

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Foundations

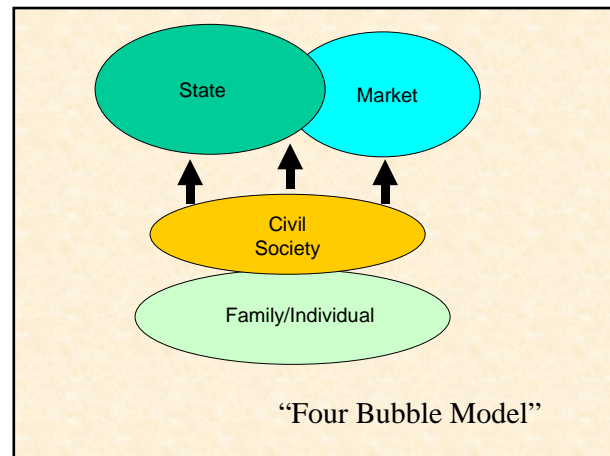
*“Competing concepts of ‘civil society’ thus almost invariably bear the marks of the political struggles within which they were born.”  
(Edwards and Foley, 2001 p. 2)*

#### Introduction

The drizzle in Hanoi makes the streets and sidewalks dirty, but the colors jump out from the drear concrete backdrop: green trees, yellow raincoats, red brake lights of impatient traffic. I pulled my mud-spattered Honda up under the dripping eaves of a small shop and pulled off my streaming plastic poncho. Mr. Cong had asked to meet me in this swank Taiwanese tea house, a slightly upscale venue, both casual and chic. This response to my request for an interview was significant in that it signaled that he did not want our discussion to be formal; he did not want to be inhibited by the strictures that a meeting in his office would impose. An informal chat allows even a

political theorist and Party member like Mr. Cong to venture beyond the Party line. In the tea house there is no bust of Ho Chi Minh mounted high on the wall, supervising the meeting and ensuring political propriety.

But Mr. Cong is no rebel. He is a Marx-Leninist theorist who edits the leading Vietnamese Communist Party theoretical journal. He is a committed Party man. Yet he is also a man who enjoyed a good discussion and different points of view, as I learned in our subsequent meeting. He is also a connoisseur of



**Figure 3:** The Western Four Bubble Model of Civil Society

medicinal Chinese teas, and as our steaming cups arrived, filled with twigs, leaves and berries, our informal<sup>15</sup> discussion on the concept of civil society in Vietnam began.

It began rather poorly, I must say, when I pulled out my pen and sketched a diagram similar to Figure 3Figure , which I have dubbed the “4-bubble” model of civil society. As I proceeded to explain this classic Western model as a space of association

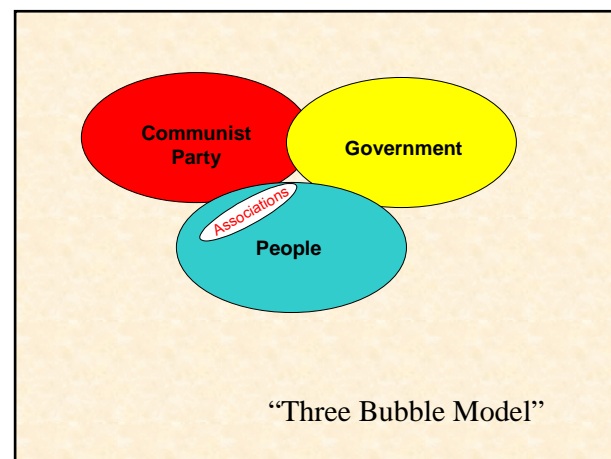
<sup>15</sup> “Informal discussions” are perhaps the best way to understand the ideas and opinions of informants in Vietnam. Meetings in offices allow for some views to be exchanged, but they rarely escape the formality and formulaic discussions of officialdom. The same official who would never go beyond reciting the party line in his office (with the Vietnamese flag on the wall and a bust of Ho Chi Minh silently observing the proceedings) may become an open and engaged discussion partner over a coffee or beer.

and as a “buffer” against a potentially expansive state, Mr. Cong listened, politely engaged (though I got the impression he had seen it before).

When I finished, there was a thoughtful silence. Mr. Cong sat, leaning forward, lips slightly pursed, hands folded on the table across from me. Those familiar with Vietnam might recognize the body language of a polite colleague who is trying to find a way to tell you (respectfully) that your ideas are, well, non-sense.

After a very short time – Mr. Cong was too much a professional and a gentleman to let the silence become uncomfortable – he smiled reassuringly. He then

proceeded to draw and describe the classic Marxist-Leninist model of society in 3 parts, the Communist Party, the Government, and “the People.” (See Figure 4.) This model reflects very neatly the roles laid out in the Vietnamese state’s



common slogan, familiar to all

**Figure 4:** The Marxist-Leninist 3-Bubble Model of Society Showing “Associations”

Vietnamese citizens from elementary school on up: “The Party leads, the People rule, the Government manages” (“*Đảng Lãnh Đạo, Nhân Dân Làm Chủ, Nhà Nước Quản Lý*”). When I asked where civil society fit in this model, he deftly changed my terminology and said, “Citizens are allowed to form their own associations under the law, and these associations are clearly part of the sphere of the People.” Civil society,

redefined as “associations,” was not to be given its own domain. In this “official” model, it augmented the category of “the people,” but it did not constitute a fundamentally new or different set of relationships between citizens and the state.

I was not convinced; modeling the structural domains of Vietnamese society in order to map space for a Vietnamese civil society was getting us nowhere. Mr. Cong’s use of what I call the “3-bubble model” was an unfortunate reversion to the Party line, as it were. But it was, perhaps, no more unfortunate than my own use of the oversimplified, Euro-centric, 4-bubble model to start off the conversation. As our discussion progressed, it was clear that neither of us had a great deal of faith in either the 3-bubble or the 4-bubble models for discussing anything approaching the reality of civil society in Vietnam. These structural concepts of society were based on assumptions about the nature of the state and its relationship with society that either do not hold true in Vietnam, or do not translate in a manner that is useful (or makes sense) to the current Vietnamese experience.<sup>16</sup> Forcing civil society into a Marxist-Leninist framework was as equally unappealing as forcing it into a liberal Western European one.

Any exploration of civil society theory opens a Pandora’s box, a bewildering chaos of definitions, paradigms, descriptions, and explanations of what should and shouldn’t be considered part of the concept. Theoreticians and practitioners alike must content themselves with picking among the pieces to construct a version of civil

---

<sup>16</sup> I will discuss translation issues in more detail in the next chapter.

society theory that meets their needs and offers explanation. All attempts at denoting the concept are partial at best, dictated by theoretical predisposition and the necessities of the project at hand.

Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this research to undertake a *complete* reconceptualization of civil society in terms that make sense to Vietnam. However, acknowledging the fundamental misalignment between the Vietnamese conceptions of society in general and the Western (and essentially Euro-centric) ideas of civil society underscores the inherent problems of transplanting this idea in Vietnam. My project is not to add one more definition of civil society to the growing pool of Western-authored definitions, but rather to examine how the term is deployed by various actors in Vietnam. Using a Critical Development Studies approach and ethnographic methods, my project is to find a more comprehensive and more nuanced way to look at the state-society issues in Vietnam as played out by local NGOs than is provided for in what I call “classical” civil society theory. This chapter lays out the theoretical backgrounds I am using in this endeavor, focusing on those threads that inform international development discourse, and places my work within those varied and frequently contradictory literatures on civil society. These theoretical underpinnings will help set the stage for the empirical work that follows in later chapters.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part I will trace the origins of the idea. As a concept it has important antecedents in the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, and it was developed in part as a reaction against medieval ideas of state

society relations. But in fact, the concept of civil society was a creature of the Enlightenment, described and expanded by several Enlightenment thinkers and writers, and by others in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the time of its multiple conceptions, civil society manifested itself as a number of related, intertwined, but distinct threads of thought, defying useful unitary definition – foreshadowing our current struggles to find a common understanding of the concept today. After my brief look at the history of the idea, I will discuss some of the current debates in civil society theory and mention a few of the hundreds of typologies that have been introduced for categorizing and explaining the myriad uses of the term. The variations of meanings attributed to the term “civil society” by modern writers – Foley and Edwards’ “rough pastiche” (1996, p. 38) – are often combinations of ideas selectively chosen from the writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The second part of this chapter will discuss how the term “civil society” is used in international development, and particularly how geographers and other academics have written about civil society in development and the Third World. In many cases, the term is deployed by international development agencies without a clear understanding of its intellectual antecedents and without a working definition. The issues surrounding civil society in Vietnam are wrapped up in these more general concerns about civil society in development discourse, which in turn are derived (though somewhat carelessly) from the legacies of earlier writers.

Finally, noting the deficiencies of “moving” this European concept to non-Western societies, the third part of this chapter looks at an alternative conception of civil society – focusing on the social and political processes involving civil society and the state rather than on the formal legal structures and institutions that Western academics and development agencies often use to define civil society. This focus on *processes* rather than *structures* opens the possibilities for recognizing forms of civil society that exist in non-Western settings but that otherwise might be overlooked. Though still limited and contingent, this approach proves more useful in describing and explaining civil society in non-Western contexts such as those that form the targets of international development projects. In the next chapter I will add to the theoretical dimensions of this chapter and through an examination of the Vietnamese experience with the concept of civil society.

### **History and Current Debates in Civil Society**

The political and ideological history carried in the concept of civil society is daunting. Civil society is a concept rooted in Western European and American political philosophy, turning tightly on issues of liberalism – liberal democratic theory and liberal economics. Beyond that, the myriad of forms that civil society takes in the hands of theorists over the last two centuries makes for a confusing state of affairs. Scholars and others often trace the history of the concept of civil society is like a genealogy, questing for antecedents of legitimacy. I will follow this genealogical practice to illustrate the confusing multiple threads from which current conceptions of

civil society are derived, and like all such histories of the concept, this section must necessarily be partial and selective. I will follow this historical overview with a short discussion of current interpretations and debates on the concept, particularly those that affect the issues within civil society in development.

### ***Ancient and Medieval Antecedents to the Idea of Civil Society***

The Enlightenment authors who wrote about civil society were steeped in the classic Western philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and there are echoes of these philosophers' ideas in later conceptions of civil society. For instance, Socrates believed that citizens had both the right and the responsibility to be directly involved in state policy formation. He said that policy should be based on rational, public argument, designed to uncover truths – a position that finds modern manifestation in advocacy and democratic theory. Plato, on the other hand, believed that citizens should practice a civic morality and dedicate themselves to a common good (like modern philanthropy). It is Aristotle, however, who is often credited with being the first to discuss civil society directly. He defined a *civil* society as “a public ethical-political community of free and equal citizens under a legally defined system of rule...” (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 84) Laws in such a society should be “the result of public deliberation among average citizens rather than experts, since people through discourse enhance their collective practical intelligence and ensure optimal satisfaction of all parties in the society” (O'Brien, 1999, no page number).



All three of these philosophers argued that the citizen must participate in civic (political) life. In fact, their notions “did not allow for our distinction between state and society” (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 84). In essence, there is no distinction between civil society and political society, a realm where public debate and the application of reason make for a good society.

These fundamental views of society are overturned in the medieval period in Europe. Monarchs and Churchmen established a political order wherein citizens were not welcome to participate in political society. Rather, subjects (not citizens) were conceived of (and ruled over) as being separate from and inferior to overwhelming state and Church authority. Political society and non-political society were constructed as distinct realms, with the state and Church demanding absolute submission of their respective subjects.

It was these two sets of contending ideas about citizen/subjects’ relations to authority that set the stage for Enlightenment thinkers to attempt the mammoth job of reconceptualizing the fundamental relationships between state and society. We shall see in the following pages that civil society theories that are prevalent today are based heavily on the works of Enlightenment era political and economic philosophers, supplemented during the mid- and later 19<sup>th</sup> century by Marx and Gramsci. It is during this period that the term “civil society” was coined to refer to a separate element of society at large, and when the concept began its modern academic/philosophical journey.

*Civil Society Themes from the Enlightenment and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

“Civil society” is a term with a convoluted and complex genealogy. It was used by several writers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to try to capture new and changing ideas about social and political formations at a time when long-standing power structures were beginning to break down. Perhaps beginning with Hobbes and continuing with social philosophers such as Locke and Montesquieu, the very nature of society in Europe was beginning to be challenged. “Subjects” were being recast as “citizens,” ascriptive power bases such as the aristocracies of the European powers were being challenged by new big-money interests as Capitalism began to take center stage. During the Enlightenment period, political and moral philosophers made bold new attempts at re-conceptualizing the relationships between state and society.

Anheier (2004) explains:

"As a concept, civil society is essentially an intellectual product of 18th century Europe, when citizens sought to define their place in society independently of the aristocratic state and when, simultaneously, the certainty of a status-based social order began to suffer irreversible decline. The early theorists of civil society welcomed these changes" (p.20).

They went beyond the medieval demand for submission to authority and harkened back to the ancients' beliefs that citizens should be actively engaged in the workings and policies of the state.

In this section I will describe the contributions of a small number of influential Enlightenment and 19<sup>th</sup> Century writers to the ideas of civil society. Each of these

writers approached the topic in very different ways, but each contributed to our modern understandings – and confusions. In this brief survey I will extract four major themes that recur separately and in various combinations in these writers' works on civil society: resistance to the state; capitalism and property; associational life; and links to democracy. These themes are critical to understanding current usage of the term civil society, especially as the concept is applied to international development discourse. This section will provide some historical understanding of where those themes originated.

**Hobbes and Locke.** John Locke (1632-1704), like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) a generation earlier, believed that the state was a powerful and potentially dangerous (if necessary) actor, an entity that is distinct from *society*. Even though the state was in the business of protecting citizens' rights, it often had interests that differed from those of the individual, leading it to become expansive at the expense of its citizens. In a major break with his intellectual predecessors (including Hobbes and especially medieval writers), Locke believed that in cases where the state violated the social contract, the citizens had the right to rebel: "The community perpetually retains a supreme power of saving themselves from ... their legislators, whenever they shall be so foolish or so wicked, as to lay and carry on designs against their liberties and properties" (Locke, *Second Treatise*, quoted in Perring, nd). In support of this right of citizens to protect themselves from the state, Locke advocated for the right of citizens to form associations freely. We see, then, Locke's formulation of three central ideas that form the basis for subsequent conceptions of civil society: that there is something

known as *society* that is separate and sits in contract with the state; that citizens may freely form associations within society; and that citizens retain the right to oppose the power of the state. We will see these ideas in various forms in virtually all modern conceptions of civil society in the following sections.

