
Civil Society in African Contexts: Reflections on the Usefulness of a Concept

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the usefulness of the concept of civil society — both as an analytical construct and as a policy tool — in non-Western contexts, drawing on a selected review of literature on Africa from anthropology and development studies. Rejecting arguments that the concept has little meaning outside its Western origins, but critical of the sometimes crude export of the concept by Western development donors seeking to build 'good governance', the author examines different local meanings being created around the concept as part of an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and markets. The article seeks to clarify different theoretical traditions in thinking about civil society, and suggests distinguishing the use of civil society as an analytical term from the set of actually existing groups, organizations and processes which are active on the ground. The concept is therefore useful in the analysis of contemporary politics, but is also important because it has a capacity to inspire action.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a global ubiquity to the concept of civil society among researchers and activists, and a widespread assumption among many policy-makers in different parts of the world of its global relevance to strengthening development and democracy. The aim of this article is to provide some reflections upon whether or not the concept of civil society can be seen as useful — both in terms of the analysis of social and political processes, and in relation to policy intervention aimed at poverty reduction and development — in the context of non-Western societies; and if so, how.

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The question of usefulness can be explored along two dimensions: on the one hand, the concept of civil society may be 'useful to think with' in the sense of supporting analysis which can help to make sense of political and social realities, while on the other it may be 'useful to act with', by helping to inspire action on the ground. The term civil society, which itself has multiple meanings, may of course also be useful in different ways to different kinds of people, including political activists, development workers, policy-makers and academic researchers. Among some development policy-makers and policy-focused academics, an idea of civil society has become influential which tends to be deployed in ways which limit not only the diversity of local civil society understandings and struggles, but also the essentially political nature of the concept itself. In providing a critique of this trend, this article seeks to contribute to research on the relationship between concepts, ideologies and development policy and, perhaps, to aspects of development practice.

This introduction presents some brief general comments about the recent rise to prominence of the concept of civil society, as both an analytical construct and as a policy tool. The article then moves on to discuss several different views about civil society in non-Western contexts, drawn from a selected review of literature on Africa from anthropology and development studies. It is not the purpose of the article to engage in detail with the complex definitional debates about the meanings of civil society, which have been summarized effectively elsewhere (Keane, 1998; van Rooy, 1998); nor does it aim at a comprehensive review of the African politics literature. It is not the intention to attempt to generalize about Africa, which is vast, complex and diverse. Rather, the article aims to explore selectively some of the different positions in relation to the relevance of civil society which have appeared in this literature.

It is useful to begin with a brief discussion of the different versions of the concept of civil society which are commonly drawn upon. Civil society is generally understood as 'the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the State and marketplace' (van Rooy, 1998: 30). Civil society is usually seen as being situated beyond the household, and writers such as Robert Putnam (1993) — whose work has been highly influential among policy-makers in recent years — argue that civil society is composed of horizontal solidaristic groups which cross-cut vertical ties of kinship and patronage. The idea of civil society has many different roots. The Scottish enlightenment thinker Adam Ferguson saw civil society as a socially desirable alternative both to the state of nature and the heightened individualism of emergent capitalism (Ferguson, 1767/1995). The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel argued that self-organized civil society needed to be balanced and ordered by the state, otherwise it would become self-interested and would not contribute to the common good (see Hegel, 1821/1991). Both approaches shaped the concept's early evolution. Moving from the social and political sphere to a narrower organizational focus, the work of Alexis de Tocqueville has been widely influential and has been used to

support arguments 'in favour of' civil society. De Tocqueville's positive account of nineteenth century associationalism in the United States (de Tocqueville, 1835/1994) stressed volunteerism, community spirit and independent associational life as protections against the domination of society by the state, and indeed as a counterbalance which helped to keep the state accountable and effective. This account — and elements of those which preceded it — tended to stress the role of civil society as one in which some kind of equilibrium was created in relation to the state and the market. The neo-Tocquevillian position can now be seen in current arguments in many Western countries that the level of associationalism within a society can be associated with positive values of trust and co-operation.

