

## Book Review

*Civil Society* by Michael Edwards, London: Polity, 2020. 171 pp.

The spread of authoritarian populism, rising cultural and political polarisation, the deepening privatisation and commercialisation of the public sphere, and the increasing bureaucratisation of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other nonprofit organisations invoked questions around the possibilities of civil society. The more we push for the idea of civil society, the closer it reaches a bottleneck. If universalism and cosmopolitanism are at the driving seat of global society, current events like ethnonationalism and populism of different stripes serve as food for pessimistic thought about civil society. Furthermore, since there is no consensus among experts and policymakers on what civil society is, what it does, or even whether it exists in certain parts of the world, it is still far-fetched to be optimistic about the idea of civil society, unless efforts are made to provide clarity over its meaning and relevant emancipatory potential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the latest edition (the fourth) of his book *Civil Society*, Michael Edwards continues to express his optimism over the idea and spirit of civil society, and at the same time provide descriptions and prescriptions over the problems highlighted above. Against this backdrop, Edwards asserts that civil society is essential for world order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it is proven throughout human history. Considering its richness in history, Edwards sketches the origin of the idea from time immemorial, in which it was believed that community was the source of strength for civil societies. This belief later developed into the idea of a limited state, before again evolving as the idea of the market gained ascendancy. The strength of his work lies in the possibility of the overlap between the three models of civil society associational life, the good society and the public sphere, and the synthesis of all three, along with its application as he described in the book.

The introductory chapter aims at setting the tone for contemporary intellectual debate on the concept of civil society as a form of deliberative democracy, a concept which is widely applied to this day. Beginning with the genealogy of the idea of civil society, from Antiquity to the Christian era to the Enlightenment, Edwards attempts to clarify to readers how the

idea of civil society has been generally argued over by opposing camps of Liberals and Marxists, before landing on the Habermasian deliberation of communicative action within civil society.

In the subsequent chapters (2, 3 and 4), he painstakingly details the idea of civil society, made up of NGOs and other voluntary associations, as part of the society (the world of associational life), civil society as a kind of deontologically guided society (the good or virtuous society), and civil society as the public sphere; a space of argument and negotiation. There exists a theory of associational life, which points to the nonprofit sector, containing all associations and networks between the family and the state, where membership and activities are voluntary. This theory was derived heavily from de Tocqueville's idea and it illustrates civil society as a social sphere, distinct from states and markets. It is through the medium of non-state action that people can exercise their freedom for good. This is a medium that is always necessary but never sufficient to achieve its goal without working together with the state and market, arguing that the three sectors are not necessarily inextricably interwoven.

It is important to mention here that a higher number and larger size of associations are not magic bullets that can guarantee a bigger space for the voluntary sector, and it makes no sense to lump all nonprofit organisations into a single category of associational life. Inside the world of associational life, there are many political spectrums, as he has highlighted. While conservatives see associations as vehicles to rebuild traditional moral values, liberals see them as counterweights to the power of government and business. Progressives, on the other hand, see them as platforms to advance new visions of the society. Furthermore, conflict, counterhegemony and social capital; both bonding or breaching continue to be responsible for the expansion and contraction of space for the voluntary sector under the associational life model.

Certainly, civil society is not necessarily exclusive to a circular world, explained Edwards. The transnational religious movement and the existence of voluntary sectors in the Middle East and Africa are equally important in providing a cross-cultural perspective of civil society. How do we achieve consensus in a society when not only social capital, but counter-hegemony and conflict also exist in the society, not only among and between voluntary sectors, but also among and between the state and market? How can we have a society that is guided by love and freedom, truth and beauty, courage and compassion, if this is the case?

Defining civil society in normative terms as a good society (the second model) carries metaphysical connotation, wherein there is strong belief that the idea of absolute and universal good do exist independently from worldly human activities, and humans have the duty to strive towards attaining a good or virtuous society. Such a deontological perspective of society exists in both religious and secular societies. Thus, the Islamic concept of *ummah*, the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, the Kantian idea of a global ethical community, or the *civitas humana* of Wilhelm Röpke are obviously relevant here. Such conceptions of civil society naturally develop across the boundary of state and society, reminding us of ideas like human rights (religious or secular) and peace as well as international solidarity. In short, Edwards asserts that theories of the good society help us focus on the challenges that motivate the search for freedom and human progress that is guided by the universal principle, and this cannot be achieved in the world of associational life alone without cooperation and collaboration with the state and market, as well as the institution of the family.