**Scottish Enlightenment:** It is not uncommon to see Scottish Enlightenment writers credited with the idea of civil society, particularly Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith. Both of these writers believed that civil society is predicated on strong capitalist markets, free from government interventions. In Ferguson's usage, the essence of "...civil or 'civilized' society [is] not in its political organization, but in the organization of material civilization," that is, its economic organization (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 90). Edwards (2001, p. 2) tells us that to Ferguson and Smith, "'civil society' represented the realm of 'civilization' and rising standards of living based on specialization or the 'division of labor.'" Within this capitalist economy, men would be able to behave with equanimity and "civility." It was through these writers that the idea of civil society first became intertwined with capitalism, asserting that private property was in fact the basis for a civil society. Therefore the state's role, according to the Scottish Enlightenment writers was to protect civil society, in part through the protection of private property. This, according to Hudson (2003, p. 10), was a radical change. The inclusion of capitalist markets and private property in the concept of civil society is once again a common thread in forms of international development based on neo-liberalism and globalization. We see this position still being debated, as modern

scholars wrestle with ideas of including or excluding the market, labor unions and business associations in definitions of civil society.

**Hegel.** Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) momentous work, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* or *Rechtsphilosophie*) is often considered to be the "great synthesis" of the ideas of civil society. As Cohen and Arato (1992, p. 91) write, "[a]ll strands of the history of the conception of civil society so far presented meet in Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*."

Hegel envisioned civil society as a separate sphere from the state and a fundamental byproduct of a capitalist society. For him, social relations existed within a complex class structure embodying many competing interests. Civil society could thus become a site of conflict and contestation between competing interests. In response to this possibility, Hegel devised the notion of the Corporation, a form of intermediate group that promotes its own interests in the context of the greater social good, "the meeting place of both the will of the individual and the universal will of society..." – similar to what de Tocqueville later described as associations.<sup>17</sup> As a social mediating force, the Corporation, "teach[es] civic virtue as a means of promoting the common good, but it is the State that is the ultimate arbiter of morality, and, as such, gives civil society its necessary moral directions" (O'Brien, 1999, no page number).

---

<sup>17</sup> I will discuss de Tocqueville below.

In Hegel, then, we see two major threads of civil society thought coming together. First, Hegel posits that the capitalist system, with its myriad competing class interests, is the basis of civil society, a variation of the idea introduced by the Scottish Enlightenment writers. Secondly, through Hegel's writing we see associational life (Corporations) emerging as a fundamental feature of civil society thought.

**Tocqueville.** Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) has had, perhaps, the most influence on Western (or more specifically, on American) ideas of civil society of all the early writers. For many current writers on the subject of civil society, whether academics, governments or international aid agencies, "...Tocqueville's writings on civil society in the early nineteenth century have been central, and are the touchstone for much of the revival of debate" (Sirianni, n.d., no page number). A political philosopher, de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1830 and described what he saw as a vibrant democracy in action in his book *Democracy in America*, published in 1835.

Tocqueville was struck by his observations that Americans formed and joined a great many associations "of all kinds and for all purposes," and he concluded that "in this lay the strength of their democracy" (Sirianni, n.d., no page number). According to Tocqueville's assessment, civic associations "reinforced the spirit of collaboration so vital for public affairs, and political associations, in turn, taught habits that could be transferred to nonpolitical forms of cooperation... The strong force of [American] individualism was counterbalanced by an equally powerful associational life centered

in the independent churches and voluntary associations” (Sirianni, n.d. no page number). Echoing Hegel’s ideas that participation in the “Corporation” promotes civic virtue, Tocqueville “puts special emphasis on the ability of associational life in general and the habits of association in particular to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity” (Foley and Edwards, 1996, p. 39).

For Tocqueville and his modern intellectual descendants, “intermediate organizations” and associations are a crucial part of a functioning democracy, providing a mediating force to promote local interests to and to buffer against a potentially expansive state. In this, we can see de Tocqueville’s connection to both Locke’s and Hegel’s ideas. Thus in Tocqueville’s conception of civil society, the mutually reinforcing institutions of democracy and voluntary associations take front and center, creating themes in civil society thought that become the foundations for a great deal of modern writing on civil society.

**Marx and Gramsci.** Karl Marx (1818-1883) wrote very little on the idea of civil society, and it does not figure large in his theories of politics, economics and revolution. When he does discuss civil society, Marx agrees with Hegel and the Scottish Enlightenment writers that civil society is a by product of modernity and capitalist division of labor, a result of a class-based society. However, contrary to Tocqueville and Hegel, Marx does not see it as a realm that promotes democracy or mediates citizens’ interests vis-à-vis the state. Rather, it was a bourgeois “illusion that needed to be unmasked” (Hudson, 2003, p. 11). According to Marx, civil society is

dominated by powerful class interests and becomes yet another realm for oppression and class conflict. Since the state is, in Marx's conception, the embodiment of bourgeois interests, "civil society was subservient to the political state" (Yu, 1995, p. 90). Or, as Alexander (1998) puts it,

[n]ot only is civil society simply a field for the play of egotistical, purely private interests, but it is now treated as a superstructure, a legal and political arena produced as a camouflage for the domination of commodities and the capitalist class (p.4).

Building on Marx's work, Antoine Gramsci (1891-1937), a Marxist political theorist, agreed that civil society is an arena dominated by state interests. He further refined the idea, paralleling Hegel and Tocqueville, by describing the formation of intermediate associations as the backbone of civil society. But according to Cohen and Arato (1992), Gramsci saw of these intermediary associations as a function of the "demand of the state for consent, and its tendency to organize and educate such consent..." (p. 146) Even so, Gramsci theorized, intermediate associations can "turn into key vehicles for social movements..." and challenge the dominance of the state and ruling class, even though they are initially creatures of the state (p. 146-7). Again in Marx and Gramsci we see three of our major themes described: Capitalism as the underlying logic for the creation of civil society, the formation of intermediate associations as the form, and resistance to the state as a potential consequence.

Thus we see 4 basic themes woven in and out of this abbreviated intellectual history of civil society:



- resistance to (or a buffer against) the expansive state;
- capitalism and markets as a basis for civil society;
- associational life as fundamental to civil society; and
- civil society as the basis for democracy.

Since the “rediscovery” of civil society in the late 1980s, these four themes, with their roots in the Enlightenment, have been combined and re-combined, adapted and deployed in countless variations by academics, development agencies, governments and activists for the last 20 years. Before we look at how these themes have been reinterpreted through the lens of international development in the next part of this chapter, I will briefly examine some of the current intellectual debates about the concept of civil society.

### ***Debates in Civil Society Theory: Commonalities and Confusion***

From the above very brief and necessarily incomplete look at some of the antecedents of the modern idea(s) of civil society, and from the many others that space does not allow me to describe, scholars, development workers, and government officials have built what Foley and Edwards (1996, p. 38) calls a “rough pastiche,” a *series* of definitions of civil society. These definitions are often based on selective and partial readings of theory and then constructed of compromises that rarely leave anyone satisfied. Trying to understand the multitude of ways in which various actors – scholars, government officials, aid workers, etc. – have drawn from and combined various historical threads of the concept of civil society is daunting. It seems that each

use of the term implies a different formulation of ideas, usually without explicit acknowledgement of the antecedents of those ideas.

Consequently, for the past decade and more, scholars have repeatedly attempted to untangle the uses of the term “civil society,” building typologies and categories for different applications of the term. Predictably, if unfortunately, given the contested and political nature of the concept of civil society, these categorizations themselves are beginning to proliferate, creating a second level arena for debate on the concept, a “meta-contestation.”

