

WHAT IS “CIVIL SOCIETY” AND HOW DOES IT DEVELOP?

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SUMMARY

The paper consists of four sections: Why civil society? Why now? Civil society and the good of persons. Civil society and the crisis of authority; and, finally, the future of civil society.

In the first section, the question as to why civil society is so much discussed at the present moment is raised. The answer lies in the fact that new democracies which were not permitted to sustain or to develop civil societies under authoritarian rule need to create robust civil societies if their democracies are to flourish. In addition, civil societies in the mature democracies of the West are, in all too many cases, faltering and not flourishing. For concerned citizens in each of these quite different situations, civil society signifies a sphere of associational life that embodies the many plural dimensions of complex human lives – families, churches, labour, charities, political associations. An ecological analogy helps us to think about civil society as a form of moral and social ecology that emerges slowly over time. Civil societies cannot be designed; nor can they be understood through linear models. Thinking ecologically, one is able to see the ways in which the cumulative effect of individual choices may redound to the disadvantage of others – of the common good – over time. The atomized culture of late modernity tends to separate people from civil society associations and the power and robustness of these associations declines. This undermines democratic life.

The second section of the paper moves to consider how civil society is linked to the good of persons, beginning with the recognition that we are sustained in thinking about and acting in decent ways through our participation in institutions. Most people do not «do good» spontaneously and without a social environment. Indeed, it is difficult for us even to recognize what is good and what is not unless we live in a social world framed by a moral horizon that helps us to evaluate both individual and social possibilities. The evidence now available tells us that overly powerful states and market forces erode civil society and thin out the forms of civil fellowship that help citizens to sustain a shared sense of participation in a way of life in common. The great moral teachers have all recognized that human beings

are more likely to be stirred to action and to compassion when they can think and act concretely in relation to their neighbours and when there are specific tasks they are called upon and able to do. The social institutions of civil society help to shape and to sustain such dispositions. Alexis de Tocqueville and Vaclav Havel are cited as two great proponents of the importance of civil society, past and present. Subsidiarity is noted as the most powerful theoretical framework available for explaining what a civil society is and what it does that cannot be done by other more centralized and top-heavy institutions and forces.

Section three raises the question: what sustains a civil society? The answer, in part, is legitimate, accountable authority. But one reason civil societies are in trouble lies in our present confusion over the functioning and meaning of authority in all spheres of civil and moral life. John Stuart Mill, who counterposed liberty and authority, is cited as an example of a tendency to assert that decent human freedom can be sustained without authority. But this is not possible because if we cannot distinguish authority from unacceptable forms of coercion and violence, we lose our political and moral bearings. Authority is required to bind us to the present and to locate us in decent frameworks shaped by traditions that are sturdy yet resilient.

The fourth and final section of the paper ponders the future of civil society. A terrible irony is noted, namely, that even as many domestic civil societies are in trouble, we are rightly called to create an international civil society in order to help sustain a regime of human rights and to promote greater international fairness in the economic and social spheres. Pope John Paul II is a critical figure in these developments, both as the most eloquent spokesman for human rights in the world today but also as the most articulate defender of global equity. His Holiness has drawn attention to the phenomenon of “superdevelopment”, a phenomenon this paper links to the erosion of civil society in developed countries and to the difficulties attendant upon the creation of a civil society in less developed polities and societies. The paper concludes with John Paul’s insistence that we are called to hope and to trust and the observation is made that civil societies cannot flourish unless hope and trust are ongoingly generated.

WHY CIVIL SOCIETY? WHY NOW?

