

EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY OR CIVIL SOCIETY IN EUROPE?
The Sketch of a Working Paper for CIVICUS in Europe
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Purpose

The purpose of this short paper is to provide a basis for a first discussion of the nature of European civil society or, as the title suggests, of civil society in Europe. The ideas put forward in it, and/or others which may be suggested in discussion over the coming six months or so are intended to contribute to the development of a document setting out an understanding of the roots and nature of civil society which will be of use to CIVICUS in defining its future role and strategy in Europe.

There is, it is to be hoped, no need to emphasise the difficulties which lie in the way of reaching an understanding of so complex a topic as civil society in Europe, or indeed any region of the world, and this paper does not at this stage pretend to be anything other than an attempt to stimulate others to contribute their knowledge and ideas.

Introduction

The difficulties begin with the terms 'Europe' and 'civil society' neither of which is easily defined.

Europe

Where does Europe begin and end? And is it a geographical or a cultural entity (or construct)?

We appear to have little difficulty in admitting to the European fold all of Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkan States, the Baltic States, Scandinavia, and Russia.

And, of course, former Soviet republics – the interesting question being *which ones?* How far East do we stop and on what grounds? When the geographers say Asia has arrived, or for other reasons?

The long reluctance of the EU to consider Turkey's application for membership may be interesting here. Turkey's human rights record has not been exemplary but, if we are honest, is not religion also an important factor in our reaction – even though Turkey is a democracy and a secular state? If we were to be completely honest (and politically incorrect) perhaps we should say that 'Europe' ends where 'they' no longer 'look' like 'us'.

Probably, the nearest we shall get to a useful answer for our purposes is to say that **Europe is both a geographical and cultural area** – *geographical* because Europe clearly has physical limits, wherever they may be located, and a culture which is essentially European exists elsewhere in the world (Australia, Canada, even the US etc., together with some classes in some other countries such as Argentina); and cultural because a certain broad culture (though see below) is nonetheless constitutive (a defining characteristic) of Europe.

Civil Society

We sometimes talk of civil society as though it were one thing, and moreover the *same* thing wherever it is found. This may, indeed be one of the assumptions on which CIVICUS is itself based – that there is sufficient congruence between civil society in very different parts of the world to make it worthwhile having a 'representative' organisation at the global level.

An alternative view would have it that the term 'civil society' used in this global sense obscures as much as it illuminates – that the nature of civil society can only properly be understood in the context of, or in terms of, particular societies.

In practice, most informal discussion of civil society typically assumes both that there is 'something' which can be called civil society in virtually all parts (nations) of the world *and* that the features of civil society vary considerably from place to place. This paper proceeds on that assumption. That is to say, it assumes that the *sphere* of civil society is present in all European nations but that the *characteristics* of civil society vary from place to place.

From the point of view of the European branch of CIVICUS the practical question is, therefore, whether civil society in the various nations of Europe shares a sufficient number of features in common for us to be able to talk of European civil society.

European civil society

Since civil society cannot be considered apart from the general culture in which it exists, the question "Is there such a thing as European civil society?" is in part the question of whether there is such a thing as European culture¹.

The answer must be a tentative yes - depending on how far Europe is supposed to extend.

For present purposes its most relevant features are:

- a belief in, and the practice of, (more or less) democratic forms of government (and of governance more generally)
- an adherence to the rule of law
- a respect for human rights, including those of free communication and the free exchange of ideas
- the separation of powers²

One might add, at the risk of some controversy, that European culture:

- is confessionally typically Christian
- in economic matters is marked by a clear preference for (more or less) free markets
- is marked by a concern with human (social) 'solidarity'³

It may be said that the presence of civil society is implicit in a culture with these broad features. But these features are, precisely, sufficiently broad to leave a good deal of room for differences between civil society as exemplified in different nations. That should not be surprising given the differences in culture between the nation states and indeed within countries.

¹ I take it that European 'culture' is at the heart of what is often called the European 'model' – most often in contrast to the US 'model'.

² That is to say, most importantly, of the executive and the judiciary.

³ It could be said that all societies have a 'centre' and a 'periphery'. The difference between the US model and the European model is that on the whole European societies are more concerned with equality of outcome and the US more with simple equality of opportunity. In other words Europe tries to keep the centre as large as possible whereas the US is content is the periphery remains predominant.

What is civil society?

The following definition might be useful: civil society is a sphere of social interaction between the family, economy, and the state, taking in (for our purposes) voluntary associations, public interest foundations, social movements and forms of public discourse, debate, and communication. Civil society creates itself (it is not an artefact of the state or commerce but of self-mobilizing citizens) and in developed forms is to a degree institutionalised on the basis of specific law.

In democracies it could be said that political society arises out of civil society and not vice versa.

It is important to recognise that civil society is not *necessarily* opposed to the state, or to political or economic society (though in practice it may be). The distinguishing feature of civil society is that (unlike those directly involved with politics or the economy i.e. businessmen or politicians) its actors do not seek directly to control either the economy or the state but rather to influence them.

One might approach the matter from another angle by suggesting that civil society exists in the 'spaces' (spheres of interaction) between the state and political and economic society, and in important ways mediates between them. In this sense differences between civil societies in the various European nations might well be said significantly to reflect the size and shape of the 'spaces' left available for civil society actors and their institutions.

What are the factors which affect the size and shape of these spaces and the ability of civil society actors to make use of them?

Some factors are clear. In no particular order:

- the degree to which the state remains powerful, centralised, and is regarded as the chief welfare provider and arbiter of public good (e.g. France, Finland)
- in contrast the degree to which the principle of 'subsidiarity' applies (e.g. Germany)
- the extent to which societies are organised around socio-political 'pillars' of socialist and church institutions - e.g. Belgium and the Netherlands⁴
- the degree to which the nation has enjoyed social and political stability over a long period of time. (State building concentrates on achieving unity and uniformity and thus does not privilege civil society. Extreme left or right governments do their best to destroy it.)
- the existence of local power structures to which emerging civil society institutions can easily relate
- the adequacy of civil society law and fiscal provisions (e.g. presence or absence of remnants of mortmain)
- the degree of co-operation/distrust between government/public authorities and civil society actors and institutions
- the degree of economic development and the availability of indigenous public and private funding

One model or several?

At the risk of gross generalisation one might suggest that there are *at least* four or five main models of civil society in Europe:

⁴ In such societies government and the church have tended to divide the provision of welfare between themselves leaving relatively little space for 'private' civil society organisations – at least in this sphere of activity.

- the Anglo-Saxon – ancient roots and unbroken history, very well established, non-political-party, extensive and free co-operation with public authorities etc
- the pillarised – tendency to be marginalized in favour of state and church, co-operation with public authorities in practice necessary
- the ‘Southern’ - tendency towards co-operatives and mutuals (post risorgimento), politicised, some clientism
- the ‘statist’ – associations seen by the state as contributing to ‘solidarity’ but otherwise still strong traces of historical distrust – emphasis on ‘social’ rather than ‘civil’ dialogue and consultation

The newer democracies (CEE etc.)

It may be too early to say what will emerge by way of civil society in the newer democracies – whether they will conform to one of the existing European models or whether they will develop entirely new characteristics. At present, again at the risk of arousing controversy, the sector in these countries is typically:

- poorly funded
- over-dependent on foreign donors
- concentrated almost entirely in the large centres of population
- relatively unskilled
- tends to oppose government rather than co-operate with it
- not yet well enough organised to lobby effectively.

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