The idea of civil society: Evolution and Challenges in the Central and Eastern European Context since 1989

“The pressure of exhilarating events...abruptly vanished, and I found myself standing bewildered, lacking the inner motivation for anything at all...It was an extremely odd sensation, comparable to a bad hangover after some wild binge...Many of my colleagues at Prague Castle felt the very same way. We realized that the poetry was over and the prose was beginning...we realized how challenging, and in many ways unrewarding, was the work that lay ahead of us...At the deepest core of this feeling there was, ultimately, a sensation of the absurd: what Sisyphus might have felt if one fine day his boulder stopped, rested on a hilltop, and failed to roll back down. It was the sensation of a Sisyphus mentally unprepared for the possibility that his efforts might succeed...”

— Vaclav Havel, speech at the Salzburg Festival, July 1990.

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In 1989 a series of peaceful revolutions brought an end to Soviet dominance in the communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Dissidence, demonstrations, protests, and the collapse of the communist regimes led to the institution of democratic governments after four decades of communist rule. These revolutions revealed both the ubiquitous decay of the Soviet-based communist system as a whole, but also how civil society had developed a voice of dissidence and resistance within each nation in response to the repressive structures of communist regimes. The active and involved role of civil society during the collapse of the communism was what seemed to have made these events unique in comparison to other revolutions. More than a decade has passed since these events, during which the idea of civil society in the Central-Eastern European context has evolved considerably. Both politicians and theorists have attempted to assess the strength of ‘civil society’ in these states, and have used the notion as an interpretative tool in attempt to measure the democratic health of former communist states.

1 Following the pattern in the relevant literature, I will talk about Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania as a group of “Central East European states.” These were the Warsaw Pact states under the tutelage of the Soviet Communist Party, but not directly under the control of the USSR. (Each had its own communist government.) There is much variation among these states, however, and also much variation in the amount of study done in each state about civil society. Most examples are thus drawn from studies of Poland, Hungary, or studies of these states as a group.
Especially in the years just after 1989, most theorists seemed to agree with the basic idea that a strong civil society is intimately related with a strong democracy. (Ekiert, 1992; Bernhard, 1996; Geremek, 1992) Yet during the 1990’s, disagreements developed about the relationship between the two concepts, how one causes or creates the other, and how the relative strength or weakness of the relationship is connected to the potential reemergence of non-democratic regimes. It is clear now, after a decade of debates, that vigorous democratic mobilization of publics and the vigor of civil society associations are not necessarily directly correlated in the context of Central-Eastern Europe.

The peculiar history of the region and the effects of the transition in 1989 between communist and democratic-capitalist systems explains this seeming disjuncture, and also reveals how the assumptions made by many theorists about democracy’s need of civil society could be insufficient to explain the complex relationship between civil society and democracy at present in the states of Central-Eastern Europe. These debates within the field of political science reveal the stark fact that Vaclav Havel’s boulder did not sit still upon the top of the hill for very long after he helped bring an end to the domination of the communist party in Czechoslovakia. As president of Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic) he, like other leaders of these states, has faced a Sisyphian struggle to continue to realize the goals of the original revolution that began under his tutelage within civil society in the 1970s.

For all Central-Eastern European nations, furthermore, the rock has many times rolled back down the hill in the past decade, so-to-speak, and the debates about the perceived decline of civil society shed light on the political and economic struggles within these states during the 1990’s. Discerning the role of civil society today has meaningful consequences for the future of Central-Eastern European states, especially as questions of EU admission become more imperative. Civil society’s role in protecting human rights and political freedoms, furthermore, which was so well demonstrated through the way peaceful resistance to communist repression was channeled through civil society in Central-Eastern Europe before 1989, also has useful lessons for the less hopeful future of communism’s other European legacy, the Balkans.

