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# Civil Society: the Sickness, Not the Cure?<sup>1</sup>

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The concept of civil society has enjoyed remarkable popularity in recent decades. Originally deployed by scholars who wished to address general questions of human social evolution, it has undergone many changes of meaning before entering its current vogue. I shall argue that the concept of civil society is inadequate for investigating the integration problems faced by mature industrial societies. Ernest Gellner's take on it is better than many others, but he fails to integrate civil society adequately into his own variant of evolutionary theory, and to distinguish normative ideals and ideologies from actual social processes. Ultimately, his work on this topic shows the limitations of his own distinctive Enlightenment commitments. Current attempts to operationalise the concept through the promotion of NGOs, both local and foreign, show that Eurocentric models deriving ultimately from a pre-industrial age offer no solutions to contemporary dilemmas; they are (to paraphrase Karl Kraus on psychoanalysis) a symptom of the disease rather than the cure.*

## **ORIGINS AND REVIVAL**

Deriving from the Latin *societas civilis*, the concept of civil society has a long and confusing history. In Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was used as a general, inclusive term by theorists concerned to address basic questions of social evolution.

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In these early formulations (including that of Adam Ferguson), civil society subsumed the institutions of the state. It came to be detached from and opposed to the state in the work of Hegel. After critique at the hands of Marx, for whom civil society was but a mask for the domination of the bourgeoisie, the term went missing almost without trace for most of the twentieth century. Its revival owed much to the work of Antonio Gramsci, and came to fruition thanks to a combination of western leftists and Eastern European dissidents in the years leading up to the collapse of socialist regimes in 1989–1991. At that time it usually meant everything not clearly identified with the socialist state. Later it was also commonly used to refer to a ‘third sector’ between the state and the marketplace, and in particular to clubs, associations and non-governmental organizations of all sorts. In this usage, by the beginning of the twenty-first century the term had moved outside the academy, to be widely used in development aid programs and even taken up by the World Bank.

I have not softened my longstanding scepticism concerning the provenance and usefulness of this term (Hann 1990). As an ethnographer who carried out fieldwork projects in Hungary and Poland in the 1970s, I was naturally interested in the discourses of intellectuals in those countries and in points of contact with western scholars. A number of direct personal scholarly links promoted what, in retrospect, seems to me a rather strange coalition. For example, Andrew Arato, one of the American scholars on whom Habermas has drawn (*e.g.* Habermas 1992), had personal contacts in Hungary. John Keane’s work (1988) built on his close links to Prague, and was particularly influential in Britain. East and West had different agendas but there were enough points of contact to launch the concept of civil society into its recent vogue. For Eastern European oppositionists it was all too easy to identify civil society with ‘the people’, in opposition to a repressive socialist state. The view from the New School in New York took the same dualism, finding in civil society not the destructive, ‘egoistic’ forces identified by Hegel and Marx, but the emancipatory forces of popular solidarity and autonomy, as theorised by Gramsci.

This is how the story began in the 1980s. Some of this work was highly sophisticated scholarship (notably Cohen and Arato

1993), but a massive vulgarization of the concept took place in the 1990s, after socialist regimes had collapsed and new democratic forms of government were installed in their place. It was increasingly taken for granted that 'civil society' had been entirely absent under socialism. Some scholars had tried in the 1980s to quantify its decline by counting the numbers of registered associations (Hankiss 1990). This tendency has come to dominate. Donors operationalise the concept in the only way they understand, according to which increasing the number of non-governmental organizations is the key to building civil society. This has only the most tenuous of links with the Tocquevillean emphasis on the role of associations in the establishment of American democracy. Despite the ubiquitous coarsening of the idea, civil society continues to fascinate academic social scientists<sup>2</sup>. Even more surprisingly, some European historians have made 'the project of civil society' central in accounting for the emergence of modern democracies and the public sphere from the Enlightenment onwards (Kocka 2000).

### THE GELLNERIAN PERSPECTIVE

I suggested recently (Hann 2001) that Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism depends upon a theory of culture, which shows him to belong in the 'romantic-holist' tradition that runs from Herder to Malinowski and beyond. This element in his work betrays his roots in Central Europe. Here I argue that his late writings on civil society complement and correct his writings on nationalism and culture, though his implicit evolutionism is vulnerable to the charge of Eurocentrism.

