Civil society from liberal and communitarian perspectives

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Introduction

Initial data from my ongoing research on civil society in Kyrgyzstan indicates that some non-governmental organisations and academics are interested in such questions as what civil society is, how it developed in the West, a place of its origin, and how it can be applied to Kyrgyzstan. However, research data also shows that there is a lack of discussion on the above questions in a local academic milieu. Therefore, in this paper, I will try to answer the question of what civil society is. I will discuss different definitions of civil society from the liberal and communitarian perspectives. This paper is a platform for my next paper, in which I will discuss a civil society situation in Kyrgyzstan using one of the schools of thought on civil society. It will be available in January 2008.

A concept of civil society has a long and rich history. While its origins can be traced back to the times of Cicerone (Kumar 1993:376), its real rise as a centre of an intellectual and political discussion came about when a social order of a community was challenged by the progress of a market economy. Around the 12th century, the market economy started developing and resulted in 'new freedoms to buy, sell and own as well as to make a choice' (Howell and Pearce 2001:18). Such changes freed individuals from kinship and family and were also accompanied by striving for political power and political equality. These were key issues, which western political theorists of that time have addressed in their works on civil society (Howell and Pearce 2001).

As a result, different schools of thought have emerged. Such diversity was amplified with works of contemporary theorists after a recent revival of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (Kumar 1993). At present, civil society is known as a term with a variety of definitions. Notwithstanding a widespread use of the concept, especially in developing countries, it is not an easy task to agree on one definition due to their diversity and complexity. Nevertheless, the diverse pool of definitions within the western theory of the concept can be subsumed under two approaches: liberal and communitarian (Cohen and Arato 1995, Barber 1999 in Bartkowski and Regis 2003).

Liberal approach

From a historical perspective, the liberal understanding of civil society is expounded clearly in the work of Locke, who is a classic liberal. His vision of civil society revolves around a main flaw of the state of nature, which is lack of impartial judges. According to Locke, only civil society can resolve this inconvenience of the state of nature by providing equal and independent people with a legitimate political authority, which takes over a function of making impartial judgement on their conflicts (Dunn 2001:50-55). Put differently, Locke considered civil society as a legitimate political order, where people, who have learned to discipline their conducts – the civilised, could co-exist as a community. In other words, it was a contrast to the state of nature (Khilnani 2001:18-19).

Christianity is a central element in Locke's vision of civil society. It holds a community together as shared culture. Civil society is built upon it to maintain the community life (Khilnani 2001). A Christian creed that all people are equal before God is locus of Locke's work. Locke asserted that people were 'equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions…; all servants of one sovereign master' (Dunn 2001:44). Trust is a basis of a relationship between people (Dunn 2001).

According to Locke, the government derives from people and represents different groups of the society (Khilnani 2001:18-19). It has a 'fiduciary relation to society' since the society comes before the government. In case of violation of trust by the government, the society can 'recover its freedom of action' (Taylor 2006:92). In addition to the representative political power, to secure civil society, it is necessary to have private property rights and toleration of worship (Khilnani 2001:18-19).

When Christianity was no longer a sufficient response to the problem of the community, theorists of a commercial society, such as Adam Smith, offered a new approach, the secular one. A crucial point in their civil society was that relationships between people were based on trade need and more importantly on private sentiments. The latter ones not only made a distinction between market exchange and private relationships but they also introduced voluntariness and choice in relationship. People were freed from pre-commercial kin-bond and patron-client relations. They could enter into relationships with anyone they sympathised with (Khilnani 2001:21-22). As a result, strangers were not enemies any more. A community of indifferent citizens emerged. Such a transformation of people took a society a level up from barbarity and rudeness to politeness and polish. This led to a social, economic and moral order in the community – 'being the products of the unintended collective outcome of private action' (Khilnani 2001:21-22).