Two other issues are frequently flagged in discussions of civil society. One is the idea that civil society is essentially fragile, borne out by Putnam's (2000) account of anxieties surrounding the 'collapse' of community in the United States, typified by his idea that people now go 'bowling alone' instead of in groups. The other is concern about the historical specificity or otherwise of civil society, which is a concept which has clear roots in Western European experience and which may therefore have only limited relevance to non-Western contexts (Blaney and Pasha, 1993). Both concerns are revealed in Brown's (2000) account of civil society as a precarious, time-bound construct which first emerged from a distinct 'historical moment' in certain areas of Western Europe during the late eighteenth century. The new middle classes, along with a commercializing landed aristocracy, required conditions for sanctioned private accumulation underwritten by a state which maintained legal order and stability. However the state was unable to impose religious conformity, which led to an atmosphere of relative tolerance in which a new civil society flourished. The state became strong enough to maintain law and order but not so strong as to become oppressive — a balance which Brown (2000: 8) argues was crucial:

There is very little margin for error here — if the state is too extensive it will strangle civil society at birth, too weak and private institutions will compete for its role as provider of order; if people are too much involved in each other's lives then they will lose the sense of distance needed to preserve civility, too little involved and they become part of an atomized 'mass society'.

Such ideas have been highly influential in relation to efforts by development policy-makers during the past decade to promote democratic institutions and market reforms in developing countries. This is the so-called 'good governance' agenda which was made popular in the early 1990s and which suggested that a 'virtuous circle' could be built between state, economy and civil society which balanced growth, equity and stability (Archer, 1994). Indeed, much of the recent interest in civil society is clearly linked to the global dominance of neo-liberal ideologies during the past decade, which envisage a reduced role for the state and privatized forms of services delivery through flexible combinations of governmental, non-governmental and private institutional actors.

There is a different strand of civil society thinking which has also been influential in some parts of the world. This strand has been influenced by Antonio Gramsci, writing much later than the earlier civil society theorists, who argued that civil society is the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contains a wide range of different organizations and ideologies which both challenge and uphold the existing order (see Gramsci, 1971). These ideas were influential in the context of the analysis and enactment of resistance to totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America from the 1970s onwards. Gramscian ideas about civil society can also be linked to the research on 'social movements' which seeks to challenge and transform structures and identities (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Howell and Pearce, 2001).

Two differing civil society traditions can therefore usefully be distinguished, although it has been the organizational view of civil society exemplified by de Tocqueville which has been most enthusiastically taken up by agencies within development policy discourse during the past decade (Davis and McGregor, 2000). Since the early 1990s, the 'good governance' agenda has deployed the concept of civil society within the wider initiatives of supporting the emergence of more competitive market economies, building better-managed states with the capacity to provide more responsive services and just laws, and improving democratic institutions to deepen political participation. Development donor support for the emergence and strengthening of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has formed a central part of this agenda (Archer, 1994).

While the various concepts of civil society may be useful for the purposes of analysis, they may have less value as a prescriptive tool in the hands of policy-makers. There are four main reasons for this. The first is that, as we have seen, different understandings of the term exist and this makes it difficult to agree precise policy purposes. A second reason is that since the concept of civil society is primarily a theoretical one, it may not lend itself in any straightforward way to a practical policy level application. Third, if the concept of civil society is arguably historically specific to particular time(s) and place(s), then it may be sensitive to differences of history, culture and economy. Finally, a key problem with the concept is the frequent lack of clarity within the research literature or within political discourse as to whether a discussion of 'civil society' refers to an analytical concept or to an actually existing social form. This is a difficulty which muddles much of the policy level debate on the importance of civil society. With these problems in mind, it is useful to hold on to van Rooy's (1998) characterization of the usefulness of the concept of civil society to development policy-makers in terms of an 'analytical hat-stand' on which to hang a whole range of ideas about politics, organization, citizenship, activism and self-help.

Despite the argument that the concept of civil society is historically specific, the concept is generating interest and debate in both Western and non-Western contexts. The view that the concept is of less relevance to non-

Western contexts can obscure the fact that, as Hann and Dunn (1996) argue, there is little agreement about the concept even within Western contexts in terms of its relevance and practical policy value. Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001: 3) point out that 'Some of the ambiguities in the contemporary Third World discussions arose because of the multiple meanings of the term in the Western tradition itself . . . it was not enough to say that those who used the idea did not look carefully at the Western concept. There was no single or simple Western concept to study and emulate'. If we move on to consider non-Western contexts, differences of culture, history and politics will complicate these questions of 'usefulness' still further.

