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Uncivil Society



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Definition

Over the last decade the concept of uncivil society has been increasingly used to refer to a wide range of different phenomena. It is used as a shorthand to refer to all sorts of manifestations of civil society that are viewed as a threat to liberal democratic or civic values. Scholarly debates and worries about democratic backsliding and increased authoritarianism fuel attention to how certain “uncivil” acts and actors are threatening democracy and undermine a well-functioning civil society able to prevent de-democratization. The term is also used to refer to “uncivil” elements of society such as criminal and terrorist organizations, or associations with exclusionary agendas. Conversely, a few global social justice activists have adopted the term as a badge of pride, arguing that uncivil society encompasses “any group that threatens the status quo” (Kopecky and Mudde 2003, 10; also see Sullivan et al. 2010).

Introduction

Despite its popularity, the concept remains analytically unclear and undertheorized. In this entry we explore the different meanings of “uncivil society.” Just as its opposite civil society, uncivil society tends to become an “omnibus concept” to which a variety of meanings are attached (Viterna et al. 2015). The fact that many authors also refrain from providing clear definitions makes it even more complicated. Viterna et al. (2015) point to the normative, functional, and structural meanings of civil society that developed over time, and each of these meanings can also be found in the use of uncivil society as a concept. The normative meaning refers to civil society as a civilized and civilizing force, whereas the functional dimension focuses on the effects of civil society, in particular its democratizing effects, and the structural dimension refers to civil society simply as a collective agent beyond the family, separate from state and market. We use this conceptual distinction to discuss the different uses and meanings of uncivil society.

Historical Background

A short survey of the use of uncivil society in scholarly literature makes clear that the concept began to proliferate after the turn of the millennium. Before 2000, the concept was mainly used in two specific debates. Initially, the concept

figured in debates about the role of religion in society, and its relations to nation, state, and civil society (Demerath III and Williams 1985; Hann 1997), and then from the 1980s onward it emerged in the context of democratic transitions, in particular in Central and Eastern European countries and to a lesser extent in Latin America and Africa.

In debates about religion, the concept of uncivil society is used to refer to societies becoming less “civilized” in terms of trust and cohesion. Demerath III and Williams (1985) discuss the role of civic religion in American society: a culturally legitimate religion of the nation that transcended sectarian differences while justifying a social order and defining statehood. For a long time civil religion enabled Americans to define themselves politically. Yet, in the 1980s, these authors posit, the USA has become an “uncivil society,” fragmented, pluralized, and polarized and no longer bound by a single civil culture. Hann (1997) also discusses the unifying role of religion in nation and state building, focusing on Poland and Turkey. Yet here too “the imaginary community of the strong nation-state has become rather tattered at its edges, but the pursuit of egoism in the marketplace does not seem to be leading to greater trust between neighbors, or to greater tolerance of ethnic and religious differences” (p. 43). According to Hann uncivil forms of society, in particular economic liberalization and a relaxation of state border controls, developed in both countries that negatively affect populations of border regions.

Scholars studying processes of democratization discuss the development of both civil and uncivil society. According to Whitehead (1997) the prevalence of “incivility” and uncivil society is particularly strong in new democracies. He argues that “in both the post-authoritarian and the post-communist experiences efforts at democratization are frequently overshadowed by the emergence or proliferation of anti-social forms of individualism and group organization that substitute for, or even seek to subvert, the forms of civil associationalism” (p. 96). Kotkin (2009) uses the concept to refer to the communist establishment, which in his analysis played a key role in the collapse of the communist regimes across

Central and Eastern Europe, rather than civil society which is usually cast in this role. Kopecky and Mudde (2003) argue that the weakly developed civil society in the CEE region, together with the tradition of anti-governmental struggles during the communist era, led to the rise of some anti-democratic movements and tendencies. These movements are often anti-state and anti-democratic, creating divisions between “us” and “them,” and are therefore labeled uncivil.

Key Issues

Normative Dimensions

Normative definitions of civil society posit it as “good society.” In line with this, uncivil society is frequently defined as “bad society” or the “dark side” of associational life. While civil society is seen as embodying and promoting virtues like freedom, justice, fairness, and equality and the defense of human rights (Risse 2000), uncivil society then undermines or threatens such values. Whitehead (1997) proposes that uncivil society is characterized by the lack of a spirit of civility, of “civic responsibilities” or “civic mindedness.” Akman sees this as the key distinction between civil and uncivil society: “unless we can make the specifically civil quality of social and political interaction count conceptually, the term civil society becomes meaningless; it becomes impossible to distinguish civil society from its antithesis: uncivil society” (2012, 327).

Civic values often become synonymous with progressive values, and uncivil society then becomes a shorthand for right wing, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim groups and illiberal organizations that promote racist, sexist, homophobic, or other exclusionary ideologies (Pérez-Díaz 2014; Ruzza 2009). Such organizations exclude opponents and manipulate their social base, promote “sectarian, demagogic, uncivil policies” (Pérez-Díaz 2014, 822), or are adherents to “political religions” (Voegelin 2000). The element of ethnic or religious exclusivism chimes with the extreme right groups studied by Pedahzur and Weinberg (2001) and many of the movements discussed by Kopecky and Mudde (2003) or

Ruzza (2009). It also figures largely in the literature on African civil society, which emphasizes the pervasiveness of ethnic divisions (see, for instance, Fatton 1995, 73). The discrimination of and aggression toward certain social groups, it is argued, stands at odds with the ethos of civil society, which is oriented toward the common good and solidarity of all (Eder 2009; Ruzza 2009).

