
CIVIL SOCIETY



Civil society has become one of the favorite buzzwords among the global chattering classes, touted by presidents and political scientists as the key to political, economic, and societal success. As with Internet stocks, however, civil society's worth as a concept has soared far beyond its demonstrated returns. To avoid a major disappointment in the future, would-be buyers should start by taking a closer look at the prospectus.

by Thomas Carothers

The Concept of Civil Society Is a Recent Invention

Enlightenment needed. The term "civil society" can be traced through the works of Cicero and other Romans to the ancient Greek philosophers, although in classical usage civil society was equated with the state. The modern idea of civil society emerged in the Scottish and Continental Enlightenment of the late 18th century. A host of political theorists, from Thomas Paine to Georg Hegel, developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the state—a realm where citizens associate according to their own interests and wishes. This new thinking reflected changing economic realities: the rise of private property, market competition, and the bourgeoisie. It also grew out of the mounting popular demand for liberty, as manifested in the American and French revolutions.

The term fell into disuse in the mid-19th century as political philosophers turned their attention to the social and political conse-

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quences of the industrial revolution. It bounced back into fashion after World War II through the writings of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who revived the term to portray civil society as a special nucleus of independent political activity, a crucial sphere of struggle against tyranny. Although Gramsci was concerned about dictatorships of the right, his books were influential in the 1970s and 1980s with persons fighting against dictatorships of all political stripes in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Czech, Hungarian, and Polish activists also wrapped themselves in the banner of civil society, endowing it with a heroic quality when the Berlin Wall fell.

Suddenly, in the 1990s, civil society became a mantra for everyone from presidents to political scientists. The global trend toward democracy opened up space for civil society in formerly dictatorial countries around the world. In the United States and Western Europe, public fatigue with tired party systems sparked interest in civil society as a means of social renewal. Especially in the developing world, privatization and other market reforms offered civil society the chance to step in as governments retracted their reach. And the information revolution provided new tools for forging connections and empowering citizens. Civil society became a key element of the post-cold-war zeitgeist.

NGOs Are the Heart of Civil Society

Not really. At the core of much of the current enthusiasm about civil society is a fascination with nongovernmental organizations, especially advocacy groups devoted to public interest causes—the environment, human rights, women’s issues, election monitoring, anticorruption, and other “good things.” Such groups have been multiplying exponentially in recent years, particularly in countries undertaking democratic transitions. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to equate civil society with NGOs. Properly understood, civil society is a broader concept, encompassing all the organizations and associations that exist outside of the state (including political parties) and the market. It includes the gamut of organizations that political scientists traditionally label interest groups—not just advocacy NGOs but also labor unions, professional associations (such as those of doctors and lawyers), chambers of commerce, ethnic associations, and others. It also incorporates the many other associations that exist for purposes other than advancing specific social or political agendas, such as religious organizations, student groups, cultural organizations

(from choral societies to bird-watching clubs), sports clubs, and informal community groups.

Nongovernmental organizations do play important, growing roles in developed and developing countries. They shape policy by exerting pressure on governments and by furnishing technical expertise to policy makers. They foster citizen participation and civic education. They provide leadership training for young people who want to engage in civic life but are uninterested in working through political parties. In many countries, however, NGOs are outweighed by more traditional parts of civil society. Religious organizations, labor unions, and other groups often have a genuine base in the population and secure domestic sources of funding, features that advocacy groups usually lack, especially the scores of new NGOs in democratizing countries. The burgeoning NGO sectors in such countries are often dominated by elite-run groups that have only tenuous ties to the citizens on whose behalf they claim to act, and they depend on international funders for budgets they cannot nourish from domestic sources.

