

How the Presence of Vibrant Civil Society Triggers Democratisation

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Abstract

How does a vibrant civil society establish a profound basis for the emergence of liberal democracy and what particular type of democracy does the presence of such a civil society propagate? This work focuses on the participatory nature of the citizenry in a vigorous civil society and its direct implications for the democratisation of a given country. The principal merit of civil society is that it provides a transitory, interactive cosmos between private and public spheres and therefore encourages people to organize, educate and enrich themselves forming a separate entity from the government.

Keywords: Civil society, democratisation, liberal democracy.

Introduction

Doubtless, civil society is a widely used and misused term, especially in relation to the modern conception of liberal democracy. On some occasions, it is treated as a kind of miraculous remedy for a country's path toward democratisation, on others it is used as a point of criticism of actual democracies. Due to this ambiguous usage, there is much scope for a critical discussion of civil society in light of its significance for liberal democracy. If we enquire whether a vibrant civil society is a necessary condition for the formation, maintenance and long-term development of a genuine liberal democracy, we will first of all require a clear notion of what distinguishes a vibrant civil society from a listless one. For that purpose we will concisely present the most common measures of civil society, comparing them in terms of merit. Likewise, we shall introduce a definition of our

dependent variable liberal democracy including the key criteria it rests upon. Apart from these initial clarifications, we will briefly investigate whether a flourishing civil society could in some cases be an obstacle to the emergence of liberal democracy, thus adapting a more critical perspective. Having established the foundation for a purposeful discussion we proceed to interpret civil society's significance for liberal democracy in light of three crucial outcomes it ideally entails. Firstly, civil society in any flavour creates an intermediary zone between private and public, which empowers the individual to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfil his role as a democratic citizen. Secondly, the presence of a vibrant civil society directly provokes decentralisation of power, a characteristic feature of liberal democracy. Thirdly, civil society (if functioning properly) decisively contributes to a pluralism of ideas and interests - thus diminishing an authoritarian emphasis on a single, often ideological, paradigm such as religion, nationalism, or socialism.

After looking at these intrinsic features of civil society, we will turn our attention to other conditions that are necessary for the presence of liberal democracy, namely market-capitalism and a symbiotic relationship between the so-called cornerstones of society – the market, the government, and civil society itself. In the course of this work, I will focus on the ways in which a vibrant civil society is clearly necessary, but by no means sufficient for a country to sustain liberal democracy. Therefore, I will also demonstrate two other indispensable factors that are essential for the presence of liberal democracy.

Considering the diversity of notions of civil society, I will mainly focus on the distinction between the three models proposed by Michael Edwards, which are civil society as “associational life”, as the “good society” and as the “public sphere” (Edwards, 2009, p. 18, p. 45, p. 63). At the same time, this clarification serves to contrast the idea of civil society to the term ‘social capital’, which comprises social interaction in its totality and is employed to give it a measurable value. Despite mirroring a lot of intersections, the two terms aren't interchangeable, as civil society is a sphere of human interaction that usually creates and rests upon the presence of social capital (World Bank).

What makes civil society vibrant and how it can be related to liberal democracy

The vibrancy of a given civil society is most commonly determined by proxy measurements that are then used for comparative analysis. Such proxy measurements of civil society are membership in voluntary associations, expenditures in the voluntary sector, participation in demonstrations, boycotts and petitions, and informal social networks (Paturyan, 2012, p. 2). The higher a country scores according to these measures, the more vibrant its civil society is. Clearly, this form of measurement is problematic for the reason that the mere abundance of voluntary association and action doesn't necessitate the actual flourishing of civil society. That is why research that includes more extensive qualifications, as for instance the one performed by Freedom House (2012), gives a more meaningful account of the state of civil society. In short, we can ascertain that a vibrant civil society is likely to generate social capital and thus facilitate the collaborative interaction between individuals. This result is not necessarily a reflection of a high number of civic associations, but of the quality of their inner workings.