**Civil Society until 1989**

There have been almost as many definitions of “civil society” put forth as there have been societies in existence, but the historically and geographically diverse use the term reveals some continuities. The primary point on which most all definitions intersect is the notion that civil society plays a mediating role between the citizens of the state and the power of the state’s governing apparatus. It is a check to the coercive use of state power against citizens, and is more tangibly comprised of groups of citizens in voluntary organizations and associations.
Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first to write at length about the relationship between the democratic institutions of America and the proliferation of citizen’s associations.\(^2\) Jurgen Habermas defined the bourgeoisie public sphere of the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries as a certain *Lebenswelt* between the official and unofficial spheres of life.\(^3\) In the context of contemporary Western democracies, civil society usually refers to associations such as trade unions, business associations, churches, political parties, and other such organized groups.

In the context of the communist regimes of Central-Eastern Europe under communism, however, civil society had a somewhat different meaning. A clear separation between the public and private spheres in communist societies was oftentimes blurred by the personal nature of police surveillance, and by the fact that freedom of expression and association did not always exist. In this more Kafkaesque environment, ‘civil society’ often existed in someone’s living room, in a café, in the churches, and even at jazz clubs in the later years. It was the small space between the regime and the individual where dissent against the regime occurred. While it was much harder to define, Central-Eastern European civil society under communism proved to be a very powerful force that allowed citizens to resist the atomization of life that the communist systems created. The core idea behind all civil societies is that people acting in concert with each other can provide an infinitely greater check on state power than can any one person acting alone. Even with the ubiquitous suppression of individuals in communist society, coupled with the state’s efforts to prevent association, civil society nonetheless existed and succeeded in weakening and helping to collapse the communist state. (Stokes, 1993)

Correspondingly, once those communist states relinquished their power, the nature of civil society within those states changed considerably. The civil society that provided a forum for dissent against a semi-totalitarian regime no longer had a structure and a purpose once that regime no longer leveled the same constraints against its citizens. Thus, like everything and everybody in the former communist states of Central-Eastern Europe, civil society underwent an identity crisis. What was it now? How would it function? Who would lead it? It was apparent through various occurrences within these states that the role of civil society declined after 1989. The most troubling to many was the decline in predominance of Solidarity in Poland, largely seen as one of the strongest pre-1989 civil society organizations. This and other troubling occurrences led to serious and poignant debates about the meanings of 1989, how to construct new identities, and the viability of democracy in Central-Eastern European states. Yet to meaningfully discuss the civil societies in these states after 1989, yet again another definition of civil society had to be outlined, because without the presence of the communist state apparatus, the associations which had once come

\(^2\) *Democracy in America*

\(^3\) *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*
together to challenge the state’s power had become the state. Encouraging dissent was no longer in the interests of the new leaders. (Havel himself a good example, going from dissident to president in less than two months.) So what was there to challenge the state? What was there to prevent a reemergence of a totalitarian state or a dictatorship? These questions had some very disturbing answers after 1989, and while reports coming from the region recently seem to produce more optimistic theories and models about the viability of democracy for these states, the continuity of today’s civil society with that of the dissidents before 1989 and the relationship of this to democratization remains a pertinent question for many theorists.

**Post-1989 Crisis**

In the early 1990’s the perspectives on civil society in Central-Eastern Europe were not terribly optimistic. It had become apparent that the strength of civil society institutions had declined considerably since 1989 in these states, and theorists began to grapple with why this had happened. In the backdrop of these considerations loomed the conflict in the Balkans, where the lifting of communist control had unleashed a brutal civil war fueled by angry nationalism, collapsing the state altogether. The political situation in many of the former Soviet republics had also reached a critical juncture, with many declaring independence in non-peaceful, nationalistic ways. Bronislaw Geremek, a former member of Poland’s Solidarity and later a minister of the government, wrote in 1992:

> [W]e believed that the civil society we were forming in the midst of our struggle against communism would prove a strong buttress upon which a future democratic order could lean after the collapse of authoritarian power…. It is apparent to me that we were trying to change hard realities with mere words…Our search for this kind of community may be regarded as naïve or even irrational, but there is no denying that it was a highly effective force against totalitarianism. The problem is that when the common enemy of totalitarianism disappears, the reason for being of such a community begins to evaporate. It is then that a fundamental choice emerges: an open society or nationalism. (10)

This seemed to be the predominant dichotomy in the discussions of civil society in the early 1990’s; it was either sink or swim. It would only become apparent somewhat later that there were intermediary possibilities, and that perhaps a nation could statically float without being fully engaged democratically, but without fully drifting into nationalism or back to totalitarianism.

