Historical Evolution of Ideas and Theories Related to the Concept of Civil Society

Abdul Mueed Kamran  
Ph.D Scholar  
Department of Political Science  
Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan  
mueedkamran37@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

Syed Shahid Hussain Bukhari  
Professor/Chairman  
Department of Political Science  
Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan  
shahidbukhari@bzu.edu.pk

Abstract

The article presents the historical origin and growth of civil society. The philosophies of many philosophers show the ever-changing dimensions of civil society from time to time. The historical debate starts from classical political economists’ views, continues with Hegelian, Marx’s and Gramsci’s notions of civil society and ends at the current debate on civil society. Classical scholars considered civil society as an economic sphere and the property of emerging industrial societies that were characterized by complex segmentation of labor, the centrality of production and economic interactions. They give more importance to the state rather than individuals. Hegel, Karl Marx and Gramsci are the main philosophers of the classical school of thought. Other scholars like Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, John Rawls, Michal Sandel, Charles Tayler and Michal Walzer also contributed in the debate of relationship between the state and civil society. Current scholars like Foucault, Derrida, Deliuze, Lyotard, Fradric Jameson and Francis Fukuyama have discussed the term of civil society with new directions and ideas. The main focus of these scholars is state, human rights, morality, socialism, liberalism and social movements. Their main point is
that individuals are more important than the state. The major analysis of this article is based on qualitative approach. The article concludes that the nature of ideas about relationship between the state and civil society and the influence of civil society on state and that of state on civil society have shaped civil society in different dimensions in different periods of history.

**Keywords:** Historical, Theory, Civil Society, Classical Political Economist, Non-Profit Organization

**Introduction**

The notion of civil society has a long history. Its roots can be traced in Aristotle’s ideas. In view of Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, the term “political community” used by Aristotle is considered civil society today. Modern scholars like Habermas use the terms of “social capital” and “mass society” for civil society. Civil society is an emerging arena for social and political change in all over the World. It includes a vast range of registered and unregistered organizations like trade unions, labor unions, professional associations, faith-based organizations, cultural associations, community based organizations, social welfare organizations, non-for-profit schools, philanthropic foundations, and voluntary associations that represent the interests of public. In reference to the significance of civil society in present time, the evaluation of relationship between state and civil society is needed. The article starts with the historical debate on the concepts of classical philosophers like Hegel and Karl Marx whose main point of discussion is economy and they considered civil society dependent on the state. Modern scholars discuss about the nature of relationship between state and civil society with new dimensions. They focus on human rights, ethics, social values, liberties and social movements and civil society is a source to fulfill these values. The article covers those dimensions of civil society which have been changing with time.
Classical School of Thought and Civil Society

Classical political economists discussed on the idea of civil society and called it as an economic sphere. They claimed that civil society was the property of growing industrial societies that were categorized by intricate segmentation of work, focusing on manufacturing and business dealings. The central and dominant point of their discussion is economy. Ellen Meiksins Wood says that ‘this is particularly modern concept of civil society’. (Wood, 2012) This notion of civil society arose systematically for the first time in 18th century. It was dissimilar from former conceptions of society. Civil society expresses a different arena of human relationships and actions, distinct from the state. It covers the whole type of relations between private and public sphere of the state. It is a network of distinct economic activities like marketing, production and exchange of products. (Wood, 2012, pp. 97-98)

The classical school of thought contributed to political theory in different manner. It moved the political discourse from the state to civil society. They raised voice for the liberty of civil society. Their most important effort was to fix the bounds of the state. But they gave more importance to the potential and the capability of civil society to attain coherence. Karl Marx and his supporters in this regard, can be considered the leading spokespersons of the evolving system of capitalism. Hegel and Marx explained the specific concept of civil society that classical scholars had valorized and their examination of civil society establishes a foremost theoretical break on the subject.