Taylor (2006) stresses on three features, which the above philosophers have introduced in their perceptions of civil society. The first feature is viewing society as 'an extrapolitical reality'. Taylor asserts that these philosophers considered society as an economy, that is to say, as 'an entity of interrelated acts of production, exchange, and consumption' with its own autonomous laws. For them, thus, the economy was an aspect of social life in which the society functioned outside of politics (Taylor 2006:94). The second feature is introducing a notion of public opinion. Taylor states that, for these philosophers, public opinion was 'something that has been elaborated in debate and discussion and is recognised by everyone as something held in common'. Most importantly, it was formed by society not by a political structure or a church as it was done before (Taylor 2006:95). The third feature is introducing a notion of civilisation. Taylor notes that the concept meant 'pacification, enlightenment, technical development, arts and sciences, and polish mores'. At that time, people of modern Europe started distinguishing themselves from other nations or their predecessors based on civility (Taylor 2006:96).

In the contemporary discourse, 'Ernest Gellner's work on civil society is one of the clearest expositions of the liberal position' (Howell and Pearce 2001:19). Gellner (1994:32) believes that a modern, standard definition of civil society as a cluster of non-governmental organisations standing against the state to prevent its domination has pitfalls, which can undermine the very sense of civil society. According to him, central authoritarianism has not always been oppressive. He claims that there has been another kind of oppression by referring to communities of the pre-modern times. The key point of his argument is that a social structure of communities, which was organised based on kin bonds, oppressed individuals. There was a certain place and role for each person in the community, which did not depend on the individual's will. The disobedience of the community rules was punished (Gellner 1994:42-25). Therefore, Gellner argues that civil society has to guard against not only from central authoritarianism but also from communalism, as he puts it from the 'tyranny of kings' and the 'tyranny of cousins'. This civil society, he stresses, should consist of modular men.

A modular man is an individual, who is free from kin bonds and rituals and can express his ideas and pursue his interests freely. Gellner believes that the modular man should have certain moral and intellectual qualities. He 'should be capable of undertaking and honouring, deeply internalising, commitments and obligations by a single and sober act. He also should be capable of lucid, Cartesian thought, which separates non-conflation of issues, the separation out of social strands, which makes society non-rigid presupposes not only moral willingness but also an intellectual capacity'. Gellner points out that clear thought is not given by birth, but it should be taught (Gellner 1994:42-45).

Further, Gellner goes on that there should be a cultural homogeneity for the modularity of men. Each individual should be replaceable. However, this does not imply that individuals should be identical. Conversely, they should be different for the sake of development. The irreplaceability occurs when there are no common symbols of communication between an individual, who is going to fill a vacant slot, and a group. Gellner refers to the shared communication of symbols as culture. He claims that the homogenous culture requires individuals to be modular and to change their social identity within a flexible social structure. However, it also limits their employability, effective participation and citizenship and makes them nationalists to protect their culture (Gellner 1994:43-44).

Another contemporary liberal is John Hall. He (1995) defines civil society by referring to an agrarian civilisation. According to him, the agrarian civilisation is not civil society notwithstanding the fact that it cannot penetrate thoughts of different pastoral tribes and peasant communities. Hall claims that civil society is about a civilised interaction of the state and the society and has to do with modernity, where such a state-society interaction is necessary. For Hall, civil society is self-organisation of the society. He points out that presence of and toleration for social diversity is very crucial. Like Gellner, Hall says that individuals should be unconfined from kinship ties and rituals. They should able to join and to leave any association voluntarily (Hall 1995:26-27).

Obviously, contemporary liberal understandings of civil society differ from the antecedent ones in one way or another. Let us compare the works of Locke and Gellner. It can be succinctly summarised from the above-stated that freedoms and rights of individuals are the loci in both works. For Locke, civil society is concerned with the provision of equal and independent individuals with impartial judges to solve conflicts, which arise between them in the state of nature. For Gellner, civil society is a mechanism to guard free individuals from the tyranny of kings and the tyranny of cousins. For both civil societies, there is need for shared culture to hold a community together. In the case of Locke, it is Christianity.

