

Civil Society

A Reader in History, Theory and Global Politics

Edited by

John A. Hall

*Department of Sociology,
McGill University, Montreal, Canada*

and

Frank Trentmann

*School of History,
Classics and Archaeology Birkbeck College,
University of London*

palgrave
macmillan

¹ Ernest Gellner, 'The Importance of Being Modular', in John A. Hall ed., *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995). This article is a good summary of a large number of Gellner's works on civil society, written in the reflective and the activist modes. Many of these writings, including some polemical essays, have been put together in Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

² For discussion of the ways in which civic activity in the United States has declined, see Robert Putnam, 'The Strange Disappearance of Civic America', *American Prospect* (Winter 1996); 'Bowling Alone', *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995); and Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). See pp. 227–31 in this reader.

*Augustus Richard Norton (b. 1946), a political scientist at Boston University, had a significant impact on the understanding of civil society within Muslim societies as the result of his important two volume collection on Civil Society in the Middle East (1995). In this section, he expresses measured optimism because of the growth of associational life. Still, the future of civil society depends upon the transformation of authoritarian rule within the region.**

The symbol of democracy is the contested election and the secret ballot. This is altogether understandable, since the right to cast a meaningful ballot free of coercion is a metaphor for a participant political system. But, democracy does not reside in elections. If democracy – as it is known in the West – has a home, it is in civil society, where a melange of associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen. Although the concept of civil society is resistant to analytical precision, the functioning of civil society is literally and plainly at the heart of participant political systems.

In fact, the icon of the global trend of democratization is civil society. In the face of repression in Latin America, Eastern and Southern Europe, civil society is sometimes credited with thwarting authoritarian designs and challenging arbitrary rule. Nonetheless, civil society did not topple regimes, as much as the regimes crumbled from internal corruption and hollow claims for legitimacy. Civil society was more the beneficiary than the wrecking ball. Moreover, civil society is often idealized as an unmitigated good thing. Like any social phenomenon, civil society can, and, often, does have, a negative side. Self-interest, prejudice and hatred cohabit with altruism, fairness and compassion, and the unrestrained free play of civil society is a chilling thought, not a warm and fuzzy one.

Civil society speaks in a myriad of voices. The vanguard of civil society has been human rights activists, religiously-inspired protest movements, artists, writers and professional groups of lawyers, doctors or engineers who insist on governmental accountability and thereby expose the excesses and the weaknesses of authoritarian rulers. There is no denying the awe-inspiring

courage that must be summoned to speak out, to demonstrate, to stand one's ground in circumstances where the policing apparatus is both ubiquitous and untethered by legal restrictions, where the sovereignty of the individual is a gift rather than a right.

Civil society is also grounded in a free economic market and the quest of the bourgeoisie for political differentiation from the state. As Simon Bromley notes, the rallying cry of the bourgeoisie has been liberalism not democracy, but the formation of a civil society is enabling for democracy.

[A] liberal civil society provides both the structural underpinning of representative democracy and the terrain on which an organized working class can develop. Historically, the latter have proved to be not capitalism's 'grave-diggers' but its democratizers.

The fostering of civil society is a crucial step toward realizing a freer Middle East. One is hard pressed to design a participant political system which could survive very long in the absence of a vibrant civil society. In short, the existence of civil society is central to democracy.

However, civil society enthusiasts often contain their excitement when it comes to the Muslim world, and especially the Middle East. There, civil society is said to be deficient, corrupt, aggressive, hostile, infiltrated, co-opted, insignificant, or absent, depending on which observer one prefers to cite. For instance, in widely read essay, Ernest Gellner notes that Muslim societies 'are suffused with faith, indeed they suffer from a plethora of it, but they manifest at most a feeble yearning for civil society.'

One way, an important way, of assessing the quality of political life in the Middle East is to inquire into the status of civil society there, to plumb their 'yearning' for civil society. As Saad Eddin Ibrahim notes, there has been impressive growth in associations since the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. During this period the numbers grew from 20,000 to 70,000. Of course, only a minority are active and effective. Ibrahim cites a recent study in Egypt showing that 40% of registered associations are actually viable. Among the interesting blossomings of civil society is the emergence of political parties, including 46 in Algeria, 43 in Yemen, 23 in Jordan, 19 in Morocco, 13 in Egypt, 11 in Tunisia, and 6 in Mauritania. But, far more important are the professional syndicates (*niqabat*) which have sometimes given shape to politics. In Sudan, the professional associations effectively overthrew the government in both 1964 and 1985. Significantly, the present Islamist-cum-military government of Sudan rushed to regulate and stifle syndicates, apparently to preclude a reprise. In Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, the syndicates have often been potent players, not least because of their linkage to international counterparts that enable them to enlist moral protection from abroad.

If, as we assume here, a vital and autonomous civil society is a necessary condition of democracy (though not a sufficient one), what does the present

status of Middle East civil society portend? More fundamentally, does civil society exist in the Middle East?¹ Many observers are doubtful that civil society, particularly in the Arab world, is sufficiently diverse or mature to lend durability to open, participant systems. Moreover, a number of respected scholars have expressed skepticism that vibrant, autonomous civil societies will soon emerge in the Arab countries, considering the statist economies that stifle free association and the intolerance of populist Islamist movements. In the Middle East, and particularly in the Arab states, democracy has been bestowed rather than won, and, as the Algerian example illustrates, the gift may be revoked.

