

The myth of civil society

'The left' has become amorphous and ineffectual. Into this vacuum 'civil society' has poured, with all the tumultuous incoherence it implies.

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A prerequisite for development, according to western donors, charity professionals and dispensers of aid, is the fostering of a vibrant civil society. Civil society includes all groups and organisations which, independently of government, unite people in a common purpose; it comprises diverse actors and participants, including faith and community groups, non-government organisations, environmental pressure-groups, trade unions and others concerned with social improvement and reform.

By encouraging the expansion of civil society, especially in countries with authoritarian or dictatorial governments, the story goes, spaces will be created for a wider, more ample democratic debate. This will lead to greater pluralism and make rulers more accountable, transparent and less liable to corruption.

This model is a transplant of an idealised version of western society, which, it is true, is characterised by an impressive range of voluntary bodies and associations. One of the most positive aspects of life in Britain, for instance, is that no wrong, abuse or evil in the world fails to call forth organised resistance, whether the plight of political prisoners in a poor African country, victims of natural or unnatural disaster anywhere in the world, or a threat to the livelihood of the most marginal indigenous peoples. At the same time, like-minded people also gather for less serious purposes - to rejoice in the immortality of Elvis Presley, to cultivate the hundreds of varieties of fuchsias in the world or to re-enact scenes from English history. Civil society can be both earnest and frivolous, absorbing the energies of the most high-minded as of the obsessive and the self-seeking.

The global elevation of civil society is, however, not quite as disinterested as it may appear. It is axiomatic, since the death of socialism, that governments must everywhere retreat, not only from economic activity, but equally, from the provision of basic services, including, education, health, welfare and the nutritional status of the people. Liberalisation, privatisation and global policies of "small government" (except in the areas of defence and law and order) have led to a withdrawal by governments from areas of concern, which, until recently, had been seen as their primary functions. Passing over these former official activities to faith groups, NGOs, charities, business and other actors, is usually carried out in the name of efficiency, justice or simply cost. Civil society, ever responsive and responsible, is to be inheritor of these official disinvestments.

In the process of benign renunciation of power, however, other actors emerge in "civil society", many of them neither particularly civilised nor sociable: druglords, people traffickers, money-launderers,

criminal networks and large-scale fraudsters, Mafiosi, goondas, slumlords, traders in prohibited goods - arms, gems, endangered species from west African songbirds to ivory. The rise of such activities is also a consequence of the disengagement of ruling elites from the business of welfare as opposed to the welfare of business. Who is to guarantee that the groups and organisations occupying terrain lately abandoned by governments (or "governance" in the inflated term for its diminished role) will be humane or altruistic? That civil society is going to be a force for "progress" is at best, a sentimental error, at worst, a cynical screen for the aggravated inequalities of the age.

The raising up of civil society is also a substitute for an earlier - and fallen - instrument of change.

Until the recent past, it was taken for granted that the principal - indeed, the only - significant motor of change was organised labour, the working class and its institutions, trades unions and above all, the sub-political solidarity of people who had been the victims of capitalism for more than two centuries; what was broadly understood as the constituency of "the left".

The collapse of the Soviet Union, together with a wider decay of popular faith in socialism, has allowed an exuberant expansion of the only remaining industrial system. This has rapidly occupied the spaces evacuated by the eclipsed socialist vision, which had proved itself mirage, since it dissolved in the presence of a capitalist version of plenty.

The old focus of resistance to capitalism has now been downgraded, and the "labour movement" is merely one interest group among the many which now make up the rich social fabric implied by the term "civil society." In consequence, leftist parties have become expert mimics of their sometime conservative or liberal rivals; and "the left" has become amorphous and ineffectual, the ghostly afterlife of a movement of collective, social hope. Into this vacuum "civil society" has poured, with all the tumultuous incoherence it implies.

With the removal of the threat of socialism, capitalism itself has also undergone an apparent transformation: assuming a number of benign or neutral aliases, including globalisation, the world economy, a global market, even an international community. This has not prevented a conspicuous display of its unchanged nature: the growing gulf between wealth and poverty, waste, excess and extravagance in some places, penury, destitution and misery in others; although the global media have been dedicated to a tendentious portrayal of only the positive achievements - the iconography of wealth, the malls and galleries of boundless luxury, perpetual economic growth, the emergence of a high-spending middle class in almost every country in the world. "Civil society" is a rescue mission for the narrowing parameters of a democracy that has ceased to challenge capitalism; and it assumes the role formerly borne by the transformative destiny of a disgraced socialism.

Civil society is certainly not going to mount the challenge that socialism did; but having snuffed out all alternatives, token resistance is required; a noisy clash of interests between a wide variety of social groups, each fighting for their share of the - sometimes strange - fruits of capitalism, but posing no serious threat to its continued wellbeing in the world. Civil society is unelected and unaccountable. Its

effectiveness lies in the capability of any one of its competing parts to mobilise the largest numbers of people. It has one immense advantage - its most visible component is dominated by middle class protagonists; and as such, is the most effective form of policing of the poor who, as everyone knows, unless checked, soon take on the form of mob, rabble, canaille or some other disorderly shape.

No wonder civil society is now an essential part of developmentalism: it sets up a strident competitive clamour between groups of the privileged. This creates an agreeable impression of diversity and democratic pluralism; but is designed to ensure that nothing challenges the destructive system of which civil society is both ornament and agent of control.

Source: <http://www.civilsocietybuilding.net/>