The Re-emergence of an Idea

As we have seen, civil society is an old idea which has in the past two decades undergone a massive global revival. The Comaroffs describe this as an elaborate mythological cycle of imagining, memory loss and ultimately the recovery of the concept. After emerging in Enlightenment Europe and later influencing important nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers such as Hegel, de Tocqueville and Gramsci, the concept was largely forgotten. In the 1980s, it was rediscovered and given new contemporary relevance by dissident intellectuals in communist Eastern Europe engaged in anti-totalitarian struggle. The concept has ironically returned to the West where it has been 're-remembered' along with a realization that 'we [in the West] have been living it without noticing' as 'part of the unremarked fabric of society itself' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 5).

In fact, the concept of civil society did not lie as entirely dormant as accounts such as this one suggest. As we have seen, in Latin America from the 1970s onwards, the Gramscian concept of civil society was embraced by activists fighting against authoritarian military regimes. Keane (1998) shows how Yoshihiko Uchida and the 'civil society school of Japanese Marxism' (*ibid.*: 13) emerged in the 1960s. Drawing also on Gramsci's ideas, Uchida argued that Japanese civil society was weak, because the patriarchal family and a culture of individual deference towards power allowed a specific Japanese capitalism to grow quickly, with very little social resistance.

The recent re-entry into political discussion has, as the Comaroffs (1999) point out, brought a paradox: while some policy-makers have become interested in how to build civil society in countries where it is perceived to be weak or non-existent, such as in Africa, a level of anxiety has now been generated in some parts of 'the West' that it has somehow been lost, as witnessed by Putnam's (2000) argument that associationalism has declined in the United States. According to the Comaroffs, there is another irony in the relatively sudden re-emergence of the concept of civil society — it is often misleadingly presented as being both new and conveniently free of any historical baggage.

This apparent novelty is misleading and potentially dangerous. Firstly, as an old term, it may represent an outdated ‘modernist’ concept with limited relevance for explaining contemporary patterns of change. Secondly, if the apparent dormancy of the concept is investigated further, it is possible to show that the ‘re-remembering’ of civil society in the West has been somewhat selective, focusing as it has on the version which emphasizes the role of non-governmental organizations ‘balancing’ the state. By contrast, a Hegelian concept of ‘civil society’ may be useful in understanding how access to and exclusion from public space and citizenship rights was organized in colonial African contexts, while Gramscian ideas about civil society have long been relevant to understandings of organized resistance to colonialism and post-colonial states. In addition to the breadth of different understandings of ‘civil society’, there are also both ‘old’ and ‘new’ understandings of the term.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE IDEA TO AFRICA

In Western development policy circles the act of ‘re-remembering’ has, as we have seen, been a selectively political one, since the version of civil society which has dominated development policy agendas has been one which plays down or ignores the more conflictual implications of the Gramscian version (Davis and McGregor, 2000). It is this view that has tended to dominate much of the policy debate concerned with civil society in Africa. This section now briefly analyses a range of positions found in the literature on the relevance or otherwise of the concept of civil society.

Four different possible answers can be identified to the question ‘is the concept of civil society relevant to Africa?’ The first is a clear ‘yes’, based on the idea of a positive, universalist view of the desirability of civil society as part of the political project of building and strengthening democracy around the world. There are many organizations and activists that explicitly embrace this view. For example, the global civil society network CIVICUS aims to ‘... help advance regional, national and international initiatives to strengthen the capacity of civil society’.¹ The second possible answer is a clear ‘no’, based on the argument that a concept which emerged at a distinctive moment in European history can have little meaning within such different cultural and political settings. From this perspective, ‘civil society’ is just another in a long line of attempts at misguided policy transfer from the West. The third is an adaptive view which suggests that while the concept is potentially relevant to non-Western contexts it will take on local, different meanings and should not therefore be applied too rigidly, either at the level of analysis or in the implementation of policy, where it should not

1. See CIVICUS website: www.civicus.org.

be deployed instrumentally in search of 'predictable' policy outcomes. Fourth, there are those who imply that the 'relevance question' is probably the wrong question to ask, arguing that the idea of civil society — whether explicitly recognized as such or not — has long been implicated in Africa's colonial histories of both domination and resistance. This view takes a broader perspective on social and political changes, and analyses these in historical and cultural context, whether or not there is explicit reference made to 'civil society' concepts. Each of these points of view will now be briefly considered.

