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Conceptual Understanding of Civil Society and its Contemporary Usage

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to understand the concept of civil society and explain how it was conceptually perceived and defined by various theorists and international organizations. As the term civil society itself was complex to define however, this study identified some important features of civil society association by analyzing different understandings of thoughts. This study also discussed critical account of the Marxist tradition on this notion of civil society. In the end, contemporary usage of civil society was mentioned where it presented a close relation with modern democracy. Qualitative and descriptive method was used for this research paper. For that, theoretical aspect of concept was taken into consideration.

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INTRODUCTION

"Definitions matter, for a number of reasons. The definition of civil society is one of the more important problems in moral, social, and political thoughts. One answer stipulates how one will use the term, but, as logicians insist, whether stipulative definitions are clear or unclear, advantageous or disadvantageous, or the like, are factual questions" (Palmer 48).

In English usage, with the passage of time, civil society somehow has acquired some important characteristics such as its voluntary nature. Its members must have respect and acceptance to others groups and must display consent and dissent on issues. Therefore, its membership is not grounded in blood relation or any specific community, but in free individual choices that allow each and every free individual to be part of civil society. It plays as a midway bridge between family and state or public and private. It is not like any Ku Klux Klan society that is popularly named as uncivil society. In that sense, civil society as voluntary 'institutionalized groups' comes in way of depicting some kind of resistance to state (Waller). This concept has various contradictory meanings that lead to ambiguity of the semantic structures of it as the term has travelled through different historical origins and association (Carver 25).

Definitional Understanding of Civil Society

Although, some theorists and International organizations have tried to redefine civil society in several ways for bringing clarity to the concept. Here, are some definitional thoughts on civil society presented by organizations and theorists:

According to World Bank

The World Bank has adopted a definition of civil society developed by a number of leading research centers. "The term civil society to refer to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, Scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide of array of organizations: community groups, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labour unions,

indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (World Bank).

According to CIVICUS Organization:

“Civil society: The arena, outside of the family state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interest. Civicus includes the following in its definition of civil society: civil society networks and organizations; trade union; faith based networks; Professional associations; NGO capacity development organizations; philanthropic foundations and other funding bodies” (Civicus).

According to Michael Walzer:

“The words ‘civil society’ names the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology that fill this space” (Walzer 64).

According To Michael Edwards:

“Civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it and a framework for engaging with each others about ends and means” (Edwards).

According to John Keane:

“The emerging consensus that civil society is a realm of freedom correctly highlights its basic value as a condition of democracy; where there is no civil society there cannot be citizens with capacities to choose their identities, entitlements and duties within a political, legal framework” (Keane 114).

“Somewhat differently, Charles Taylor writes about civil society as a web of autonomous associations, independent of the state, which bind citizens together in matters of common concern, and which by their existence or actions could have an effect on public policy” (Carver 25).

“It is probably safe to say that civil society broadly refers to the formal and informal associations and networks in society which exist outside the state” (M. Hendriks).

Some definitions refer civil society to the domain of voluntary association, encompassing everything from loose apolitical social networks to organized and politically motivated interest groups.

After going through above definitions, it could be observed that it is a progressive concept and has various meanings in terms of different perspectives, time and circumstances like the above mentioned definition by USAID which describes civil society as a voluntary association that is free from the state, where its habitants or members work for the common good. Somewhere it promotes and protects democratic values such as freedom, equality and right. Similarly, The World Bank gives the idea of what civil society contains. It explains that the presences of non-governmental and non- profitable organizations are part of civil society. Michael Walzer here, tries to give a communitarian perspective of civil society and says that civil society is not only for public sphere but also for a private sphere like family. This idea gives a broader understanding of civil society, which makes people altruist in nature towards a whole society. He gives more attention to the common welfare of people in civil society. Since according to him civil society is an expression of people’s thoughts, their beliefs and identities. It emerged for the sake of family and community of people. It is also a medium of creating social capital through civic engagement, which is well defined by Robert Putnam. Michael Edwards views civil society as an ends and means both. So civil society is what we, as active citizens make it. Further John Kean as a liberalist sees civil society as a realm of freedom which carries basic value of democracy. Civil society provides such conditions that make people more capable to choose identities and entitlements in legal framework. This is a necessary requirement for any form of democracy. Hence, civil society is a kind of source for any governance to get legitimacy from society.

Thus, after explaining these different meanings of civil society, it can be said that civil society has no single definition even though it has some common characteristics by which we could identify civil society’s existence and relevance of it. Those are mentioned as follows;

- Non - government organization and nonprofit organization.
- Independent of state.
- Non violent.
- Open society.
- Promoting democratic values.
- Based on trust.
- Protect social capital through civic engagements.
- Sometimes seen in the form of social movement and social activism.