Here are some examples: In her review of the use of the idea of civil society in Geography, McIlwaine (1998, p.417) divides the literature into two categories, the “liberalists,” typically the “pro-civil society” camp of development practitioners, among others, who look to civil society to overcome the problems encountered in development practice, and the neo-/post-Marxists who criticize the use of the term/concept, preferring to describe civil society as a “site of oppression and power inequalities.” Taylor (1990) takes a more historical approach in his typology, claiming that in current usage, the term “civil society” borrows equally from political philosophy concepts presented by Locke and Montesquieu. These borrowed concepts are rarely or never examined, he says, but are inherently incompatible, leading to an “unhappy marriage” of ideas and therefore an unstable theory. Edwards (2004, p. vi) characterizes civil society as a “notoriously slippery concept, used to justify radically different ideological agendas, supported by deeply ambiguous evidence, and suffused

with many questionable assumptions.” In their 1996 paper, Foley and Edwards argue that the notion that civil society can (or should) both engage the state (*a la* Tocqueville) and oppose it (*a la* Locke and Hegel) leads to what they call the “paradox of civil society.” As these examples suggest, scholars are not only divided about what civil society means, but also on how they describe the debate itself.

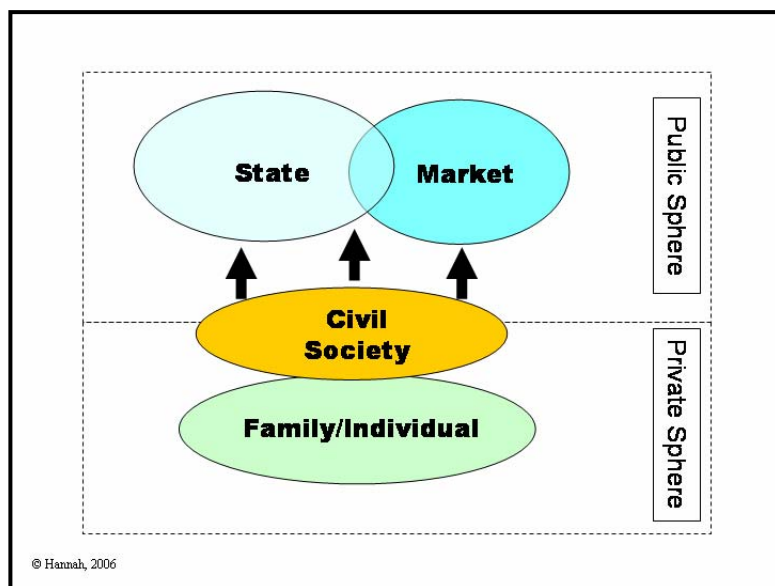
### *a. Commonalities*

There are two major commonalities that tenuously hold the idea of civil society together across disciplines and across discourses. The first is the idea that civil society constitutes a distinct and identifiable part of society at large, separate from the state

and from the “private sphere,” usually identified as the family or the individual. Nearly all definitions describe civil society in spatial metaphors, as a “realm,” “sphere,” “arena,” or similar term,

indicating that it is an

essential (and elemental) piece of overall social structure. This sphere or realm is conceived as sitting between and buffering the individual (or family) – the realm of



**Figure 5:** Civil Society Positioned Between the Public and Private Spheres

the “private” – and the state (and the market in some conceptions) – the realm of the “public.” (See figure 5.) Such a conception can be seen in the works of some of the enlightenment writers such as Locke, Smith and Hegel, who nonetheless had different takes on what this separate realm called “civil society” consists of. Modern writers still do not agree on what makes up this separate realm, how to delineate it, or exactly what part it plays in society as a whole.

A second commonality among most current definitions of civil society is the characterization of its members as “voluntary associations,” or “associational groups.” Harking back to Tocqueville, but with antecedents in Hegel and echoes in Gramsci as well, this focus on groups of people coming together in a realm outside of the household, the state, and the market is a dominant theme. Referring again to the spatial metaphor diagramed in figure 5, civil society is the social space in which people come together to communally pursue their interests.

But even given such broad similarities, it is difficult to find agreement about what exactly makes up this social space called “civil society.” For instance, authors debate whether the market should be included with the state as a force in opposition to civil society, or if market-based organizations (such as professional associations or labor unions) should be included in civil society definitions. Should ascriptive groups such as clan associations – though not voluntary by nature – be considered civil society organizations? And perhaps the most important but least discussed (in

international development circles), is civil society a end in itself, or is it a means to transform (democratize) the current government in a given place?

### ***b. Classification Schemes***

To demonstrate the range of attempts to organize academic discussion, I will touch on three examples where scholars propose typologies for classifying schools of civil society thought. In my first example, Bach Tan Sinh (2002, p. 121, quoting Kaldor's 2000) divides the various uses of the term civil society into 5 categories: 1) The *Societas Civilis* – a society “civil” and peaceful, where “violence has been minimized as a way of organizing social relations”; 2) *Bourgeois Society* – an “arena of ethical life in between the state and the family,” linked to the emergence of capitalism, including markets, social classes, civil law, and welfare organizations; 3) The *Neo-liberal version* – “a non-profit voluntary 'third sector'” that both restrains state power and provides services relinquished by a retreating state; 4) The *activist version* – a realm in which individuals work outside formal political channels to to pressure the state, reminiscent of opposition to Central European communist states in the 1980s; 5) The *Post-Modern version* – “an arena of pluralism and contestation, a source of uncivility [*sic*] as well as civility.”

As a second example we can look at Michael Edwards (2004), who proposes dividing the myriad writing on civil society into three “theoretical positions” or “traditions.” The first group is made up of *analytical models*, by which he means explanations of various forms of associational life. The second group is comprised of

the *normative models*, which talk about the kind of society civil society is supposed to produce and/or maintain. The third group of writings is *civil society as 'public sphere,'* a more abstract set of writings largely based on a Habermassian view of the public sphere as “an arena for public deliberation, rational dialogue and the exercise of ‘active citizenship’ in the pursuit of a common interest” (p. viii).

In my final example, Foley and Edwards (1996, p. 39) divide up the entire realm of civil society debate into only *two* major schools. The first, which they label “Civil Society 1,” (CS-1) based mainly on the work of Tocqueville, focuses on “the ability of associational life in general and the habits of association in particular to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity.” Their “Civil Society 2” (CS-2) “lays special emphasis on civil society as a sphere of action that is independent of the state and that is capable – precisely for this reason – of energizing resistance to a tyrannical regime.”

Although dividing the current literature on civil society into such broad categories is inherently problematic, the division of civil society writings into these categories can be useful to a point. Many political scientists fall within the CS-2 camp – particularly those working on Eastern Europe – claiming that the idea of civil society had lain dormant for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a great number of scholarly overviews of the history of the concept of civil society credits its revival to Eastern European social scientists and activists of the 1980s. (See for example Ehrenberg, 1999; Cohen

and Arato, 1992; and Seligman, 1992.) Alexander (1998) is certainly among the foremost champions of this position:

Almost single handedly, Eastern European intellectuals reintroduced ‘civil society’ to contemporary social theory. Until they started talking and writing about it, it had been considered a quaint and conservative notion, thoroughly obsolete (p. 1).

In CS-2, opposition to tyranny becomes the foremost characteristic of civil society, and the rhetorical constructions are expressed as the binaries of struggle:

The juxtapositions are well known: society *against* the state, nation *against* the state, social order *against* political system, *pays reel against pays legal* or *official*, public life *against* the state, private life *against* public power, etc. The idea was always the protection and/or self-organization of social life in the face of the totalitarian or authoritarian state (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 31).