Prescriptive Universalism

The idea that civil society in Africa is a 'good thing' which needs to be encouraged and 'built' has been eagerly taken up in some quarters. This has perhaps been in response to early (and of course continuing) ideas by outsiders that Africa was hostile to the development of civil life. Adam Ferguson wrote in 1757 that Africa had a 'weakness in the genius of its people' and did not inspire the virtues 'which are connected with freedom, and required in the conduct of civil affairs' (Ferguson, 1767/1995: 108). More recently, Harbeson (1994: 1–2) has argued that civil society is crucial to Africa's future political development: 'Civil society is a hitherto *missing key* to sustained political reform, legitimate states and governments, improved governance, viable state–society and state–economy relationships, and prevention of the kind of political decay that undermined new African governments a generation ago' (my italics). In this view, the concept of civil society fills a theoretical gap in social science approaches to economic and social development in Africa, where both donors and African governments have largely failed so far to develop sound policies. The conceptual framework of civil society allows for setting out and agreeing working rules about improvements to the workings of the state and economy.

According to Harbeson (1994), this framework now has the potential to shift discussion away from a focus on the balance of power between state and society to debates about the terms of the interdependence between state and society. The state is seen as the binding, organizing principle of the political order — the arena within which processes for the authoritative allocation of social values takes place. Individuals, groups and organizations are seen as part of the political order when they participate in these processes, but are '... part of civil society when they seek to define, seek support for or promote changes in the basic rules of the game by which social values are authoritatively allocated' (Harbeson, 1994: 4). In this view, civil society is not just about associational life, but is also about individuals and associations which take part in wider rule-setting activities. Support for the view of civil society as 'counterbalance' to the state can also be found in more anthropological accounts. In his recent study of the negative effects of

large-scale modern state planning schemes in Africa and elsewhere, Scott (1998) argues that a 'prostrate' civil society which is unable to resist such designs provides the 'leveled social terrain' upon which an authoritarian state can then build.

Following from such positive views of civil society has come the phenomenon of prescription at the level of policy. Within development policy discourse, the framework of good governance has brought support for civil society as part of a policy package transferred to Africa and elsewhere by official donors and NGOs. For example, it has taken the form of support for the monitoring of elections and voter education by civil society organizations, and to 'capacity building' work in relation to local NGOs through the provision of organizational support and training.

This perspective on civil society remains a relatively optimistic one, although there have been concerns raised within it. One is the danger of what Blair (1997) calls 'civil society gridlock' in which so many different interests are active that they paralyse social and political life through a multiplicity of claims made on services and resources. This is particularly likely to happen when the state is weak, because additional 'claims' made from within civil society on the state may simply weaken it further. Another is the problem of prescriptive failure when planned or desired results fail to emerge. Despite being technically part of 'civil society', certain groups generated by a policy intervention may not in the end 'fit in well' with the prevailing political or moral vision. For example, Garland (1999) analyses the work of an international NGO working with a hunter-gatherer community in Southern Africa and finds within it an assumption that Western civil society ideals are lacking locally and therefore need to be transferred and built. While members of the local community readily seized the opportunities which were on offer for building civil society with this outside support and resources, they were later criticized by the NGO for having created the 'wrong' kinds of civil society institutions because they were based on clan, kin and market systems.

Western Exceptionalism

Following from the critique of this prescriptive universalism argument, some researchers suggest instead that the concept of civil society really has little meaning outside the contexts of Western Europe or North America. For example, in rejecting many of the arguments for the simple policy transfer of civil society to Africa, Maina (1998: 137) argues that 'civil society is a concept made to order for the political reality of Western society' which has 'limited explanatory power' for the complexities of African associational life because it fails to understand the domination of African societies by a predatory state, the informal character of many forms of organization, and the fundamental roles played by class and ethnicity.

In a recent overview of Mozambique, Sogge (1997: 42) finds three sets of reasons to doubt the relevance of the concept of 'civil society'. The first is historical. The colonial state has constrained associational space so tightly that 'Mozambiquan ways of associating together hardly ever resemble institutions of civil society known to Westerners' because they were not voluntaristic. Under Portuguese colonial rule, the interests of business, labour and farmers were organized through state-controlled associational forms, and when political leaders emerged after independence they did so from colonial state structures, and not from the trade unions or the legal profession as in some other African countries. The second reason is that during the past fifteen years of structural adjustment, characterized by weak public services and low wages, there has been a gradual diminishing of state power and legitimacy alongside a reduction of citizen expectations of the state. The result is that there are now few real incentives for citizens to organize, since power is widely perceived to be exercised from outside the country. Finally, there is an ambiguous distinction between the public and the private. Those forms of associational activity that do exist tend to do so within an 'obscure realm' where informal social and political action is preferred over formal, and where the forms of organizational activity constantly change shape in the effort to avoid capture or co-option.

