

Putting Civil Society in its Place

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Radical politics used to be broader thought of as an attempt to overturn both received wisdom and entrenched social hierarchies. Whether this is the exact meaning that radical politics is invested with in the current political moment, is debatable. For what we have on our hands is a relatively new set of agents, armed with their own ideas of what is the problem is and what the solution should be, and with their own notions of how they should go about getting this done. Does this new form of politics challenge the politics of status quoism or reinforce it? This essay examines this issue through an exploration of the new avatar of civil society.

The Rediscovery of Civil Society

By the 1970s and the 1980s, intellectuals in Eastern/ Central Europe had realised that the two options that had historically been available to people engaged in radical politics, were simply not for them. The first option was the reform of state power from above. The second was that of revolution from below. Both these

options had been ruled out by the Brezhnev doctrine; that the erstwhile Soviet Union would not hesitate to intervene in the affairs of East European states on demand. If on the one hand the doctrine reinforced the power of arbitrary bureaucracies and political elites in actually existing socialist societies, on the other it propelled reflection on novel ways to beat an authoritarian system. One such idea that was adopted with some enthusiasm, was that citizens should turn their collective back on Stalinist states, and attempt to carve out a 'free zone' in society. This free zone, which rapidly came to be populated by social associations, self-help clubs, and solidarity networks, East Europeans called 'civil society'.

Civil society was supposed to foster camaraderie among otherwise atomised individuals. However, in a relatively short time, self limiting associations acquiring a trajectory of their own developed into a powerful political movement. This movement was spontaneous, unorganised, and haphazard, but it bore results. In 1989, the world was to witness a somewhat awesome spectacle: that of ostensibly powerful states collapsing like the proverbial house of cards before agitating and agitated crowds assembled in the streets of Eastern and Central European capitals. Political commentators hastened to proclaim an end to ideology: 1989. '*Annus Mirabilis*-Year of Wonders'. The political commentator

Timothy Garton Ash¹ was to write the obituary of socialism with some delight: 'This was the year Communism in Eastern Europe Died. R.I.P 1949-1989' (Ash 1990: 131). And the concept of civil society came onto the lips of political agents and policy makers as the antidote to everything that is undesirable in politics, from non-performing states to military regimes.

In retrospect, two aspects of the civil society argument, forged as it was in the specific context of Stalinist states, gives us cause for thought. Firstly, when citizens in this part of the world demanded civil liberties, particularly the right to freedom of expression and association, institutionalisation of the rule of law, limited state power, political accountability, and a free market, they were practically re-enacting the bourgeois revolution that had taken place in England in the seventeenth century against absolutist state power. John Locke, our quintessential liberal thinker, may well have authored the civil society script in and for East Europe in the 1980s. The triumph of liberal democracy was, in

¹ T. Garton Ash (1990) *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of 1989 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague*, New York: Random House, p 131.

effect, firmly established in 1989. Secondly, the civil society argument performed a closure on revolutionary imaginaries. William Wordsworth², wrote:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!-Oh times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!

But from the 1980s onwards, civil society replaced revolution as the prime locus of political imaginations and strategies. 'Great masses may well never again march under red banners or sing *The Internationale*' wrote Kai Nielsen³ with some sadness (Nielsen 1998:54). And he was right. From 1989 onwards, scholars

²W. Wordsworth (1809) *The French Revolution As It Appeared To Enthusiasts At Its Commencement*, <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/726/> accessed on 17 January 2009, Online text © 1998-2009 Poetry X. All rights reserved. From *The Friend: A Literary, Moral, And Political Weekly Paper*, Oct. 26, 1809 / 1809.

³ K. Nielsen (1998) 'Reconceptualising Civil Society for Now: Somewhat Gramscian Turnings' in M. Walzer (ed.) *Towards a Global Civil Society*, Providence: Bergahn Books, pp 41-68, p54.

and activists have spoken of many things that are considered good for the human condition, rights, human development, social capital, trust, and civil society. But scholars now hardly ever speak of radical politics as once understood; as standing a system on its head.

Before grand and evocative visions of revolutionary transformation, the civil society argument appears peculiarly tame. All that it suggests is that the inhabitants of the space between the market, the household, and the state, should come together in all manners of associations, to keep careful watch on the state and to initiate policy. Nevertheless even this avatar of civil society is politically acceptable; for it can make for radical politics. For one when individuals, otherwise far too preoccupied in eking out a living, come together to think out how they can best address their collective problems, they engage in an activity called politics. Political activity ensures that individuals are able to make their own history, even if the history they make is not the history they chose to make in the first instance. What is significant is that persons through collective action demand justice, equality, and freedom by right. Thereby the political discourse is transformed, and practices of domination contested and recast. Radical politics in other words produces and reproduces political agents in the radical mode. The statement may be tautological but is not necessarily untrue.