Civil society is on the tips of our tongues nowadays whenever the question of how well democratic societies, whether old or new, are faring. That this is so is, perhaps, unsurprising. For we seem to have arrived at a point of recognition, namely, that neither markets nor states suffice to order a decent way of life in common. So if we ask – why civil society? why now? – we are drawn, first, to a consideration of civil society as a concept with a long and uneven history. For the political philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for example, civil society was a realm of competition and

contract whose divisions would be healed over only when the citizen entered that most universal of all ethical realms, the state.¹ In the Hegelian scheme of things, civil society is a higher realm than that of individuals and families but definitely lower in the overall picture than the more complete and perfect entity, the state.²

This way of talking about civil society is *not* what those claiming the term for contemporary political debate have in mind, however. For contemporary advocates of civil society, civil society signifies a sphere of associational life that is ‘more’ than families, yes, but it is also other than government. This is precisely one of its virtues rather than its defects or inadequacies. The state does not exist to “transcend” civil society but, rather, to serve it.

But what, exactly, is being served? A variety of plural associations, the many forms of social life that dot the landscape of well-functioning democratic cultures, from families to churches to neighbourhood groups. Civil society encompasses labour organizations, professional associations, and social service networks. Political parties are also part of this picture. This network lies outside the formal structure of state power. Observers of democracy have long recognized the vital importance of civil society thus understood. Some have spoken of “mediating institutions” that lie between the individual and the government or state. These mediating institutions locate each of us in a number of little estates, so to speak, which are themselves nested within wider, overlapping frameworks of sustaining and supporting institutions.

Perhaps one might think of this as a densely textured *social ecology*. For civil society is a realm that is neither individualist nor collectivist. It partakes of both the “I” and the “we”. One aim of maintaining a robust civil society is to forestall concentrations of power at the top or at the core. A second lies in the recognition that only many small-scale civic bodies enable citizens to cultivate democratic civic virtues and to play an active role in civil life. Such participation turns on meaningful involvement in some decent form of community, by which is meant commitments and ties that locate the citizen in bonds of trust, reciprocity, mutuality, and civic competence.

Embedded in the civil society framework is a recognition that our

¹ The key Hegel text in question is, of course, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975).

² In this, of course, Hegel is building on an Aristotelian foundation and Aristotle’s ranking of the *polis* as “the final and perfect association”. See ARISTOTLE, *The Politics*, ed. and trans. Ernest Barker (New York, Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 4.

social and political worlds are enormously complex and that they emerge and take shape concretely over time. No social engineer can “design” a civil society. No linear model can explain one. Civil society is a repository of generations of human actions and reactions to a material and moral environment. A sturdy yet supple civil society embodies the decocted wisdom of the ages yet remains open to new insights and challenges. A civil society is a system, but it is an open system. If environmental thinkers have shown us how the cumulative effect of misuse of an environment can, at one point, be more than a natural ecology can bear, so civil society analysts argue much along the same lines. They call upon us to evaluate the ways in which depletion and misuse of civic and moral resources can have debilitating, perhaps at one point even catastrophic, effects.

Thus, for example, the cumulative effect of thousands upon thousands of individual “choices” may redound to the benefit or disadvantage of others. If I live in a culture that encourages almost unlimited consumption, no single act of mine will be seen as harmful in a direct way to others. But hundreds of thousands of persons choosing unwisely, in a way that encourages or even comes to require what Pope John Paul II has seen as a culture of overconsumption and “super-development”, promotes corrosive results over time.³ Eventually, we may even relinquish our capacity to choose wisely and well. Our great gift and responsibility of moral autonomy and free will may atrophy as we reduce human freedom to a selection from among a vast array of consumer choices in a world in which individual goods triumph and the notion of a common good is rejected or lost.

The increasingly atomized culture of late modernity, or so civil society advocates insist, pushes us in this harmful direction as human beings are cut off from the saving grace and presence of their fellow human beings. We come to see ourselves as independent in all things rather than as existing in a world of complex interdependencies. Civil society, by contrast, is a concrete way we have of recognizing and fostering decent and life-affirming interdependency. We are called to love and to serve our neighbour. But we cannot do this unless we have a neighbourhood; unless there are institutions that are present and strong, churches first and foremost; unless there are processes of moral formation through institutions, beginning with families, that call us to responsibilities as well as rights; to recognition of finitude as well as to action in freedom.