The positions of Locke and Gellner with regard to institutionalisation of civil society differ from each other. According to Locke, there is no distinction between civil and political societies. In fact, civil society is a synonym for the legitimate political order. For Gellner, civil society is located between the state and the individual. It is a space filled with various political associations and economic institutions, which should be established only on a voluntary basis (Gellner 1995:54). The theorists also have different visions on a relationship between the state and civil society. In Locke's work, civil society is pro-state (Dunn 2001:55). This is because Locke did not consider the state in modern post-Hobbesian form as 'a coercively effective monopoly claimant to the power to coerce legitimately' (Dunn 2001:55). The state is

representative and based on trust. However, if it fails to maintain trust, people can regain their freedom of actions. According to Gellner, the state and civil society have adversarial relationships. The role of civil society is to balance the state to prevent its monopoly of political power (Hall 1995:15). Additionally, as has been noted above, civil society also stands against communalism.

On the whole, the position of the contemporary liberals can be summarised as follows. The liberal understanding of civil society is based on freedoms and rights of individuals (Cohen and Arato 1995:8-9), particularly 'in the private dimensions', which 'include the realm of individual choice as well as social relationships in the market and the home' (Barber 1999:15 in Bartkowski and Regis 2003:128). Liberals claim that individuals have moral rights, which 'serve as constraints on government and on others but are under the control of the rights holder' (Cohen and Arato 1995:8-9). People have these rights because they have moral autonomy and human dignity. The idea of moral rights is premised on 'individual autonomy, moral egalitarianism and universalism' (Cohen and Arato 1995:8-9).

To sum up, the liberal approach to civil society can be defined as follows. Its key basis is freedoms and rights of individuals. Civil society is a space between the state and the individual. It is occupied with different political associations and economic institutions, where membership should be exclusively voluntary. The state and civil society oppose each other. The role of the state is to frame civil society. It is supposed to conduct non-intervention policy towards a private aspect of people's lives. The role of civil society is to check on the state to prevent its monopoly.

Communitarian approach

Hegel is known as an eminent communitarian. Along with his liberal predecessors, he discussed the repercussions of the rise of the market economy on the social order of the community (Khilnani 2001:23). By critiquing the liberal understanding of civil society, Hegel developed an alternative vision of the concept. He refused to believe that an autonomous and unregulated economy could have only benign effects (Taylor 2006:97). He also could not accept 'self-interest as the ultima ratio of social organisation' (Femia 2001:134).

The central element in Hegel's variant of civil society is that the interaction between people is premised on more than just self-interest. The individuals interact with each other because of solidarity and their will to live as a community (Femia 2001). For Hegel, an individual cannot achieve his ends without referring to others. When he refers to others, his ends become universal. Therefore, the achievement of his ends satisfies not only the welfare of his but of others too. Thus, he turns from an individual unit to a social whole (Jones 2001:123, Kumar 1993:378). Owing to educational power of civil society institutions, the individual comes to

understand that 'he wills his ends only in willing universal ends' (Kumar 1993:378). The universal ends find their ultimate destination in the state. In this way, the society becomes politically organised (Taylor 2006:97). In other words, Hegel's civil society is a space where the individuals achieve their welfare collectively. This means that the welfare of one individual depends on the welfare of others, that is to say, on civil society. Therefore, according to Hegel, civil society becomes a 'universal family' by 'drawing people to itself and requiring them to owe everything to it and to do everything by its means' (Hegel in Jones 2001:123).

Hegel institutionalises civil society in the form of different corporations, 'which are concerned with social, religious, professional and recreational life' (Kumar 1993:379). He asserts that their key function is to educate and represent their members. Trade unions and professional associations are the main corporations. These are legally organised bodies 'with powers to determine the recruitment of new entrants, to enforce standards of work, and to organise the welfare of their members' (Jones 2001:124). Other civil society institutions include 'the whole range of public institutions such as courts, welfare agencies and educational establishments' (Kumar 1993:379). Such a variety of civil society institutions make 'fragmentation and diversity of power' possible within the political system (Taylor 2006:98).

> Thus the different elements of Hegel's political society take up their role in the state, make up the different estates and form the basis for a differentiated constitution.… In this way, we avoid both the undifferentiated homogeneity of the general-will state, which Hegel thought must lead inevitably to tyranny and terror, and also the unregulated and ultimately self-destructive play of blind economic forces…(Taylor 2006:98).

