that are distinct from the market and the state is the subject of the second analytical category of late 20th-century civil society. It sees civil society as a forum where people may discuss issues in public and work together to achieve shared goals. In this sense, civil society is frequently linked to the advancement of democracy and the safeguarding of human rights. However, the boundaries of civil society in this sense are not always clear, as it can include a wide variety of associations, from informal social groups to large NGOs. There is disagreement over the place of the family and the individual in civil society; some contend that they belong in the private realm, while others maintain that they are a part of civil society. The contemporary idea of civil society was greatly influenced by Montesquieu's focus on intermediary entities as a way to safeguard political liberty and limit the authority of the government. He believed that the presence of these intermediary bodies, or

what we would now call civil society organizations, was essential for preventing tyranny and preserving individual freedoms. Overall, the notion of civil society as an intermediary realm between individuals and the state became increasingly prominent in political thought during the Enlightenment and its aftermath. The premise behind this conceptualisation was that civil society organisations may be extremely important in fostering social cohesion, defending individual liberties, and curtailing the state's power. Today, the concept of civil society continues to be debated and refined, but its central role in democratic governance and social progress is widely recognized. While a balanced relationship between central power and the people was presented by Montesquieu's in his concept of civil society, later political thinkers such as James Madison tended to emphasize either civil society or the state.

Civil society endorsing equal right

James Madison, being a typical liberal, emphasized the importance of civil society as a means of protecting minority rights. Madison believed that interests and passions should be free to associate and that civil society should be based on equal rights rather than privileges. Association, according to Madison, was the best protection against domination by any competing interest. In contrast to Montesquieu, who saw intermediary bodies as deriving their rights from tradition, Madison believed that civil society should be based on the equal right to associate in diversity. This perspective emphasized the importance of voluntary associations and the need for a strong civil society to counterbalance the power of the state.

Ralf Dahrendorf's was a German-British sociologist and political thinker who developed his own understanding of civil society, drawing heavily on the ideas of James Madison. Building on James Madison's advocacy for a civil society where passions and interests are free to associate and have equal rights, his contemporary understanding of civil society underlines the significance of association as its defining feature. A network of associations, or groups of people who get together voluntarily to pursue common interests and objectives, is what Dahrendorf defines as civil society. According to Dahrendorf, civil society's creative chaos of associations comes together to create an environment where the most people can discover the best opportunities in life.

This idea is similar to Madison's emphasis on the protection of minority interests through the free association of individuals within civil society. According to Dahrendorf, the marketplace and the public sphere serve as the principal arenas for interaction amongst the groups that make

up civil society. In terms of economics, the public sphere is where people and groups participate in political activity and public discourse in order to influence societal development, whereas the market represents the area where people and groups pursue their economic interests through voluntary exchange. Thus, the public and the market serve as the settings in which the most people can discover the best prospects for a fulfilling existence. These two spheres are where the associations of civil society engage. Dahrendorf also acknowledges that dangers to civil society can come from other forces besides the government. Large enterprises or powerful religious groups, for instance, may be a threat to civil society's ability to engage and freely associate. Unlike earlier philosophers, Dahrendorf regards the state as one of many potential threats to civil society, along with giant corporations and powerful religious denominations. Instead, he places emphasis on the necessity of building a strong civil society capable of fending against any possible dominant forces, whether they originate from the state or anywhere else. While discussing the state's dual role as empowering and threatening, a number of academics and philosophers specifically drew attention to the difference between the state and society. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's writing was the most impactful. His view of civil society clearly defined the boundaries between the family, civil society and the state. He argues that the balance between individual and group goals within the family has been harmed by the complex division of labour, production, distribution, and consumption that is a part of the modern economic process. Modern economics have made it more difficult for people to imagine common goals and have given them an incentive to put their own aims ahead of those of the community. Therefore, the three institutions of the Police for law enforcement and enforcing public policies, the Corporations for social self-organization and self-government, and Administration of Justice for conflict resolution must be used to regulate and integrate the conflicts that result from modern economic activity. By resolving conflicts, fostering a basic sense of unity and integration, and channelling particularities, these three institutions support a social structure that would otherwise be immobilised and incapable of functioning. Hegel saw a crucial link between the state, civil society and economic relationships. This inspired thinkers to establish another school of thought distinguishing civil society from both the family and the state.

Civil society as restricted realm

Civil society as a subsystem.

According to this group of writers, civil society is a more constrained space that is apart from the family and the state. According to these scholars, society can be divided into smaller systems, including the economy, the state, and the family. Civil society is one of these sub-systems, which is defined by a core characteristic. The passage also suggests that characterizing society solely on the basis of being "civilized" or contrasting civil society with the state is overly simplistic and doesn't reflect the complexity of social reality.

Marx viewed civil society as being entirely focused on economic life, where people's interactions with one another are motivated by their own materialistic desires and personal interests. Marx thought that economic forces completely alienated people from one another in civil society, where they predominated. He considered economic disparity to be the fundamental aspect of civic society. In contrast, there was formal equality among people in the political society. Marx and Hegel had fundamentally different views on the nature of civil society. Marx saw it as solely driven by economic forces and leading to inequality, while Hegel viewed it as a means of integrating social relationships through the regulation of conflicts arising from modern economic activity. These thinkers proposed the notion that civil society is a subsystem within a larger social and political structure, and that it differs from other components of the same system by a particular characteristic. Overall, these groups highlighted how different authors have different perspectives on the meaning and scope of civil society, and how this concept can be further divided into sub-systems within society.

Conclusion

Challenges and strength of democratic regimes rest on the civil society. However, the concept of civil society has changed over time, with various authors and academics highlighting various facets of it. The early modern and classical authors viewed civic society as a system-level perspective that included a variety of social actions. Civil society was primarily seen as separate from the state or political society throughout the 19th century. Some writers in the 20th century focused more narrowly to adapt civil society to a certain sub-system. The fact that all three of these viewpoints coexist in academic and popular discourse making civil society as perplexed idea to the new generation of thinkers as the same term is used to describe a widely divergent empirical phenomenon. It is crucial to keep in mind that earlier notions have not entirely been superseded by more recent versions, and that understanding the historical development of a concept helps to put current discussions into context.

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