Yet other writers shared Geremek’s pessimism during this time. Grzegorz Ekiert, a prolific theorist of the Polish case, wrote in 1991:
The rise of Western-type democratic regimes in the region is...very uncertain. In my view, a transition towards another type of non-democratic political arrangement is more likely than genuine democratization, given the complexity of the current economic, political, and social crisis in the region, as well as certain aspects of its political culture and traditions. (Ekiert, 1991, 288)

He goes on to further explain a new theoretical framework for looking at the prospects of democratization in Central-Eastern Europe, and points out weaknesses in the other pre-1989 interpretations. While pessimism pervades the article, he does set up a framework whereby he argues that “a revival of the state through the infusion of civic culture” (313) must occur alongside the economic and political reforms necessary for democracy. He spends a significant portion of this work analyzing the political culture of Poland under communism, and how the state ‘destroyed political society,’ which he sees as the rooting place for democracy. This disproves the former commonly held notion of convergence theory, Ekiert claims, which postulated that the socialist states would slowly be transformed into systems more like western democracies, and that western democracies would slowly produce larger state apparatuses similar to socialist states. Those like Ekiert, who were trying to explain the role of civil society (or any other aspect of the situation in Central-Eastern European states at this time), were still grappling in 1991 to explain the structure and meaning of the 1989 collapse. Ekiert approaches this question using the lens of political and domestic society, distinguishing between the two concepts. His 1991 article represents well the grappling effort to find a new post-1989 paradigm to discuss the issues of post-communist states, civil society being just one of those issues.

Inequality and Cooperation

Within this discussion Ekiert points to the weakness of societal institutions capable of sustaining a future democracy, but he also derives his pessimism from the economic situation then facing these states. This is a point all theorists agreed upon. The economic hardship produced by the transition from communism to capitalism made these states vulnerable to political extremism. The economic situation also confronted civil society with a unique and unforeseen problem: groups that had once cooperated as equals in the face a

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4 Ekiert does not use ‘civil society,’ but divides up the concept into domestic society (those associations outside of the public realm) and political society (those in the active political community). “This distinction between domestic society, political society and the state allows us not only to account for the various dimensions of the relations between the state and society overlooked by past approaches, but also to identify new socio-political changes and processes in the region which shaped patterns of collapse in state-socialist regimes and to discern the contours of the current transition process.” (1991,300)

5 He also rejects modernization theory, the new model of corporatism, and the new institutional approach as sufficient tools for unraveling the complexity of the transition.
common enemy were now competing for resources (both human and economic) in an atmosphere of inequality. The former incentives for cooperation, namely defying the oppressive state, no longer existed.

R. Putnam’s (1993) model of cooperation could provide one framework for understanding this occurrence, as cooperation within civil society groups and between individuals was an important issue after 1989 within these states. Putnam argues that people cooperate with each other because they trust one another and can build their own social capital by furthering that trust. This requires the rule of law and norms of reciprocity in order to produce horizontal networks of civic engagement. These norms and laws are created, furthermore, by historical phenomenon and the path dependence of institutions and individuals.