When Benjamin Barber speaks about civil society as “a third and independent domain” (Barber, 1998, p. 47), he alludes to the importance of a vibrant civil society in its role as an opposition force to a country's ruling powers of market and government. But does such an opposite pole necessarily entail the formation of values that characterise a liberal democracy? Although this claim might convey, at its core, a correct message, the general formulation definitely makes it uncertain. This has to do with the fact that one needs to assess the type of pole that emerges in opposition to the existing power structure. It could propagate violence and subordination, which stand in stark contrast to any notion of liberal democracy. Hence, we should concentrate on analysing the underlying principles and features of civil society in terms of their significance for liberal democracy.

Now the time has come to substantiate the term liberal democracy which refers to “a political system marked not only by free and fair elections but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property” (Zakaria, 2007, p. 17). This distinguished definition of liberal democracy will serve as a model in order to establish a precise interrelationship between civil society and liberal democracy. Thus, we will examine certain characteristic aspects of civil society that directly provoke a country's being a liberal democracy. Now, it becomes crucial to highlight that our investigation aims to prove the

importance of a flourishing civil society in two different respects: on the one hand for non-democracies to democratise, and on the other hand for already sustained democracies to further strengthen their democratic status.

Civil society creates an intermediary zone between private and public

It has been posited that individuals mostly get engaged in two opposite spheres: the public and the private. The public sphere comprises the citizen's political participation by means of electing representatives or by public expression, whereas the private sphere primarily mirrors the person's activity as an economic subject, both as a producer and a consumer. In this context, we can neglect the person's individual boundaries, of which family is the most important example, since we aim to consider the individual in its role as a democratically determining agent. Let us imagine the situation that a citizen feels alienated in its role both as an economic and a political agent. There seems to be no platform for her to express her views, to share both knowledge and interest with like-minded people, or even to protect her fundamental rights. In such a scenario, the individual is deprived of any power and thereby lacks the possibility to learn to exercise it. Such a citizen necessarily feels "homeless, suspended between big bureaucratic governments...and private markets..." (Barber, 1998, p. 45).

This observation doesn't necessarily reflect a division of private and public, but points to the existence of separable spheres in which particular needs and goals are pursued. According to this reasoning, the economic sphere provides the necessary resources for a person to achieve a sustainable living, the political sphere serves to entail true representation of a country's citizens and the accountability of the rulers while the sphere of family and friends marks the sphere of interpersonal affection, sympathy and love.

The idea we want to put forward here is that civil society should also be seen as a distinct sphere that serves a particular purpose, namely the assertion of common interests and rights within a range of societal networks (Calhoun, 1993). This sphere of civil society is neither strictly private nor public, but establishes a highly important intermediary zone between private and public. Strikingly, civil society is both an expression of the private interests of the individual and a channel for a more effective public role of the individual as part of a greater social network. It is by that definition that

we can see its direct connection with democracy: civil society becomes a "democratic institution" (Calhoun, 1993, p. 279) increasing the power of the people to "alter their own conditions of existence" (Calhoun, 1993, p. 279). In that way, individuals acquire certain skills and experiences that enhance the "collective pursuit and defense of their interests and values" (Kim, 2000, p. 9) and by doing so strengthen their role as democratic citizens. By contrast, the lack of a functioning civil society doesn't necessarily lead to an authoritarian regime, but it makes a society far more prone to succumb to such a trend as an important empowering mechanism is missing. Additionally, even an already sustained democracy faces the menace of collapse if an active civil society is lacking or its character begins to deteriorate so that individuals as a result cease to engage in civic affairs. A probable consequence of civic apathy is political apathy as the former promotes the latter. Thereby, democracy also becomes endangered and may disappear entirely in the long run.

Whereas the negative effects of a lack of a vibrant civil society have now been illustrated, we keep looking for immediate effects of such a society regarding a consolidation of liberal democracy. We may already note that the presence of a civil society empowers the individual to find her own sphere that is independent of her role as either economic subject or political decision-maker. This independent, civic sphere "offers a space for public work, civic business, and other common activities that are focused neither on profit nor on a welfare bureaucracy's client services" (Barber, 1998, p. 44). That is the transitory aspect about civil society that establishes a linkage between private and public sphere and most importantly constitutes the cosmos in which citizens can ideally interact in a peaceful, productive and mutually enriching manner.