Where Marx saw civil society as the site of class conflict dominated by the state, the ideas of civil society that were (re-) born in Eastern Europe saw it as the site of political conflict *with* the state (as Gramsci predicted it may become).<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, writers on development, social capital advocates, proponents of democratization efforts, and those studying philanthropy tend to focus more on civil society in terms of CS-1. Their arguments tend to focus on the formation and support of various forms of associations in society and the effects those associations have on the quality of life or on state-society relations.

---

<sup>18</sup> This image of authoritarian regimes falling due to popular pressure exerted through civil society informs many deployments of the term “civil society” in international development either explicitly or implicitly as we will see in Part 3, below.

All of these approaches to defining or classifying civil society embody very real normative assumptions about what civil society is/is not and should/should not be. Clearly, defining civil society as a necessary precursor for democratic change is far different than defining it as a site of charitable work in the community. Especially in an authoritarian state such as Vietnam, the latter is viewed by the state as a benevolent and worthy arena for social engagement, whereas the former is a direct challenge to the state's political legitimacy, not to be countenanced.

And yet, the injudicious application of the concept, *sans* historical or linguistic insight, is in fact the norm in international development. In the next section I will look at how the international development community has adopted the term "civil society," frequently (if not virtually always) without explanation of what is meant, and very rarely with any kind of historical explanation of their particular use of the concept. Used in this somewhat cavalier manner, "civil society" becomes a catchword that drives an unspoken agenda and strengthens a hegemonic discourse of development in the Third World.

### **Civil Society in Development**

*"There is no single European concept of civil society. On the contrary, the term is used in multiple, conflicting and contradictory ways, many of them dependent upon a detailed understanding of the context and language in which they were originally used. ... it is necessary to grasp the complexity and subtlety of European usages, which themselves signal a wide range of possibilities, most of which are not universal accounts applicable to any conceivable time or place... ahistorical and decontextualized approaches to uses of the term are unsound"* (Hudson, 2003, p. 9).



### *A Crisis in Development*

The complex and tangled history of the idea of civil society has led to the modern adoption and deployment of the concept by a wide range of actors for an equally wide range of interests. One of the principle realms in which this term is used – and the realm which I am most interested in for this dissertation – is international development. Touted by both new-liberal/neo-modernizationists and by progressive development theorists, civil society has become a fulcrum for leveraging development agendas. As a group, development theorists and practitioners have failed to heed Hudson's admonition (above), and use the term in most unsound ways.

The history of development since World War Two is one of failed approach after failed approach. Both in theory and implementation, development organizations have never lived up to their own expressions of goals and mission. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century a confluence of international issues worked to further challenge the development ideal. The rise of the neo-liberal economic agenda in the 1980s and 1990s put additional pressures on poor nations, as did the creation of new economic trade regimes such as NAFTA and the WTO. The fall of the Eastern European communist states left Third World countries with much less bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the West, as there is now only a single super-power.

By the 1980s, development was in a crisis (Watts, 1995; Hart, 2002). Modernization and economic growth policies had failed to deliver on promises. The failure (as some characterized it) of the Green Revolution put technological optimism

in question by exposing the multi-dimensionality of poverty, and the possibilities of doing more harm than good through the application of technology. The international debt crisis underlined the failure of growth-led policies. The Vietnam War, Watergate and a series of scandals and failed policies undermined confidence in governments' ability to deal effectively with issues of poverty and inequality. Academically, modernization theory proved as lacking as dependency theory in providing a way forward. The "problems" of poverty in the Third World were still with us, if not growing worse, and the "solutions" were not clear.

Failures of modernization theory, structural adjustment policies, Third World debt, etc., in the 1980s led to changes in how the donor countries approached development. At one extreme, what Watts (1995, p. 45) calls the "(neo)modernization" discourse has developed, based on neo-liberal macro-economic ideas ("globalization") and espoused by most of the larger international development agencies. The "New Policy Agenda" has revealed itself as "political and economic liberalization," leading to a new "myth of development": a combination of the "myth of the market plus civil society" (Hulme and Edwards, 1997, quoted in McIlwaine 1998, p. 420).

This new approach from the political right promoted globalized economics with a renewed emphasis on democratization (usually under the guise of "good governance") in Third World countries as the magic formula for alleviating poverty. This was a significant departure from past policy among the international donors,

which often ignored government structure in their recipient countries, or consciously decided that political reform could be deferred until economic advancement was manifest. In addition, whereas earlier mainstream development paradigms relied on the state as an “indispensable actor” in the development process, a sense of “disillusionment” set in and the Third World state was recast as a major hindrance to development (Hyden, 1997, p. 4). Democratization was more than a human rights issue; if it can reform a weak state, it is a key to economic advancement as well. It is a means to an end, no longer an end in itself. This marriage of democratization and globalization sets the stage for the mainstream development discourse’s embrace of civil society, relying heavily on the *market* and *democratization* threads in civil society discourse. Major development organizations such as the World Bank and large international NGOs have adapted the civil society concept into their programs and their daily jargon. Strategies, project proposals, reports and evaluations are rife with the term “civil society” or one of several related terms (such as “New Social Movements,” “citizen mobilization,” “local NGO formation,” etc.).

Meanwhile, a movement among left-leaning, mostly Third World scholars arose at this time to challenge the very basis on which the idea of development was premised. The “anti-development” (or “post-development”) scholars (such as Escobar, Esteva, etc.), believe that “development,” practiced and as envisioned by neo-modernizationists, is not a solution, but is itself part of the *problem* of global poverty. In short, “You must be very dumb or very rich not to notice that development ... stinks” (Esteva, 1985, quoted in Watts, 1995, p. 45). What we need, say the post-

development writers, are alternatives. Post-development adherents includes many different actors with vastly different political and theoretical bases. “While differentiated across multiple axes, they are united by antagonism to Development as a normalizing, deeply destructive discursive formulation emanating from the West” (Hart, 2002, p. 651). Ironically, post-development interpretations (e.g., Escobar c1995) have come to the same conclusion as neo-modernizationists: namely that *civil society* is a critical component to any social progress, call it “development” or “alternatives to development” (Hart, 2002; Hyden, 1997; Watts, 1995) . These theorists tend to rely on civil society ideas based on *resistance*. to the state (which includes resistance to global capitalism) and on the formation of a robust associational sector.

In the late 1980s, then, we see that both mainstream development thinkers and radical “anti-development” thinkers came to the same conclusion:

Both the new development economics of the 1990s and the anti-development paradigm stake claims for alternative strategies ... [yet] they speak in the same register in reasserting the role of civil society and in questioning the form, function and character of the developmental state (Watts, 1995, p. 59).

This convergence around civil society of (fundamentally divergent) neo-liberal and post-development “solutions” to the crisis of development has brought the concept into prominence in the world of development practice. As Fowler (2000) puts it, “Today, international development is *characterized* by the aid system’s urgent embrace of the concept of civil society” (emphasis added).

But as Gillian Hart (2002) warns, this ironic confluence of conclusions from such opposite political projects in no way indicates a meeting of the minds. This consensus on the importance of civil society to development certainly does not indicate agreement on development as a whole, or even on the purposes and functions of civil society in promoting development. Rather, she reminds us of the "multi-layered struggles that have arisen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of market triumphalist claims of the Death of Development" (p. 650). It is within these struggles for the meanings of development – and for the vision of the future – that the struggle over the meanings of “civil society” has relevance.