Civil Society Is Warm and Fuzzy

That depends on whether you like snuggling up to the Russian mafia and militia groups from Montana as well as to your local parent-teacher association. They're part of civil society too. Extrapolating from the courageous role of civic groups that fought communism in Eastern Europe, some civil society enthusiasts have propagated the misleading notion that civil society consists only of noble causes and earnest, well-intentioned actors. Yet civil society everywhere is a bewildering array of the good, the bad, and the outright bizarre. A random walk through Web pages on the Internet helps convey a sense of that diversity [see box on page 22]. Recognizing that people in any society associate and work together to advance nefarious as well as worthy ends is critical to demystifying the concept of civil society. As commentator David Rieff wrote recently in connection with Bosnia, "[Former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan] Karadzic represented the aspirations of ordinary Serbs in that extraordinary time all too faithfully, and could rightfully lay just as great a claim to being an exemplar of civil society as Vaclav Havel." If one limits civil society to those actors who pursue high-minded aims, the concept becomes, as Rieff notes, "a theological notion, not a political or sociological one."

The idea that civil society inherently represents the public good is wrong in two other ways as well. Although many civic activists may feel they speak for the public good, the public interest is a highly contested domain. Clean air is a public good, but so are low energy costs. The same could be said of free trade versus job security at home or free speech versus libel protection. Single issue NGOs, such as the National Rifle Association and some environmental groups, are intensely, even myopically, focused on their own agendas; they are not interested in balancing different visions of the public good. Struggles over the public interest are not between civil society on the one hand and bad guys on the other but within civil society itself.

Moreover, civil society is very much concerned with private economic interests. Nonprofit groups, from tenants' organizations to labor unions, work zealously to advance the immediate economic interests of their members. Some civil society groups may stand for "higher"—that is, non-material—principles and values, but much of civil society is preoccupied with the pursuit of private and frequently parochial and grubby ends.

A Strong Civil Society Ensures Democracy

Tempting thought. An active, diverse civil society often does play a valuable role in helping advance democracy. It can discipline the state, ensure that citizens' interests are taken seriously, and foster greater civic and political participation. Moreover, scholars such as Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam—whose influential 1995 article, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," chronicled an apparent decline in U.S. community-oriented associations—have argued forcefully that a weak civil society leads to a lack of "civic engagement" and "social trust." But other evidence suggests that a strong civil society can actually reflect dangerous political weaknesses. In a 1997 article that some have nicknamed "Bowling With Hitler," Princeton professor Sheri Berman presented a sobering analysis of the role of civil society in Weimar Germany. In the 1920s and 1930s, Germany was unusually rich in associational life, with many people belonging to the sorts of professional and cultural organizations that are thought to be mainstays of pro-democratic civil society. Berman argues, however, that not only did Germany's vibrant civil society fail to solidify democracy and liberal values, it subverted them. Weak political institutions were unable to respond to the

Virtual Civil Society?

Critics of political scientist Robert Putnam have seized on the rise of the Internet to rebut his views on the decline of associational life in America.

But the argument that the Internet is creating a meaningful, virtual civil society depends heavily on the medium's ability to generate "social capital"—what Putnam identified as the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" among citizens. It is not enough for the Internet—like the telegram, telephone, or fax machine before it—to encourage the organization of groups. Instead, Internet-based associations need to have the same qualities as associations in traditional civil society, with members interacting as if they were in a church, conference center, or ballpark. Beyond being a tool, cyberspace needs to be a place.

Clearly, the Internet is a powerful communications tool. The poster child for Internet activism, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), has electronically joined nongovernmental groups committed to the ban of antipersonnel landmines, allowing them to exchange information more easily. Even the most traditional elements of civil society are adapting to this new technology: The Roman Catholic Church now regularly broadcasts masses over the Web.

But, as Internet pundits have pointed out, cyberspace can also become a place where individuals associate around issues of importance to them. Not only do Catholic priests hold masses over the Web, they converse with the devout in chat rooms. And by 1999, the ICBL had transcended its role as an electronic relay service, become a coalition of more than 1,300 organizations that was able to pressure 89 nations to ratify the Land Mine Treaty, and won a Nobel Peace Prize. When associations emerge in or from cyberspace and unite individuals around a common interest or goal, the Internet becomes more than just an advance over the telephone—it becomes a place where social capital is generated.

