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Re-Imagining Civil Society

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IS THERE MORE TO THE CURRENT DISCOURSE ON
civil society than just fascination with the trendy?

Since the 1980s, perhaps even earlier, people's participation, people empowerment, NGOs and social movements, and the catch-all concept of sustainable development have been fashionable themes. Is civil society one more baloney in the shelf? What gives this notion its current forceful appeal? How relevant is it to the construction of the 21st century society?

A dominant theme in the discourse of the Scottish enlightenment in the late 17th and 18th centuries, the notion of civil society has been through a long process of revival and forgetting. Its meaning also changed from time to time.

For the English philosopher John Locke, civil society is the domain of political association among men (Locke never mentioned women) set apart from the natural order

ordained by god or king. Men enter the realm of civil society through the mutuality of consent and contract. Civil society and political society were then one and the same.

In the modern world, the idea of civil society has arisen in response to some general breakdown in social paradigms and social order. Its emergence also indicates a certain striving to resolve seemingly unending contradictions in social life, such as those between individual and society, the private and the public, egotism and altruism, between a life governed by reason and one driven by passions.

Finding a reconciliation and synthesis of these oppositions has been the main preoccupation of social thought. The crisis in social order and the breakdown of existing paradigms caused by autonomous individual action, the growth of market economies, the commercialization of land, labor and capital, among other things, have been the driving forces for rethinking the existing models of society and authority.

A related question is the unending puzzle of whether men (and women) are by nature good or evil. This moral dimension has always accompanied every discussion of civil society, suggesting that the notion of civil society has to include the question of ethical vision.

The idea of civil society in its classic sense, was supposed to be the answer to all these contradictions. It was to be the social representation of a unified vision of the social order that also recognized the legal, moral and economic autonomy of its individual parts. After four hundred years, however, social thinkers have yet to agree on a common answer. The unified image conjured by civil society would not square with reality.

In their own separate ways, Hegel and Marx shattered the classic civil society paradigm of social representation. Both posited the separation of political society and civil society, the former being the domain of the state and the latter being the arena of market relations or the realm of exchange among autonomously transacting individuals. Like their predecessors, Hegel and Marx also problematized the synthesis of individual and society, of private and public, of greed and charity but found their own differing solutions.

In Hegel, civil society resolves itself in the universal state. Hegel viewed civil society as the realm of the worldly, the arena of civil and human affairs, in perpetual conflict with itself. The solution of civil conflict was to be found in the universal idea represented by the state. Hegel's critics, Marx was foremost among them, saw in this the reintroduction of the idea of God incarnate in the state.



On the other hand, Marx looked to the future reunion of civil society and political society. In the here and now, state is but a mirror image of the human predisposition to conflict, expressed in class struggle. The state is under the grips of whichever class rules the market or civil arena and therefore serves not universal but mainly the dominant class interest. But the state can also be an instrument for human emancipation from conflicts that, for Marx, are essentially property-based. Hence, the capture of state by the oppressed classes and its eventual withering away as a consequence of the disappearance of class struggle shall bring about a classless society. In other words, Marx's communist society is the union of civil society and political society.

Modern Marxists, perhaps modern Hegelians too, have kept to this state-society construction. Italian communist Antonio Gramsci would stand out among those who pursued Marx's theory of civil society. His main contribution was perhaps in recommending that civil society is a complex arena that must be understood, played and transformed by working class parties and movements instead of abandoned completely to those forces who already command a natural hegemony over it. From Gramsci, one gets a sense that the civil society is a much more complex site of struggle than the one involving the process of acquiring state power.

The current discourse on civil society carries a heavy Gramscian overtone. This is indicated by the weightier emphasis given to the role of the civil arena in the struggle for emancipation. At the very least, the empowerment of social and civic sectors is accorded a value equal to that of changing political structures. Indeed it is set as a goal worth pursuing for its own sake. Further, it is within this context that the state-oriented project is viewed as but a transitory moment to social empowerment. An extreme variant of this is a swing in the opposite direction, meaning, holding civil society up as if the state arena does not exist.

In the current discourse, civil society has two broad meanings. One has to do with institutions or organizations. The other pertains to values and beliefs.

The first meaning of civil society takes different forms. One looks at civil society as an aggregate of civil institutions distinct from state structures. Another views civil society as a set of entitlements that would equate this concept with the notion of citizenship in a democracy. These entitlements span a whole range, like freedoms of association and expression, the right to vote and be voted into public office, a free or alternative press and so on. Such rights, complemented by civic



responsibilities, cover the civil, social and political expressions of citizenship.

