

Civil Society.

Michael Edwards

Nowadays, it is difficult to have a conversation about politics or public policy without mentioning the words “civil society”, so one might assume that politicians and policy makers are clear about what they mean when they use these words, and why civil society is so important. Unfortunately clarity and rigor are conspicuous by the absence in the civil society debate. According to whose version one prefers, civil society means “fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty” (the Cato Institute), “the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and the tyrannical market” (the World Social Forum), the missing link in the success of social democracy (New Labour), the “chicken soup of the social sciences”, the “new analytic key that will unlock the mysteries of the social order”, “our last, best hope”, the key to ‘good governance’ and poverty-reducing growth, and the real reason for war against Iraq – to kick-start civil society in the Middle East.

Some see civil society as a specific product of the nation state and capitalism; others as 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. Is it one of three separate sectors of society or intimately interconnected with states and markets? The preserve of groups predefined as democratic, modern, and ‘civil’, or home to all sorts of associations, 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? What is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall?

Can such radically different views all be correct? Can they be reconciled? Should we even try? Or is it time to discard this concept as hopelessly confused, joining a growing backlash against the idea of civil society and the specific deficiencies of civil society organizations?

These are the questions my new book seeks to answer, though my goal is not consensus. There are lots of different positions on civil society, and each may be useful and legitimate in one context or another. Recognizing that civil society does indeed mean different things to different people at different times is one of the keys to moving forward. Rather, my aim is greater clarity, since greater clarity can be the basis for a better conversation about civil society in the future – its promise and potential in both theory and practice, certainly, but also the pitfalls and dangers of using this term as a political slogan or a shelter for dogma and ideology.

My starting point is to deconstruct the existing conversation about civil society into three schools of thought – civil society as the world of associational life (the most common view), civil society as the good society (the kind of society these associations are supposed to generate), and civil society as the public sphere – meaning the arenas in which citizens talk to each other about the great issues of the day and arrive at some political consensus; and then reconstruct these three approaches into a new, integrated and I hope much more convincing view of civil society in the round.

The first school of thought believes that voluntary associations act as ‘gene carriers’ of the good society – microclimates, if you will, for developing values like tolerance and cooperation, and the skills required for living a democratic life. The trouble is that real associational life is home to all sorts of different values and beliefs, and values and beliefs are fostered in families, schools and workplaces as well as in associations. For the same reason, associations can rarely secure the level of political consensus that is required to achieve broad-based social reforms. So my second school of thought – civil society as the good society – is important because it sets the contributions of voluntary associations in the proper context, insisting that progress towards social, economic and political goals is associated with action across different sets of institutions, including government and business. “Good neighbors cannot replace good government.”

However, if the good society requires coordinated action between different institutions all pulling in the same direction, how do societies decide which direction in which to go, and whether it is the right one as conditions and circumstances continue to change over time? How are choices made, trade offs negotiated, and ends reconciled with means in ways that are just and effective? For answers to these questions, we have to turn to my third school of thought and consider civil society as the public sphere.

The concept of a ‘public’ – a whole polity that cares about the common good and has the capacity to deliberate about it democratically – is central to civil society thinking. The development of shared interests, a willingness to cede some territory to others, the ability to see something of oneself in those who are different and work together more effectively as a result – all these are crucial attributes for effective governance, practical problem-solving, and the peaceful resolution of our differences. In its role as the ‘public sphere’, civil society becomes the arena for argument and deliberation as well as for association and institutional collaboration, and the extent to which such spaces thrive is crucial to democracy, since if only certain truths are represented, if alternative viewpoints are silenced by exclusion or suppression, or if one set of voices are heard more loudly than those of others, the ‘public’ interest suffers.

Each of these schools of thought is useful but incomplete, so the best approach is to embrace a holistic approach that integrates elements of all three - civil society gains strength both as an idea and as a vehicle for social change when the weaknesses of one set of theories are balanced by the strengths and contributions of the others. Civil society as the good society keeps our ‘eyes on the prize’ – the goals of poverty-reduction and deep democracy that require coordinated action across different institutions. Being clear about ends and means helps to guard against the tendency to promote certain institutions

over others as a goal in and of itself – voluntary associations over states, for example, or markets over both. However, the vision of the good society says little about how such goals are going to be achieved, and associational life does seem to be an important – if incomplete - explanatory factor in most contemporary settings. Structural definitions of civil society are useful in emphasizing the gaps and weaknesses of associational life that need to be addressed if they are to be effective vehicles for change. However, the differences and particularities of associational life generate competing views about the ends and means of the good society. Without our third set of theories – civil society as the public sphere – there would just and democratic way to reconcile these views and secure a political consensus about the best way forward. In turn, a healthy associational ecosystem is vital to the public sphere, since it is usually through voluntary organizations and the media that citizens carry on their conversations. Finally, the achievements of the good society are what make possible the independence and level playing field that underpin a democratic associational life - by reducing inequality, for example, and guaranteeing freedom of association.

Where does this leave us in terms of public policy? Most importantly, it releases us from the conceit that we can ‘build’ civil society by starting more NGOs or encouraging volunteering – measures which by themselves will probably accomplish little. Instead, we should be looking to strengthen the pre-conditions in which interactions between associational life, the public sphere and the good society seem likely to be favorable to goals of peace, democracy and social justice. This means attacking all forms of inequality and discrimination, giving people the means to be active citizens, reforming politics to encourage more participation, guaranteeing the independence of associations and the structures of communication, and building a strong foundation for institutional partnerships, alliances and coalitions.

Civil society faces huge question marks as both a theory and a vehicle for social change, but I think it is precisely its flexibility and openness that makes it useful as a framework for exploring the great questions of the day, a function civil society has performed since the days of the Ancient Greeks – the nature of the good society, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the practice of politics and government, and 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. And because the essence of civil society is collective action – in associations, through the public sphere, and across society – the debate that has grown up around this term reminds us that individual efforts and experiences can never substitute for the relationships of love, solidarity, sacrifice and friendship that are the essence of our true human nature. At a time when such relationships are severely strained by broader changes in society, international relations and the economy, this may be the most important lesson that civil society has to teach.

Michael Edwards is the author of “Civil Society”, published by Polity Press in the UK and Blackwell in the USA.