

What is civil society?

‘Civil society’ refers to the networks of organisations and institutions which result from, and in turn, frame, people’s day-to-day interactions. The social scientist Ernest Gellner once observed that civil society is a social space located between ‘the tyranny of kin’ and the ‘the tyranny of kings’ – in other words, between the intimacy of family life on the one hand, and the impersonal power of the state on the other. It is that middle realm of social life which brings people into contact with each other in terms of ‘sociality’, often practical, instrumental and specific. It is what makes society ‘social’ as opposed to political or economic, and it means we cannot reduce people to ‘citizens’ (the creatures of the state), nor ‘customers’ (the creatures of the market).

It is important to recognise that this sphere of sociality is not simply about formal membership, that is, belonging in a formalistic way to associations either because we have to (such as professional associations) or because we choose to (churches or political parties). Most people do not belong formally to any such bodies, but they have a rich ‘social’ life. They do not pay their dues in a formal sense (such that if you do not, you are struck off), but participate in a whole range of activities, donating money or, more often, their time and labour. That is why women are so vital in civil society; they may not ‘belong’ formally to as many associations as men, but they are involved in far more activities of a voluntary and ‘informal’ sort.

Scotland prides itself on the density and achievements of ‘civil society’. The parliament was recovered largely because various people in various guises lobbied, persuaded and even bullied the political classes into action at a time, in the late 1980s and 1990s, when formal politics had failed to deliver the expressed wishes of the Scottish people. The Scottish parliament is probably civil society’s greatest achievement, involving as it did trades unions, churches, voluntary associations, pressure groups and so on. It managed, at a peculiar conjuncture in political life, to concentrate pressure and minds.

Can civil society do it again by effecting major change in the great challenges of our day: the economy, environment, politics, inequality and poverty? Perhaps it can, but it cannot be mobilised in any simple sense. This is not because it is ineffectual, but because of its character. It is informal, partial, unregulated, and above all, dynamic. Civil society is not a ‘thing’, still less an army of coordinated activity. Some people will support some causes, and not others; sometimes, coalitions will be possible, most times, they would not. The strength of civil society lies in the cross-cutting alliances and influences. Every now and again, concerted action will be possible, as in the peculiar moment in the 1990s when Scottish civil society became the midwife (a good metaphor, if you think about it) of political change. Is civil society a ‘movement’? It is not as such, in the sense that it marches to a single drum; no drummer, no army, merely people coming together to express concerns about the state of their world, and where possible, to change it. Civil society is at no-one’s beck and call, and most often we see its power after the event. All, and it is a big all, it requires is that people come together to express not so much their individuality as their sociality; their shared concerns and care for themselves and others. Out of that all things are possible.

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