The Concept of Civil Society
Its Central Role in Shaping Democracy

Origin

The modern usage of the term is often traced to Adam Ferguson, who saw the development of a "commercial state" as a way to change the corrupt feudal order and strengthen the liberty of the individual.[1] While Ferguson did not draw a line between the state and the society, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, made this distinction in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.[2] In this work, civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in German) was a stage on the dialectical relationship between Hegel's perceived opposites, the macro-community of the state and the micro-community of the family.[3] Broadly speaking, the term was split, like Hegel's followers, to the political left and right. On the left, it became the foundation for Karl Marx's bourgeois society[4]; to the right it became a description for all non-state aspects of society, expanding out of the economic rigidity of Marxism into culture, society and politics.[5]

Direct Link to America

In *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), Alexis de Tocqueville praised the New World and the democracy it would bring, while at the same time warning against the dangers of tyranny of the majority and what he called 'mild' despotism. He saw democracy as an equation that balanced liberty and equality, concern for the individual as well as the community. Tocqueville thought that extreme social equality would lead to isolation, more intervention by the government and thus less liberty. A critic of individualism, Alexis de Tocqueville thought that association, the coming together of people for common purpose, would bind Americans to an idea of nation larger than selfish desires, thus making a civil society which wasn't exclusively dependent on the state.

"Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types -- religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large, and very minute …. Nothing in my view deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America."

Current research shows, at some level --

Link between quality of public life and the performance of social institutions

Education, urban poverty, unemployment, control of crime and drug abuse, health all linked to civic engagement.
Norms and networks required for civic engagement.

U.S. plays central role in systematic studies of the links between democracy and civil society.

**Definition**

There are myriad definitions of *civil society*. The London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society working definition is illustrative:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.[6]

**Civil society and democracy**

The literature on links between civil society and democracy have their root in early liberal writings like those of de Tocqueville. However they were developed in significant ways by 20th century theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who identified the role of civil society in a democratic order as vital[7].

They argued that the political element of many civil society organisations facilitates better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result[8].

More recently, Robert Putnam has argued that even non-political organisations in civil society are vital for democracy. This is because they build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it[9].

Others, however, have questioned how democratic civil society actually is. Some have noted that the civil society actors have now obtained a remarkable amount of political power without anyone directly electing or appointing them[10].

**Civil society and globalization**

The term civil society is currently often used by critics and activists as a reference to sources of resistance to and the domain of social life which needs to be protected against globalization. This is because it is seen as acting beyond boundaries and across different
territories\footnote{\textsuperscript{11}}. However, as for civil society can, under many definitions, include those businesses and institutions who support globalization, this is a contested use\footnote{\textsuperscript{12}}.

On the other hand others see globalization as a social phenomenon bringing classical liberal values which inevitably lead to a larger role for civil society at the expense to politically derived state institutions.

**Examples of institutions within civil society**

- non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- private voluntary organizations (PVOs)
- peoples' organizations
- community-based organizations
- Intermediary organizations for the voluntary and non-profit sector
- community foundations
- Community leadership development programs
- civic clubs
- trade unions
- gender, cultural, and religious groups
- charities
- social and sports clubs
- cooperatives
- environmental groups
- professional associations
- academia
- businesses
- policy institutions
- consumers/consumer organizations
- the media
- citizens' militia
- religious organizations
- civic groups
- community organizations
- clubs

Whether all of these institutions are by definition part of civil society is up for debate. Neera Chandhoke, a scientist from India, thinks not. She concludes that only institutions that are critical of the state are the real thing, while the rest are merely not governmental. The key here is that not every institution is a 'countervailing power' to the state. In developing countries, civil society is popular with aid donors because it can make government behave in a better way. But mock civil society organisations can exist that serve only to gain access to development aid.
Footnotes

1. An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 1767
2. Ettext of Philosophy of Right Hegel, 1827 (translated by Dyde, 1897)
4. ibid
5. ibid
7. Almond, G., & Verba, S.; 'The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes And Democracy In Five Nations; 1989; Sage
8. ibid'
10. Agnew, John; 2002; 'Democracy and Human Rights' in Johnston, R.J., Taylor, Peter J. and Watts, Michael J. (eds); 2002; Geographies of Global Change; Blackwell
12. United Nations: Partners in Civil Society