Others define uncivil behavior as illegal behavior, or as a lack of commitment to act within the constraints of legal or preestablished rules (Whitehead 1997). UN Secretary Kofi Annan coined “drug-traffickers, gun-runners, money-launderers, and exploiters of young people for prostitution” as uncivil society (1998). Others refer to mafia, terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Ku Klux Klan. Piotrowski (2009) sees the use – or the will to use – violence as a main defining element (p.179). Yet, the emphasis on the use of violence or “not abiding by the rules” (Whitehead 1997) is rather problematic as it categorizes the many social and revolutionary movements that have used violence or extralegal action in their struggles as uncivil society, while both civil society and social movement scholars agree that violence, just like civic disobedience, may be an effective means to push for political and social change. Adherence to legal or even societal norms is far from desirable in nondemocratic societies and proscribes challenges to the status quo even in democratic ones (Kopecky and Mudde 2003). To underline this, scholars adopt concepts like “uncivic activism” (Alvarez et al. 2017) or “unruly politics” (Khanna 2012) as positive labels to refer to recent forms of protest that disobey the accepted forms of civic participation. Unruly protests may emerge in response to the failure of formal elite civil society to address and represent the needs and concerns of marginalized groups and grassroots organizations. While these struggles are distinctive from the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and formalized civil society organizations, there are also many interrelations between these actors and actions within the civic space (Alvarez et al. 2017; Glasius and Ishkanian 2015).

A final dimension often mentioned is the anti-modernism of uncivil society (Kaldor and Muro 2003; Ruzza 2009). Ruzza argues that uncivil society is marked by “a non-modern or an anti-modern conception of life predicated upon forms of politics of the enemy” (2009, 91). Kaldor and Muro make a wider point about the anti-modernism of many religious and nationalist militant groups (2003, 165–166). However, although both note that this often goes hand in hand with misogyny, neither wants to suggest that anti-modernism is in itself uncivil.

The discussed meanings of the “civil” in “civil society,” and hence also on what might constitute uncivility, are inevitably politically loaded and Eurocentric. Some authors, such as Chabal and Daloz (1999), who are skeptical of civil society as a concept anyway, reject any substantive use of civil as having racist connotations: “Does it connote a certain idea of ‘civility’ an identifiable arrangement of social activities that make for a more ordered society? If that is the case, might it not imply a given type of societal evolution, which would come dangerously close to an argument about the comparative merits of more ‘advanced’ societies where there is indeed a ‘civic’ civil society?” (1999, 19). Similarly, Turner (1999) calls attention to the uncivil basis of settler society in New Zealand, with an argument that could equally well be applied to many other postcolonial societies. According to him, the historical construct of a “civil” society being brought to “savage” Maori stands in the way of white New Zealanders’ understanding historical violence and current disruptive (“uncivil”) behavior on the part of Maori as collective responses to the brutal imposition of early capitalist modernity, which robbed them of their land and transgressed against their customs.

Functional Dimensions

Based on the ideas of Tocqueville civil society is often presented as fundamental and indispensable to a flourishing democracy. Associations of civil society should serve as “schools of democracy” (de Tocqueville 1969, vol. 2, 517) that provide individuals with information and negotiation and deliberation skills and instill civic virtues. Against

this “mutual strengthening theory,” empirical studies from a variety of regions have brought up important counterpoints. First, having a vibrant civil society is not to be conflated with having a “civil” civil society. This argument is most persuasively pursued in a historical article by Berman, which shows that Germans in the Weimar Republic, having lost confidence in the state, were “addicted to associating” in much the same way as Tocqueville observed of early Americans but that these dense associational networks were rapidly and successfully infiltrated and captured by Nazi organizers, accelerating and buttressing the Nazi seizure of power “from below” (Berman 1997). Second, religious or nationalist movements often have a democratic base, and sometimes have overthrown non-democratic governments, but their values are not necessarily democratic and certainly not liberal. Segments of civil society imbued with liberal, “western” values on the other hand do not necessarily have democratic legitimacy in the form of a grassroots base (Abdel Rahman 2002). Third, adherence to liberal democratic goals does not necessarily equate with internal democracy or vice versa. Uncivil movements may have civil outcomes and vice versa. Civil society organizations operating in and contributing to liberal democracies may lack mechanisms of internal accountability.

In the context of democratic backsliding, rising illiberalism, and authoritarianism, the concept of uncivil society is frequently used to denote groups that reject liberal democracy and its practices (Ruzza 2009). In this context, populist and right wing organizations become labeled as uncivil society. Yet, as Kopecky and Mudde (2003) argue, excluding illiberal, right wing, or populist associations from civil society also screens off potentially vital ingredients of associational life and democratic politics. Inclusion is therefore necessary to stimulate vibrant debate and pluralism. Urbinati and Warren (2008) stress that civil society serves representative functions between elections, linking public officials with constituents. This implies that civil society should represent the broadest possible range of constituencies to improve the quality of deliberation and

decision-making. This is not to say that civil society organizations cannot be harmful for democracy (Berman 1997; Ruzza 2009).