³ See, especially, his discussion of these themes in the encyclicals *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Centesimus Annus*.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE GOOD OF PERSONS

Thinking about what civil society is reminds us that human beings are complex creatures who do not do good spontaneously most of the time. Wanting to do good, we have turned at various points to government to take over when charity did not suffice. Wanting to reap the rewards of self-discipline and hard work, we have turned to economic structures to generate jobs and prosperity. In the minds of some, unfortunately, government became not only a line of defense against social distress and unacceptable levels of injustice, but the only font of ethical decency and concern. Strong statist despised, or disdained, civil society because it did not seem up to the tasks they believe needed to be done and, as well, because the plural complexities of civil society challenge all top down social engineering and totalizing efforts. Similarly, the market, many optimistically believed, would be the source of social well-being as individual opportunities and rewards generated overall social benefit. The economy alone, they argued, was powerful enough to fend off efforts to locate too much power in governments. And there matters often got stalled. But what we have learned in the past half-century is that, even as families and churches and other associations of civil society have been buffeted about and even undermined by external powers of many kinds, there is no substitute for them. Without civil society, a political culture cannot sustain a decent moral and social ecology.

The evidence on this score is abundantly clear. It tells us that neither government alone, nor the economy alone, nor the two in tandem, can sustain the rich world of democratic civic life. The evidence also tells us that government and markets may even be harmful in specific ways. Rather than serving civil society, they may grow too powerful and may erode civil independence, social interdependence, and plurality. It is, therefore, not surprising that a growing sense of unease pervades much of the moral landscape of both developed and developing democracies. For all the wealth being generated in some sites (the United States being *primus inter pares* in this regard), there is a gnawing sense that all is not well with us. Take, for example, the fact that social science surveys indicate that American citizens no longer trust either their government or one another.⁴ Citizens look at one another with suspicion and mistrust. This is

⁴ For a detailed account of the state of the civil society debate in America, replete with social science data, consult 'A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths. A Report to the Nation from the Council on Civil Society', available from The Institute for American Values, New York City, New York 10023.

debilitating as democracy presupposes a form of civic fellowship and requires an affective bond between citizens to help sustain a shared sense of participation in a way of life in common.

At our best as social beings, we trust one another; we have some confidence in our ability to work together and to face our difficulties with hope; we try to act decently in our dealings and we expect the same from others; we understand the vital role of government but we know that we have direct responsibility for democratic civic life; we extol the workings of a free economy but we believe that economic forces must be shaped by a moral sense. The great moral teachers have long insisted that human beings are more likely to be stirred to action and to compassion when they think concretely of fellow citizens and neighbours; when there are specific tasks they are called upon and able to do; when reciprocity is an ever present possibility and expectation. We need social institutions – a civil society – in order to channel, to shape, and to sustain our civic dispositions. Thus, it is altogether unsurprising that a body of recent work by American social scientists indicates that regular churchgoers are less likely to divorce, to abuse their children, to get caught up in cycles of violence and addiction, and more likely to serve their neighbours. Why? Because membership in an institution that instils ethical habits of the heart helps people to enact that ethic in the lives of their communities. There are many institutions that historically aided in this effort. But, in all too many places on the globe at present, they are faltering, not flourishing.

Let us dig into this matter in more depth. Recall, if you will, my use of the notion of a moral and civic ecology somewhat analogous to natural ecologies. I insisted that, just as the one can be sullied and depleted, so can the other. Civil society as a way we have to sustain and to recognize our interdependences is based on a long tradition of moral, philosophical, and theological thought. Aristotle insisted that the proper end of human beings required membership in associations, both household and *polis*. Alexis de Tocqueville, whose work on *Democracy in America* is a recognized classic, contrasted the rich world of associational self-help he found when he toured America in the Jacksonian era (c. 1830) with a worst-case scenario of what might be America's fate at some future point.⁵ Tocqueville's argument has more general bearing on thinking about civil society in the context of democracy so it is worth pondering at length.

