

Class Notes

February 8, 2005: Civil Society, Social Movements and NGOs

Erik Nielsen

Historical Development of Civil Society

Feudalism is rooted in custom and religion and in bounded relationship of land owners to surfs.

Development of merchant class gave rise to the development of market economy and freedom from constraints of feudalism. Trades began to develop professional societies such as guilds and associations. Market economy liberated individuals from feudal constraints. Cafes, clubs, and nightlife of the 18th century provided a forum for debate that epitomized the ideal of the public sphere. From 19th century onward, formalization of the public sphere – political public sphere (parliament) that would mediate between state and society. Creation of state-civil society duality.

Civil society is a modern concept, although it can be traced back to Aristotle. According to Kaldor, “for early modern thinkers, there was no distinction between civil society and the state.” Hegel, in the early 1900’s, defined civil society as “the intermediate realm between the family and the state.” For Hegel, civil society was defined as a form of freedom, where the individual becomes a public person. Hegel’s definition included the economy and was therefore also taken up by Marx and Engels. Gramsci, an Italian scholar, further elaborated the definition of civil society, by incorporating the idea of political liberalism. From this view, the definition included the broader participation of people, members of the public, in politics. His definition incorporated not just the relationship between state and family, but included culture, ideology and political debate.

Today, most scholars regard civil society as being composed of non-economic and non-governmental organizations operating to serve the needs and interests of society. Clearly this will shift depending on the specific social-economic and political context of a particular society. However, civil society organizations can be broadly classified in two arenas: 1) serving to oppose, challenge or ‘counter-balance’ State power; and/or 2) providing social and economic services the State is unwilling or unable to provide. Within a democratic context, where plurality of association is crucial, civil society serves to strengthen the fabric and interaction among all members of society. However, it was noted that organizations do not necessarily have to be classified as ‘good’ or promoting particular norms, therefore organizations such as the KKK or crime syndicates often are regarded as civil society actors.

The Nation-State and Governance

The nation state and associated sovereign models of absolute power have dominated inter-state relations since the creation of Westphalia; however, a gradual and increasingly noticeable shift toward a governance framework has emerged. The readings argue the nation-state is in decline and the role of (global) civil society is an increasingly important component of the global system of governance.

The world today has become increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent, a process commonly referred to as globalization. The concept of ‘governance’ has emerged; governance is not synonymous with ‘government’. This premise is based on the assumption that key components of a governance framework are rooted in a new ‘globalized’ society that incorporates not only a changed and reformed State, but also a new understanding of sovereignty models (or at least more conditional forms of sovereignty), the influence of private interests, and particularly the growing importance of civil society.

The readings argue the shift from governmental and sovereign conceptualizations of state toward a more fully integrated global construct of governance has become a growing and powerful discourse, particularly during the last decade. The growing inter-connectedness, through the emergence of movements, groups, networks and organizations, have all “called into question the primacy of states.”

Emerging forms of alternative governance strategies (nationally, regionally and internationally), particularly local/national civil society and increasingly transnational civil society advocacy efforts, are growing in prominence and effectiveness. Ultimately a redistribution of power is taking place, where the historical centralized power and control of 'the' State is being devolved to a growing array of actors in the global arena.

NGOs

CSO – Clark uses term to refer to all organizations – interest groups, social movements, unions, religious, sports, cultural, crime syndicates and gangs. Legal recognition is not a prerequisite in his definition, so includes underground.

NGO – formal organization formed for purpose of benefiting public (not just their members), independent of government with defined officers and leaders.

Clark – presents different types and forms of NGOs. Refers to the three I's – Interests , Ideas and Ideologies.

Social Movements

A social movement is characterized by collective versus individual action. A social movement is distinct from a crowd or riot; it is coordinated behavior that seeks to resist or promote change, whether social, cultural, economic or political.

Social movements tend to be composed of networks of individuals or coalitions of organizations with a defined purpose. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be members of a social movement, but not all NGOs are contentious in nature or play an oppositional role to the State. Social movements can be national, regional or global in orientation; however, it is only in the last few decades that social movements have begun to actively (and noticeably) operate in a global context. It is important to note that NGOs are a component of social movements, where civil society should be understood as the 'fabric' of society and under that rubric specific organizations such as NGOs are situated. NGOs are organizational entities that advance three key themes: interests; ideologies and ideas.

Up until the 1970's social movements were seen by scholars as irrational; since Western society was based upon open and plural forms of association, there was no rational reason for an individual to participate in organized forms of opposition or protest. The Chicago School of thought believed that members participating in any form of collection action were irrational and 'pathological'; social movements and its membership represented a breakdown in society, ultimately that these individuals were 'malfunctioning'.

During the 1960's in the United States, a growing dissatisfaction with the State emerged; just as there can a market failure, there can also be a failure in how the government provides services or represents the citizenry. Protests against the State unfolded over a variety of themes including war, nuclear weapons and power, the environment and the role of women. As many scholars were now themselves participating in these 'movements' due to their own dissatisfaction with the State, a new understanding and appreciation of what initiated a 'movement' surfaced. Scholars now argued that the strains and tensions that individuals experienced could be due to societal inequity and that democracy was not a perfect institution, therefore collection action by disenfranchised members of society was now viewed to be a reasonable form of association to affect change. Olsen focused on why individuals would participate in collective action if the result was a collective good. Building on Olsen's arguments, McCarthy and Zald focused on rationality of mobilization, particularly the role of resources in mobilization and the professionalization of social movement organizations.

Social movements are: A conscious, collective organized attempt to bring about or resist large scale change in the social order by non-institutionalized means; Unconventional groups that have varying degrees of formal organization and that attempt to produce or prevent radical or reformist type of change; A collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society in which it is part.

Shift away from view of maladjustment -- Does this reflect change in the 1960s or was the problem with the theory? Examples - 1351 Statute of Laborers; Anti-corn Law of 1839

Movements tend to be composed of organizations as well as ad hoc groups and networks; many social movements stemmed from the work and action of specific NGOs and can serve to 'secure' a movement and stabilize it over time. One view is that groups have structure, leaders, statement of purpose, and a logistical base. However, new movements differ and many not have these characteristics. Some movements are centralized; others less so. Agreement that there are organizational features, but different views on how much.

Social Movement Organizations

Complex organizations that identify their goals with the preferences of the movement and then try to implement those goals. The notion that social movement organization continuously move toward "formality" is asserted through the Michaels/Weber thesis. Some scholars believe that as soon as an organization formalizes it can no longer be considered part of a 'movement'; others disagree. Formalization can limit readiness, but assist an organization by increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of other actors, particularly the State (see Gamson). For some (e.g. Clark) an SMO is an NGO; Others (e.g.) Smith et al, suggest that they are different

Global Civil Society

Given the increased use of communication, application of technology and ease of transportation, contributing to a greater diffusion of ideas and values across boundaries, a growing shift from a national to a more global orientation of social movements has emerged. Within the last two decades, social movements on a global scale have become more prominent and effective. This evolution links closely with the shifting role of the nation-state; globalized social movements, some argue, provide additional evidence of how the State's unilateral power is further eroding.

Differentiate between types of actors - NGO - INGO - TSMO