Structural Dimensions

Schmitter has argued for the independence of civil society from both public authorities *and private* units of production and reproduction, i.e., of firms and families, in order to be capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions promoting their interests or passions, but do *not* seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole. This makes the civility of civil society interdependent with that of the state and market. Hence, civil society can only be as civil as the circumstances allow. Avritzer (2004), for instance, develops uncivil society as the prototype of civil society most likely to emerge when (1) the state is too weak to guarantee either physical or material security, (2) the market economy exists only in clientelist form, and (3) political society is nonexistent or fragmented to the point of destruction. He cites Peru and Colombia as Latin American prototypes of this situation while acknowledging that elements of it can be found in all Latin American countries. The challenge in these situations is whether civil society can produce civility in spite of the state and the market.

Similarly, Whitehead (1997) theorizes the social locations where civil society is weak or absent by reversing the four conditions Schmitter requires for recognition as civil society: (1) encroachments on dual autonomy from the state and the market; (2) which subvert civil society’s capacity for deliberation; (3) which may encourage usurpation of the state or the market; and (4) incivility within, i.e., lack of respect for the rules and for others within civil society. He stresses that each society contains its own unique combination of these factors, and hence there is a great variety of uncivil societies.

Uncivil societies may also refer to those contexts in which associational life is coerced, co-opted, or controlled as often happens under authoritarian regimes. Here associations are top-down creations intended to serve state interests, as was the case in former Soviet states or currently in

Russia, Turkey, or Venezuela to name just a few examples. Also, examples abound where associations are not directly managed by the state, yet severely curbed, policed, or repressed, limiting their ability to perform a role in the public sphere. Research on the “closure of civic space” makes clear that civil society organizations are facing increasing political restraints all over the world, including restrictive legislation to control their activities and to ban or restrict foreign funding (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Rutzen 2015). State hostility entails not only threats to the rights of civil society but also repressive or even violent actions ranging from disproportionate auditing as a means of control to physical attacks of activists (Baker et al. 2017). An additional practice is the creation of an “alternative” civil society which absorbs and takes over the spaces previously occupied by associations that are then labeled as anti-state and anti-government. This way governments reconfigure the realm of civil society in a way that directly supports state power.

The classical theorists, it is well-known, made no distinction between civil society and the market. For Locke, the civility of civil society consisted precisely in providing sufficient physical security for the individual so that he could through his industry and ingenuity amass property. Hegel on the other hand has described particularly vividly the dynamic nature of what he called civil society – what would nowadays be called the capitalist system – but he did not at all believe it to be civil. Without checks and balances provided by the state, it neglects or exploits the poor who cannot help themselves. Similarly Marx thought of civil society as bourgeois society, a necessary stage in history, but inherently exploitative. Since then, through the detour of Gramsci’s insistence on dividing material base from cultural superstructure, civil society has come to mean the “non-state, nonmarket” realm of society. Yet while the distinction is made by most authors (but see Fatton (1995), who emphatically includes the informal economy in his not so civil society in Africa), capitalism is now generally accepted as the global “background setting” in which civil society operates. This may be, as Shils (1992)

puts it, because the alternative has proven even more uncivil, or just because empirically, this is the background setting found in most parts of the world. Recent work has begun to take into account the problematic relationship between uncivil society and global capitalism, but this relation is as yet much less theorized than that between uncivil society and democracy. Meanwhile it is interesting to note that the distinction between for-profit and nonprofit motives pertaining to most definitions of civil society is often left behind when discussing uncivil society.

Future Directions

While the concept of uncivil society has become a commonplace in academic literature and beyond, it remains vague and ill-defined. While some scholars seek to redress this problem by offering conceptual clarification, others argue that such attempts illustrate how difficult it is to draw clear lines. Bob (2011) argues that uncivil society’s referent is never clear and unambiguous, and Kaldor and Muro (2003) warn against arbitrariness in distinguishing the civil from the uncivil. Many authors therefore insist on an empirical definition of civil society that includes “uncivil society” as a tendency within it (Abdel Rahman 2002; Berman 1997; Bob 2011; Fatton 1995; Kaldor and Muro 2003; Kopecky and Mudde 2003). Some authors suggest abandoning the concept altogether (Kopecky and Mudde 2003; Kaldor and Muro 2003; Bob 2011). This is most clearly voiced by Bob (2011) who points out that the term may “limit or foreclose much-needed analysis of powerful if sometimes repugnant organizations, goals and tactics” (p. 219). Indeed, we need more and better research into variations in normative orientations, functions, and tactics that third sector actors may employ, but also to study variations in configurations between civil society, state, and markets within and across countries.

Cross-References

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- ▶ [Civil Society and Democracy](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society and Religion](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society and Social Capital in Central and Eastern Europe](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society Theory: de Tocqueville](#)
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