Civil society significantly contributes to an ongoing decentralisation of power

A corollary of our notion of civil society as an independent and private cosmos in which individuals can discover and fulfil themselves is the crucial aspect of the decentralisation of power. By joining different associations individuals unite with others and learn to exercise different forms of freedoms, such as freedom of assembly and expression. In this respect, it is important to outline that associations constitute forces that are independent of the government and as such contribute to a separation of wealth, knowledge and power among different groups of people. The reason why this aspect contributes crucially to the formation of a democracy is that it prevents the accumulation of

power by the state, which is so characteristic of the authoritarian state. On Michael Edwards' account, "it cannot be coincidental that rising inequalities and concentrated power in America have paralleled the decline of nationally federated associations such as labor unions and the gradual erosion of the public sphere" (Edwards, 2009, p. 89). So what exactly does this show us? This underpins the observation that a poor civil society with regard to the associational sphere amounts to an uneven accumulation of power and wealth, as well as to "vertical relations of authority and dependency, as embodied in patron-client networks" (Putnam, 1993, p. 101).

Thus, it follows that the presence of a broad range of active associations entails "primarily horizontal networks, bringing together agents of equivalent status and power" (Putnam, 1993, p. 173), which necessarily contributes to the phenomenon, which is so significant for our discussion, of the division and decentralisation of power among the distinct actors within a state framework. To substantiate this essential aspect of a vibrant civil society we should make a distinction between decentralising and privatizing power (Barber, 1998, p. 62). Whereas the latter suggests a "slack and irresponsible government" (Barber, 1998, p. 62), the former "nourishes, protects and encourages robust civil society" (Barber, 1998, p. 62). In short, one has to emphasise that the decentralisation of power and the concomitant horizontal relations which constitute a vibrant civil society evidently promote the formation of a genuine liberal democracy. Further, it is important to direct our attention to an additional striking feature of civic engagement and its exact confluence with our notion of a liberal democracy, namely the rise of pluralism.

Civil society adds up to pluralism

Michael Edward considers civil society as a public sphere that empowers associations to represent diverse beliefs, views and values whereby a multifaceted, pluralistic society is promoted. In such a society each member can freely elaborate, express and debate on a set of issues, values and ideas. In this way, diversity promotes exchange of information and as a result innovation and progress is accelerated. At the same time, this pluralist feature contributes decisively to "enlightened understanding" (Dahl, 1998, p. 37) since each individual obtains the theoretical and often practical access to a wide range of opinions and perspectives. This aspect has a huge impact on the public's qualification to exercise democracy since citizens thus have a real choice, the choice between

“alternative viewpoints” (Edwards, 2009, p. 64).

In addition, the presence of various conflicting civil institutions furthers the idea of checks and balances, which refers to the mutual control and limitation of different sources of power. Still, one might object that such diversity would add up to a fragmented society, which is characterised by mutual hostility, intolerance and conflict. But what is the alternative? What will become evident if we imagine a state in which there is one paramount idea or belief which prevails against all others is that this lays the foundation for a regime which doesn't need to be affirmed by consent for the very reason that the prevailing idea is regarded as something absolutely indisputable and at times even divine. If we consult Adam Smith's opinion on this topic, the key problem will become more obvious: “The interested and active zeal of religious teachers can be dangerous and troublesome only when there is, either but one sect tolerated in the society, or where the whole of a large society is divided into two or three great sects.” (Smith, 1976, p. 314) Irrespective of the origin of this idea, whether it is religious, political or social, it is strongly protected by the government and even enforced by means of coercion if faced with opposition. To make this claim clearer, we should take a historic example into account that represents such a predominance of a single view.