If one accepts Putnam’s assumption that social context and history profoundly influence the effectiveness of institutions, and agrees that representative governments are facilitated by a social infrastructure of civic-minded communities, some light can be shed on why Central-Eastern Europe might still be having problems with civil society development. Putnam’s model applies quite well in the negative sense; the grave economic situation after 1989 broke down much of the little trust people had in each other, and one can see that the existence of such networks was greatly challenged, and in some places civic engagement became quickly non-existent. The income divide between rich and poor was something no communist citizen was used to. The equality of economic poverty had been taken for granted, and unequal wealth produced suspicion and mistrust from those who had not been as successful in adapting to the new system. Furthermore, the importance of history and path dependence applies to the Central-Eastern European situation as well. While all citizens could recognize the negative aspects of a communist system and see how that system had adversely affected their lives for forty years, it was definitely still the case that individuals and institutions exhibited path dependent behavior and had a difficult time adapting to new democratic institutions. This is why, in studies of democratization, researchers choose variables which indicate whether or not people respect the rule of law, are influenced by television, have a party identification, choose to vote, or have a sense of class consciousness. These are

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6 Daphne Berdhal’s (1999) ethnographic study of a small village on the East-West German border during the collapse from 1989-1991 demonstrates this breakdown of trust very thoroughly from an anthropological perspective. As villagers were able to cross the border, obtain western goods, and many simultaneously lost their jobs in a state-run local factory, social relationships became precariously weak in comparison with when villagers had united against the common disdain for the socialist state. Where the World Ended. Reunification and Identity in the German Borderland, Berkely: University of California Press.
habits and beliefs known to have been unaccepted and not widespread in communist societies, so the degree to which people have diverged from their ‘dependence’ on communist habits can be measured through looking at whether or not they have acquired such ‘democratic’ habits.

Civil society, and the degree to which people seem willing to cooperate with each other, as already stated, is widely seen as an important indicator of such democratic inclinations. Cooperation in the associations of civil society, if we follow Putnam’s model, would mean that people have started to trust each other again, and have embarked on the long and weary road to building embedded social networks by investing in social capital. Perhaps, then, the continued weakness of civil society does not mean a coming dictatorship, but rather simply that generational turnover must occur before social trust can become fully embedded. As had been seen more recently as well, when the economic situation became less precarious, civil society started to rejuvenate. (Arato, 2000, discussed below) Old habits die hard, as it is said, and even though the ‘habit’ of participating in civil society existed extensively before 1989 in many of these regions, Putnam might say that it was in fact a different sort of civil society ‘habit’ than what is needed now to sustain fully embedded horizontal social networks in a democracy.

Thus interpreting the problem weak civil society depends on how one defines the term. Definitions are not just words for their own sake: they limit the boundaries of thinking and acting. The idea of civil society has evolved as the actual situation in these countries has changed; the term means something different now than it did before 1989, and the debates about pre- and post-1989 continuity of civil society institutions are commingled with changing definitions. It is worth disentangling a sampling of the competing conceptions and definitions, even though not everyone who has written about civil society since 1989 can be discussed in this limited space.

**Competing Definitions**

Michael Bernhard (1993, 1996) gives four useful points of definition for discussing civil society in the post-1989 Central-Eastern European context:


This is clearly not a definition fully useful to pre-1989, however. In communist societies, one could argue that [1] and [2] existed in some form. The criteria of [3] applied merely because civil society institutions were separated from the state by law in that they were mostly illegal, although that is clearly not what Bernhard means here. The guarantees of [4] did not exist. So the evolution of the idea of
civil society underwent some change between 1989 and Bernhard’s application of this definition to Central-Eastern Europe in 1996. He explains, however, the changes which made a new definition necessary: civil society was demobilized through pacts with the new government and lost its leadership base through its own success in entering government. Thus the residual effects of post-totalitarianism have not been conducive to civil society development, nor have the social consequences of economic transformation. (1996, 309)

Bernhard’s theory of civil society depends on a distinction he makes concerning the two stages of democratization. First a regime must undergo the process of ‘emergence’ by institutionalizing democratic structures: the writing of a constitution, the formation of a parliament via free elections, and the establishment of institutions and offices to support the parliament and president. Bernhard focuses on Poland, which had by 1996 achieved these goals. The second stage, however, and the one with the most important link to civil society, is commonly referred to as ‘consolidation.’ This Bernhard defines as when “all major political actors have come to accept the rules of the new political game.” (1996, 310) By political actors, it is meant to include voters and political parties, whereas the emergence process is mostly focused on institutions. This model can also be framed as ‘the first transition’ and the ‘second transition’ to democracy, as Bernhard chooses to do. (310) The enfeeblement of civil society in both these transition processes is his concern, and he points to how civil society was demobilized after 1989 due to its very success. “The ultimate irony of this situation is that the more successful the democratic opposition is in reaching its ultimate goal, democratization, the more it deprives civil society of its political leadership.” (313) The leaders of pre-1989 civil society like Havel and Walesa became leaders in the new governments, leaving civil society without competent and experienced helmsmen. This is what Bernhard calls “decapitation;” civil society’s decline after the first transition in 1989 can be partly explained by such a leadership crisis.