G.W.F. Hegel brought theoretic improvement in the concept of civil society. He is considered the first theorist who differentiated the state from civil society, in contrast to those theorists who had used political and civil as same thing. Hegel was inclined by the classical political economists’ views that detached civil society from the state. (Chandoke, 2007) To Hegel, ‘civil society was an achievement of modern world’. Civil society was a sphere where individuals can legally chase their self-defined benefits. It was advanced and instructive, recognizing the abilities of people. Although Hegel followed the classical thought, but he contributed
in three different manners: first, he worked on the notion of civil society comprehensively and kept it away from economic view. (G.W.F.Hegel, 1952) According to Hegel, ‘civil society was usually an important step in the transformation of the family as a type of social organization as the last form of such organization’. He evaluated civil society as one of the moments of ethical life which organized the individual life and the other two were the family and the state. In a family, particular interests were fixed on natural love and fear. (G.W.F.Hegal, 1952) In state the code of ‘universality’ was adopted as the main form of ethical life. According to Hegel, civil society was a “theatre” where two philosophies of modern society: “particularity” and “universality” were debated and the tension between them was resolved. (Chandoke, 2007) Second, Hegel discriminated a main clash between the individualist views of civil society and the reproduction of the community as an ethical object. When individuals were stimulated by self-interest then civil society had collapsed physically and morally. (G.W.F.Hegal, 1952) Egoism and instrumentalist ideas of social relations were the self-interested actors. These actors lay off ethical life. His third contribution was the recognition that the civil society could not be left alone; it had to be structured under a frame. He argued that an ethical community was the single manner by which his sense of freedom, interests and needs were recognized and achieved under an ethical direction.

Hegel tells three ways to generate a sense of community in interdependence of individuals. First, all the activities of individuals mostly labor was social. He acknowledged that daily economic activities among worker class created a type of social contact among independent individuals. Second, individual interest added meanings only in a society. Individual interests could be legalized only through shared meanings. Rights could also be in a set-up of jointly acknowledged and mutual duties. These duties called for that individuals would give respect the rights of others. Third, the progress of an exchange economy would increase the forms of social relations, reliability and community building. (G.W.F.Hegal, 1952) The mechanisms of modern bourgeois society delivered the sources of their own restoration. It is the
countervailing trend in civil society that provides the mode of ‘universality’ to moderate self-interest. In view of Hegel, individualism and the communitarian moment were two principles of civil society. Hegel definitely thought that the market should be controlled, not only to balance economic consequences, but more essentially to balance social and moral consequences which detached huge segments of individuals from the advantage of modern life. The regulation of market produced the complete range of intermediate institutions that would organize the associational life. (Jones, 2001, p. 123) These institutions would adjust ‘particularity’ and established ‘universality’.

Hegel’s concept of civil society is a complex one because of a complete range of procedures. These procedures are historically traced. According to him, civil society presented ways for the self-definition of the individual in the age of freedom and equality. In contrast, it revealed the rationality of the market. But he did not stop here. He said that the logic of community arose from the social and economic interdependence of individuals. So Hegel went away from the analytical to the normative moment. Hegel discerning the instability of the communitarian moment, provided for a range of institutions which intervened the sphere of particularity and brought it into the sphere of universality. If Hegel’s concept of civil society is a narrative of desire of self-interest then civil society, to Hegel cannot be left as it is, it has to be organized.

The Hegelian system of political conciliations is connected with the specific ways by which the destructive effects of particularity can be reduced. Hegel’s system of political mediations can see in civil society because it does the duty to attach individuals with the state. The theorists give importance to these mediatory institutions because an individual enters political life through these institutions. He says that modern society lacks integrative institutions which can protect the individuals and social interests. (G.W.F. Hegal, 1952) Hegel’s system of intermediation includes two kinds of controls; first, public authorities like law courts, wellbeing associations and the police department guard the individual’s rights. Hegel gives space these institutions in civil
society because they provide a rule-bound frame in which relations and common responsibilities make their job; secondly, controls are those classes or estates and organizations that provide collective moment in civil society and intervene and modify the activities of individuals. Estates offer particular administrative duties at the lower stage. They bring articulated opinions to bear upon the public matters and they represent individuals and associations in the state. Corporations offer the act of moral socialization. They are the second moral factor after the family in civil society. These corporations have three dimensions. First, they provide sense of identity and possession to the disjointed individuals. Second, they assist as a model of integration in many contending interests and enforce discipline on their members and minimize self-interest. Thirdly, they support the interests of all their members as a pressure group in society. Social classes, estates and corporations give the occasions of social awareness and convey the individuals that their shield and existence is in these associations.

Marx raised the concept of civil society from Hegelian view that civil society was measured by conflict, egotism and self-interest and this phase required to be exceeded. Hegel accepted the state as the superior entity, whereas Marx said that this supreme status of state must be recognized within the domain of public sphere itself. (Chandoke, 2007) Civil society in view of Marx is a sphere where self-interest of individual comes across with other man’s self-interest. Therefore, it was the sphere of oppression. Marx said that settlement could not take place between contradictory interests in prevailing structure. There was a requisite of new frame to go beyond egotism, self-centeredness, inhumanity and exploitation. Marx considered civil society as a ‘theatre of history’. He reversed Hegel’s notion in which he presented the state as superior. He said that civil society could not be existed without the state but the state could be existed without civil society. (Fermon, 1996, p. 136) Both Marx and Hegel have same views about analytical thought but different in normative thought. Marx asked a qualitatively different set of questions to bear upon problems. Therefore his view of civil society, political parties and state was entirely different from Hegel. There were two levels of analysis in Marx’s concept of civil society. In first level, analyzing the Hegelian’s
philosophy, he said that the principle of ‘universalism’ was just a utopia. Therefore it could not go above the sphere of egoism and self-interest. In second level, he used the way of political economy and focused to probe into civil society itself. The first stage is investigative, and the second looks for the solution of the problem.

