

Civil Society Speech: Short Version. (30 mins)

Thanks to Femida for organizing this event, and to you all for coming. I'm delighted to be here.

It is impossible to have a conversation about politics or public policy these days without someone mentioning the magic words "civil society", so one might think that people are clear what they mean when they use this term and why it is so important. Unfortunately, clarity and rigor are conspicuous by their absence in the civil society debate, a lack of precision that threatens to submerge this concept completely under a rising tide of criticism and confusion.

According to whose version one prefers, "civil society" means "fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty" (Cato), or it means the opposite - "the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and the tyrannical market" (WSF), or for those more comfortable in the middle ground of politics, it constitutes the missing link in the success of social democracy (central to Third Way thinking and supposedly-compassionate conservatism), the "chicken soup of the social sciences" – you know those books that provide much-needed comfort without that much substance, so if you can't explain something, put it down to civil society! Adam Seligman, tongue firmly in cheek, calls civil society the "new analytic key that will unlock the mysteries of the social order", Jeremy Rifkin calls it "our last, best hope", the UN and the World Bank see it as the key to 'good governance' and poverty-reducing

growth, and even the real reason for war against Iraq – to kick-start civil society in the Middle East, according to Administration officials in Washington DC. As a new report from the Washington-based Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis puts it, “the US should emphasize civil society development in order to ensure regional stability in central Asia” - forgetting, of course, that citizens groups have been a prime cause of destabilization in every society since the Pharaohs.

Some claim that civil society is a specific product of the nation state and capitalism; others see it 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. Some see it as one of three separate sectors, others as intimately interconnected or even inter-penetrated by states and markets. Is civil society the preserve of groups predefined as democratic, modern, and ‘civil’, or is it home to all sorts of associations, including ‘uncivil’ society – like militant Islam and American militias - and traditional associations based on inherited characteristics like religion and ethnicity that are so common in Africa and Asia?

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? Can you build a civil

society through foreign aid and intervention, or is this just another imperial fantasy? What is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall? And in any case, do these questions really matter, except to a small band of academics who study this stuff for a living?

When an idea can mean so many things it probably means nothing, so I think the time has come to be rid of the term completely or, now that it has acquired a life of its own, to at least be clearer with each other about the different interpretations in play. Consensus is impossible given the range of views on offer, but clarity is not, and greater clarity can be the springboard for a better conversation about the promise and potential of civil society as a basis of hope and action for the future, *and* about the pitfalls of using this term as a political slogan or a shelter for dogma and ideology. Recognizing that civil society does indeed mean different things to different people is one of the keys to moving forward, because it moves us beyond false universals and entrenched thinking. And for those who want to discard the term completely my plea would be, not yet - “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.” As I show in my book, ideas about civil society can survive and prosper in a rigorous critique.

In part, the fog that has enveloped this term is the result of an obsession with one particular interpretation of civil society as a *part* of society - the world of voluntary associations - forgetting that there are earlier and later traditions that have just as much to offer. It was Alexis de Tocqueville [the man you probably all remember

from your schooldays] that started this craze on his visits across the Atlantic in the 1830s, who saw America's rich tapestry of associational life as the key to its emerging democracy. "Americans of all dispositions have an incurable tendency to form voluntary associations." Originally however, civil society, from Aristotle to Thomas Hobbes, represented a *kind* of society that was identified with certain ideals. And in modern societies, realizing these ideals – like political equality or peaceful coexistence - requires action across many different institutions, not just voluntary associations. Most recently, philosophers have developed a new set of theories about civil society as the '*public sphere*' – the places where citizens argue with one-another about the great questions of the day and negotiate a constantly-evolving sense of the 'common' or 'public' interest.

