

## The Third Sector: Sharing the Burden



Perhaps the greatest weakness of the Western concept of civil society is the absence of consensus on how to define and, therefore, measure it. Definitions of civil society are many, and this is precisely why it is so difficult to reach a consensus. Aristotle's *politike koinonia* became the Latin *societas civilis* which, in turn, eventually became the English "civil society" or "public sphere" or "third sector." Some think that civil society was thriving at the end of the Middle Ages; for others, it was born with the Enlightenment.

Marx and Hegel characterized civil society as "society minus the state," while Gramsci positioned civil society as the third societal sector: "between the economic structure and the state with its legislation and coercion stands civil society." A century earlier, Tocqueville was struck by the comparison between young America's "art of association" and another Western trend present on the eve of the French Revolution, observing that "there were not ten Frenchmen who could come together for a common cause." Kant and Fichte, Hume and Ferguson, Paine, Hobbes and Locke, followed later by Jean Cohen, Andrew Arato and Ralf Dahrendorf, to mention just a few, all wrestled with the concept and the importance of civil society. Ernest Gellner could not have been more explicit when he stated: "no civil society, no democracy." Despite the broad debate, no explicit definition of civil society exists.

However, a common denominator does exist in the many definitions: the precondition for the existence of civil society is a normative consensus among its members. Civil society deals with the moral and social order. While the *modus operandi* of civil society's opposite – the administrated society – is exclusion, civil society is based on inclusion. Immature or absent civil society heralds the birth of closed societies. Thus totalitarianism is the definitive triumph of a closed society over civil society. The theoretic contributions of K. R. Popper on open societies and the practical inputs of his student, George Soros, on opening societies remain pivotal to the practice today.

How fares civil society today? Some see civil society under ferocious siege from closed or centralized governments. Others see it thriving. Still others speak of "the spleen of civil society," pointing to a perceived culture of complaint. Political analysts and sociologists frequently mention the need to fine tune the weaponry civil society used so effectively in the '80s and early '90s. How about concepts such as "Living within the truth" (Vaclav Havel) or "Antipolitics" (Gyorgy Konrad), heroic works that undermined totalitarian regimes? Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan answer this

debate as follows: "Ethical civil society represents 'truth', but political society in a consolidated democracy normally represents 'interests'"/.../ "Antipolitics is dangerous for democratic politics. In new democracies, the effort should no longer be to live parallel to state power but to conquer and direct state

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power. In fact, most of the values and language of ethical civil society that were so functional to the tasks of opposition are dysfunctional for a political society in a consolidated democracy."

This issue of *Elections Today* initiates a debate on the status of civil society and its potential role in this new millennium. Not an easy task.

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