However, this was not to be, and any idea that people could make their own histories through radical politics in civil society was quickly subverted by two developments. Firstly, the legacy of East /Europe ensured that civil society came to be seen as democratic per se, and not as the site where democratic groups have to struggle for the realisation of democracy against the strategies and the subversions of non democratic groups. Civil society is, after all, pretty much what its inhabitants make of it. All that the concept provides us is a space which is relatively autonomous of the state and the market, a set of values, certain preconditions such as the rule of law and a free media, and the vocabulary of rights. These weapons ensure that civil societies have won their most momentous victories against undemocratic regimes, but the project of democracy has to be realised in civil society through intentional action.

Like politics itself civil society can be occasionally creative, but it is plural, and for that reason messy. Therefore, in the history of political ideas, the meaning of civil society has been contested. No theorist, who subscribes to Tocqueville's formulation on civil society as the realm of social associations, has remotely anything in common with a Gramscian, for whom civil society represents the space where capitalist hegemony is created and recreated. A Hegelian worries that civil society is neither wholly good nor entirely bad, for it is the site of the battle between particularity and universality. An orthodox Marxist who has not

taken Gramsci seriously would dismiss civil society as the sphere of the sale and the buying of labour power. And an economist hijacking Adam Smith's complex formulations in the *Wealth of Nations* [without reading his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*] would employ the concept of civil society as synonymous with the capitalist economy.

In contemporary usage civil society has become a tiresomely 'hurrah' word hijacked by donor agencies, rendered synonymous with the non-governmental sector, and seen as a substitute for a non performing state and a profit driven market. Perhaps the ubiquity of a concept ultimately paves the way for its undoing, because if the concept is accepted by, and acclaimed by everyone, it must have lost its cutting edge. Where are the grey areas of civil society that Hegel spoke of? Where are the exploitations and the oppressions of civil society that Marx passionately castigated? Where is the state inspired project of hegemony that Gramsci unearthed so brilliantly and insightfully? Where do we find the ideological construction of subjectivity in this civil society? Where do we look for struggles over meaning, over form, over content, in all these contemporary formulations? The result of all this enthusiasm over a re-discovered and re-invented concept is that civil society as political theory had thought about it, as political theory had agonised over it, has gone missing.

Secondly, even as civil society was yoked to development agendas and appropriated by donor agencies, the concept has come to be identified almost exclusively with the third sector, the non-profit sector, the voluntary sector, or more popularly non-governmental organisations. Civil society is supposed to be an unruly sphere where citizens groups, reading clubs, debating forums, social movements, and various forms of civic action compete and clash over meanings of what is a good life, where the state has gone wrong, and what it should be doing about securing such a life. It is the site for the politics of contestation as well as the politics of affirmation. It is the site for transforming citizens into political agents. It is the site therefore of radical politics. Today, however, civil society has become synonymous with the NGO sector. And this has bred its own contradictions; because no longer are ordinary men and women given the opportunity to make history or to speak back to histories not made by them.

The civil society argument has now been around for more than twenty five years. The problems of the world remain as intractable, even as the numbers of agents who seek to negotiate the ills of the human condition have expanded exponentially. Is it time that we begin to reconsider the nature as well as the role of civil society? Is it time to restore civil society to its rightful place? Perhaps.

Four Reasons for Restoring Civil Society to its Rightful Place

I do not mean to dismiss the NGO sector, because some NGOs have initiated innovative ways of resolving the problems of poor and impoverished people of the global south. When they train people in methods of water harvesting, or organic ways of growing food, or when they provide services that the state has proved incapable of delivering, or when they design pioneering educational programmes, they render signal service. Given the inability of the 'third world' state to deliver the basic preconditions of good life to the citizens, the non governmental sector has filled in a significant gap in service delivery.

But can this substitute for an activity we call radical politics? Does the involvement of NGOs enhance the political competence of the constituency or diminish it? Many of these organisations consist of specialists engaged in the business of managing collective life. They are just not in the business of engaging in an activity that we call politics, let alone politics in the radical mode. And it is precisely this aspect of the non governmental sector that is troublesome. As suggested above, when ordinary men and women engage in the politics of making their own histories, howsoever badly they may make these histories, they acquire agency.

It is precisely this notion of radical politics that is at a discount when NGOs hijack political initiatives and constitute human beings as subjects of political thinking thought elsewhere. Or worse when they constitute individuals as consumers of services rendered by them. For we must ask this uncomfortable question of even the most well-meaning of these groups: *who* was consulted in the forging of agendas? *When?* And *how* were the local people consulted, through what procedures and through what modalities? Were they consulted at all? Do, in short, NGOs represent people and their needs? Or are they managing people who do not have even a remote chance of influencing their agendas? And when we consider the somewhat formidable range of activities that have been taken up by these actors in civil society, our doubts intensify. For now these organisations dictate what kind of development should be given to the people of the global south, what kind of education they should receive, what kind of democracy should be institutionalised, what rights they should demand and possess, and what they should do to be empowered. What we see is the collapse of the idea that ordinary men and women are capable of appropriating the political initiative. What we see is the appropriation of local and political agendas in favour of the agenda of the specific NGO.