Let us consider the communist ideal that was pursued by the Soviet Union over a period of more than 70 years. Communism as an idea transcended all facets of human existence such as education, social interaction, the labour market and governmental institutions, which in itself doesn't exclude the possibility of a democratic regime. Likewise, in the modern time capitalism seems to be such a prevailing concept which ceased to be a pure economic system, but left its characteristic imprint on the totality of human behaviour and mutual interaction. Whether it is the social sphere which manifests a strong emergence of materialism and a simultaneous decline in religiousness or the political sphere which is dominated by corporate lobbyism, capitalism can be considered as a prevailing modern paradigm. Accordingly, the very idea of one predominating paradigm as we have now recognised is an obvious obstacle to the consolidation of liberal democracy. The presence of such a single paradigm undermines and often even prohibits the formation of opposition poles and is mirrored in elections that don't reflect the actual will of the citizens.

That is how one of the cornerstones of a democratic system, “free and fair election” (Zakaria, 2007, p. 17), is eliminated by the simple lack of pluralism. On the contrary, the presence of a vibrant civil society excludes the possibility of such a development which has to do with the very nature of such

a civil society as a “non-legislative, extra-judicial, public space in which societal differences, social problems, public policy, government action and matters of community and cultural identity are developed and debated” (Edwards, 2009). However, we must not forget that this depiction reflects a civil society in its ideal manifestation, which doesn’t exactly reflect reality.

Market-capitalism as an additional necessary condition for liberal democracy

As we have witnessed there is a narrow interrelationship between vibrant civil society and liberal democracy, but is this the most important and possibly only necessary condition? We have stressed the significance of some elements of civil society, such as the formation of a transitory sphere between public and private, the decentralisation of power, and perhaps most decisively the emergence of pluralism. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind other necessary conditions for the construction of a genuine liberal democracy. One of the most fundamental conditions is certainly market-capitalism, because it propels individuals and groups of people who aren’t guided by the government to acquire wealth and prosperity.

In this respect, one has to remember the importance of the decentralisation of power, and one may be entitled to ask if there is any economic system which is more appropriate to achieve this goal than a free-market economy. The principal reason for this is that in “a market-capitalist economy, the economic entities are either individuals or enterprises that are privately owned by individuals and groups, and not, for the most part, by the state” (Dahl, 1998, p. 167). The success of these economic actors decreases the government’s supremacy regarding capital, labour resources, technology or knowledge, since it enables these actors to become autonomous and self-determining in the absence of any “central direction” (Dahl, 1998, p. 167).

By the same token, the risk of political suppression through the government is considerably reduced as governmental control and enforcement are restricted. In addition, market-capitalism generated, from a historical perspective, immense economic growth, which directly promoted the emergence of liberal democracy (Dahl, 1998, p. 167), whereas economic stagnation results in anti-democratic movements, such as the disruption of the rule of law due to unbridled conflict between economic subjects. Strikingly, a thriving economy as achieved, for instance, by a capitalist-market economy also promotes the vibrancy of a civil society and therefore should be regarded as a significant aspect

in our discussion of the interrelation between civil society and liberal democracy. Yet, you might question, why is this the case?

This has to do with the kind of growth that is generated in a market economy, which no longer remains in the hands of the ruling elite, but is distributed across entire social classes. Thereby, market-capitalism “creates a large middling stratum of property owners who typically seek education, autonomy, personal freedom, property rights, the rule of law, and participation in government” (Dahl, 1998, p. 168). The depicted impact of market-capitalism stimulates civil society from three distinct standpoints that we reflected on the very beginning of our enterprise. First, it offers to a wide range of economically independent citizens the opportunity to join associations which assert a certain appeal on them. That is civil society as an associational sphere. Second, the notion of civil society as a good society mirrors values and principles such as tolerance, trust, autonomy, freedom, or democracy (Edwards, 2009, p. 47) that are similar to the ones strengthened by market-capitalism.

Ultimately, market-capitalism and concomitant economic welfare lay the foundation for a “discursive public sphere” (Habermas, 1987) since people have the ability to and interest in constituting themselves as active citizens. Albeit it is a legitimate approach to investigate distinct conditions in an isolated manner, it might also be helpful to reflect on the mutual interaction of civil society, market and government, and the effects that follow from this for our core question.

