

# CIVIL SOCIETY

by Sir Ralf Dahrendorf



*It is often assumed that in the revolution of 1989 in Eastern Europe ideas travelled from West to East*

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Sir Ralf has had a longstanding interest in citizenship in civil society which received added stimulus from the events in Eastern Europe on which he published his book, "Reflections on the Revolution in Europe". He said, "Common Purpose is an excellent example of civil society in action".

It is often assumed these days, by implication or in so many words, that in the revolution of 1989 in Eastern Europe ideas essentially travelled from West to East; that the new democracies of East Central Europe, and perhaps of South Eastern and Eastern Europe, have borrowed the main concepts on which revolutionaries, and those who have followed them, are trying to fashion their societies. Reference is made in particular to the notion of political democracy itself, the set of institutions devised not only to put governments in place but also to ensure that it is possible to get rid of them, if that is the wish of the people. The other is the notion of the market economy, of an economic structure which responds to demand, and is not developed from some central notion of what is good for others.

While there is some truth in this general assumption, one concept has travelled the other way; the concept of civil society.

Civil societies, to be sure, were not invented in East Central Europe in 1989 and 1990; but the concept has returned to the place from which it may have emerged, in 17th and 18th century political thought, with a new intensity and a fuller meaning than before.

## ■ Havel

Since 1989 a number of authors in Eastern Europe have written about the subject: Adam Michnik in Poland, Elmer Hankiss in Hungary, Zhelyu Zhelev in Bulgaria. But in this, as so many respects, no one has found better words to describe what people had in mind than Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia. I will begin by quoting from a lecture he gave in October 1991 at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania when he received an Honorary Doctorate. It is, in my opinion, a profound text from an occasion of particular significance to him

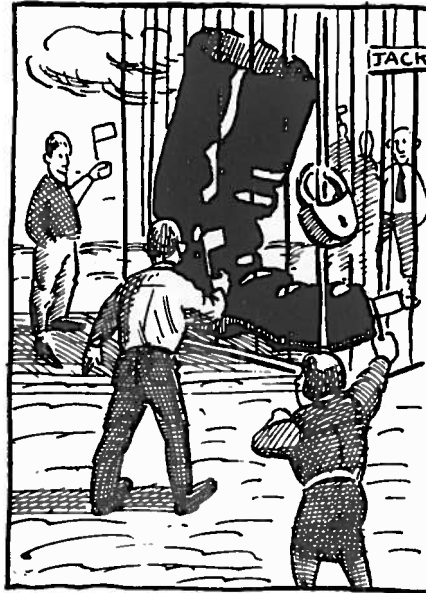
as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania is an area in which a large number of Czech immigrants have settled with their families; so it is appropriate that the New York Review of Books should have published this lecture under the title "On Home". I quote:

"I am in favour of a political system based on the citizen and recognising all his fundamental, civil and human rights in their universal validity and equally applied. In other words, I am in favour of what is called a civil society. A civil society based on the universality of human rights best enables us to realise ourselves as everything we are, not only members of our families, our community, our region, our church, our professional association, our political party, our country, our supranational communities. And to be all of this because society treats us chiefly as members of the human race, that is as people, as particular human beings whose individuality finds its primary, most natural and, at the same time, most universal expression in our status as citizens, in citizenship in the broadest and deepest sense of the word."

### ■ Monopolistic Structures

As I said, I believe this is rather a profound statement, and I hope to demonstrate this in my remarks. It is quite clear, without much analysis, that civil society in this sense, for a man like Havel and for Michnik and Mankiss and Zhelev and many others is, in the first instance, the counterpoint to monopolistic structures. I use the words "monopolistic structures" because I think we should be precise in our language. I am not just referring to totalitarianism in the strict sense of the term, as it applies, above all, to Nazi Germany between 1935 and 1945, and to Stalin's Soviet Union for a number of years. If one looks at totalitarian regimes it is quite clear that these have a massive interest in

destroying civil society: and it is precisely the institutions and organisations to which Havel alludes that have a built-in resistance to the claims of totalitarian power.



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But even monopolistic structures such as those of socialism in the Brezhnev era find civil society a disturbing obstacle to the exercise of power by a nomenclature of rulers. Why is this so? It is so because civil society represents independent sources of "power" in the widest sense of the word; independent patterns of social organisation which by their very nature cannot be controlled from one central place.