Secondly, since the inception of modern politics it has been assumed that elected representatives are accountable to the citizens for the policies they make, and for

the policies they do not make. NGOs play a larger than life role in our collective lives. But unlike legislators, NGOs are not elected. And they are not likely to be elected at any point of time, because that is not their mandate. This really means that while these organisations are in the business of representing constituencies in forums of decision making and engaging in the politics of advocacy, they are not in the business of being accountable to these constituencies. This can lead to some bewilderment, because many of these organizations are beyond the reach of representation or accountability. Therefore, the idea that a definable system of authority is even *notionally* answerable to the democratic will has been seriously compromised. More significantly a politics of advocacy that is shorn of representation and accountability provides no substitute for self-determining and empowering action born out of specific experiences.

Thirdly, we may well find that in the process the non-performing state in particularly the global south has been rescued. At the very moment when the state in this part of the world was being pilloried by activists and citizens for non-delivery, and when it was being castigated by political activists as corrupt, non-performing, and non-responsive, NGOs entered the scene to bail it out by sub-contracting for it. In the process, voluntary and market agencies have not only rescued and perhaps legitimised the non-performing state, they have neutralised political discontent by stepping in to do what the state is expected to do for the

citizens. In sum, though skilled professionals are not accountable to the people themselves, they save the state from being accountable.

Fourthly, the one question that confronts us at this juncture is the following: how much can the NGO sector achieve? What are the limits of civil society interventions? Civil society agents are just not in a position to summon up the kind of resources that are required to emancipate citizens of the global south from poverty and deprivation. It is only the state that can do so through widening the tax net, and through monitoring the collection of revenues. Moreover, NGOs can hardly implement schemes of redistributive justice that involve transferring of resources from the better to the worse off sections of society. Above all, the non-governmental sector cannot establish and strengthen institutions that will implement policy. These tasks simply lie outside the pale of civil society activism. NGOs can lobby for and mobilise people for social and economic rights. But ultimately the realisation of these rights depends largely upon structures of governance.

In sum, the present avatar of civil society has replaced citizen activism with professional and often well funded NGOs who are neither representative of the people, nor accountable to them. In the process, citizens instead of engaging in the politics of history making are reduced to consumers of agendas brought to

them on a metaphorical platter. These developments have led to the depoliticisation of civil society, a decline of citizen activism and involvement, and the reduction of political contestation to demands for better services.

Conclusion

Across dominant streams of thought and policy prescriptions, the general consensus seems to be that the state is the problem. Instead of trying to make the state deliver what it has promised through constitutions, laws, and rhetorical flourishes, policy makers and advocates of civil society organisations would rather establish parallel systems that can substitute for the state in areas of service delivery. Two issues are of some significance here. Firstly, civil society agents are neither in the business of making policy, nor in the business of implementing these policies. Civil society agents are in the business of creating, fostering, nurturing, and reproducing informed public opinion that can be brought to bear upon the making and implementation of policy through civic activism. Correspondingly civil society has to keep watch on the implementation of policy. In 1790, the eminent Irish orator, wit, legal luminary, and Member of the British Parliament, John Curran (1750-1817) had suggested insightfully that

‘the condition on which god hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance’. It is this very task that politics entrusts to civil society.

Secondly, not only does the state have the power to institutionalise and mandate a just order to remedy the ills of the human condition, it has an obligation to do so. The democratic state takes decisions in our names, it imposes these decisions on us, and it legitimises these decisions. We as citizens have a right to ask why the state practices injustice, to challenge the policies of the state, and to compel the institution to redress its acts of omission and commission. The state cannot call upon the NGO sector to bail it out of its current difficulties, which have been created by its own incompetence, corruption, and insensitivity to the needs and the aspirations of the citizens. States are condensates of power but they are also the locus of popular aspirations and the site where political projects are realised. They should respond to these aspirations for therein lies state legitimacy and acceptability. If the state continues to stand squarely in the middle of collective imaginations; it has to do something to merit that status.

This is not to say that civil society does not matter. Citizen activism, public vigilance, informed public opinion, a free media, a multiplicity of social associations, and citizen activism are a vital precondition for democracy. It is only a vibrant civil society that can prevent the political elite from lapsing on its commitments and responsibilities. It is this vibrancy that has to be brought back

to civil society so that significant challenges to the status quo can be conceptualised and executed through collective action.

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