According to Tocqueville, democracy requires laws, constitutions, and

⁵ ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York, Harper Perennial Books, 1988).

authoritative institutions. But it also depends on what he called the “habits of the heart” forged within the framework such institutions provided. He urged Americans – and all future citizens of democracies, for he saw democracy and equality as trends that would develop everywhere, at least in the West – to take to heart a possible corruption of democratic cultures over time. For democratic citizens might awaken one day and realize that something terrible had happened. Separated from the saving constraints and nurture of overlapping associations of civil society, persons in democratic regimes might come to be more dominated by a lower and lower mean on the level of culture and, as well, might find themselves caught up in webs of control instigated from above with the express aim of muffling the disintegrative effects of atomized self-interest.

It is worth remembering that for Tocqueville religious belief was inseparable from free public life. Why? Because churches engage in ethical formation; they teach us moral restraint, thereby releasing us for civic life and stewardship. Without strong churches and religious liberty, no flourishing civil society is possible. For this reason, I believe that, were Tocqueville alive today, he would press us to consider where we now find ourselves. Does not the culture of late modern democracies encourage excess, not restraint? Does not consumerism and the advertising and the media generally promote profligacy, not decency? Are we not underwriting bad habituation to wrongly ordered desires rather than nurturing good habits of the heart and intellect? If our answers to these questions is a reluctant “yes”, it is a reasonable bet that our society’s civil society is in trouble or has failed to take root in the first place. The latter situation is more likely to pertain in countries denied a civil society because they suffered the deprivations of authoritarian, top-heavy, state-bureaucratic regimes.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, even as many social critics and moral leaders in developed Western democracies see a decline in their moral ecology, the most penetrating observers of the new democracies in central Europe fear that a democratic civil society may not emerge in a robust way in the first place. Thus, President Václav Havel of the Czech Republic, in a recent “State of the Republic” address to the Parliament and Senate of the Czech Republic on December 9, 1997, commented critically on the state of Czech culture. His comments are worth quoting at some length. He noted:

“I have left culture to the end not because I consider it to be some super-structural ‘icing on the cake’, but for precisely the opposite reason. I consider it the most important of all, something that deserves to be mentioned at the very conclusion of my remarks. I am not thinking of culture as a separate sphere of

human activity ... I mean culture in the broadest sense of the word – that is, the culture of human relationships, of human existence, of human work, of human enterprise, of public and political life. I refer to the general level of our culture ... Culture ... can be measured, for example, by what skinheads shout in the bar U Zabranskych, by how many Roma have been lynched or murdered, by how terribly some of us behave to our fellow human beings simply because they have a different color of skin.

... you must know that I am talking about what is called a civil society. That means a society that makes room for the richest possible self-structuring and the richest possible participation in public life. In this sense, civil society is important for two reasons: in the first place it enables people to be themselves in all their dimensions, which includes being social creatures who desire, in thousands of ways, to participate in the life of the community in which they live. In the second place, it functions as a genuine guarantee of political stability. The more developed all the organs, institutions, and instruments of civil society are, the more resistant that society will be to political upheavals or reversals. It was no accident that communism's most brutal attack was aimed precisely against this civil society. It knew very well that its greatest enemy was not an individual non-Communist politician, but a society that was open, structured independently from the bottom up, and therefore very difficult to manipulate".⁶

Havel's words conjure up the concept of *subsidiarity*, the most powerful theoretical framework for explaining what a civil society is and what it does that cannot be done by other, more centralized and top-heavy institutions and forces. Here we do well to recall the modern social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, Pope Pius XI, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and Pope John Paul II. In these encyclicals, culminating with the extraordinary contributions of Pope John Paul II, we find an affirmation of human rights that sees rights, not in individualistic, but in social terms. The assumptions of Catholic social thought provide for individuality and rights as the goods of persons in community – in a civil society.⁷ Working from the principle of subsidiarity, the Popes here argued that it violates a right order of things to assign to greater or higher associations what smaller associations can do. The purpose of larger associations, including the state, is to help members of a body politic and social rather than to erode or to absorb its many plural associations. Subsidiarity, then, is a theory of, and for, civil society. It keeps alive alternatives between individualism, on the

⁶ VACLAV HAVEL, 'The State of the Republic', *The New York Review of Books* (March 5, 1998, pp. 42-46), pp. 45-46.