### ■ Systematic Destruction

The history of totalitarianism could be written as the history of the systematic destruction of the elements of civil society. Certainly, even in the early period of Nazi Germany all organisations which were not controllable from a central place were at risk, starting with the obvious ones, such as political parties and trade unions and going on to those which were less obvious but highly

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visible - churches - and then many, many others, some of which may seem surprising. People have often wondered why Nazi rulers turned against the traditional army; why they turned, for example, against traditional student corporations with their Right Wing tradition; why they turned against the remnants of the aristocracy, and the answer is that all these were independent foci of social organisation which by their very nature resisted the construction of a centralised and monopolistic power system.

The battle against civil society has succeeded unevenly in the different countries of East Central Europe after the last war, and I think the extent to which it did or did not succeed is likely to tell us something about the chances which these countries have of developing a lasting infrastructure of liberty now they have broken out of the straitjacket of monopolistic power. In this respect Romania is probably in the worst position, and Poland in a relatively good one: the mixed Fascist/Communist regime of Ceaucescu has gone out of its way to destroy all remnants of independent social organisation, whereas in Poland the Church and, later on, Solidarnosc as a movement have produced models of social organisation which were not easily controllable from the centre and which were, in fact, at no time controlled by the Communist Party and the nomenclature.

#### ■ Conscious Organisation

What makes up civil society? If you go into the history of the concept - and I will mention two names before giving a more contemporary definition - it is worth reading the chapter entitled "Civil Society" in John Locke's Second Treatise on Government. He says the following about human social relations: "Civil society begins beyond the merely factual relations between people, the

crude exercise of power" - for example by physical violence - and what he tends to call natural formations, such as the family. "Civil society begins where there is a degree of conscious organisation."

Civil society in Locke's terms is not just another word for "society". It describes rather forms of association which involve norms and institutions to uphold norms. This involves the old debate as to whether there is any association without domination. The dream that we should be able to create associations which do not involve domination is time-honoured. My own view is that although the dream itself is utopian it has an element which is critical to understanding civil society as a form of organisation apart from the State.

#### ■ Plurality, Autonomy, Civility

Let me start with the word "apart" and what I mean by it: there are associations which do not imply or require of necessity the political organisation of the state. In this context it is worth reading James Madison, one of the three authors of the Federalist papers. Madison was, above all, concerned about the way in which people could be enslaved by others, not only by governments but also by oppressive majorities. "Ultimately", he wrote, "only civil society can help us". Why? Because, according to that tradition of thought, association in civil societies has three critical characteristics, which I will call plurality, autonomy, civility.

Plurality, first of all; civil society means that there is never just one association without competition in any given field. Having mentioned Poland a moment ago, it is one of the problems of Poland after the end of a monopolistic socialist rule because now the Church is without competition, as it were, in the Polish context. (The subject of the changing face of the church in the Polish scheme of things after the processes of 1989/

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1990 really requires a separate, and much longer, discussion.) A single state church, like any other single association or organisation, is incompatible with the notion of civil society, and plurality of associations and organisations is part of the concept itself.

Autonomy, a big word; in this context I mean that associations/organisations live, in the widest sense, by their own resources, that they are not the creatures of government. The need for autonomy has generated the biggest problems to civil society in many parts of the world - certainly in the whole of continental Europe where, more often than not, associations and organisations had to fight for their autonomy because they began as creatures of the State. The struggle of Universities for autonomy is a prime example of this.

Civility; I speak with a certain amount of diffidence here because it is a comment on people's behaviour, on people's attitudes. Civil, civilized - these are very important values and yet much harder to describe in institutional terms.

Nevertheless, an important feature of civil society is civic sense, civic pride; the readiness on the part of people to make use of their opportunities for association in a plurality of organisations which are autonomous, and through which people can behave in a civilized manner.

## ■ Entitlements

This is one half of the definition of civil society but there is another half which Havel emphasised - it is not only individuals who are the elements of civil society, but individuals as citizens, equipped with a set of entitlements or rights which are common to all members of society. In another context, I have argued that perhaps the single greatest advance to have taken place in modern societies in the last 200 years is the extension of this notion of citizenship to

more and more people, at least within some societies, and to an ever-growing area of social participation from the civil through the political to the social sphere. So civil society as I understand it, and as Havel understands it, is a society in which citizens can form associations among which there is competition, of which there are a plurality, which are autonomous and which encourage and require civil, civilized behaviour.



From this point one could take the argument in a great many directions. I will confine myself to a brief comment about civil society and the state and one slightly longer comment on perhaps the most burning issue of the present day and this is on "home" - on the relationship between civil society, democracy and people's sense of belonging.