Yet with its ubiquitous usage, what does the term “civil society” really mean in the context of international development? The answer is not at all clear. Or, looking at it another way, the answer is contingent: the term can take on a variety of meanings and assume infinite positive connotations precisely because the denotation is never nailed down. “Civil society” is an example of a “floating signifier... with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified” (Chandler 2003, no page number). Different actors draw different meanings from the classical political philosophy theories, pulling together the various intellectual threads in various combinations to create ideas of civil society to match development agendas.

Ferguson’s (1995) and Abrahamsen’s (2000) work both illustrates how these ambiguities can lead to the capturing and manipulation of entire aid projects. The “veil of imprecision” (McIlwaine 1998, p. 420) surrounding the concept is typically ignored

and simultaneously utilized to discursively construct the “‘rough pastiche’ that has become the accepted version of civil society” (Foley and Edwards 1996, p. 38) which then becomes operational in Third World contexts. In fact, as mentioned above, proponents of civil society in development span the ideological spectrum from neo-liberal institutions promoting “free market” economic solutions to radical NGOs promoting “participatory” development practices to post-development scholars looking for “alternatives” to development.

One commonality of the use of civil society in development is its frequent conflation with “NGO.” This turn reflects, in part, the Tocquvillian theme of “civil-society-as-associations” as well as the donors’ imperative for finding “civil society” organizations in beneficiary countries “who are already familiar with, or can be taught, the language of development, such as participation, planning, poverty reduction, sustainability and good governance” (Malaluan, 2002, p. 8). This focus on formal organizations “ignores social configurations and how citizens interface with each other and the state ... Civil society existed before and extends far beyond” NGOs (Fowler, 2000). Yet international development tends to focus its efforts on promoting NGOs as a proxy for civil society (Fowler, 2000; Carothers, 2005). Fowler (1996) sums up this untenable position that the development community has taken on civil society in these terms:

The emergence of civil society in the international development agenda provides the political compliment to the economics of adjustment; these two pillars being bridged by the concern for good governance. However, the understanding of civil society on which

this agenda is being operationalised is too historically narrow and geographically Western. Further, its current interpretation too partial, portraying a harmony model which does not correspond to reality anywhere (p. 29).

In the following section I will review some of the academic writings on civil society in development.

### *Civil Society and Development Studies*

Geographically, current literature on civil society in development takes lessons from around the world. Perhaps the largest number of articles in the last 10 years relate to work from Latin America, with another large number from Africa. A much smaller number are based on Asia, Arabic states, or global civil society issues. The scholarly interest in civil society in Africa and Latin America may well mirror the investment of donors in civil society projects. However, although the number of articles on these two regions is similar, the form these articles take is generally quite different.

Articles on Latin American civil society tend to look at established examples of civil society “in action,” assessing how it does or does not “work.” Both Coehlo’s (2002) and Acharya’s (2004) work looks at civil society representation in government councils in Brazil, and Hughes’ (2002) and Carruthers’ (2001) assessments of civil society in the environmental sectors of Mexico and Chile (respectively) are also clear examples of this. Writings on African civil society during this period, on the other hand, tend to focus on the role of donors and their push to create “good governance”

through the support of civil society on that continent (Barakat, 2002; Coelho, 2002; Hearn 2000; Jenkins, 2001; Jenkins, 2002; McEwan, 2003; Mercer, 2003; Mohan, 2002). These articles are virtually all critical of donor focus on civil society – particularly USAID as the largest contributor to projects designed to enhance civil society, but also other bilateral agencies and multi-lateral organizations such as UNDP and the World Bank.

Several of articles, particularly those on the Latin American experience with civil society, discuss the direct relationship between civil society and state governance (e.g., Acharya, 2004; Junior, 2005; McIlwaine, 1998b). Coelho (2002) even presents a model from Brazil of “state-society co-management” leading directly to state policy formation. Yet several scholars of and from Latin America are skeptical about the ability of something called “civil society” to adequately represent members of the society. Some point to clear conflict between members of civil society (e.g., Junior, 2005; McIlwaine, 1998b; Hughes, 2002; Islah, 2004) and others to cases where civil society has been co-opted and/or dominated by elite members of society for their own ends (e.g., Carruthers, 2001). Such empirical studies call into question exactly who “civil society” speaks for, and whether there can be any one, *unified* thing called “civil society” (see Hughes, 2002; Islah, 2004).

Among the many other concerns among the critical development authors examining civil society, three are the most noteworthy. The first is that support for civil society in Third World countries is constructed by donors as a non-political or



apolitical form of intervention, whereas it is in fact highly political (Jenkins, 2001; Jenkins, 2002; Junior, 2005; McEwan, 2003; McIlwaine, 1998b; Mercer, 2003; Mohan, 2002) Development agencies use a particular set of definitions for the term civil society which, when combined and conflated with the “good governance agenda,” are in fact a recipe for fundamental political transformation of governments (McEwan, 2003). Hearn (2000) argues that such projects are essentially “political aid,” under the guise of “development.” Jenkins (2001) says that these transformations attack the epistemological foundations of African societies, being

nothing less than a backdoor attempt to transform African societies from the ground up by substituting a new understanding of individual political subjectivity -- for it is only through such a novel basis for the “self” that the accompanying features of an open political sphere and a “neutral state” can perform the roles assigned to them in liberal political theory and neo-liberal economic policy (p. 1).

The second concern among writers on civil society and development in Africa is exactly the point that Jenkins mentioned, civil society acts as a link or a bridge between liberal political theory and the neo-liberal economic agenda under-girding current international development paradigms. As a supposed locus of “choice,” civil society is premised on the market-oriented policies of major donors and exists in a policy constellation that included Third World debt and the forces of globalization (Mohan, 2002; Jenkins, 2001; Jenkins, 2002; Mercer, 2003; Mittleman, 1998). This critique sheds light on the ways in which civil society promotes a capitalist agenda, often undermining competing social equity agendas in the process.

The third concern, somewhat in conflict with the first, is that the form of civil society supported by international donors, i.e., the formation of service-providing NGOs, is a grossly limited version of the original idea. Such a crippled civil society, the critique claims, is in fact a “safe” and watered down version, one that will maintain order and focus dissent within acceptable channels. It serves to legitimize state and donor policy, including structural adjustment regimes (Mercer, 2003). Contrary to theory, under these circumstances civil society “acts not as a force for challenging the status quo, but for building societal consensus for maintaining it” (Hearn 2001).

Among these current writings on civil society and development are a small number that are written without empirical basis, as exercises in theory-building. It is interesting to note that two articles, Fukuyama (2001) and Radcliffe (2004) attempt to use the idea of social capital to explain civil society in current development theory. Schuurman (2000) also discusses social capital, but only in the context of what he calls the “paradigmatic disorientation” that has afflicted development studies since the mid-1980s. He echoes Hart (2002) and Watts (1995) in identifying the major shift in development theory with the move away from old-style modernization theory into a new set of ideas that include civil society as a cohesive idea, holding together a paradigm based on neo-liberal economics and Western liberal politics (what Watts, 1995, p. 45, called “neo-modernization”). Several authors, especially Jenkins (2001 and 2002) and Hearn (2000 and 2001) look hard at the theoretical underpinnings for “good governance” policies in international development and find them wanting on several levels. The implementation of such policies are shown to be of benefit to donor

agencies and beneficiary governments, rather than to the citizens that are supposed to be protected and nurtured by civil society, in ways that are reminiscent of Ferguson's (1995) "anti-politics machine." But perhaps the most scathing critique of civil society in development comes from Wickramasinghe (2005) who demonstrates how, through the adoption of a neo-Tocquevillian concept of civil society, Western donors have created a kind of civil society in the Third World that can just as easily act as a site of oppression as of emancipation. Civil society co-optation by international development projects and policies has effectively muted dissenting voices rather than enhancing them. He writes,

...forces and interests combine and connive in a sometimes oblique manner to form a "civil society" where global institutions consume local initiatives and formations ... (p. 459) It is in their attempt to wed theory and practice that donors have effectively stripped the notion of civil society of any substantive meaning (p.483).