⁷ For a helpful, theoretically rich summary of papal teaching see MICHEL SCHOYANS, 'Democracy in the Teaching of the Popes', *Miscellanea 1. Proceedings of the Workshop on Democracy* (Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican City, 1998), pp. 11-40.

one hand, and collectivism, on the other. Neither individualistic nor collectivist orders can sustain a civil society.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

What does sustain a civil society? I propose to zero in on only one theme, that of authority. Legitimate, accountable authority is implied, at least tacitly, in every discussion of civil society. Robust yet resilient authority is required to sustain institutions. Surely one reason civil societies are in trouble lies in our present confusion over the function and meaning of authority in all spheres of civil and moral life. For example: there is a tendency in modernity, exemplified most tellingly, perhaps, by John Stuart Mill in his classic tract, *On Liberty*, to contrast *liberty* with *authority*. Rather than posing liberty against tyranny or domination or authoritarianism, Mill sets liberty and authority up as antinomies. Mill got things entirely wrong. For we require authority in order to sustain decent, other-regarding liberty. Authority derives from the notion “to authorize”, to help generate and even bring into being and to hold and to secure that which is generated. Authority helps to secure and to sustain social institutions. It derives from the fact that we see people as responsible and can hold them accountable.

If we are incapable of distinguishing authority from unacceptable forms of coercion and even violence, we fall into a kind of abyss. This was Hannah Arendt’s argument in a famous essay on authority. Minus authority, claimed Arendt, we even lose a sense of the past and of tradition as “the permanence and durability” of the world seems to melt away. This loss is “tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed ... has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape to another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else”.⁸ Arendt singles out for critical fire arguments deeply implicated in the conflation of coercion and authority. She also helps to remind us that the legitimate authoritative figure historically was one who was bound by law, by tradition, by the force of past example and experience. Being bound in particular ways guaranteed a framework for action and helped to create and to sustain particular public spaces – whether of church, polity, or other institutions of social life. Bounded freedom, constituted by authority, is the only way human beings have to

⁸ HANNAH ARENDT, ‘What is Authority?’, in *Between Past and Future* (Baltimore, Maryland, Penguin, 1980), p. 95.

guarantee creation of a common space; to simultaneously constrain yet to nurture and to make possible human action.

The life of a decent polity, after all, is not just about life but about a good life. This good life plays a formative and educative role. It inducts each generation into a way of being in the world made possible only when people submit to authority mutually and thereby hold one another accountable. Without such an authoritative framework, there is only violence or rampant antinomianism. Let us return to Tocqueville and his fears about where the age of democracy and equality might take us. He suggested that, over time, the horizon of democratic civil societies might recede as complex, authoritative traditions eroded or collapsed. The upshot is a cynical notion that the past has been nothing but a story of chicanery and arbitrariness in any case. In order to be free, we must escape tradition altogether. But this winds up not being freedom so much as a desperate flailing in a civil universe stripped of moral texture.

In such a world, we grow more and more apart from one another. We repudiate even the possibility of a rough and ready sharing of moral norms and aspirations of the sort that help us to treat one another decently and to work together. Even the procedural norms of democratic governmental institutions may be called into question. Our confidence in the possibility of sustaining truth itself wanes. We come to believe that all that exists is self-interested and self-serving opinion. This is indeed worrisome, for as Hannah Arendt also insisted, in her great work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction ... and the distinction between true and false ... no longer exist”.⁹

THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The stakes, it seems, could not be higher. At the end of the twentieth century, we find many of our fellow citizens perplexed and even in a state of something akin to moral exhaustion. For they – and we – have been taught that lived life exhausts itself and is self-encapsulating; that to extend oneself to others is not a norm but an extraordinary act of sacrifice; that anything and everything is arbitrarily constructed and nothing is given or can be taken on trust. Those most likely to be thus overwhelmed are those

⁹ HANNAH ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 474.

stripped of the sustenance provided by a rich civil society, a dense moral ecology. The terrible irony, of course, is that even as old and new democracies find themselves troubled or even reeling from the failure of civil society, we are being called – rightly – to the task of building something like a civil society on the international level.