James Ferguson (1998: 3–4) points out that civil society 'has become one of those things (like development, education or the environment) that no reasonable person can be against', but that 'the current (often ahistorical and uncritical) use of the concept of civil society in the study of African politics obscures more than it reveals, and, indeed, . . . often serves to help legitimate a profoundly anti-democratic transnational politics'. He shows how the 'nation building' paradigm of African politics, which envisaged the construction of national identities and structures of hierarchy in place of backward, traditional, primordial affiliations, has gradually given way to a 'state/civil society' paradigm which sees the importance of a dynamic local civil society in balancing, taming and reducing the role of the state. The irony is that both models, though different, mirror each other and therefore share a basic false assumption of the existence of a vertical state/society opposition. Power in Africa has long been exercised by entities other than the state — such as the British South Africa Company, a private corporation, which established structures for colonial rule in Zambia, and more recently the international financial institutions such as the World Bank, which have determined state policies through 'structural adjustment' programmes. At the same time, any differentiation at the national level between state and civil society in Africa is, according to Chabal and Daloz (1999: 18), largely illusory '... and derives more from wishful thinking or ideological bias than from a careful analysis of present conditions'.

The tendency among outside policy-makers is usually for African civil society to be conceived of in terms of a set of development NGOs, most of which are funded by bilateral or multilateral development donors or by

international NGOs. Some of these NGOs are large transnational organizations which are effectively taking over some of the state's functions in health or education. The range of organizations which may lay claim to being part of civil society is of course much wider than just the NGOs. At the same time, these transnational NGOs have complex horizontal links which stretch beyond Africa. The reason the civil society concept is unhelpful in such cases, Ferguson argues, is because these NGOs do not actually challenge the state 'from below' but are instead 'horizontal contemporaries' of wider institutions of transnational governmentality. These new forms of transnational connection show up the idea of a national 'state/civil society dichotomy' as simplistic and inaccurate. This point is well illustrated by Ferguson's ethnographic work on community organizing in a South African township. In this account, one particular activist sets out his key challenge as building class-based civil society alliances with international solidarity groups and with certain official donors, rather than building local networks with what he regards as certain repressive elements within local civil society.

Adaptive Prescription

The problem with the first 'universalist' view is that it tends to view phenomena through a limiting Western lens and ignores the historical legacy of colonial civil society building. It also ignores those organizations which do not fit with its prescriptions (for example because they are based on kin or ethnicity or local 'tradition') or may miss altogether groups which take an unfamiliar form. The prescriptive view is also based on imagined past stages of Western civilization around eighteenth and nineteenth century capitalist society and manners (Hardt, 1995). Such discussions have come to see Western-oriented intellectuals, lawyers, entrepreneurs, teachers and church people as 'vanguards' of civil society's development in Africa because of efforts to develop an active public sphere, the role of voluntary organizations and the emergence of media institutions. Rejecting both this perspective and the notion of Western exceptionalism, a third 'adaptive' view tries to argue that there is a middle way between crudely imposing the concept from outside or simply abandoning it altogether as being inappropriate.

Despite his earlier objections to the concept of civil society in relation to Africa, Maina (1998) later reluctantly concedes that such a concept can have value if it is adapted in various ways. In particular, he suggests that it be amended to include activities and not just organizations, and that it needs to move away from a 'Western' preoccupation with rights and advocacy to include self-help groups that are organized for personal, economic ends. An emphasis on informal, self-help activity reveals the existence of an active civil society founded on a strong mistrust of the state and the overcoming of civic apathy, and Maina suggests that it may be from this sector that independent political leadership can emerge. For example, hometown

associations in Nigeria have long been an important part of the livelihood and survival strategies of millions of Nigerians; this form of associational life has evolved to meet the challenges of living under colonial administration and, more recently, the absence of local government under a highly centralized Nigerian state (Honey and Okafor, 1998). In a study of civil society in Tanzania between the 1950s and the 1990s, Gibbon (2001) identifies a core of lineages, age-sets, elders' committees and women's credit groups which have long co-existed independently of the state, alongside a set of other more formal entities such as churches, branches of political parties and primary co-operatives which have constantly shifted their allegiances and identities over time. In Uganda, *munno mu kabi* women's groups — informal local self-help associations — have proved flexible in responding both to local problems and crises in the provision of home care services to HIV/AIDS patients and in negotiating effectively their preferred mode of support from international NGOs (Brehony, 2000).