Gellner was a relative latecomer to the civil society literature. He described the idea as a 'dusty term, drawn from antiquated political theory, belonging to long, obscure and justly forgotten debates...' (1994: 5, cf. Seligman 1992, Kumar 1993). Yet, he went on to explain, in the 1980s this 'dusty term' was 'suddenly endowed with a new and powerful capacity to stir enthusiasm and inspire action' (*ibid.*). In other words, Gellner seems to have welcomed the revival of civil society because of the conjuncture in Eastern Europe. He has no deeper ambition to apply the concept in a larger intellectual project. We know that, unusually among his

anthropologist contemporaries, he took questions of social evolution very seriously. He frequently declared himself to be a 'trinitarian': there were three basic stages of human evolution, based successively on food collecting, agriculture and industry. This is not so far removed from the ideas of the eighteenth century civil society theorists. Yet in the fullest statement of his historical anthropology, *Plough, Sword and Book*, published in 1988, the term civil society is nowhere mentioned. A mere six years later, civil society was the central concept in *Conditions of Liberty*. Questions of evolution are here addressed only implicitly. Civil society is taken as shorthand for the conditions of modern liberal, individualist, 'modular' western society: he finds the term a superior shorthand to the term democracy, but he does not really explain why. It is contrasted to an earlier mode of organizing society, which Gellner caricatures as the 'tyranny of cousins'. This mode is in any case not sustainable in modern industrial conditions. For a long time, notes Gellner, intelligent observers had supposed that centralized socialist systems might offer a genuine alternative mode to that of capitalism; but it turned out that those systems were economically inefficient as well as morally repugnant, because of their repression of the individual. So Gellner's volume turns out to be a triumphalist celebration of the West, almost on a par with Fukuyama's *The End of History*. The rest of the world has no alternative but to acknowledge the superiority of the western model, cognitively and socially, as well as economically and politically.

Gellner was not impressed by attempts to measure the health of civil society through quantitative studies. He cannot be held responsible for the bowdlerizations that continued after his death. There are, however, too many simplifications in his own treatment. Perhaps the most obvious is his dismissal of the socialist 'ideocracies' and his refusal to entertain the possibility that at least some socialist regimes had developed social systems to which a great many of their citizens were deeply attached. If the collapse of socialism led to high levels of intolerance and actual violence, might we not argue that, in some dimensions at least, society was more civil under socialism? If mistrust and cynicism predominate in the post-socialist public sphere, can we really share his assumption that the Western model of civil society is intrinsically superior to that

which it is replacing? Gellner was philosophically very close to Karl Popper and contemptuously dismissive of those who, within the Western tradition, preferred to form 'churches' rather than open their theories and analyses to critical debate. Neo-Marxists and Freudians were among those he lampooned in this regard. But, in the case of civil society, if the persistence of so many negative phenomena more than a decade after the collapse of the old regimes is still attributed to not having enough of the new model, the question must arise: how much longer must a Popperian or Gellnerian wait before he or she concludes that the champions of civil society have themselves come to form something resembling a church, imposing their own closed system of convictions on populations whose own deepest values lie elsewhere?

### **CITIZENSHIP AND ENTITLEMENTS**

Like Gellner, Jürgen Habermas has become an enthusiastic proponent of civil society. The fact that a German scholar needs to introduce the Anglicisation *Zivilgesellschaft* takes us directly to some of the key problems. The Enlightenment project in the German speaking world was formerly encapsulated in the phrase *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. I think that this, or simply *Bürgerschaft*, Citizenship, is still the best umbrella term for addressing John Locke's project in the Europe of today. The classical concept of a civil society was developed in a pre-industrial age that did not know anything like the massive flows of people and goods found in the contemporary world. It is surely utopian to imagine that the social and political issues of our age can be addressed through models in which society is opposed to state. The role of the state, but also of other political authorities above the state and below it, is vital for the enforcement of welfare entitlements, the rule of law, market regulation etc. These are the issues that scholars are currently addressing from various disciplinary perspectives under the heading of 'European citizenship'. Citizenship is not understood here in the restricted legal sense of nationality (though the importance of this aspect should not be underestimated). Rather, in the tradition associated particularly with Marshall (1977), citizenship is a broad term that

encompasses a comprehensive range of political, economic, social and cultural entitlements.

