



Second
Edition

CIVIL SOCIETY

Michael Edwards



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Civil Society

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*For Cora
My own "civil society"*

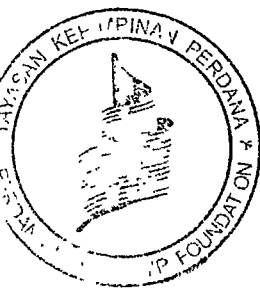


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Preface

When the first edition of this book was produced in 2004, it was reasonable to claim that civil society might be the “big idea for the twenty-first century,” as my original preface put it. Support for this idea was high across the political spectrum, in many different parts of the world, and among theorists, activists, policy-makers and practitioners alike. For some in the administration of President George W. Bush, for example, the invasion of Iraq was justified in part as an attempt to “build civil society” in the Middle East as a counterweight to extremism, while, across the Atlantic, “Moscow’s policy placed civil society at the heart of its comeback strategy” by developing an officially sponsored NGO infrastructure to “destabilize pro-Western governments and regain influence in places like Ukraine,” two positions that demonstrate the sheer slipperiness of this concept, or at least the uses to which it has been put by some politicians.¹

It is probably impossible for any idea to survive this amount of attention, adulation and manipulation, and over the last five years there has been a noticeable move away from some of the exaggerated claims that were being made for civil society in the early 2000s. As one noted scholar puts it, the “church of civil society” has lost some of its membership and magic.² This is surely a good thing, bringing greater rigor to

the debate and forcing a more analytical approach to civil society's potential as a vehicle for understanding and changing key elements of our world. I hope that *Civil Society* has helped to move the debate in this direction in some small ways, as was its intention. Given the amount of new material that has become available in the intervening years, now is a good time to update the original book and its arguments in the light of new developments.

Although there have been some important contributions to civil society theory since 2003, it is the *practice* of civil society that has been most challenged by political and economic developments in many parts of the world. On the political side, attempts to restrict or close down the space for independent citizen action have arisen as governments from Russia to Brazil, Egypt to Cambodia, and Uganda to the United States have formulated tighter laws, regulations and registration requirements for NGOs and other civic groups. Many of these attempts have been justified by reference to the "war on terror" and the need to clamp down on support for organizations deemed to be conduits for terrorist funding, but very few cases of such leakage have been successfully prosecuted, and these moves seem motivated by more basic, pre-existing suspicions of civil society's rising influence.³ Another line of attack has been against NGO accountability, long seen as a source of concern by NGOs themselves (and subject to substantial improvements over the past few years) but now taken up by their critics as an entry point for a broader questioning of their increasing voice.⁴

Taken together, the impact of these developments may be severe, not just in targeting specific organizations and constituencies but in creating a broader climate in which certain positions, activities and even dissent in general are seen as increasingly risky – fears that are appearing among civil society activists in the US and the UK and not just in Russia, China and other more openly authoritarian contexts.⁵ As Charles Tilly has pointed out, social movements throughout recent history have formed almost exclusively in democratic

regimes, and placing more restrictions on citizens' rights to free speech, association and access to information may make it even more difficult to identify and strengthen the connections between associational life, the public sphere and the good society that form the central theme of this book.⁶

The second set of challenges have come from the economic arena, and specifically from the increasing encroachment of business and the market into areas traditionally seen as the preserve of civil society (if indeed one sees these institutions as separate). For many years, there has been tension between radical and neo-liberal interpretations of civil society, the former seeing it as the ground from which to challenge the status quo and build new alternatives, and the latter as the service-providing not-for-profit sector necessitated by "market failure." Today, "philanthrocapitalism" – the belief that business and the market can solve social problems as well as create an economic surplus – is as "big an idea" as civil society, perhaps even bigger. It remains to be seen whether the global financial crisis of 2008 dampens enthusiasm for this new trend, but, for now, social enterprise, social entrepreneurs, venture philanthropy, corporate social responsibility and "creative capitalism" occupy a central position in public and political debate.⁷

Civil society is part of this debate, of course, both as a source of positive influence on business and as a potential beneficiary of stronger financial management and market-based strategies for financial sustainability, but there is also skepticism among philanthrocapitalists about the power of collective action, social movements, democratic decision-making, community organizing and the non-commercial values of solidarity, service and cooperation. "A society that reduces everything to a market inevitably divides those who can buy from those who cannot, undermining any sense of collective responsibility, and with it, democracy."⁸ Will philanthrocapitalism and increased government regulation undermine civil society's transformative potential by reducing the ability or willingness of citizens' groups to hold public and private power accountable for its actions, generate