The salient feature of Hegel's civil society is a relationship between the state and civil society. It can be considered that the state and civil society are complementary units of a whole organism. For Hegel, the state is not just a 'convenient partner' for individuals to achieve their needs as it was for his liberal forerunners but it is a token of their 'deep inner need to identify with social whole' (Femia 2001:134). Further, the state is a force that keeps civil society away from destruction. It incorporates corporations and association of civil society into itself (Taylor 2006:97) and supervises them (Jones 2001:124). In other words, civil society cannot self-regulate itself. It needs the state to do so for it (Taylor 2006:97).

Hegel's understanding of civil society is echoed in works of other philosophers. For example, Gramsci draws on Hegelian ideas, particularly on 'political and cultural hegemony of a social group over the entire society as ethical content of the state', while developing his interpretation of the concept (Kumar 1993:382). For Gramsci, civil society can be found in the superstructure, that is to say, in the state. He asserts that the state is a combination of political and civil societies. Gramsci develops his conception of civil society as a response to a question

why capitalism did not fall as Marx and his followers predicted. He rejects an idea of Marx, which has reduced civil society to a mere economic sphere and has stated that capitalism makes people egocentric. Gramsci does not consider capitalism as an ethics-free place. His idea is that the exploitative exchange relationships between the classes are 'underpinned by a complex of moral injunctions that make this relationships seem right and proper to all parties in the exchange' (Femia 2001:139).

Gramsci agrees with Marx that one class has the hegemony over the society. Thus, he asserts that the hegemony is manufactured and maintained in civil society through so-called private organisations (Kumar 1993:383). According to Gramsci, people are not driven just by their basic needs but also by their values notwithstanding the fact that they might be biased due to such factors as class and others (Femia 2001:139). Therefore, the superior class spreads its values through different private institutions to maintain its power (Kumar 1993:383). As a result, for Gramsci, civil society is a place where 'the values are established, debated, contested and changed'. It is a necessary instrument for the ruling class along with 'ownership of the means of production and capture of the apparatus of the state' to ensure its dominance in the society. It is also a space, which any new class striving to overthrow the old one has to capture (Kumar 1993:384).

As their precursors, contemporary communitarians critique the liberal approach to civil society, particularly its core principles: individualism and universalism. With regard to the first principle, 'communitarians argue that the liberal ideals of moral autonomy and individual self-development are based on an atomistic, abstract, and ultimately incoherent concept of the self as the subject of rights (Cohen and Arato 1995:9). This, they go on, results in concentration on non-political forms of freedom and a limited understanding of political life, agency and ethical life. Communitarians back up their critique of liberals with an empirical argument, which states that 'individuals are situated within an historical and social context; they are socialised into communities through which they derive their individual and collective identity, language, world concepts, moral categories, etc. (Cohen and Arato 1995:9). Furthermore, they assert that their liberal opponents do not fully understand that 'communities are independent sources of value and that there are communal duties and virtues…distinct from duties to others qua their abstract humanity (Cohen and Arato 1995:9).

As for the second principle, communitarians argue that 'what the liberal sees as universal norms grounded in the universal character of humanity (dignity and moral autonomy) are in fact particular norms embedded in shared understandings of specific communities' (Cohen and Arato 1995:9). The individual derives his principles for moral judgment only from a community, in which he is integrated. Duties belong not to an abstract man but to a member. As a result, 'the

proper basis of moral theory is the community and its good, not the individual and her rights' (Cohen and Arato 1995:9). Communitarians believe that people can 'lead meaningful moral lives and enjoy true freedom only on the basis of a shared conception of the good life and within the framework of a substantive ethical political community (with a specific political culture)' (Cohen and Arato 1995:10).