I suggest that a shift of emphasis to citizenship would serve to cast east-west comparisons in a rather different light and facilitate more balanced evaluations. Which European country was the first to follow France in proclaiming a liberal constitution in the 1790s? The answer is Poland, though probably not many people in Britain, France or Germany are aware of this fact. Poland at that time had a multi-religious society that was more tolerant of group differences than most so-called 'multi-cultural' states in contemporary Europe; but like many other achievements of Eastern Europe, this tends to be eclipsed in the western accounts of European past. A broad approach to citizenship would make us more aware of this bias and inhibit us from classifying European states according to the simple east-west grid. So long as the focus is on civil society, it is self-evident that, in recent decades at least, the West has had more of it, the East less. But if we follow Marshall's multidimensional approach, we may recognise that certain elements of modern citizenship, notably economic and welfare entitlements came to be well developed in the socialist period. Political and legal rights were more developed in the West, but economic and social rights were more securely established in the East. This seems to me to provide a better framework for comparison and evaluation than a self-congratulatory Occidentalists framework, in which the only rights that have value are those which have prevailed in the West, the implication being that there must now be a unidirectional flow as these are transferred from West to East.

It is myopic to ignore the problems that European societies now face, in the West as well as in the East. Virtually all western societies have massive internal problems, including problems of unemployment, political extremism, and the citizenship claims of minority groups of various kinds. Problems of ethnic and national identity have posed the most serious threats in many parts of Europe in recent years. It seems to me that they also threaten civil society theorising. When civil society was promoted against the socialist state it carried the implication of free individuals who somehow made up a harmonious and solidary community. The illusory character of this *solidarność* has been nowhere more clearly demon-

strated that in Poland, where the social movement of that name quickly disintegrated in the wake of the socialist state, leaving behind some forces promoting civility, but also some that tended in the opposite direction. The general lesson is that a model of liberal individualism cannot guarantee stable and cohesive societies. For these, more inclusive forms of citizenship are required. New forms of governance, from the European Union down to regional and local levels, cannot ignore the ties of sentiment that bind individuals together into groups; a failure to respect minority rights can lead to highly uncivil outcomes (Hann 1998).

### **CIVIL TÁRSADALOM IN HUNGARY**

Let me now turn to a particular case in order to show how an anthropological approach can expose Eurocentric and ideological aspects of the currently dominant usages of the concept of civil society. The fieldworker who immerses herself or himself into the life of a small town or a village can sometimes report back to the seminar room in the capital with stories that tell urban intellectuals things they did not previously know about their own societies. Let us take the case of Hungary, where intellectuals such as György Konrád and Elemér Hankiss played an important role in the revival of the concept in the 1980s. Here, as in Germany, the old term was modified: *polgári társadalom*, corresponding to *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, was now replaced by *civil társadalom*. Of course, the precise connotations of these words were somewhat different from the German case, and the actual historical processes to which they were applied were very different. Hungarian embourgeoisement (*polgárosodás* – German, *Verbürgerlichung*) began rather late. Until the 1940s, not only was Hungary's economy primarily agrarian but the social structure exhibited marked continuities with the feudal past. In particular, the landless labourers who lived and worked on latifundia-style manors hardly enjoyed full civil rights in a substantive sense. This old hierarchy was destroyed in the socialist period by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and collectivisation. The term *polgári* was now associated firmly with bourgeois, capitalist society. Its other meaning, that of civic or civil,

was largely ignored, hence the need to import an English adaptation in the 1980s.