So without strong leadership, Bernhard argues, the organizations of civil society confronted a whole set of attitudes and assumptions within the communist publics about politics and political participation, many of which were not conducive to democratic thinking. He agrees with Ekiert and Putnam that political culture and traditions, a form of path dependence, represent a considerable obstacle to surmount. Publics who have been forced to the polls under the threat of coercion to vote for uncontested candidates will be likely to take advantage of the opportunity not to vote, even after choices came into

7 Weigle and Butterfield give a good account of this stage in “Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes. The logic of emergence.” Comparative Politics, 25: 1-24 (1992) They deconstruct the process of emergence in Russia and the Eastern European states in comparative perspective.
existence. Publics who have developed distaste for the lies and corruption within politics, and who had done their best to avoid politics for the very reason politics was everywhere (the anti-politics approach of Civic Forum and Solidarity were only the most prominent examples of this), will be hesitant to ally themselves with a political party and a campaign. Furthermore, those who have become worse off under the new economic system will not necessarily see democracy as an institution worth supporting through participation. Bernhard claims that a dual society has arisen from the tension between new institutions and old ideas lingering in people’s heads: “Institutions, social structures, and modes of behavior derived from the old state-socialist mode continue to exist alongside sectors of the economy which have adapted or are in the process of adapting to the market.” (1996, 317)

Unlike Ekiert and Geremek, whose perspectives on the economic situation of the early 1990’s derive from a subdued sense of impending doom, the stabilization of currencies and the beginning of growth in Central and Eastern European economies in the mid-1990’s led Bernhard to a new and more subtle perspective on the relationship between the changing economy and civil society:

Economic recession demobilizes support for reform and mobilizes groups behind political leaderships that oppose it. This reorientation of the axes of political conflict has the short-term effect of weakening the existing organizational basis of civil society, while providing new issues that will help realign it. This is the beginning of the transformation of the insurgent civil society of liberalization into the institutionalized civil society of interest articulation under an established democracy. (1996, 322)

This is key to understanding how Bernhard conceives of civil society’s role in the future of Central-Eastern European states. There is the distinct possibility that this reorientation of attitudes will produce anti-reform protests, which is an example of interest-oriented mobilization. Yet according to Bernhard, anti-reform attitudes (however organized they may be, and however much they coalesce into associations that look like civil society) will weaken the social

8 Vaclav Havel described well how communism politicized everything: “Communist power walks through my bugged bedroom and distinguishes my breathing, which is my own private matter, from what I say, which the state cannot be indifferent to...The web of direct and indirect manipulation is a strait-jacket that binds life and necessarily limits the ways it can appear to itself and structure itself. And so it languishes, declines, wastes away. It is cheapened and leveled. It becomes pseudo-life.” 1987 “Stories and Totalitarianism” Open Letters, trans. Paul Wilson, 337-338.

9 This is an unfortunate use of terms in some way, as it could be inappropriately commingled with the idea derived from pre-1989 civil society, that of the parallel polis or parallel society—terms used by Adam Michnik and Vaclav Havel to describe the under layer of society where the state exerted less control, and the space in which civil society grew under communism. Dual society, in Bernhard’s mind, is something of a muddled inversion of Michnik’s concept.
networks necessary for real civil society formation. He calls such organizations ‘étatist in character,’ because they are essentially looking to the state to redistribute goods differently to lessen the impact of the economic stress. Civil society, as organizations apart from the state and serving a function as a challenge to the state and to provide a check to the state’s power, would ask the state to reform, not just to redistribute goods to their group. The lingering attitudes of socialism are evident here, as those resisting the new economic system are falling back on assumptions of old: the state should provide for us, and we should not change that. Yet Bernhard is right that a state-centered agenda does not strengthen civil society, and the anti-reform groups, while they are mobilized interest groups, ironically do not contribute to creating embedded civic networks and democratic assumptions.