Interaction between civil society and other spheres determines the success of liberal democracy

As indicated in the last paragraph an essential condition for a country’s being a genuine liberal democracy is the interaction between the different cornerstones of the state as a whole, namely the market, the government and, as we now might think, civil society. A system of mutual checks and balances needs to be there to ensure “effective participation” (Dahl, 2000, p. 37) on behalf of the citizenry. It is unlikely and at the same time undesirable that these cornerstones will transform in completely independent entities. This has to do with the immediate dependence of the state’s success on their effective linkage. Too wide a gap between them would bear the risk of their respective degeneration, whereas a too strong linkage between these elements would increase the probability of one actor having supremacy and dominance in the long run.

To make this subtle interdependence more comprehensible, we should elaborate on the significance of the autonomous character of civil society. Unless civil society is truly autonomous, it can easily be infiltrated by governmental or economic agents who exclusively pursue their own interest as we will consider in short. Doubtless, this would severely endanger the integrity of civil society. Yet, such an exploitation of civil society not only weakens its contribution to a country's being a liberal democracy, but corrupts the entire system from the inside, so that authoritarianism and despotism are likely to result. Thus, we have to accentuate the necessity to find an equilibrium between civil society and its main obstacles in order to achieve genuine liberal democracy: "government itself, when it is arrogant and overweening; market dogmas, when they presume that private individuals and groups can secure public goods; and the yearning for community, when it subordinates liberty and equality to solidarity" (Barber, 1998, p. 69).

Critique of the role of civil society

At this stage, it becomes expedient to adopt a critical perspective from which the importance of civil society has been undermined and even negated. A common line of criticism goes that the presence of a vigorous civil society doesn't solve the problem of elite domination, which pervades both the government and the market. Rather, civil society is marked by the same elite structure and therefore it is questioned that civil society can ever promote liberal democracy. Here, one can object that assuming that civil society is subject to elite domination doesn't imply that large parts of the population are excluded. Surely the cost of participating in civil society doesn't lead to individuals being entirely excluded from it. The primary cost of civic participation is time and not material resources, so that people who want to become an active part of civil society can do so according to their individual capacity and motivation.

Adding to that, there are various degrees of civic participation which naturally vary in terms of the resources people need to have. Yet, considering a person who is only minimally engaged in a single civic association, there are still opportunities for this person to acquire new information and knowledge through his engagement. This person may not play an integral part in the democratic process, but she may at least express her voice through voting because of a sense of social responsibility she developed by means of her civic participation. For that reason it would be

fallacious to infer that we should get rid of civil society due to it being dominated by elites since there is hardly a human system which doesn't comprise a form of domination or discrimination. In fact, civil society is a structure that is able to challenge existing elites since both market actors and government officials occupy completely different spheres of action. In addition, a thriving civil society erects higher demands to its main figures resulting in them being more accountable and transparent. In sharp contrast, in the case that civil society lacks or is weak there is little scope for individuals to oppose power structures, as became particularly evident in our discussion of the decentralisation of power that results from a vibrant civil society.

Conclusion

In the course of this work we have expounded the main characteristics of civil society that serve as a driving force for liberal democracy to appear in the short run and be sustained in the long run. These are linkages between the private and public spheres, decentralisation of power, and pluralism. It is crucial to recognise that the more vibrant civil society is the greater the extent to which it promotes those developments and hence the more likely democratisation will occur. We have also elaborated on other necessary prerequisites for liberal democracy such as market capitalism and an effective collaboration between government and market actors. What do our gained insights ultimately amount to? Do we have to regard a vibrant civil society both as a source of and a panacea for liberal democracy? Indeed, the close overlap between fundamental features of liberal democracy and the impact of a vibrant civil society makes it rational to deduce that civil society, where it thrives in a country, directly promotes the emergence of liberal democracy. However, the underlying problem is that conversely liberal democracy in at least a basic form needs to be established to empower citizens to get engaged in civic participation, mutual interaction and public deliberation. At this point, we begin to recognise the immense difficulty of distinguishing between source and end, facilitator and recipient. Nevertheless, this is not the matter of a selection between these two, civil society and liberal democracy, but rather the matter of finding a setting in which they can display their undeniable merits to the greatest extent.

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