The intellectuals who reinvented *civil társadalom* stressed the importance of voluntary associations independent of the state. Comparisons with the pre-socialist period indicated a decline. The number of such associations in fact began to increase well before the political changes of 1989. The number of non-profit organisations rose from just under 8,800 in 1989 to more than 43,000 in 1995<sup>3</sup>. Many of these were in fields such as sport and leisure, as they had been under socialism and in the pre-socialist years, but others were concerned with education and welfare provision, from which they were largely excluded in the socialist decades. In all of these fields there was a decline in state provision. What do such figures and trends reveal about the changing quality of social life? I suggest that it is a mistake to rely on such statistical indicators to support claims that civil society has expanded. Major changes have indeed taken place, but they should not blind us to continuities. Rather than imagine a totalitarian state ceding power to a pluralist, civil society, a more nuanced assessment is required. Civil society theoreticians themselves insist on the desirability of a differentiation of spheres, and we can proceed along similar lines.

In the domain of politics, considerable successes have been achieved. A single party dictatorship has been replaced by a competitive system and, at the highest level of government, power has changed hands four times without significant disruption. The fact that no post-socialist government has achieved re-election indicates, however, widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of political leaders. Politicians are held in low esteem and electoral participation rates have fallen to American levels.

In the domain of law, there can be little doubt that the quality of *Rechtsstaatlichkeit* has risen significantly. At the highest level, the Constitutional Court has proved its effectiveness. Not only is the legal machinery at other levels also free of political interference, but the legal profession is once again able to attract high calibre recruits. Legal services have become, again following American patterns, exposed to norms of market competition.

The economic domain as a whole has undergone sweeping changes, though after the reforms of the later socialist decades the



changes were less striking in Hungary than anywhere else in Eastern Europe. Many private enterprises previously confined to the black, grey, or 'second' economy could now expand their activities, operate abroad for the first time, and negotiate loans from new banks, also private. Hungary attracted massive foreign investment and consumers welcomed wider choice in most fields. On the negative side, there was also public discontent over high inflation rates and a tendency to associate all successful new entrepreneurs with dubious business practices and even with 'mafia'.

This last tendency has direct implications for the last domain I wish to note, which I term the social. This is of course a catchall, but it can hardly be overlooked in any discussion of civil society. More clubs and associations have come into existence, but some people are now less active outside the private sphere than they were previously because they lack the money and because some state subsidies (*e.g.* for sport and trade union organised summer vacations) have been withdrawn. Crime rates have soared and income differentials have widened significantly. Many have become unemployed, many more feel less secure and have experienced the contraction of welfare entitlements. Groups such as the Roma, which have always experienced discrimination at the hands of the majority, have been exposed to still higher levels of violent antagonism.

All of these points can be readily documented. Indeed anthropologists and other social scientists have also identified most of them elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Harder to document, but no less important for an assessment of what is happening to civil society, is the subjective dimension. What do people feel about the changing quality of their social contacts, of the moral foundations of their workplace, their local community or their nation-state? The slogan civil society exercised a powerful moral appeal to intellectuals in the 1980s, above all in the work of Václav Havel, who diagnosed the condition of late socialist Czechoslovakia as 'living a lie'. In the 1990s, however, many post-socialist citizens have had cause to recall the original moral principles on which socialist societies were constructed. For example, they recall strong identities forged at the workplace and contrast these with the rigour imposed by their new private employers, or with their unemployment. Many

seem to believe that social equality itself is intrinsically valuable and therefore bemoan the trend towards greater inequality. If they could use the jargon of social scientists they might say that they attach more significance to a sociological 'equality of outcomes' than to individual 'equality of condition' as civil society theoreticians would define this<sup>4</sup>. Of course the latter dismiss the hankering after security and equality as a regrettable nostalgia and point to the high price that was paid in other domains to achieve these goods.

This account of differentiated domains needs to be reintegrated, since people do not in fact live their social lives in tidy separate compartments. In order to move beyond the generalities that I have sketched above, anthropologists usually work in relatively small communities where they can study in detail how the various domains fit together. I have worked since 1976 in the village of Tázlár, with a population of just over 2000. This village lies on the Great Hungarian Plain and was affected by Ottoman occupation. It was resettled from the 1870s onwards, precisely the period in which *polgárosodás* got under way, and in an economic sense the migrants to Tázlár were very obviously a part of the emerging capitalist society. Indeed the aspiration of most of the peasants who bought land here was to become independent, 'bourgeois' family farmers. For the majority, however, this was an unrealistic goal. This region was one of great poverty in the inter-war decades. Tázlár, too, was a victim of the country's stymied social structure (Erdei 1957). In terms of substantive entitlements, many if not most of its citizens were disenfranchised.