First, a brief word about civil society and the state. I said that monopolistic states must almost by definition, and certainly by virtue of their ruling groups, fight autonomous associations as independent sources of power. It is therefore understandable, certainly in the new democracies of East Central Europe, that people on the whole see

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civil societies as having been a source of opposition to the government; first of dissidence, then of hostility and finally of a positive battle against it.

It is more difficult to define the precise significance of civil society once the state is organised in a democratic manner, and many mistakes are made by those who talk about this subject. There is a tendency, at any rate in the older democracies, to believe that civil society is under all circumstances an instrument of opposition to government, and that one has to see civil society, whatever happens, as the answer to the "structural violence" or the fundamental imposition on liberty represented by all conditions of power. I believe this is misleading but can also see, as we all can, how difficult our fellow-Europeans in the new democracies find it to come to terms with their civil societies now that their governments are no longer, as it were, the enemy.



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#### ■ Associations

In my view we misunderstand civil society quite fundamentally if we believe that it is primarily an instrument for fighting governments. In a free country, civil society is the world in which people

spend the major portion of their lives - which is what I meant when I said earlier that it was apart from government, apart from the state. In a free country, in other words, it is the associations and organisations, and, to some extent, institutions in which we live which engage our interest, and our feelings and emotions. They do not require government at any point other than as a guarantor of citizenship rights. As far as the associations are concerned, they are a world in themselves, the world of the free society. If one looks at civil society as I do then political participation in the narrow sense ceases to be as important as many teachers of civics, quite naturally, think, because political participation is only one of the many forms of participation in the opportunities offered by the world in which we live.

To extend the subject a little, I regard small and medium-size businesses as a part of civil society. Now small and medium-size businesses should not need government except for certain framework conditions and, as a rule, should not have any dealings with government and should not encounter it. I wish I could say the same thing for universities and institutions of higher learning: if they encounter government all the time there is something wrong with the vigour and strength of civil society and opposition is needed.

#### ■ Creative Chaos

The point cannot be made too forcefully or too often: life in a free country is not primarily about politics, indeed most of the time politics will not enter it at all, it is rather about the creative chaos of civil society with its associations and organisations.

Civil society is also in an important sense "home". I have called this the most burning issue of the day, because we experience in Europe today - in post-

communist Europe above all, but in the more fortunate parts as well - a resurgence of tribalism and fundamentalism which provide a threat to open societies. There are reasons for this resurgence. The Cold War, and even nomenclature rule, provided a framework which made it easy for people to define their place. Now that these coordinates of life are gone, people have lost their bearings. It does not help that all modern societies have tended to destroy old linkages and emphasized individual interests. There is a built-in tendency towards anomy in the modern world. Another Czech writer put it well: "In the bad old days nothing was permitted but everything mattered; now everything is permitted but nothing seems to matter any more".

This is the open flank of democracy and the market economy. Both are splendid mechanisms for coping with human error. They minimize the cost of error. But they do not give people a sense of belonging. Democracy or the market economy by themselves do not make people feel at home.

## ■ A Sense of Belonging

So what does? And to complicate the question further: what agencies or forces can give people a sense of belonging without destroying the principles of the open society? How can we be free and at home as well? There is no simple answer, though Vaclav Havel, in the quotation with which I started, came close to one. He referred to the groups and organisations to which we belong as a series of concentric circles around the individual. Citizenship defines the individual equipped with certain basic rights: but civil society defines the world of belonging. It creates bonds and ties - I have called them, ligatures - which give meaning to what we do. At the same time, it is fully compatible with democracy and the market economy.

This is why ultimately no task is more important in the new democracies than the building of civil societies. We can all contribute by helping sustain publishers and research institutes, foundations and voluntary organizations, public-interest groups, small businesses and a panoply of non-governmental agencies.



*A series of concentric circles around the individual*

This will take a long time; it will involve as many failures as successes; but it is crucial. Nor should we be complacent about civil society at home. Our East European neighbours know how important it is to have a plurality of autonomous associations: but we have taken this for granted. Indeed, in the 1980s there was a tendency on the part of government to clamp down on civil society "There is no such thing as society, there are only individuals, and families" - which had unfortunate consequences. We can do worse than follow the lead of those who have rediscovered the open society recently and stimulate associations which offer a sense of belonging as well as the lifeblood of liberty.

*Our thanks to Sir Ralf Dahrendorf*

*What agencies or forces can give people a sense of belonging?*