Whether or not international development is swallowing local civil society and replacing it with its own version is hard to see, precisely because "civil society" is so difficult to define, recognize and measure. Anheier (2004), among others, has suggested a method for measuring civil society, and the CIVICUS "Civil Society Index" project is using this method to measure the robustness of civil society in dozens of countries around the world.<sup>19</sup> I am skeptical of the ability of a single methodology to capture the diverse forms and functions of civil society in diverse cultural and political settings. The danger, of course, is missing sound and interesting forms of civil society activity when the social institutions that are involved do

---

<sup>19</sup> A team of Vietnamese and foreign researchers recently completed an assessment of Vietnam's civil society using the CIVICUS methodology. I have yet to see their final report.

not meet predetermined criteria for membership in civil society. The follow section explores one way to move beyond definitions of civil society based on particular institutional forms.

### **A New Approach – Civil Society Processes**

On that rainy day in Hanoi, in that chic Taiwanese tea shop, Mr. Cong and I struggled to find common ground in our discussion of “civil society.” Neither his Marxist-Leninist “three bubble model” nor my Euro-centric “four bubble model” of society (see Figures 3 and 4 above) adequately described civil society in Vietnam, nor the complex place occupied by VNGOs. In fact, in all my interviews with Party and government officials, as well as with Vietnamese NGO officers and staff, I never found satisfaction – or even much interest – in these models (no matter how many bubbles were used). On occasion, if the person I was talking to had had some academic training in the West, we could discuss these models academically. But in virtually every case my informant would change the direction of the conversation with a remark something like, “But in Vietnam things don’t really work that way.” Then the discussion would inevitably shift from “the way things *are*” – embodied in models and expressed through nouns – to “the way things *work* (in Vietnam)” – embodied in anecdotes and expressed through verbs.

In fact it was these linguistic shifts, coupled with the limited utility of the structural “bubble” models of civil society, which convinced me I needed another approach. If Vietnamese are talking about civil society-like ideas (the term itself is rarely or never used) through anecdotes and actions, perhaps that is a better way to

approach the problem. Subsequent reading and discussions with scholars<sup>20</sup> revealed that a small number of academic writers (e.g., Cheek, 1998; Uphoff and Krishna, 2004; Fowler, 1996; and Wischermann 2004), are beginning to move toward a more “process-based” way of discussing civil society. I was not alone in finding that a “structural” approach – i.e., defining civil society through specific forms of autonomous associations and other social institutions – is difficult to use in empirical research; such structures predicted by civil society theory are typically poorly defined, or, if carefully defined, represented only limited aspects of the debate, and may or may not correspond to actual entities in Vietnamese society. A process approach, on the other hand, tends to open up the possibilities for understanding complicated state-society interactions that a structural approach tended to miss.

Academic writings on civil-society-as-process are particularly notable in research done on non-Western societies, where the application of idealized categories and definitions – based as they are on Western Euro-American ideas of state and society and on historical models from Western experience – does not give an accurate representation of non-Western society. Clearly, in my discussion with Mr. Cong I was hindered by my own point of departure, the “Four Bubble Model.” Although Mr. Cong and I came to a fundamental agreement that civil society was a real thing, with real social and policy implications for modern Vietnam undergoing the *đổi mới*

---

<sup>20</sup> I was fortunate to have extensive discussions with both Dr. Timothy Cheek and Dr. Joerg Wischermann, both of whom I met while conducting fieldwork in Vietnam. These discussions particularly influenced my shift to this new approach.

reforms, we couldn't, at that time and in that place, agree to a definition. The theory was not traveling well.

***Civil Society Is What Civil Society Does***

As I alluded to above, there is a growing discontent with civil society theory is evident among certain scholars: discontent with the ideas and underlying assumptions of what constitutes civil society, what structures are or should be considered parts of it, and its role(s) in society and politics. Interestingly, this discontent, manifesting itself in attempts to rework the idea and to extend the theory, is most evident in scholarship of non-Western societies, particularly in Asia and in the Third World. For many scholars of non-Western countries – not to mention non-Western scholars – the Western liberal foundations of civil society theory are less attractive and are less likely borne out by empirical observation, than might be the case in Europe or the US.

Perhaps the most recent and most promising approach to re-working civil society theory attempts to define particular *roles* and state-society *inter-relationships* that produce civil-society outcomes, what I refer to as the “processes” of civil society. This outlook refutes the spatial metaphor of civil society as a “separate realm,” conceiving it rather as a set of activities and behaviors. It avoids simplistic categorizing of organizations as “part of” or “not part of” civil society; these categorizations often do not seem to apply in non-Western (particularly Third World) contexts where organizations such as “voluntary groups,” and “independent associations” are not as easily recognizable and often lack the prerequisite “autonomy”

from the state required in most current civil society debates.<sup>21</sup> The process approach inherently accepts the “messiness” of the world, and the difficulty in drawing hard and fast boundaries, particularly between “state” and “society.”

Uphoff and Krishna (2004) are among the advocates for this reconceptualization of civil society. If we are to recognize the roles and relationships that constitute civil society behavior, they propose looking beyond “autonomous organizations and into the state itself” for civil society processes. They write:

Civil society functions - articulating citizens' interests and demands, defending their rights and meeting their needs - can be performed by a variety of institutions and organisations, not all of which are or need to be detached from the government... [Civil Society] can be better conceived ... when [it] is understood not as an entity—what it is or what it might be—but rather in terms of *what can be accomplished* through some combination of institutional channels with historical and cultural supports on behalf of society’s members (p. 375, emphasis added).

Wischermann has written several items on civil society (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005), most based on his extensive fieldwork in Vietnam in 1999-2000. His theoretical position, informed greatly by his experiences in Vietnam, is based in part on Uphoff and Krishna’s work as well as on the theorization of the German research project called “Civil Society from the Perspective of Historical Social Sciences” at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB).<sup>22</sup> He is one of the strongest advocates for this approach to civil society, largely because it can reduce Euro-American-

---

<sup>21</sup> Chapter 5 will look at the issue of autonomy in some depth.

<sup>22</sup> The Researchers at WZB have so far published exclusively in German. I rely upon Wischermann’s descriptions of their work.

centrism in studying civil society in non-Western contexts. He rejects most Western scholars' definitions and nomenclatures for civil society, arguing that

“A normatively founded ‘ideal typus’ of civil society more often than not leads to essentialist, Western-oriented value-based notions of civil society compared to which Southern societies and Southern civil societies appear to be ‘not yet’ developed or at least ‘less developed’” (Wischermann, 2005, p. 219).

Instead he calls for an examination of civil society based on Gosewinkel and Rucht's framework of a "logic of actions" rather than a "logic of domains" (quoted in Wischermann, 2005, p. 221).