Ultimately, however, the key link between virtual civil society and social capital theory will be the depth of individuals' commitments to their "online communities." So far, the strength of these bonds has gone untested. As a result, the implications of virtual civil society remain nebulous—much like cyberspace itself.

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demands placed on them by the many citizens organizations, leading the latter to shift their allegiance to nationalist, populist groups and eventually to the Nazi Party. In the end, the density of civil society facilitated the Nazis' rapid creation of a dynamic political machine.

Even in established democracies with strong political institutions, however, there are reasons to doubt the simplistic idea that when it comes to civil society, "the more the better." As early as the 1960s, some scholars warned that the proliferation of interest groups in mature democracies could choke the workings of representative institutions and systematically distort policy outcomes in favor of the rich and well-connected or, more simply, the better organized. In the 1990s, warnings about "demosclerosis" have intensified as advocacy and lobbying organizations continue to multiply.

Democracy Ensures a Strong Civil Society

No guarantees here either. Japan has been a stable democracy for half a century but continues to have a relatively weak civil society, particularly in terms of independent civic groups working on the kinds of issues that activists in the United States and Europe hold dear, such as the environment, consumer protection, human rights, and women's issues. In France, one of the mother countries of Western liberal democracy, civil society takes a distant back seat to a powerful state. Spain, the exemplar of recent democratic transitions, is relatively weak in associational life. Political parties and elections are what ensure a pluralism of political choices; they can certainly operate in a country with only lightly developed civic associations. Some American political analysts criticize Japan, France, Spain, and other countries where civic participation is low, arguing that these states are at best stunted democracies because they lack what Americans believe is an optimal level of citizen engagement. Many Japanese, French, and Spanish people, however, contend that their systems better accord with their own traditions concerning the relationship of the individual to the state and allow their governments to make more rational, less fettered allocations of public goods. Obviously, the argument that a democracy is not a real democracy unless it has American-style civil society is not only wrong but dangerous. A strong belief in civil society should not fuel an intolerant attitude toward different kinds of democracies.

Civil Society Is Crucial for Economic Success

It's not so simple. As part of their “all good things go together” approach, enthusiasts hold out civil society as a guarantee not only of political virtue but also of economic success. An active, strong civil society, they say, can give useful input on economic policy issues, facilitate the growth of private enterprise, and help ensure that the state does not suffocate the economy. In practice, however, the connection between economic growth and civil society is not so straightforward.

Compare two cases. South Korea's economic miracle was built on the back of a repressed civil society, especially a besieged labor sector. Only in the 1980s, when the military regime felt it could afford to loosen up, was civil society given space to flourish. Unions, student groups, and religious organizations took full advantage of the opportunity and pressed bravely and effectively for democratization. Heroic as they were, these groups cannot be given credit for one of the fastest-growing economies to emerge in the last 50 years. By contrast, Bangladesh is rich in civil society, with thousands of NGOs, advocacy groups, and social service organizations operating at the national and local levels. Yet this wealth of NGOs, by no means a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, has not translated into wealth for the people. Bangladesh remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita income of less than \$350.

A well-developed civil society can be a natural partner to a successful market economy. When citizens reach a comfortable standard of living, they have more time, education, and resources to support and take part in associational life. And many sectors of civil society can reinforce economic development by encouraging sound governmental policies and by increasing the flow of knowledge and information within a society. As with the relationship between civil society and democracy, however, it is important not to assume any iron laws of causality. The path to economic success is not necessarily paved with civil society, and a strong civil society can co-exist with a relatively weak economy (and vice versa). What's more, too much or the wrong type of civil society can be economically harmful. Some economists believe, for example, that Latin American labor unions, a mainstay of the region's civil society, have been one of the largest obstacles to Latin America's economic growth and stability.