My starting point in the book is to deconstruct the existing, confused conversation about civil society and then reconstruct the relationships between these different schools of thought in a new, and I hope more convincing synthesis. The first school 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 and competing values and beliefs (think pro and anti-choice groups, for example, or peaceniks and the NRA). There's another problem with this thesis too, because the values and beliefs we want to see developed are fostered in all the places where we learn and grow, and where dispositions are shaped, which means families, schools, workplaces, colleges and universities,

and political institutions large and small. We actually spend a lot more time in these places than we do in voluntary associations, so these experiences are especially important. For the same reason, by themselves, NGOs and other voluntary associations can rarely secure the level of political consensus that is required to secure and enforce broad-based social reforms – there's too much difference and diversity of opinion. That's why civil society, to quote the British writer John Keane "is riddled with danger, since it gives freedom to despots and democrats alike."

So my second school of thought – civil society as the good society – is very important, because it sets the contributions of voluntary associations in the proper context and guards against the tendency to privilege one part of society over the others on ideological grounds – voluntary associations over states for example, or business over both. Good neighbors can't replace good government, and nonprofits shouldn't be asked to substitute for well-functioning markets. Historically (think of the US in the 20th century and East Asia after World War II), success in achieving good society goals has always been based on social contracts negotiated between government, business and citizens.

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 collective 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 in its role 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 inevitably suffers. When all politics are polarized, public policy problems become embedded, even frozen, in politics that cannot solve them – think health care and welfare reform in the US, for example. Breaking the resulting gridlock requires the creation of new publics in support of broad-based reform – exactly what is missing in the US right now.

All three of these schools of thought have something to offer, but by themselves are incomplete and unconvincing. So the logical thing to do is to connect them so that

the weaknesses of one set of theories are balanced by the strengths and contributions of the others. What does that mean in practice?

Civil society as the good society keeps our ‘eyes on the prize’ – the prize being the goals of poverty-reduction and deep democracy that require coordinated action across different sets of institutions. 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 – the first approach I described - are useful in emphasizing the gaps and weaknesses of associational life that need to be fixed 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, anchored in religion, politics, ideology, race, gender and culture. Without our third set of theories – civil society as the public sphere – there would be no 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, anchored in the law.

So it's not difficult to see how each approach builds on the others in order to offer a more compelling explanation of civil society's significance. One can construct a similar tripartite relationship at the global level too – "global civil society" as an additional layer of transnational associational activity, a new kind of global society or form of International Relations marked out respect for human rights and the peaceful resolution of differences, and as an emerging global public sphere exemplified by events like the World Social Forum, Internet sites like openDemocracy and open source technology.

Thinking about the issues in this way helps us to pose an actionable set of questions instead of arguing in the abstract over which theory is correct. Most importantly, how do shifting patterns of associational life help or hinder the realization of good society goals, and what can we do to revive the public sphere if we believe it is an important transmission mechanism between the two? In essence that's the question that keeps me awake at night in my role at the Ford Foundation, though we would phrase it rather differently – "how do governance and civil society as means contribute to peace and social justice as ends?"

However you phrase it, this question generates a rich agenda for public policy discussions, but a very complicated one since there is no obvious consensus on the answers and the evidence is very muddy – three schools of thought. The social capital school – like Robert Putnam [whose work I'm sure you all know well] - sees

associational life in general as the driving force behind the positive social norms on which the good society is founded – things like cooperation, trust and reciprocity. So the logical policy is to encourage as much volunteering and voluntary action as possible even if some of it is used for nefarious purposes. Somewhat magically in my view, these differences will, Putnam argues, work themselves out in the general scheme of things, much like the “hidden hand of the market.”

The comparative associational school – like Theda Skocpol – see particular configurations of associational life as the key to securing the public policy reforms the good society requires - the nationally-federated mass-membership, cross-class groups like PTAs, labor unions, elks and other forest creatures, that have declined so much over the last 50 years and which used to provide strong bridges between citizens and government that led to reforms like the GI Bill of 1944. What has replaced them? A burgeoning array of single-issue advocacy groups largely based in Washington DC, incapable of fashioning a social consensus that is broad enough to force through significant change.