Civil society has its own significant history since the classical time up till now. It has a very close relation with democracy in all historical periods. Therefore it is said that, “civil society itself is a site for contestation concerning the boundaries of politicization, and more specifically democratization” (Carver)

Although, civil society is the product of society, on academic front it has been quietly associated with social science that contains subjective notion. On that basis, civil society places itself between state and family and the public and private sector called commercial economy. For this reason, civil society seems to encompass wide range of public spaces including professionals, school, universities, welfare associations, demonstration, public gatherings, and social movements etc. Civil society is basically called third ‘sector’ because it is neither political nor profitable. It is a non - governmental and non profitable sphere. In modern usage it is found to be very different from that during the classical time. It carries purely associations of civic people and encourages masses to participate voluntarily rather based on ascriptive ties. Apart from that, civil society neither has any motives of getting into politics for power nor into business for profit. But it takes initiatives and confronts with state apparatuses for the sake of society. Many theorists argue that civil society as modern phenomena referred to an educated, civil and bourgeois society in comparison to primordial society (Carapico 91).

On critical note there are some theorists for instances; Marx and Antonio Gramsci, who critically viewed civil society as a tool of exploitation. They perceived civil society that develops in capitalist society for the sake of bourgeois’ interest only. Marx argued that state institution supported civil society in capitalist society since it had control over the means of production. According to Marx, the base of a society determines formation of other institutions like political, cultural, etc. In other words, Marx understood economy as the base of capital society which determines how other superstructures should be like. But Gramsci gave a bit of different notion of civil society that does not use force but consent for maintaining the hegemony of dominant class. So according to both theorists civil society has nothing to do with consolidation of democracy. It just protects the interest of dominant class and subordinates others.

Of course, Marxist descriptions of civil society mentioned above provide critical angle for it. But after, fall of communism Marxist ideology has lost its relevance in the contemporary period. So, in modern democracy, Marxist’s thought is only taken into consideration as it gave some understandings or criteria to measure and disclose civil society if it has despotic nature.

Civil Society in Contemporary Usage

Civil society gained its importance again when solidarity movement in Poland was started by its citizen for demanding autonomous public sphere. And they challenged the communist authoritarian state. It was taken as revival of civil society. “Similar movements started in other countries of Eastern Europe like Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Intellectuals and political activists presented the image of an unrepressed civil society to mobilize citizens against oppressive states and reclaim the sphere of privacy in social life. During these movements, dissident leaders and activists began to assert their rights to free speech and free association to carve out a public space for their political activities. Such movements saw the utility of the concept of civil society in its anti-statist charge” (Singh 199).

Contemporary period was completely influenced by liberal democracy and explicitly presented civil society concept in the way of enriching liberal and democratic virtues. Collapse of communism, failure of leftist movements and emergence of new social movements in third world, all these global changes left a remarkable space for glorifying democracy over other kinds of regime. Rise of social movements was becoming the most favorable place for civil society actor to participate in it as a great influencer factor. Civil society plays a key role in the democratization process especially in third world and authoritarian countries.

Contemporary theorists like John Kean, Jean L. Cohen, Andrew Arato, Michael Walzer, Jurgen Habermas and others, elucidated civil society as a public sphere where dialogues and discussions on different issues take place. This sphere itself clearly distinct from both the arena of state and economy (Carver 25).

Furthermore, Alexis de Tocqueville in his book “Democracy in America” mentioned the significance of public association in democracy. He viewed civil society as a protector and promoter of individual rights. Most prominent theorist Robert Putnam, in similar work on civil society, emphasized on civic engagement for the better functioning of democracy. Civic engagement creates social capital in society that transforms into generalized trust among citizens. It is a network of social communication that encourages people to participate in daily public affairs and help one another. Above all understandings contain west notion due to civil society’s

wide prevalence in western society. That's why in third world civil society was considered as a product of western society. Besides that, third waves of a democratization process brought relevance of civil society in third world country as well. Though it differs from western understanding of civil society as it follows different culture. But because of globalization, media and social networks, it has now been adapting in these societies too. Since civil society imparts democratic values in citizens. It works as a watch dog to examine state's action and urge government to function in a democratic manner.

In that sense, the nature of civil society has been changing progressively. In contemporary usage, civil society contains different association types such as non-government organization, social movements, public gatherings, schools, colleges club, libraries, academics and professionals etc.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Idea of civil society is about to support and strengthen the social and political system through civic engagements. Though it was difficult to reach on one definition. However, through this paper specific feature of civil society were taken into focus that differentiates it from other organization. As it is mentioned that civil society is an open society and has space for every individual. Violence has no space within its realm. Sometimes, civil society actors participate in civil society led movements where they find a favorable place for expressing their issues more effectively. Thus, it has become indispensable in modern democracy. As per normative understandings, civil society relies on democratic values and develops civic virtues in its members. Contemporary usage of civil society covers a wide range of public sphere that is called as third sphere. It is complementary to democracy since it provides appropriate grounds to citizens for participating in deliberation process that turns into political participation. Still, civil society is dynamic concept and shaping up according to different social and political contexts.

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