Helping Out Is Hard to Do

The United States sponsors efforts to bolster civil society around the world as part of its overall support for democracy. On paper, the idea seems uncontroversial and its pro-democratic rationale clear. Yet the civil society on the ground in many target countries does not always jibe with broader U.S. interests, leading to problems and paradoxes.

In Egypt, a small but growing portion of the more than \$2 billion of U.S. aid each year is devoted to democracy promotion. Support for civil society is limited, however, to the narrow band of organizations that qualify as non-governmental under the Egyptian government's restrictive NGO law. As a result, U.S. aid excludes many of the groups that constitute the most vibrant elements of Egyptian civil society, particularly professional organizations (such as the Egyptian Bar Association), human-rights groups, and nonextremist Islamist groups. They are left out because the United States fears displeasing a friendly government, one that in recent years has laid siege to many independent groups. Some organizations are also off the U.S. list because they are viewed as unfriendly to U.S. policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute, even though they are genuine civic voices.

In short, U.S. support for civil society in Egypt—a highly worthwhile cause—ends up colored by partisanship, hypocrisy, and self-interest, precisely the opposite values of those that underlie the civil society ideal. Inevitably, U.S. support for civil society appears to many Egyptians as yet another example of political interference masquerading as high principle.

In any event, small doses of training and grants, even if well-conceived and well-executed, are unlikely to have profound effects on a complex, deeply ingrained sociopolitical life with centuries of history behind it. What Egypt's civic groups need now above all else is to be able to exercise the freedom of expression that the Egyptian government has pledged to respect by ratifying the major United Nations covenants on human rights. By pressing the administration of President Hosni Mubarak to respect established standards of civil and political rights, the United States and other Western powers can help foster conditions conducive to the flourishing of civil society, without threatening their regional security interests or imposing their political preferences.

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Real Civil Society Doesn't Take Money from the Government

Oh, really? When civil society groups wage a campaign for freedom in a dictatorship, a key element of their political bona fides is complete independence, financial and otherwise, from the government. In democratic and democratizing countries, however, the rules are different. Many civil society groups receive government funding. In parts of Western Europe, government support for civil society is widespread, including among groups that take on the government, such as human-rights and environmental organizations. Even in the United States, governmental funding of civil society is much more extensive than many people realize. A major comparative study of nonprofit sectors, sponsored by Johns Hopkins University, found that "Government is thus almost twice as significant a source of income for American nonprofit organizations as is private giving, despite the presence there of numerous large foundations and corporate giving programs."

The Rise of Civil Society Means the Decline of the State

Definitely not. The rise of civil society induces some to see a nearly state-free future in which tentative, minimalistic states hang back while powerful nongovernmental groups impose a new, virtuous civic order. This vision is a mirage. Civil society groups can be much more effective in shaping state policy if the state has coherent powers for setting and enforcing policy. Good nongovernmental advocacy work will actually tend to strengthen, not weaken state capacity. A clear example is U.S. environmental policy. Vigorous civic activism on environmental issues has helped prompt the creation of governmental environmental agencies, laws, and enforcement mechanisms. Nothing cripples civil society development like a weak, lethargic state. In Eastern Europe, civil society has come much further since 1989 in the countries where governments have proved relatively capable and competent, such as Poland and Hungary, and it has been retarded where states have wallowed in inefficiency and incompetence such as Romania, and for parts of the decade, Bulgaria.

Outside of dictatorial contexts, states can play a valuable role in developing a healthy civil society. They can do so by establishing clear, workable regulatory frameworks for the nongovernmental sector, enacting tax incentives for funding of nonprofit groups, adopting transparent

procedures, and pursuing partnerships with nongovernmental organizations. Civil society can and should challenge, irritate, and even, at times, antagonize the state. But civil society and the state need each other and, in the best of worlds, they develop in tandem, not at each other's expense.