Hann and Dunn (1996) argue that locally-specific 'counterpart traditions' may interact with the Western 'export' of a universal idea of civil society. Edwards (1998) develops this line of thinking in a draft paper for the World Bank which sets out a set of oppositions between Western and non-Western ideas about civil society. Rather than current prescription based on Western models, Edwards argues for a more open-ended view of support to civil society in terms of process, negotiation and as a contested domain. Within this domain, there are a series of tensions which need to be negotiated around the concept of civil society. For example, the origins of Western ideas about civil society within the growth of industrial capitalism and the nation state will contrast with the different histories and contexts found elsewhere. Secondly, the three sector model common in the West — state, market, civil society or 'third sector' — may contrast with the increased degree of 'blurring' between such sectoral boundaries in non-Western societies. Finally, the normative view of civil society as a set of positive values may clash with the mixture of traditional and modern institutions which are both civil and 'uncivil' in other societies.

The need to think more broadly about the organizational and the moral basis of civil society in African contexts is supported by the Comaroffs (1999: 22), who state that there is a 'Eurocentric tendency to limit civil society to a narrowly defined institutional arena', which runs counter to Hegel's original insistence that the civil sphere of relatedness has its origins in the historical particularities of capitalist production and exchange. There may be partisan, parochial, or fundamentalist organizations each with a claim on civil society roles and membership. Recognition of local counterpart traditions may therefore counter the tendency to undervalue the role of kin-based and ethnic organizations in helping to form public opinions and political pressure groups. The changing role of 'tradition' in helping to structure different forms of African civil society is also important. In Tunisia, Keane (1998) describes how Al-Ghannouchi has shown how

sections of the Islamic religious community are beginning to accommodate aspects of modern democratic principles within a 'post-secular' view of an Islamic society in which, between nature and God, there is a space in which human, context-bound judgments have to be made.

Widening the concept of civil society to include involuntary membership and kinship relations opens up the concept to locally-specific institutions and processes. Karlstrom (1999) argues that we need to go beyond simply identifying civil society with 'voluntary associations', pointing out that in Uganda the restoration of the Ganda kingship is politically significant despite its nonconformity with Western ideals of liberal participatory government. This restoration arguably promises a political order founded on co-existing clan-based organizations and royal rule, a more stable, responsive and representative institution than a national party system, and a long history of clans mediating between citizens and monarchy, checking excesses of power. The possibility for kinship to take on both a private and a public face in Uganda contradicts Western assumptions of civil society in which kinship relations are considered to be outside civil society norms: 'African sociocultural arrangements provide their own logic of sovereign accountability, their own public spheres, their own forms of nongovernmental organization and association' (Karlstrom, 1999: 27). While a distinction between state and society is maintained, the relationships between them are being reshaped. For example, there is a greater capacity for local government councils to delegate certain tasks and resources to elements of 'society' in the form of NGO staff, groups and associations at the local level rather than having these resources 'captured' as used to be the case.

Within such a perspective, the obvious danger is of course to move from prescription into an equally unhelpful position of cultural relativism. There are also dangers in moving too far from a generally agreed understanding of what 'civil society' really means. If it is widened to include kin groups, for example, it is a long way from Gellner's (1995) argument that civil society should not only be seen in terms of balancing the state, but is also a counter-balance to what he terms the 'tyranny of cousins'.

The Wrong Question to Ask?

This final position is the argument that the concept of civil society has always been relevant to questions of African governance and citizenship, since it was used as an organizing principle by colonial administrations. It makes little sense therefore to ask how useful the concept is to African contexts. By taking such histories and their legacy as an analytical starting point — rather than the current return to fashion of the term 'civil society' — advocates of this point of view argue that the relevance of the concept of civil society is self-evident. In his study of colonial citizenship Wilder (1999: 45) writes:

The point is not that European categories are inappropriate for non-Western cultures. Rather, the source of the dilemma lies in the fact that because colonial government rationalized and racialized native society, civil society could only be an impossible promise: at once the justification for colonial intervention (civilize the natives) and the sign of native exclusion (they are not yet civilized).