Barber states that, in the communitarian understanding, civil society is a "complex welter of ineluctably social relationships that tie people together into families, clans, clubs, neighborhoods, communities, and hierarchies" (Barber 1999:14 in Bartkowski and Regis 2003:128). Communitarians focus on 'the pre-contractual nature of social relations' and make a special stress on 'the mutual obligations and responsibilities' that overshadow individual choice (Barber 1999:14 in Bartkowski and Regis 2003). Community unites individuals into the social structure and provides moral guidance. Communitarians imagine 'citizens as publicly enmeshed clansmen who are "tied to [their] community by birth, blood…"' (Barber 1999:14 in Bartkowski and Regis 2003:128).

Walzer (1998:16) asserts that civil society is a space, where people can freely associate and communicate with each another, form and reform groups of all sorts, 'not for the sake of any particular formation – family, tribe, nation, religion, commune, brotherhood or sisterhood, interest group or ideological movement – but for the sake of sociability itself'. This is because people are by nature social beings first rather than political or economic beings. According to Walzer, 'civil society is a setting of settings: all are included, non is preferred' (Walzer 1998:16).

Walzer claims that in the communitarian approach the state not only frames civil society as it does in the liberal approach but also occupies space in it. 'It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic rules of all association members to think about a common good, beyond their own conceptions of the good life' (Walzer 1998:24). Civil society without the state engenders 'unequal power relationships'. Only the state can challenge this flaw of civil society. Furthermore, the state has to foster the roughly equal and widely dispersed capabilities that sustain the associational networks, where civility, which makes democratic politics possible, can be learned (Walzer 1998:24).

There are other proponents of the interrelated state-civil society relationships. Keanne asserts that the state is an important condition for the existence and operation of civil society. Unlike those who believe that democratisation and social justice can be achieved in the non-state sphere, Keanne believes that they can be achieved where the state and civil society in collaboration. Therefore, he states they 'must become the condition for each other's democratisation'. Civil society must become 'a permanent thorn in the side of political power'.

However, it needs supervision of the state in order to avoid self-paralyzing conflict and anarchy (Kumar 1993:385).

> In short, I am arguing that without a secure and independent civil society of autonomous public spheres, goals such as freedom and equality, participatory planning and community decision-making will be nothing but empty slogans. But without the protective, redistributive and conflict-mediating functions of the state, struggles to transform civil society will become ghettoized, divided and stagnant, or will spawn their own, new forms of inequality and unfreed (Keanne 1988:15 in Kumar 1993:385).

To sum up, the above has suggested that the central feature of the communitarian approach is the life of the community. Individuals are not considered autonomous since they are historically and socially integrated into the community. They derive their values, concepts, and a language from the community. Therefore, they are more considered as members rather than autonomous individuals. The state is not a mere framework of civil society. It is its part, which guides it to the common good. In the communitarian approach, the institutions of civil society are associations of corporative and communitarian character, which can be based on family, community, religion and other interests.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has discussed the liberal and communitarian approaches to civil society within the western theory of the concept. Both approaches address the main concern of how to maintain the social order of the community under the modern conditions. The differences between the approaches can be summarized based on three central facets. The first facet is the role of the individual. In the liberal approach, the individual and his freedom, rights and interests are the core aspect. The individuals should be free. They should be able to associate with each other exclusively on a voluntary basis. Their main interest is to fulfill their rights, freedoms and interests. In the communitarian approach, the individual is considered as a part of the social whole. He is socially conscious and associates with his counterparts out of solidarity and desire to live as a community. In other words, he is a member of the community rather than an autonomous individual.

The second facet is the role of the state. In the liberal approach, the state has a limited role. Its role is reduced to administrating justice in the society and being a framework for civil society. It conducts a non-intervention policy towards the private aspect of individuals' lives. Civil society institutions have to constantly check upon the state in order to prevent its monopoly. In the communitarian approach, civil society and the state are complementary elements of the whole. It not only frames civil society but also guides it to the common good.

The state is a necessary condition for the existence of civil society since it keeps it away from self-destruction. The third facet is the institutions of civil society. The liberal approach of civil society includes political associations and economic institutions established merely on a voluntary basis. The communitarian approach also includes associations but they can be based not only on voluntarism but also on corporatism and communitarianism.

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