Marx recognized the Hegelian’s argument that civil society was a property of modern world. He also accepted that modern society was able to legitimize the principle of autonomy of the individual. Marx wanted that state should be subordinated to civil society whereas; Hegel wanted that civil society should be subordinated to the state. Marx said that civil society was a stage where the clash between the political and the social, between confrontation and domination, between repress and liberty was played out. He declared civil society as a theatre and an actor was needed to change it. (Marx, 1967, p. 469) It could not be saved by an imposed system of mediation. Marx claimed that the modern state had the control on political life. Therefore, this sphere was unfair and it had been left intact by the political revolution that had changed the political sphere. In this sphere, egoism, selfishness, greed and exploitation continued to rule on individuals. Political sphere in relation to rights, equality and justice was not accorded by the conversion of the civil sphere. He said that revolution would bring equality and justice among individuals, (Marx, 1967, pp. 469-470) and this revolution was progressive but imperfect. He established two realities about the creation of civil society: first that civil society was not the product of bourgeois revolution unless it gained whole power and second was the baseless state’s principle of universality, because the power earlier used by political establishments had now been given to the propertied class. In contrast, Marx argued that civil society and the state were different poles of a sole conflict and this conflict was between civil society and organized classes. Unlike Hegel, Marx argued that equality and freedom of civil society were mutilated by the class structure of capitalist society. He also argued that the state did not surpass civil society (Fermon, 1996)

In Marx’s view, civil society was not a moment of the state as Hegel said. According to him, the structure of civil society could
be brought into being in political economy. Civil society concealed the whole industrial and economical life and therefore, it went beyond the nation and the state. It would be changed by an economy based on the principle of providing to everyone his due. Marx called this society as “communist”. It represented the civil society and the state as the dialectical unity. Marx explored civil society in historical perspective, but he argued that civil society had failed to maintain such sphere where the individual could achieve self-determination, liberty and self-interests. Therefore civil society should be organized by effective democratic change and this change should be revolutionary. Then an individual could be combined into a society and state.

An Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci explained the concept of civil society in a distinct way. He extended the Marxian philosophy of state. According to him, a state had two tools: one was government and the other was domination of civil society. Gramsci explored civil society in ideological and cultural perceptions and focused on the significance of social, cultural and ideological values as a tool of the state and worked on hegemony of civil society. According to Gramsci hegemony was a form of domination by which a society framework and this hegemony executed its basic responsibility. It delivered moral and educated management to plural and discrete practices in civil society. Hegemony appeared as a structural norm and he believed that there were two portions of superstructure: one was ‘private’ and the second was ‘political society’. Civil society was a combination of private or non-private organizations like trade unions, churches, professional associations and educational institutions. (Salamini, 1947) The major work of Gramsci is to explain that the ways of civil society for the organization of human relations are political. The purpose of civil society is to attain ‘power’, and the objective of political society is to get ‘direct domination’. (Salamini, 1947)

Focusing on the socio-cultural tool of civil society, Gramsci assumed that ‘civil society as an essential part of bourgeois governance system’. Civil society made it possible to the government to attain political and ideological control over society. (K.M.Seethi, 2007) According to him, “civil society reproduced
theoretical hegemony through the daily life institutions and social activities; consent for the enactment of hegemony was shaped through the institutions and actions of civil society”. In other words, Gramsci described that civil society was a part of political society. The difference between state and civil society was methodological, since they were involved with each other as necessary parts of political society. The state and civil society executed dissimilar roles, but the objective of these roles was to get power in society. (Gramsci, 1971)

Herbert Marcuse examined the thoughts of Hegel and Fascist school of thought about state and civil society. He explored Hegel’s concept that civil society could remain a functional body without giving up the basic rights of individuals. (Marcuse, 1941, p. 409) He said, a type of whole grasp is required over all on individual’s activities by force in Fascism. So the society turns into a serving power to those interests that endure the economic activity. (Marcuse, 1941, p. 410) Herbert Marcuse was called the first thinker of the ‘New lift’ during the decades sixty and seventy. He focused on human rights, social movements and women rights. (Gilitin, 1987)