Civil Society Has Gone Global

Not quite. The recent success of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, in which a coalition of NGOs (together with some governments, in particular Canada's) took on the United States and other powerful states, sparked tremendous interest in the idea of transnational civil society. Activists, scholars, journalists, and others began talking up the phenomenon of advocacy across borders. Global civil society appears a natural extension of the trend toward greater civil society within countries. At last count, more than 5,000 transnational NGOs—NGOs based in one country that regularly carry out activities in others—had been identified.

The phenomenon is significant. A confluence of factors—the lowering of political barriers after the end of the cold war, new information and communications technologies, lowered transportation costs, and the spread of democracy—has created a fertile ground for nongovernmental groups to widen their reach and form multicountry links, networks, and coalitions [see Wolfgang H. Reinicke's article on global public policy networks on page 44].

Some caution is nonetheless in order. In the first place, transnational civil society is not as new as it sounds. The Roman Catholic Church, to name just one example, is a transnational civil society group that has had major international impact for many centuries. Second, most of the new transnational civil society actors are Western groups projecting themselves into developing and transitional societies. They may sometimes work in partnership with groups from those countries, but the agendas and values they pursue are usually their own. Transnational civil society is thus "global" but very much part of the same projection of Western political and economic power that civil society activists decry in other venues. Third, like civil society within borders, civil society across borders has its dark side. Hate groups are now hooking up with like-minded extremists in other time zones, feeding off each others' ugly passions. Organized crime is a transnational venture par excellence, exemplifying the most advanced

forms of flexible, creative international organization and operation.

In short, transnational civil society is much like domestic civil society in its essentials. It has been around for a long time but is now growing quickly, both feeding and being fed by globalization. It carries the potential to reshape the world in important ways, but one must not oversell its strength or idealize its intentions. Whether local or global, civil society realism should not be a contradiction in terms.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

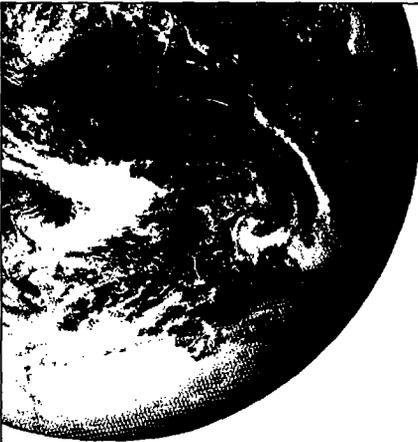
An avalanche of writing about civil society has appeared in recent years. Those who want to take a more historical view should go back to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (London: H.O. Symonds 1792), Georg Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1896), and Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1767). More recently, Ernest Gellner portrayed a new era of civil society in *Conditions of Liberty* (New York: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1994). For a sobering corrective, try David Rieff's "The False Dawn of Civil Society" (*The Nation*, February 22, 1999). A useful comparative study of nonprofit sectors around the world is set out in Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier's *The Emerging Sector: An Overview* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" appeared in the *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995). Alan Wolfe questions Putnam's data and assumptions in "Is Civil Society Obsolete?" (*Brookings Review*, Fall 1997). Michael Foley and Bob Edwards accuse Putnam of political naiveté in "The Paradox of Civil Society" (*Journal of Democracy*, July 1996). Sheri Berman gives a cautionary account of civil society in Germany in "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic" (*World Politics*, April 1997). Jonathan Rauch warns about the dangers of proliferating pressure groups in *Demosclerosis* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

A hard look at Western efforts to promote civil society in other countries is in Thomas Carothers' *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1999). Kevin Quigley critically examines civil society aid in Eastern Europe in *For Democracy's Sake: Foundations and Democracy Assistance in*

Central Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), while Alison Van Rooy has assembled usefully diverse views on such aid in developing countries in *Civil Society and the Aid Industry* (London: Earthscan, 1998). An optimistic but rigorous study of transnational civic advocacy is Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

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