Third, the school of skeptics - like Nancy Rosenblum – who don't see any reliable link between the structure of civil society and its achievements. Obviously the appropriate policy depends on which position one subscribes to.

There are some interventions, though, that would be useful across the board. The first thing we need to do is to strengthen the pre-conditions for a healthy civil society

in the three-fold sense I've described, and leave people to sort out the details for themselves without too much of a predetermined template. That 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 public communication, and building a strong foundation for institutional partnerships, alliances and coalitions. Inequality is the poison of civil society because it endows citizens with different levels of resources and opportunities to participate, so things like support for childcare and a living wage – which are not usually seen as civil-society building interventions, may be the most important areas of all. Maintaining an explicit linkage between the promotion of economic equity and the deepening of democracy is the key to avoiding the usual, anemic shopping list of NGO capacity-building interventions, community service, volunteering and so on.

Second, we need to find and support innovations in associational life that encourage citizen action to operate in service to the good society, rather than as a substitute for politics, market reform and the demands of democratic state building. That doesn't mean turning the clock back to the 1950s and forcing teenagers to join the Moose or the Elks (the Norman Rockwell school of civil society thinking), but reinventing associational life to suit the realities of a very different era in which time and energy are more limited, worn down by the demands of work and unsupported family obligations.

Such measures are highly context-specific. In the US for example (and largely based on my Ford Foundation experience), we need to build stronger links between policy groups, organizing groups, service deliverers and the media; we need to link associations across different interests and agendas and get progressive organizing out of its silos (issues and identities); we need to encourage a more democratic relationship between grassroots constituencies and those in the nonprofit sector who claim to speak on their behalf. We need to reduce the costs and risks of citizen participation (for example, making it easier to organize at the workplace), and we need to honor and connect different forms of participation so that service doesn't become a substitute for political engagement, as is happening among many younger people in America today.

It's also important to make room for surprises – like the potential political effects of self help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Weightwatchers (the largest category of voluntary associations in America with over 25million members), or the boy scouts and mosque associations in Lebanon (which turn out to be among the most progressive), or burial societies in South Africa (which played a major role in the fight against apartheid), or labor unions in France and Brazil which have given an important stimulus to new and less hierarchical forms of transnational organizing.

To conclude, civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each-other about ends and means. When these

three 'faces' turn towards each-other and integrate their different perspectives into a mutually-supportive framework, the idea of civil society can explain a great deal about the course of politics and social change, *and* serve as a practical framework for organizing both resistance and alternative solutions to social , economic and political problems. Many of the difficulties of the civil society debate disappear when we lower our expectations of what each school of thought has to offer in isolation from the others, and abandon all attempts to enforce a single model, consensus or explanation. This may not deter the ideologues from using civil society as a cover for their own agendas, but it should make it easier to expose their claims and challenge the assumptions they often make.

This is one reason why, to answer the question I raised at the outset, getting clearer about civil society *does* matter in more than the academic sense. When the National Endowment for Democracy claims to be building civil society in Venezuela but is only supporting groups mobilized against President Hugo Chavez, or President Putin boasts of developing a new NGO infrastructure to regain Russian influence in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere, or when politicians on both sides of the Atlantic continue to be engaged in a forced march to civil society in the Middle East, it is clear that the ways in which these ideas are interpreted *does* have a real impact on the lives of real people in the here and the now. "Moscow's policy places civil society at the heart of its comeback strategy" says Ivan Krastev, neatly demonstrating the dangerous elasticity of this concept when used for political ends. As Keynes's famous dictum reminds us, "practical men in authority who think themselves

immune from theoretical influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist”, just as present-day civil society builders are motivated by ideas deeply rooted in different schools of thought, but often unacknowledged, untested and insufficiently interrogated.

I trust that this is one thing that *you* will not be guilty of. Thank you.