Similarly, Mutz (unpublished conference documents, 2003) and his fellow researchers from the Munich Institute of Social Sciences have begun studies of civil society in Southeast Asia, taking what they call an “action-oriented approach” – i.e., looking at the actions and activities of civil society – rather than a “topographic approach” – i.e., describing civil society social structures. Civil society activities take place in all different social circumstances:

In our opinion civil society is not solely to be understood as a place beyond market and state, but rather as the incorporation of a certain attitude towards society which is equally relevant in all sectors of society.<sup>23</sup> (no page number)

In other words, civil society is not only found in “intermediate organizations,” but may be identified through activities and processes in state organs and in markets as well.

Fowler (1996) agrees: "A common method for disaggregating a country in the hunt for

---

<sup>23</sup> Unpublished conference materials, “Civil Society in Southeast Asia: Roles and Concepts” (June 7-8, 2004, Phnom Penh, Cambodia). The Munich Institute is compiling an edited volume on civil society in Southeast Asia using the “action-oriented approach,” based in part on work begun at this conference.



civil society is to analyze how fundamental political, economic, and social functions are allocated” (p. 19). I disagree that this is a “common” approach – I want to make the case that it should be *more* common – but I agree that paying attention to these “functions” and processes allows us to see forms of civil society we might overlook if we concentrate solely on institutions and organizations.

These writings offer an alternative to describing civil society in Vietnam based on a structural approach and a set of spatial metaphors. Following Uphoff, Krishna, Wischermann, Mutz, and others, therefore, I prefer to look at actions and activities – the processes – that embody and promote civil society interests, rather than pre-determining which groups or organizations are to be included in and excluded from civil society.

### ***Civil Society as a Continuum of Activities***

Moving from the idea that civil society is embodied in activities, it makes sense to try to understand these activities and how they correspond to specific state-society relations. Krishna and Uphoff (2004, p. 371) conclude that civil society is spectrum of relationships between state institutions and individuals. This spectrum of relationships covers a wide range of activities, ranging from activities in support of state policies such as the provision of social services (what Brown, 1997, calls “shadow state” activities), to open demonstrations and public resistance to the regime.

Placed on a continuum of possible activities, the roles that are attributed to civil society may look something like Figure 6, below. (See also Hannah, 2005, p. 106.)<sup>24</sup>

This continuum is useful in a context such as Vietnam where different forms of organizations undertake different roles or processes of civil society. For instance,

Heng (2004) has

written on Vietnam's state-run media's role as a social watchdog, contrary to assertions that such a function must be undertaken by an independent press.

This form of civil society activity,

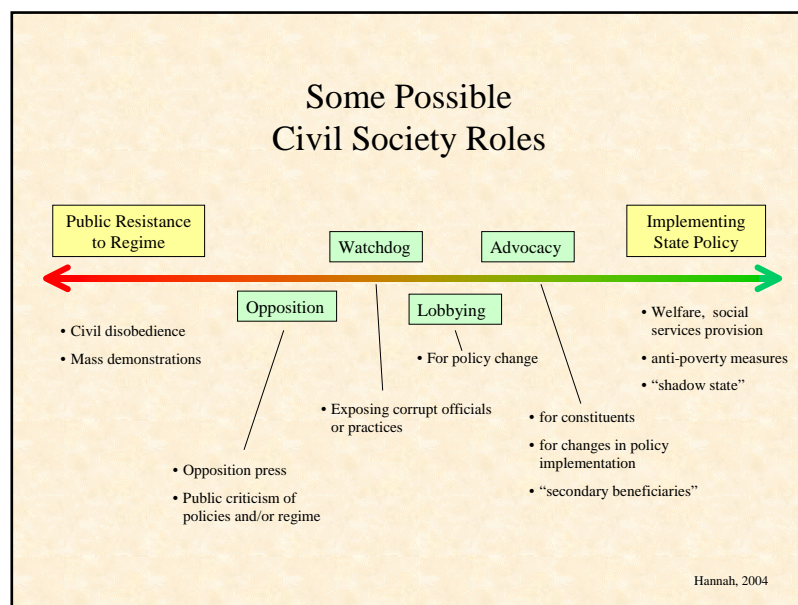
undertaken by a less-

than-autonomous organization, can be included on this continuum, where it would

typically be excluded by a structural approach to defining civil society. My work is

with relatively autonomous organizations that nonetheless seem to cluster at the right

end of this continuum, implementing state policy. Such examples would be easily



**Figure 6:** Continuum of Civil Society Roles

<sup>24</sup> Though I developed this continuum before reading his work, Fowler (1996, p. 24) also uses a similar approach in describing civil society functions and organizations. He adds a second continuum for relative autonomy from the state, allowing for a 2-dimensional, 4-quadrant characterization of civil society.

missed using a structural description of civil society, but the “logic of action” and a continuum of civil society roles allows us to put such activities in perspective with each other. I will return to this continuum in later chapters.

### ***A New Approach to Research Methodology***

Working from the framework that defines civil society as a realm of activity opens new doors to examine state-society relations. We no longer need to exclude certain organizations or associations from our study because of their constitution or their ties with the state. Rather, by focusing on processes of civil society first, and then on who within society undertakes those processes, we can broaden our perspective on state-society relations. Each “action” implies, denotes, and embodies a *relationship* with the state.

Studies that key in on processes rather than structures of civil society will be rewarded with a richness and nuance that this alternative approach can reveal. Research methods, therefore, need to shift from looking for a sector of autonomous organizations in a society to looking at who within a society/state constellation is undertaking which civil society activities and who is accomplishing which civil society objectives. In addition, I would also argue that such a change in methodology would necessitate that the social actors themselves define which state-society relationships and activities are important, rather than have such normative categories imposed on them by (us) outside researchers.

### *Acknowledging Normativity*

At this point I must acknowledge that refocusing our attention from what civil society *is* to what it *does*, while opening up a large and potentially rewarding area for research, does not eliminate all our theoretical problems. Just as there is no consensus about the definition of civil society, there is also no consensus about what actions or objectives civil society should or must embrace. Wischermann (2005) makes this clear when he writes:

In my view such an approach is attractive, but leaves the problem of how to discern, justify, and substantiate the sets of functions mentioned above unresolved. Thus, the theoretical problems are just moved to a different level, but not solved (p. 209).

This issue is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but is fundamental to the ideas I am trying to address. In short, the definitions of what to include and exclude as being part of civil society are inherently normative. These definitions express the aspirations as well as the fundamental philosophies of particular actors within societies. In my research I am not interested in creating definitions and thereby promoting a particular set of norms. Rather I hope to engage in research that “does not presuppose the validity of certain values and norms, but *asks whether or not and to what extent such values and norms are constitutive for and relevant to the actors’ practices*” (Wischermann, 2005, p. 219, emphasis in original). As such, I believe that what constitutes civil society practice must be defined by the members of the societies that we study, rather than by us as researchers.

## **Conclusion**

The tangled history of the idea of civil society had led to the modern adoption and deployment of the concept by a wide range of actors for an equally wide range of interests. However, in practice, the long and complex history behind the concept of civil society is very often submerged or obscured by the use of the term.

Reconceptualizing civil society as a realm of social action and process helps us move beyond some of the more difficult, Eurocentric problems we encounter. However, such a reconceptualization does not remove the normative issues involved; it merely displaces them.

In the following chapters I will look at Vietnamese local NGOs in the context of a development discourse based in part on the (undefined) concept of civil society and an authoritarian state that is partially successful in resisting this discourse. My encounters with Vietnamese NGOs revealed the nature of the international support for civil society, the means the Vietnamese state uses to resist and reshape the concept, and the efforts of VNGOs to survive in this unstable political environment.