Bernhard does not wholly consider, however, that with mounting discontent these groups could be a short step away from mobilizing against the government, which would constitute the reemergence of what he called an ‘insurgent civil society.’ Indeed the consternation about right-wing extremists within these states today rests on this fear of an insurgent sort of civil society. Yet again, there is a definitional problem here: does civil society by its very meaning embody the protection of human rights and freedoms potentially taken away by the state, or does it embody only checking the power of the state, which can mean doing so for potentially extremist reasons? For each step forward in the building of civil society, it seems, there is some paradox particular to post-communist Central-Eastern Europe that defies definitions and makes it look like civil society will never get fully up and running.

Bernhard’s conception of civil society lies in-between the pessimism of Ekiert’s 1992 article, whose primary concern was how to prevent the resurgence of dictatorial or non-democratic regimes in Central-Eastern Europe, and Gibson and Barnes, (1998) who write before the full consolidation of democratic regimes in these states, but after the most vulnerable economic transformations and uncertainties have come and gone. Growing recognition and assurances that these nations are on the path towards the EU, and not potentially on a similar path to the Balkan states, led to very different conceptualizations of civil society’s role in democratization. The questions theorists asked in the later 1990’s sought to explain the continued and more-or-less stable existence of the democratic governments, when civil society had not become that much stronger than in 1989. Theorists seemed to stop wondering whether the enfeeblement of civil society held the potential for the dismemberment of democracy in the particular case of the Central-Eastern European states, and started working on

10 Ekiert’s stance on all these issues underwent an evolution all its own, and he revised many of these ideas in later works. See note in bibliography.
more detailed questions about how to discern the role and impact of civil society today.

It is worthy to note that the weakness of civil society in the Balkans, on the other hand, still receives paranoid and watchful attention from the whole international community, practitioners and theorists alike, because the lack of consolidation of democratic institutions still has the potential for violently dangerous consequences. The questions about Central-Eastern European civil society have shifted, and perhaps a sense of immediate urgency is no longer there, but the relevance of the relationship between civil society and democracy continues to be contested as a working definition evolves.

In Gibson’s 1998 study of “Social Networks and Civil Society in processes of Democratization,” he chooses to outline the parameters of civil society in the following way:

Civil society is conceived as a continuum describing the interconnectedness of citizens, ranging from socio-political atomization to connectedness and integration. Making use of the idea of the ‘strength of weak ties’, civil society is operationalized in terms of social networks in which people are—or are not—imbedded. (1998, 2)

Here the concern is with what Bernhard described as ‘second transition’ issues: how to get citizens involved in the democratic process, and how to accurately assess that involvement. Gibson analyses the structure, density, and the level of politicization of social networks by evaluating citizens’ opinions of liberty, order, law, and rights consciousness across Central-Eastern European countries, as well as Spain, the US, France and Russia. By exploring beyond Central-Eastern Europe, he gains reference points for levels of democratization emanating from civil society and social networks in states that have not experienced the peculiarities of communism.

He found that only sometimes does the presence of strong social networks within civil society mean more support for democratic values. He also found no difference between transitional and established democracies, and thus the lingering effects of atomization under communist regimes to be irrelevant and nonexistent. To further focus the study he makes an important distinction between social networks with weak ties and those with strong ties. Strong ties are those resulting from very close relationships; clan, family, and very close friends. He finds these sorts of networks to be lacking in politicization. Weak ties, however, between members of a society who have more flexible relationships within civil society organizations, do in fact provide a space for politicization and the transfer of political information. This was especially important just after the 1989 transition, as people had to learn what democracy was all about, and the way in which they learned was either through such networks or through the media. Now, however, he points out that the problem of democratization has little to do with the presence of information; those who
abstain from democratic practices do so quite consciously and deliberately, not because they do not know what is going on.