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Raymond Hinnebusch argues that economic liberalization in Syria is intended to broaden the regime's political base and to lift disabling economic controls stemming from Syria's failed statist experiment. Though the process is moving forward at a restrained pace, Hinnebusch notes that one result may be a more active civil society but not democracy. Syria's traditional merchants, until recently, were politically muffled and over-regulated. The merchants are benefiting from the economic reforms and are regaining influence in the process. In short, Hinnebusch is pointing to an increasing scope for civil society in Syria. These developments may have significant consequences for the stability of Syria when the inevitable moment of succession arrives. As Hinnebusch notes, it is unlikely that the reemergent civil society will give rise to pressures for democracy. The Syrian regime has grounded its legitimacy in the peasantry and the working class, and the promotion of democracy would, Hinnebusch surmises, enliven anti-capitalist populist forces. Although analysts prone to essentialist arguments posit a post-Hafiz al-Asad struggle along sectarian lines, Hinnebusch's argument points to a different logic of competition. The strata of the society that has benefited from Syria's state dominated economy will be at odds with the revived merchant class.

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One deft appreciation of civil society has stressed the historical specificity of the concept, while expressing doubt that the idea of civil society can travel much beyond western Europe and the United States, but this conclusion smacks of a familiar problem: a confusion of the ideal-typical ... with the real world. Certainly, the reality of civil society in the West, often contrasts sharply with ideal-typical civil society. Recent examples from eastern and central Europe, as well as from some quarters of the developing world, counsel that a categorical rejection of the idea of civil society in the Middle East is unwarranted, not least because the idea of civil society is fast becoming part of the indigenous intellectual and policy dialogues.

The existence of a civil society implies a shared sense of identity, by means of, at least, tacit agreement over the rough boundaries of the political unit. In a word, citizenship, with associated rights and responsibilities, is part and parcel of the concept. Citizenship underpins civil society. To be a part of the whole is a precondition for the whole to be the sum of its parts. Otherwise, society has no coherence, it is just a vessel filled with shards and fragments. Thus, the individual in civil society is granted rights by the state, but, in return, acquires duties to the state. All governments, but particularly autocracies, tend to trivialize citizenship, emphasizing displays of citizen support and patriotic ceremonies, while paying only lip service to the rights of citizenship. Where the state, through its depredations and failures has lost the loyalty of its citizens, citizenship is an early casualty. As legitimacy crumbles civil society threatens to fragment as well. It is meaningless to speak of civil society in the absence of the state.

Civil society is more than an admixture of various forms of association, it also refers to a quality, civility, without which the milieu consists of feuding factions, cliques, and cabals. Civility implies tolerance, the willingness of individuals to accept disparate political views and social attitudes; to accept the profoundly important idea that there is no right answer. I would like to emphasize that it is as relevant to look for civility within associations as it is to observe it between them. Ironically, groups which espouse democracy and other commendable values often do not exemplify these values internally.

Thus, a robust civil society is more than letterhead stationery, membership lists, public charters and manifestoes. Civil society is also a cast of mind, a willingness to live and let live. The antithesis of civility was grimly revealed by a gunman arrested in the June 1992 killing of Farag Fouda, the Egyptian secularist and critic of Muslim fundamentalism: 'We had to kill him, because he attacked our beliefs.'

Unfortunately, civility is a quality which is missing in large parts of the Middle East. As Mustapha Kamil al-Sayyid observes in his cogent article, even in Egypt, widely revered for an active associational life, civil society is undermined by a deficit in political toleration and constricted by arbitrary government regulation. The absence of civility counsels skepticism about the short-term prospects for democracy in the region; however, if the art of association, as de Tocqueville called it, can be learned, then the promotion of civil society is no less than the creation of the underpinnings of democracy.

When groups and movements do emerge they often come in the form of human rights and women's movements. Both assert fundamental moral claims, namely the dignity of the person and the equality of the individual. Since the claims of such groups are truly basic ones, they are not easily assailed, at least explicitly, by the authorities of the state. Accordingly, they may enjoy more freedom of action than political opposition forces, or those groups which wish to affect the allocation of economic resources. These

groups may also be less susceptible to co-optation, since their demands may not easily be assuaged by privilege, position or cash.

Though elements of civil society are likely to stand in opposition to the government, government must play the essential role of referee, rule-maker and regulator of civil society. Civil society, it needs to be emphasized, is no substitute for government. All too often, there is a tendency to commend civil society as a panacea, but the evidence is compelling that the state has a key role to play.

Democratization is neither the outright enemy nor the unconditional friend of state power. It requires the state to govern civil society neither too much nor too little, while a more democratic order cannot be built through state power, it cannot be built *without* state power.

Government remains crucial to the project of political reform in the Middle East, and political reform is vital to insure stability; not stability in any static sense, since it is obvious that the problems that plague governments – inefficacy, faltering legitimacy, and corruption – cannot be wished away. Instead, projects of reform must instill a dynamic stability and that means civil society must have room to breathe.

Given the integral central connection between civil society and democracy, the long-term prospects for successful democratization in Lebanon, Egypt and Iran may be better than is commonly assumed. Moreover, while the Palestinians lack a state, there are, as Muhammad Muslih notes, the stirrings of a vibrant civil society. Whatever political entity finally emerges on the West Bank and in Gaza, there is a sound basis for attributing to the Palestinians a high potential for developing a participant political system. Elsewhere the prospects are more problematic, if not bleaker. In Iraq, civil society has been systematically decimated. Although in the Kurdish region associational life, if not civil society, has been rejuvenated, it is hard to imagine a durable participant system taking root in the entire country any time soon.

* From Augustus Richard Norton, 'Introduction', in his ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. I (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 7-14, reprinted with permission.

¹ The absence of a civil society to counter-balance despotic power was taken to be a marker of Oriental society by Karl Wittfogel in *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), and it is this lacuna that lies at the heart of the Orientalist analysis.