Only the upheavals of the socialist decades served to integrate these villagers, located only 130 kilometres from Budapest, more effectively into the national society. Thanks to a particularly flexible form of cooperative, Tázlár farmers came to enjoy even greater economic freedoms under 'market socialism' than the rural population of other regions. Most families worked privately on land that they regarded as 'ours', even though few had legal title to the plots they used. Some took commercial risks in the vegetable or wine branches. The village centre grew rapidly as people gave up their isolated farmsteads to move into new homes enjoying all modern conveniences. The socialist authorities built a doctor's surgery, new

schools, kindergardens and a Culture House in this centre. Virtually all the children who finished the eight grade 'general school' in the village proceeded to further education, either academic or vocational. For those who wanted the security of regular wage income, either in place of or (as was more often the case) in addition to a small-scale farm, there was no shortage of jobs. In all of these ways, Tázlár residents came to benefit from the same substantive citizenship rights as those enjoyed by the rest of the population. In other domains, however, rights were severely curtailed. Political party competition was absent, church groups were tolerated but confined to their own premises and not allowed to process in public; social organizations existed mainly under the aegis of the leading socialist institutions of the village, i.e. the cooperative(s), the council or the school. Other forms of association or spontaneous grouping were inhibited, though the Hunting Society was popular, and not only with the new socialist elites (*see* Hann 1980).

Since 1989 I have explored some of the consequences of post-socialist changes for these villagers (Hann 1996a, b). The cooperative has persisted but it has withdrawn from agricultural activities to concentrate on the more profitable business of producing plastic bags. As elsewhere, property relationships have been radically altered through privatisation and auctions. Yet many villagers showed little interest in becoming owners, since in contrast to the support given to this sector in the later socialist years, the overall prospects for agriculture were now extremely gloomy. This climate has in turn hindered the prospects for successful entrepreneurial activity in other sectors. Numerous villagers have experienced these years as a disempowerment. The former Secretary of the village Communist Party is an extreme case: he lost his position at the cooperative and for several years had to struggle to survive; his main income in these years was the child benefit allowance that he received from the state.

The associational life of the village has not changed very much with the new freedoms. Most of the political parties significant at the national level have a few local activists, but none is strong enough to form a branch and hold regular meetings. Members of the elected council and its leader (no longer called Council Chairman but *Polgármester*, i.e. *Bürgermeister*) are elected for their

individual qualities. Most have no party affiliation. The central institutions of the socialist period continue to dominate in the educational and cultural domains, supported as in the past by the state. Religious congregations are now visible in public spaces at major holidays, but there has been no significant rise in participation rates at church services. Recently, in a development that would probably not have been possible in the socialist years, the Women's Club split into two as a result of personality clashes within the committee. Each now seems independently viable. But even this club does not play a major role in the social lives of its members. What matters to them is the contact and support that they enjoy from their families and their neighbourhoods, and from the state. They depend on continuities in each of these domains, in order to cope with the uncertainties that have arisen elsewhere, particularly on job markets. Almost everyone regrets the demise of the old system of subsidised house building, which promoted neighbourhood cooperation and allowed young couples to live independently at a much earlier age than is possible for them today. Twelve years after their 'system change', many ordinary citizens remain concerned that basic existential securities are in jeopardy, even though no government has dared to make major cuts in welfare spending. No one sees in the private, or 'third' or 'non-profit' sectors any viable alternative to the state.

This provides at least part of the explanation for the election of a socialist-led government in Hungary in May 2002. The government of Viktor Orbán did not accept its defeat gracefully. Senior members of his FIDESZ party, now officially known as the Hungarian *Polgári* Party, insisted that the return of the socialists would mean the end of democracy. There was a high level of nationalist manipulation: the insinuation was that you could not be a loyal Hungarian and vote for the socialists or their coalition partners, the Free Democrats (who also evoked strong anti-Semitic sentiments). Politicians organized mass rallies and a network of *Polgári Körök* (Citizens' Circles) all over the country. When I visited the village, two months after the elections, the passions were still strong. FIDESZ had won convincingly throughout this agricultural region, and seemed to have taken over from the Independent Smallholders' Party as the 'natural' representative of villagers. A local group was

taking shape for the first time, but people were not sure if it was FIDESZ as a political party that was establishing itself, or rather one of the new *Polgári Körök*.