In view of Habermas, the civil society is a combination of associations, organizations and movements linked to the issues of civil society in private sphere. The civil society is based on the huge net of relations and organizations related to the issues of the common interests of public sphere. (Habermas, 1996) Moreover, observing class interests, Habermas interpreted the clashes of material interests and clashes about living standard, human values, gender equality, ecological problems and participation of individuals in decision making. These new social engagements could be seen within the civil society contrary to the state and its bureaucracy. (Habermas J., 1989, p. 82) So theorists formed a new world of observation about state and civil society. The central point of their work was to give the importance of human rights.

**Reviving of Liberal Thinking**

John Rawls’s work on justice restored the tradition of ethics and political theory in liberal thinking. His main role was the analysis
of justice theory in which he did work on civil society. He advocates that human desires like wealth, self-esteem, power, fame and right are ‘primary goods’. Rawls considers these primary goods as veil of unawareness. (Rawls, 1971, pp. 136-37) The division of prime goods will be made on the principle of ‘give respect to every one’ even in the poorest circumstances and this will take place when governing class will give up this veil. There are two principles of analysis in Rawls’s thinking. One is the principle of equality in rights, freedom of speech and thought, right of self-property, right to make association under state laws. Second principle is to provide opportunities to individuals to get any status in society. Rawls finds the concept of ‘political liberalism’ through these two principles. He separates political sphere that represent public institution from non-public cultural sphere, in which individuals establish their relations on ethical grounds. To protect the principles of constitutional democracy, Rawls put emphasis on a constitutional consensus that can be formed through equality and unity. New scholars like Michal Sandel, Charles Tayler, and Michal Walzer opposed Rawls on this ground that it is a prime responsibility of state to protect human rights and economic resources that fulfill the needs of people. Rawls tried to apply his justice theory at universal level; communitarians differed that the principles of justice must be framed according to social values. Charles Tayler rejected the liberal view that individuals are independent outside the society. (Tayler, 1985) He gives a new notion of ‘politics of universalism’ in which all the individuals have equal rights, Though, Tayler states that the “politics of universalism” is made at the cost of ‘politics of difference”. He says about liberal tradition that every man has diverse skills; so it cannot be appreciated equally for the attainments of men, as individuals or as group. (Tayler, The Politics of Recognition, 1944, pp. 41-43) Tayler offers the concept of “group rights” in his model of liberalism and presents the consent of the objectives of cultural and social groups. No doubt he wants the advocates of different cultures to universalize their ideas but he proposes that there should be no rigidity to accept that their different views may be incorrect. However, at reaching a certain point, these different views would convert really extensive apart from one another. According to Tayler, a
real harmony is possible only when it has no rigidity. He says that the flexible attitude can make satisfaction among the supporters of different civilizations. (Tayler, Conditions of an Unforsed Consensus on Human Rights, 1979, p. 124)

**Current Debate and Controversies**

In the postmodern and post structural debate about the terms of civil society, human rights and state, has attained new ways and ideas. The famous names who contributed in this debate are Foucault, Derrida, Deliuze, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Fradric Jameson. They discussed the issues of ethics, socialism and liberalism. (Harvey, 1989) The postmodernism challenges the ideas of state, civil society, human rights, nation, and universality with different approaches. Redefining the state and power at micro level, Foucault analyses the vagueness of social reality and the unclear viewpoint of power. (Foucault, 1995) Edward Said opposed Foucault by saying that he ignored resistant forces in modern societies. He argued that it would be better to focus on the local power that prevailed around the individuals. (Said, 1994, p. 29) However, in present ‘postmodernism’ goes on side by side with the well-known concept of ‘neoliberals’. In the modern world, the terms civil society ‘macro politics’ and ‘met narratives’ are changed by ‘micro politics’ and ‘mininarratives’. (C.Patton, 1993)