In this area, too, Pope John Paul II has taken the lead. In his U. N. Address, “The Fabric of Relations Among Peoples”, His Holiness acknowledged that “we are witnessing an extraordinary global acceleration of that quest for freedom which is one of the great dynamics of human history ... Men and women throughout the world, even when threatened by violence, have taken the risk of freedom, asking to be given a place in social, political and economic life which is commensurate with their dignity as free human beings”.¹⁰ John Paul II affirms that there are “indeed universal human rights rooted in the nature of the person”, and that nature, it should be remembered, is social, not atomistic; reflective of the moral law, not the end result of a utilitarian calculus. Together with the rights of persons are the rights of nations. But none of these rights is absolute and, in fact, they exist in some tension with one another. This is a tension as old as moral philosophy itself, that between the particular and the universal. If a civil society internal to one political body is that society’s embodiment of its particular identity, then a commitment to a universal set of goods of, and for, persons, perhaps requires something analogous between nations. Certainly it is the case that we are bound in a “more intense way to particular human groups, beginning with the family and going on to the various groups to which they belong and up to the whole of their ethnic and cultural group ...”.¹¹ But we are also called to come to grips with a wider international culture of difference and pluralism that requires its own structures and safeguards. His Holiness calls for an “ethic of solidarity” that promotes a more just distribution of goods and advances the prospect of a decent, reasonable life for all God’s children.

Here the phenomenon of superdevelopment plays a critical and destructive role. As Pope John Paul II has argued, superdevelopment “makes people slaves of possession and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication and continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better. This is the so-called civilization of ‘consumption’ or ‘consumerism,’ which involves so much

¹⁰ Pope JOHN PAUL II, ‘The Fabric of Relations Among Peoples’, *Origins* 19 October, 1995, Vol. 25, No. 18, pp. 294-299, p. 295.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

‘throwing away’ and waste”.¹² The “sad effects of this blind submission to pure consumerism”, argues His Holiness, is a combination of materialism and a relentless dissatisfaction, as “the more one possesses the more one wants”. Aspirations that cut deeper, that speak to human dignity within a world of others, are stifled. John Paul’s name for this alternative aspiration is “solidarity”, not a “feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people” but, instead, a determination to “commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are really responsible for all”. Through solidarity we see “the ‘other’ ... not just as some kind of instrument ... but as our ‘neighbour,’ a ‘helper’ ... to be made a sharer on a par with ourselves in the banquet of life to which we are all equally invited by God”. The structures that make possible this ideal of solidarity are the many associations of civil society.

But superdevelopment erodes civil society within those political bodies whose culture is defined by superdevelopment. And because the superdevelopment of some is implicated in the lack of minimally decent lives for many others, this phenomenon is also linked to those conditions that make it difficult or impossible for so many other societies to create and to sustain robust civil societies in the first place. Creation of a genuine international society involves us, first and foremost, in a strong regime of international human rights, with freedom to worship openly with one’s fellow citizens without fear of violence and reprisal at the top of this list. For this freedom helps to set the horizon within which other freedoms can be exercised and evaluated. But, second, no robust international civil society can emerge if some societies languish in the twilight of terrible poverty and distress and others wallow in an excess of too many goods consumed unwisely and not well.

Pope John Paul II has called us to hope and trust. Civil societies are built on hope and trust. No civil society can survive and certainly none can flourish unless hope and trust are attendant upon the building of a civil society culture and constitutive of that culture over time. This is why so many of our democratic cultures are faltering, not flourishing. In order to restore hope and trust, we are drawn back inevitably to the most basic of questions: in what does the good of human beings exist? How can we come to recognise, to honour, and to cultivate that good? Civil society is one way we have devised to answer that question.

¹² Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, in *Origins* 13 March, 1988, Vol. 17, No. 38, pp. 641-660, p. 650.

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