## EXPANDING THE MODEL

Through case studies such as this, I suggest that anthropologists can puncture some of the more optimistic and grandiose claims about the emergence of a new civil society in Eastern Europe. There is no denying the continuing normative fascination of the term, and it remains central to many external ‘development’ initiatives in the region. This is a level hardly addressed by Gellner; and if he had lived to observe what is now going on in the name of ‘civil society promotion’ he would be both amused and pained, for civil society engineering is somehow more ludicrous than the socialist engineering it is meant to replace. The anthropological studies that I have seen suggest that its appeal may be limited to narrow élite circles, and to those able through their connections to ‘instrumentalise’ it. Under these post-socialist conditions the term civil society becomes a new problem rather than a solution. It serves to distract attention away from the social issues that matter to most people, above all in the realms of jobs, welfare and security. These all involve state support and therefore fall outside the vulgar definition of civil society; yet they mean much more to people than the freedom to join a newly established Rotary Club, or a Boy Scouts group instead of the Communist Party youth organization (the Scouts were not actually eliminated in Poland, a fact that still astonishes citizens of other formerly socialist states).

In fact I have never heard the phrase *civil társadalom* in Tázlár. It belongs to the vocabulary of intellectuals in the major cities. Some anthropologists have focused on this élite discourse, and it is always interesting to note exactly how civil society is translated, often with subtle changes of association. Here, too, it is important to note the real, material consequences. For example Steven Sampson was involved for several years in distributing Danish aid funds to Albania, under the heading of ‘civil society promotion’ (Sampson 1996). He discovered how Albanians soon learned how to dis-

simulate and tailor their applications for support to the stipulated criterion of non-government organization, even when this made no cultural sense to them; but whether such initiatives have enjoyed much success in achieving the sort of normative changes that the Danish donors wanted to see in Albanian society seems very doubtful. Later work suggests that such promotion of a particular western form of civil society is destructive in siphoning away talented young people with qualifications, transforming them into strangers in their own countries (Bruno 1998; Sampson 2002; Mandel 2002). Ordinary people who lack links to the new networks of western funding are thoroughly cynical about the jargon and ideological language of these new initiatives, which in many ways replicate the didactic dogmatism of earlier ideologies.

Anthropologists can also move beyond reporting and describing, to mount challenges to the standard western definitions of civil society. They may develop alternatives on the basis of the different ways in which other cultures ensure the accountability of their elites and maintain high levels of trust. This is perhaps a different and much broader definition of civil society, but it does seem to take us to the heart of its normative appeal. Importing the narrow western model, as in the above mentioned Albanian case or as in the equally chaotic case of contemporary Russia, may be detrimental to these indigenous mechanisms. David Abramson (1999) argues persuasively that, in Muslim societies as in all other societies, 'there are social mechanisms for ensuring accountability; fostering trust between members of local communities; resolving – consensually and justly – a wide range of common disputes; and providing enough knowledge to accomplish all of the above efficiently and often enough to allow people to proceed with their daily lives'.

Of course for many western theorists such relativising of the civil society concept is unacceptable. The questions of translation and the dissemination of civil society as a norm raise fundamental issues which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere (Hann 1996c). On what grounds should this model, with its origins in a specifically European history, be exported to the rest of the world? The western liberal construction of the free individual is certainly remote from the cultures of many people in the world. It provides only a highly misleading representation of Europeans as well, or at

least of the majority of non-Protestant Europeans. But if the ideal of civil society can be detached from these specific cultural roots and conceptualised instead simply as a society in which bonds of trust and mutual accountability are highly developed, then anthropologists are in a good position to join in comparative research, and to comment on the likely consequences, case by case, of importing the currently fashionable western model.