The cultural dissatisfaction related with postmodenism has created several new movements like religious movements, feminism, anti-racism, the demand of social identification and the movements relating to ecosystem. All these movements are established against a sole authority to demand for democracy within the culture. (Thimpson, 1997, pp. 564-594) Rajni Kothari says these social movements the symbol of new ‘micro-macro dialectic’ where globalization is essential to arise. (Kothari, 1987, pp. 270-290) In the idea of mass politics, the foremost argument is to give more importance to individuals than the state. (Kothari, Masses, Classes and the State, 2002) According to Upendra Buxi, social movements not only focus on human rights but they also bring a new change and development of human rights. (Buxi, 2000, p. 36)
Kothri and his companions talk about self-government which is based on devolution and empowers the common people. Postmodernist like Laclan and Mouffe present a new notion of ‘pluralist democracy’ that is based on pluralism of social movements. They propose that social sphere has broadly extended. They see the old Gramascian concept of hegemony in which social power is achieved by ‘coercion’ and ‘consent’. (Moufee, 1987, p. 106) In the new global environment, postmodern thoughts match with neoliberal thoughts in many social issues particularly about devolution of power, participation of people in political process and social capital. (K.M.Seethi, Postmadernism, Neoliberls and Civil Society: A Critique of Development Strategies in the era of Globalization, 2001, pp. 307-320)

Francis Fukuyama, a neoliberal, sees civil society with a new viewpoint. He states that civil society is a combination of associations, business, media, trusts, churches, trade unions and educational institutions. A developing civil society is based on traditions, social norms, religion and ethics of its people. Fukuyama suggests that civil society is a complete private section of the state distinct from the government. Though, he considers that business activities take place within the domain of civil society. According to him, capitalism is adopting moral values and civil society and capitalist economy are connecting to support one another. (Fukuyama, 2001)

It can be understood that the increasing power of non-governmental organizations like World Bank and International Monitoring Fund is reducing the power of the state institutions. (Beson, 2003, pp. 357-374) Therefore, some private organizations may deeply interfere in the socio-economic system of different societies. This situation can create complication in many social activities and distract human rights situations, religious, communal, moral and racial conditions. So the state may interfere to maintain the state of ‘law and order’. Therefore, the ‘police state’ is replacing with ‘social security state’. In this situation civil society may come under the influence of state and social forces. Criticizing postmodern concept of civil society, Samir Amin states that postmodernism is an ideology of crisis. In view of Amin, there
are theoretical clashes in the existing system because of incomplete understandings and going beyond the conflict with the overall working of the real system. He also supports ‘the neoliberals utopian’. (Amin, 1993, p. 99) Consequently, the concept of ‘micropolitics’ is likely to make the objectives of neoliberal rule easy at all stages.

No doubt globalization and changes in the economic system have influenced the life of common people in the whole world. All the new dimensions that have been achieved in current time show that globalization and neoliberals have affected the human life in many states. Neoliberal policies are making weak the social welfare system, increasing poverty and motivating people at global level to raise voice for basic rights to live with honorable status.

Conclusion

The nature and dimension of civil society has been different from classical period to present time. Classical school of thought considered civil society as an economic sphere. According to them, civil society was the property of emerging industrial societies which were marked by complex division of labor, the centrality of production and commercial interactions. The economy had the distinct and dominant status in a state. Although, classical scholars made a distinct contribution in respect of shifting of political discourse from the state to civil society but they overestimated the potential and capacity of civil society to achieve harmony. Hegel and Karl Marx clarified the concept of civil society that classical scholars had valorized and their interrogation of civil society forms a major conceptual break in the theorization on the subject. According to Hegel, “Sphere of civil society is the territory of mediation where there is free play for every idiosyncrasy and where waves of every passion flow forward, regulated only by reason. In Marx’s view, civil society is the sphere where one man’s selfish interest meets another man’s selfish interest and it is the domain of exploitation. He reverses Hegel’s concept in which he gave priority to the state. He argues that the state cannot hold civil society together rather civil society has the power to hold the state together. Marx and Hegel have same opinions about analytical
thought but divergent about normative thought. Anatonio Gramasci, an Italian thinker expands the Marxian theory of state and explores civil society in ideological and cultural contexts and focuses the importance of social, cultural and ideological values as tool of the state. He says that the state is a combination of political and civil society and the purpose of civil society is to attain power and that of political society is to lead direct domination. In modern time new ideas and dimensions have been discussed about the issues of morality, socialism and liberalism regarding state, civil society and human rights by the scholars like Focault, Derrida, Lyotard and Fradric Jameson. A neoliberal Francis Fukuyama views civil society from another point. He says that civil society means the whole private sector separate from the government. He is of the view that civil society and capitalist economy are connected to each other and thus support each other.

It can be concluded that there should be a harmony between the relationship of the state and civil society. It is the responsibility of the state to allow and facilitate civil society to grow and prosper and provide the space for mediation of rational dialogue. As a result, there would be redirection of the course for the state into becoming welfare state and help develop strong democracy. Otherwise in the absence of a proper relationship, the gap between the civil society and state would increase the problem rather than positive contribution towards national progress.
References