It is less relevant to argue about universal or local realities and instead more useful to analyse the historical processes which have shaped civil society in Africa — in its widest sense — and the forms which these processes have taken. Mamdani (1996) suggests that the current ‘blinker view’ of civil society prevents us from looking critically at either European or African civil society, and particularly at their complex interrelationship dating from colonial times. Mamdani shows us that this meeting was in reality very ‘uncivil’ and aimed to institutionalize difference between groups of citizens and ethnicized subjects, and between civilized colonists governed by ‘constitutionalism’ and native tribes governed by ‘customary law’.

These enduring sets of tensions have persisted in the post-colonial era; they have helped structure the competition for state power and they have also fuelled community conflict. The growing obsession with civil society in Africa may date from the mid-1980s, but the contents of these debates have a far longer history. For example, some nineteenth century humanists arguing against slavery used a discourse of civility which implied universal human rights and norms of citizenship, while the ‘colonial humanism’ of official policies spoke of universal rights but excluded native subjects from such rights (Wilder, 1999). Nationalist resistance has long been couched in terms of citizen rights denied, and has led to many social movements and voluntary associations, and civic activism against the state in Africa has as long a history as the other struggles normally associated with the re-emergence of civil society elsewhere in the world.

Mamdani (1996) shows how much of the debate on civil society is concerned with competing ideological notions about how to match universal governance ideals against existing institutions. For liberal modernists the call is for civil rights, while African communitarians criticize the discourse on human rights or its ethnocentricity and argue instead for the reinstatement of marginalized political cultures. Mamdani therefore suggests, like Ferguson, that such dichotomies are ultimately unhelpful because they simply replay the old dichotomies of universal and particular, of Western democracies and the colonial orders which were created in their name.

The ‘wrong question’ argument therefore signals the need to bring these wider perspectives into the rather limited discussion of civil society which currently takes place. There is a rich theoretical tradition of thinking about civil society, but far less empirical work available. An exception is Masquelier’s (1999) work on an Islamic reform movement in Niger which produces an active engagement with wider forces of social and cultural change. Women are required to cover themselves in public spaces but are at the same time encouraged to pursue an education and register to vote, thereby challenging

the stereotypical conservative ideologies of gender, family and society. Such movements may be central to civil society in Africa because they seek to contest legacies of Western colonialism. In addition to the need for a broader historical and cultural perspective, it is therefore necessary to enrich debates with a more detailed understanding of ‘actually existing’ civil society activity in Africa.

CONCLUSION

Of the four different positions on the usefulness of civil society briefly outlined above, the third and fourth are the most persuasive. The ‘prescriptive universalism’ argument which has been deployed in support of the crude export of outsider visions of civil society by Western aid donors is clearly flawed, while the ‘exceptionalist’ argument which states that the idea of civil society has little meaning outside its Western origins, underestimates both the analytical and inspirational power of the term. By examining the range of local meanings being created around the concept in certain African contexts, it becomes clear that ‘civil society’ — broadly defined, with an emphasis on Gramscian notions of struggle, power and dissent — refers to increasingly universal negotiations between citizens, states and market (the adaptive argument). While the prescriptive ‘strengthening’ of civil society is strongly associated with the ideological dominance of neo-liberalism, there is the paradox that contestation by civil society organizations and social movements can also constitute a means through which such orthodoxies are challenged and resisted. Civil society is not a new term, nor is it one which has uniquely contemporary relevance. The control of public space and the exercise of power either to include or exclude sections of the population as citizens or non-citizens has long been a component of colonial history. Although such phenomena may not previously have been understood in relation to ‘civil society’, they may now usefully be analysed as precursors to what is currently meant by the term. This is the strength of the ‘wrong question’ argument, which shows that it makes little sense to allow changes in terminological fashions to obscure analysis of historical continuities which may exist between different stages of struggles between state and citizens.