In some cases, and I think this point may apply as much to China as to Eastern Europe, it may be inappropriate to think in terms of the *import* of western civil society for the simple reason that key elements of this model, such as the rule of law and contract, are as much a part of the history and culture of these regions as they are of 'the West'. It would be preferable to see China rediscover these elements in its own past, rather than be obliged to adapt a highly specific, readymade model from the North Atlantic. From this perspective it is the long-term unity of Eurasia that should be our comparative framework. The concept of civil society might again be fruitful to historical anthropologists charting some of these long-term patterns, but that would be an entirely different – intellectually far more worthwhile – task than the current agenda of counting the NGOs.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO CIVIL SOCIETY**

Most modern anthropologists are specialists not in evolution or long-term history, but in ethnography. Can the Western concept of civil society possibly be of any use here? I would argue yes. For one thing, the ethnographer should be able to document not only the rhetorical usage of civil society all over the world today. It should also be possible to address the social realities and norms of behaviour that interest us, particularly those influencing questions of social trust and civility. The ethnographer must be granted licence to move beyond the currently fashionable definition, which privileges formal associations. The adjusted, broad definition of civil society involves engaging with fundamental issues about the nature of society and government, of moral accountability and the quality of inter-personal relations; in short, it involves what I term

substantive citizenship. Cast in these terms, civil society can be explored everywhere, including contexts far removed from the European conditions for which it has been designed and redesigned.

It is surely time to take a more critical stance towards western societies and the extent to which their realities match up to the ideal. I have suggested that increasing inequalities and the failure to integrate ethnic and religious minorities are best addressed as citizenship issues. Some scholars, concerned with the evolution of real conditions of social existence, might be tempted to abandon the concept of civil society, as entirely useless in charting the transformation from 'ideocracy' or the 'tyranny of cousins' to modern capitalist democracy. The alternative, which I prefer, is to rework the concept in quite new ways. Anthropologists can join historians and others in working to protect it from trivialization and vulgarization. The origins of its universalist aspirations lie in a utopian project of the eighteenth century, launched in Europe. The substantive history of European societies since that time has undoubtedly seen an enlargement of capacities, an empowerment of the mass of the citizenry. This has been achieved through struggles between different groups in society, and owes nothing to intellectual discourses about state-society antagonism, such as those which triggered the rediscovery of civil society at a specific moment at the end of the twentieth century.

The topics of civil society, trust, citizenship, etc. in post-socialist societies have been widely debated in other disciplines, notably political science and sociology. The theories of Robert Putnam (1993) seem to have gained an especially strong following. How can anthropologists contribute? So far they have tended to concentrate on a critique of 'western design', whether in terms of regional and local studies of external development initiatives and new elites, or in more macro studies international aid to Russia (Wedel 1998). What strikes me is that anthropologists are tending to accept a definition of civil society that privileges a particular western notion, in particular the world of NGOs, their projects, and the grants that sustain them. Now, there are of course interesting questions one can ask in studies of the new NGOs, *e.g.* what proportion of the new foundation elites encountered were formally



*nomenklatura*? What services have the new NGOs taken over from the state? But is this the key job for the anthropologist? The study of NGOs has become a major interest of anthropologists in many parts of the world, yet in a country such as Russia the new *tretyi sektor* is largely incomprehensible to most people. It is hardly more open and transparent than the old hierarchy of the Communist Party, and it is not surprising that it leads to resentment and anti-western sentiments. It is in this sense that civil society should be seen as the disease, rather than the cure. Meanwhile there are many other groups and other informal networks for the ethnographer to explore. The distinctive contribution of anthropology is to investigate those alternative local models of ‘civil society’, which look quite different from those of Tocqueville and Putnam, and are overlooked in the more abstract theorising of Ernest Gellner.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for the panel devoted to Ernest Gellner at the St. Petersburg conference, Hierarchy and Power in the History of Civilizations, July 4–7, 2002. My warm thanks to the organizers Declan Quigley and Peter Skalník, and all the participants. The contents draw in part on arguments previously published in German, see Hann 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the London School of Economics has recently established a Centre for Civil Society. Its annual publication, *Global Civil Society* (volume 1, Oxford University Press, 2001) exemplifies the current trends.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Jenkins 1999.

<sup>4</sup> In my experience, the weight attached to social equality varies significantly in the postsocialist countries. For reasons that deserve a fuller historical elucidation, it is somewhat stronger in the Czech and East German cases than it is in Hungary.

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