Gibson made two important conclusions about civil society that provided fertile ground for further debate. Firstly, he concluded that the politicization of social networks is stronger the weaker the ties between the participants. Secondly, he found that the attributes of social networks are highly related to cognitive mobilization and social integration. Through studying perceptions of media, Gibson saw how cognitive mobilization plays a more active role in determining how an individual participates in a democracy in Central-Eastern European states than does social and political mobilization. This is highly significant, because as Barnes hypothesizes through additional data, this could explain the persistent weakness of civil society surviving next to the continued existence of a relatively stable democracy.

Cognitive mobilization plays a significant role in the analysis of civil society done by Barnes (1998). The term can be understood in the context of how post-materialist values have become considerably more significant in predicting voting patterns, a phenomenon well documented by R. Inglehart (1977) and seen in the politics of most Western European states since the 1970’s. The public’s reliance on post-material values results in voting patterns based on cognitive mobilization; people vote along lines of interest and identity, as opposed to with a party or a class, as they had formerly done. Gibson noted that those people within the weak networks of civil society are more likely to participate politically according to cognitive mobilization, and thus voting on personal, value-based choices. This means they would participate less in mass social and political organizations like unions and political parties.

Barnes (1998) takes this a step further and explores the relationship between this phenomenon and the end of communism in Central and Eastern European states by measuring attitudes towards unions and parties. He explains the lack of social and political mobilization in the publics of Central-Eastern Europe as a holdover of the non-existence of distinctly defined political identity in communist societies, and concludes:

[A]lternatives to political paths to identity creation are unlikely to compensate for low involvement in traditional political organizations…[these states] may move directly into the era that the advanced industrial democracies themselves now seem to be entering—a period of declining importance for mass organization, or at least a change in the nature of their political role. (1998)

Thus the sort of civil society that encompasses mass organizations will probably not develop fully in these states in the future, according to Barnes, and cognitive mobilization will prevail as the dominant mode of participation. What occurred after the fall of communism was essentially a leap across a developmental
process from materialist to post-materialist values experienced by Western Europe. Spain, also having emerged from under a dictatorship in the 1970’s, showed similar patterns.

As the analyses of Barnes and Gibson indicate, the questions being posed by theorists no longer seem to be as concerned with the issues of continuity between pre-1989 and post-1989 civil society. In Barnes’ study, however, it was worth noting that Poland ranked the lowest of all nations studied for participation in trade unions. The irony of that is befitting of another paradox: Solidarity, a union of shipyard workers, was widely viewed as one of the most robust and widespread pre-1989 examples of civil society. Yet Solidarity progressively became less significant as an organization of civil society in post-1989 democratic mobilization. The Solidarity party lost seats over the course of the 1990’s in the lower house of parliament, and presently holds none. Some have pointed out (Ekiert, 1991; Bernhard 1996) that Solidarity was both a trade union and a political party, and while often cited as quintessential civil society, its decline as an organization again demonstrates the problems of transferring definitions of civil society over the 1989 divide. Before 1989 Solidarity was a dissident organization that worked its way into the government incrementally and with great difficulty from 1980 to 1989. As nothing resembling a western political party existed in the communist states before 1989, the political party which Solidarity formed in 1989 within the democratic government was an example of a whole different sort of civil society.

Andrew Arato (2000, 71) clarifies this muddling of terms: “It should be noted that the concept of civil society has been recently used in two distinct senses: to indicate a set of societal movements, initiatives, and forms of mobilization and to refer to a framework of settled institutions (rights, associations, publics).” Certain groups are still mobilized within Central-Eastern European civil society, but other groups have been institutionalized. The way an organization checks the power of the state depends upon which category it falls into. Arato’s analysis focuses on civil society in Central-Eastern Europe (he looks at Hungary closely) as a dynamic process, without static definitions, where old organizations were ‘decapitated,’ ‘demobilized,’ or destroyed after 1989, but a new civil society eventually emerged in its place.