The potential usefulness of the concept of civil society can therefore be analysed across two main dimensions — it can be ‘useful to think with’ and it may be ‘useful to act with’. An adaptive, historically contextualized view of the concept of civil society is analytically useful because its re-emergence is linked to wider structural changes and state transformation. Blaney and Pasha (1993) argue that the claim of the universality of the idea of civil society is warranted, but that it must include the analysis of both ‘structure’ and ‘process’ to avoid being represented as a static, ahistorical concept. This means linking the discussion of African civil society with the international

capitalist division of labour and avoiding the simple conflation of 'society' and civil society. Such analyses will also need to reject a crudely normative view of civil society by accepting that civil society contains a range of diverse values and intentions. A related approach is that taken by Engberg-Pedersen and Webster (2002), who reject the generalized view of civil society as ahistorical and apolitical, and instead take a Gramscian view which deploys the concept of civil society to explore contested political space in which different groups, organizations and individuals seek to influence public policy. The concept of civil society allows us to connect local and global dimensions of political struggle, while Mamdani and Ferguson also show how the concept reveals the dangers of over-simple conceptualizations of the opposition of state and civil society given the increasing importance of horizontal transnational identities and linkages.

But how useful is the concept of civil society 'to act with' at the level of policy? Despite the tendency for development donors to see civil society as a normative concept, and to seek the 'building' of civil society mainly through financial and organizational support to NGOs, the new aid industry interest in civil society may focus attention usefully on human rights, citizen action and institutions. Whether such efforts can move forward to embrace the political aspects of Gramscian notions of civil society, or whether development projects are necessarily neutralized by the forces which act to maintain Ferguson's (1990) 'anti-politics machine' remains an open question. Recent work by Jenkins (2001), which argues that bilateral donors that support the strengthening of civil society continue to 'mistake governance for politics', suggests that this is unlikely. Jenkins shows that aid donors such as USAID build only an apolitical 'sanitized' version of civil society which excludes organizations and individuals engaged in struggles for political power and influence and which may be critical of neo-liberal orthodoxy. However, the efforts of donor-assisted civil society actors to develop more autonomous 'room for manoeuvre' should not automatically be ruled out. For example, the struggle in Mozambique to recognize collective land rights in the development of the 1997 Land Law, and the subsequent civic movement in support of the rights which it enshrines, has involved a pragmatic combination of mobilization and advocacy work by local NGOs, international NGOs and some donors (Kanji et al., 2002).

The concept of civil society has become 'useful to think with' in the sense that it has a striking capacity to inspire. It is precisely the ambiguities which lie at the heart of the idea of civil society that give it importance at this moment in history. Cut loose from simplistic policy transfer from the West, the concept of civil society has become part of the political and social discourse of a wide range of groups and individuals in Africa and elsewhere. It is animating discussion and action, for example, in the current negotiations towards constructing a new Somali government after a decade of statelessness. At the recent Djibouti peace conference for Somalia the language of civil society was deployed in documents drawn up locally in

support of the peace process: 'The representatives of civil society, together with the warlords, must come together to agree on the road to peace in the interests of all citizens, national harmony and the democratic right to choose leaders in accordance with an accepted formula' (*Horn of Africa Bulletin*, 2000: 14). In this case, the term civil society is used to describe organized sections of society opposed to the domination of society by Somali 'warlords'. Whether or not civil society can be identified in recognizable forms 'on the ground', it has taken on meanings which are providing researchers, policy-makers and ordinary people with the means to rethink politics and citizenship under conditions of global change.

Finally, a key conclusion is the need for more micro-studies of actually existing civil society. While there are many case studies of NGOs and community development projects, there are fewer micro-level studies of more broadly defined, culturally varied types of 'civil society' activity. The reworking of the concept in the light of African histories, politics and cultures allows for the possibility of illuminating more than just the problems of development policy interventions. There is a need to focus less on high levels of rhetoric, abstraction and ahistorical generalization and produce more close-up observation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 4). The absence of a clear understanding of the distinct forms taken by civil society actors and actions in African contexts requires research which links local realities with emerging global changes, but which resists being too normative in its definition. Mamdani (1996: 19) therefore argues the need for '... an analysis of actually existing civil society so as to understand its actual formation, rather than as a promised agenda for change'.

Civil society in Africa can have multiple meanings, and as an 'all-purpose placeholder' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 3) it can capture emerging aspirations in the context of local level social struggles for well-being and global economic and technological changes. The concept of civil society contains within it the seeds of contradiction in being both unitary and divisive, and prescriptive and aspirational, but it nevertheless leads us to focus on changing structure and process.

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