The third model; the public sphere, connects the previous two models together by providing a framework and space for deliberation or dialogue, and this is where negotiations and arguments take place. It is in this third model of civil society where Edwards believes free discussions and rational arguments can attenuate conflictual issues, bring about agreements and thus contribute to achieving consensus on the ends of the good society. However, he acknowledges the structural problem, which lies in such deliberative discourse, particularly on the inequality of voices, which does not necessarily end with the best decisional outcomes. Especially when it is often tainted by individuals of strong character, whose voices are usually loud yet might have little relevance. Jurgen Habermas claimed the existence of a “discursive public sphere,” which enabled citizens to talk about common concerns in conditions of freedom, equality, and non-violent interaction due to its dynamic “communicative action,” “discursive democracy,” and the “colonization of the life world”. There is a good reason to question Habermas’ thinking of public conversations reaching a consensus through rational argument, especially with the presence of the great issues of today.

Edwards is worried about the development of social media in the past five years, and it has led him to become more skeptical over the idea of technologies as important mediums to revitalise civil society. While social media presents an opportunity, he asserts that the negatives outweigh

the positives, calling for the importance of face-to-face communication. The hierarchy of power is already a problem, and the processes of commodification and commercialisation of social media is another problem, which engenders the inequality of voices, hence endangering meaningful deliberation. This all boils down to the fact that there is no guarantee that public deliberation will always lead to a rational and optimal decision, as Habermasians believe. In short, there is no magic bullet, no painless panacea and possibly no universalism to be discovered.

If it is true that there is no consensus among experts and policymakers about what civil society is, what it does, or even whether it exists in certain parts of the world, it is far-fetched to be optimistic about the idea of civil society. In chapters 5 and 6, Edwards made the effort to provide a synthesis of the three models of civil society that unites elements of all the models, responding to the question of how do these different models fit together, and if they do, what might that integrated model mean in practice? Basically, Edwards insists on the principle of an inclusive associational ecosystem, matched by a strong and democratic state, where a multiplicity of independent public spheres enable equal participation in setting the rules of the game.

Centering his integrated approach on the school of associational life, and borrowing the idea of his discussion from the works of Robert Putnam, Theda Skocpol and Nancy Rosenblum, Edwards then explains how “civic culture” sees the totality of associational life as the key to positive social norms in which the good society is built. The “comparative associational” school sees particular configurations of associational life as the key to policy reforms that shape the good society in ways that are desirable, negotiated through the public sphere, while the “school of skeptics” disputes the links between “forms and norms” implied in both of these formulations, arguing that factors outside of civil society are more important than anything that is taking place inside.

What do all of the debates on civil society mean in practice, or how do they beneficially inform policymakers? In the last chapter (chapter 6), he responds to this question. To summarise his response, these debates can help people understand the importance of strengthening associational life as a real force for change by encouraging civic groups to reconnect with their social base, build their independence, take more risks, reach out to others, and model their values in everything they do. It is also equally important to

focus as much attention as possible on reinforcing the financial independence of voluntary associations. In addition, it is also crucial to revive a democratic public sphere, especially to get to grips with polarisation, to mediate differences between groups and to manage the costs and benefits of social media by reorienting it to focus on the public interest.

In a nutshell, responding to the recent episodes of pessimism towards civil society's potential, the spread of authoritarian populism, the rising cultural and political polarisation, the deepening privatisation and commercialisation of the public sphere, and the increasing bureaucratisation of NGOs and other nonprofit organisations, Edwards calls for more efforts to revitalise the emancipatory potential of civil society. It is improper to say that the civil society project is no longer attainable, and it would be inappropriate to claim that it gets closer to the bottleneck. Hence, there is every reason to be sanguine about the need to have more civil society than to have less of it.

This is a very necessary book that is not liberal-centered, and is especially useful for academicians and policymakers who deal with democracy and development.

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