The economic crisis of the early 1990’s prevented new organizations from arising in the place of the old ones immediately, thus the proliferation of interpretations that civil society, and democracy along with it, were dangerously close to downfall. “Fortunately,” Arato informs us, “the reports concerning the demise of civil society turned out the be premature.” (2000,70) He argues that theorists were seeing a natural pattern of demobilization within civil society after its ‘mobilization’ phase had been successful in 1989, not the destructive atomization of society after 1989. Institutionalization of civil society, furthermore, was something that was slightly foreign for former communist states for all the political, cultural and historical reasons already mentioned, and
this can explain why Solidarity as an institutionalized political party was not nearly as successful as Solidarity as a dissident, mobilizing underground trade union. Comparing pre-1989 Solidarity and post-1989 Solidarity is looking at apples and oranges. The question of continuity, in light of Arato’s arguments, is no longer so interesting.

Conclusions

What then, is civil society? How can all of these definitions be distilled into an understanding of those associations and organizations within a state that are capable of checking the power of the state? It is clear there has been an evolution in the meaning of this term in the context of Central-Eastern Europe since 1989, and there will continue to be changes in the way it is conceived, analyzed, and applied to studies of politics and societies in this region and others. However, there is more to be said than the mere fact that this is a flexible term with many meanings and some sort of relationship with democracy. As many studies indicate, there is continuing uncertainty about political identity in these states— for individuals, institutions, and civil society organizations. When identity is lacking, definitions and strict categorizations become very difficult and ambiguous, as they have in the case of civil society. The pertinent question becomes whether or not people will turn toward civil society for some form of identity, and if so, what sort of civil society that will be—insurgent or institutionalized.

Vaclav Havel’s bad hangover, as he described his own identity crisis that befell him in 1990, was shared by many, and will probably not abate until generational change has imbued society with adults who were born and raised in democracies and can live their lives with political continuity. The tumultuous transition of 1989—when the government, society, and economy tried to change very rapidly—was not only incapable of dissolving the distaste for politics that citizens had already fully developed under communism, but probably increased that distaste. Jan Urban, who worked alongside Havel in Civic Forum, spoke to this issue in 1988: “I do not believe it is the opposition’s job to solve the state’s problems. It is our job to make problems for the state.”

The continuity of civil society’s role as an oppositional force before and after 1989 is ironically encapsulated here; making problems for the communist state meant the mobilization of civil society and public protest, while making problems for the new capitalist democracies means being passive and relinquishing one’s opportunities to organize within civic institutions that will help the democratic state.

Theorists have struggled to quantify and classify the manifestations of what is probably a culturally embedded cynicism about authority and government. This path dependence of distrust keeps publics from organizing in mass union and party organization. This leads to cognitive mobilization on value-based issues, not unlike how the dissidents had mobilized around value-based issues to resist communism before 1989, when it was impossible to form mass organizations. While more firm democratic identity formation is likely to come with generational changes, and the instability of definitional arguments may abate, it is unclear whether or not future generations will carry with them this cynicism for authority.

If Putnam’s argument about the strong role of history and path dependence in creating trust is true, the cynicism may be quite lasting, as most Central Eastern European citizens had such distrust long before the communists arrived. The tsars, the Hapsburgs, the Austro-Hungarians, and the Nazis (to name a few) were collectively successful in creating a culture of disillusionment and a tradition of distrust and occasional resistance. Civil society was the embodiment of this resistance. Yet if unlike past experiences of governance, the democratic states remain stable enough to protect essential human rights and freedoms, and do not collapse as they did in the Balkans, publics will at the very least accept the democracies as benign. The European Union may or may not perpetuate a perception of the benign nature of the government; the additional regulations may turn a small but institutionalized civil society into a large and insurgent one. The morphology of civil society since 1989 if anything reveals the resilience of the notion that citizens can and will make problems for the state when the need arises.

**Bibliography:**