The second meaning is even broader and more abstract. It takes us to the realm of values, beliefs and symbols. In this case civil society takes on some sort of universal orientation with respect to the moral ties that guide its component social actors and hold them as one whole. This calls to mind the old question of whether there really exists such universal bond that unites autonomous individuals around a shared community.

It is not easy to find a definitive meaning for civil society without meeting contradiction. For a long time into the future we will continue to grapple with the same old problem of reconciling the particular and universal, the private and public, the pursuit of individual interest and social cohesion, the personal good and the common good.

A recent example of this difficult search for meaning is the triadic paradigm of state, market and civil society. This derives from the analogy of prince, merchant and citizen. Against the classic model of state and civil society, this one suggests a further division of civil society into two — the individual as economic actor or part of the corporate sector and the individual as plain citizen.

Whatever conceptual difficulties may arise from this model, we must not lose sight of one important meaning that this attempt at new social construction suggests. From a very symbolic level, the triadic paradigm assigns a normative orientation for each of these actors. For the prince, public for common good. For the merchant, private for private good. And for the citizen, private for common good.

The power of this caricature can be better appreciated within a bigger picture. Since the Enlightenment, social scientists and philosophers, together with social activists, have been discoursing about human emancipation. Four hundred years had gone by and they are still discoursing. The grand narratives that had transpired produced many answers but, probably, also as many questions with respect to whether or not humanity is getting closer to this emancipation goal.

The world has gotten much closer but is not coming together. The ties that bind communities across oceans and great distances may be the same ties that detach them from their original roots. The whirl of world-spanning changes is dizzying. How so easily one gets severed from his or her living space and natural affinities and becomes connected



somewhere else with little time to think, much less decide what to do. To get connected and included means to run faster and struggle harder at every turn. And yet many are never able to catch up. It seems happiness is ever elsewhere.

What happened to human development? Why has the promised human emancipation not arrived for the many who continue to be excluded as though they don't belong to the human community? Will the future society be any better than what we have today? Why can't that better society be built in the here and now?

The world is now awash with wealth monetized at about 20 trillion US dollars, increasing by five times from four trillion US dollars in the last four decades. This enormous wealth has been produced at great costs to humanity and the environment. Obviously, there is more than enough to feed, clothe, shelter, educate, lengthen the life and provide wider choices and greater freedom of movement for every man, woman and child on this planet. There is also more than enough to pay for restoring for health of the collapsing global ecosystems and leave a more habitable environment for the yet unborn.

But ours is also a world of inequity, of massive exclusion on the grounds of color, nationality, class, gender, ethnicity, and all sorts of human bias. It is a world where resources and decisions are monopolized by a few while millions of souls are hardly able to control the events and processes shaping their everyday lives.

Equity is said to be the core political issue of the 20th century, and perhaps the centuries before it. If politics means power to decide for oneself relative to other decision-makers in society then it has been the domain of the few indeed. And when we start naming those few we can readily identify those in command of state affairs and market operations.

States, by nature, are centralizing institutions. They command resources and allegiance, by force or persuasion. Their main business is to govern, and basically from the top down, even in systems that allow for democratic participation.

Markets are supposed to be governed by free competition. And yet, free competition scarcely exists in real life. A playing field that begins as relatively fair always ends up as generally dominated by a few winners. Once in a while, states may enter into the picture to adjust the rules of the game, but the playing field never really becomes one of equal opportunity.



Historically, society has been largely at the mercy of states and markets. They have mainly dictated the mode of sharing resources and decisions. Citizens, if they are neither prince nor merchant, hardly figure in the scheme of things except when they would have become an organized opposition capable not only of pressuring for changes and more public accountability but also bringing down unaccountable governments.

Applying the classical image of a unified civil society in a situation of great social inequities and conflicts, one begins to wonder what makes one society civil and another not. If a society is still holding amid rising civil and social conflicts, some authoritarian force must be keeping the tension at manageable levels. An example would be Marcos' new society in the early years of martial law. Here the state called the shots and all but those who opted out or rebelled gave their tacit approval. This reduces civil society to the question of law and order which it is not or should not be.

The triadic paradigm in which civil society is one discrete component seems more relevant and useful. In the first place, this model avoids the Marxist and Hegelian reduction of civil society to a chaotic arena of human conflict. But more important, here, civil society becomes a dynamic factor for challenging and countervailing state and market hegemony as well as a force for creative disintegration and transition to a desired social order.

In this construction, civil society retains its permanent identity and autonomy from state or market until it dissolves in itself.





About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

