

Re-engaging the citizen in post modern times: A look at different terms and approaches

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"Few questions more clearly preoccupy our age than how to facilitate civil, free and democratic interaction among the citizens of plural societies " (Hefner, 1998:1)

In the bleakest interpretation of current social trends, we can read of an isolated citizenry, the loss of community and the caring tradition and questions about any notion of shared communality. An examination of some of the current social trends in the world today has fostered an increasing insecurity. Fundamentalists and far-right politicians have exploited this insecurity with the promise of certainty. Others in public life have encouraged a nostalgia towards the past, traditional politics and traditional values, promising a return to "the good old days" (see Cox, 1995; Latham, 1998). These trends have also created a renewed interest in civil society and many concepts of citizen engagement. In this essay, I will consider a range of current discussions around encouraging a greater role for citizens within democracy.

Renewing civil society

Civil society is generally used to apply to that sphere of society in which we are participating through voluntary choice. Society is commonly seen to have three spheres of activity: the state or government, the markets or business, and civil society which includes voluntary groups and associations, a free press, religious institutions and family (Cohen and Arato, 1992). The politics of 'a third way' relies heavily on the concept of a strong civil society, which promotes mutuality, good will and community connection. Yet the concept of civil society has a long and colourful history (based on Alexander, 1998a; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Keane, 1988b; Seligman, 1993).

The idea of civil society can be traced back to Aristotle, but in 1690, the philosopher John Locke used the idea of civil society to indicate a universal social order in which all men [sic] were equal and autonomous within the bounds of the law. At this time civil society and the state were considered to be one and the same.

During the 18th century civil society began to be conceived as separate from the state and various writers explored the relationship between government and its citizens through civil society. It was the sociologist, Alexis de Tocqueville, who identified the role of civil society "as an independent eye of society" (in Keane, 1988: 61). Tocqueville noted the many civil associations and organisations operating in 19th Century America and he considered that these provided an avenue for involvement in the wider community and played a critical role in educating citizens in the ways of democracy.

At this stage civil society included not only voluntary organisations and associations and the media but also the capitalist market including firms, banks and business associations. In fact writers like Marx saw civil society in a totally negative sense. For him civil society represented the domination of capitalism over the working classes and was no more than goods and markets for goods. It was a place in which the individual "treats other men as means, degrades himself to a means and becomes the plaything of alien powers" (Marx in Tester, 1992: 17).

In more recent writing a range of models for civil society has been discussed. For some writers civil society includes all those activities for "the sake of family, faith, interest or ideology" separate from the state and the market (Walzer, 1992: 89), for some it includes the "unhindered market with its... goods and services" (Giner, 1995: 305), while others argue that civil society is only one



sphere of activity outside of the state, the market, the family, religion and science (Alexander, 1998a). Yet Calhoun (1994b) and Evers (1995) point out that small scale economic activity and business associations play an important role in promoting a civil society and should not be left out.

Even those who would see civil society as having clearly a separate role to play from the market and state have differing ideas about its role. Foley and Edwards (1996) note two very different, yet somewhat contradictory roles for civil society. In the first version of civil society, social capital is generated and democracy is enhanced, as people learn to work together and develop a level of trust. The role of civil society is to enhance and support the work of government. The alternative view of civil society has been provided through examining the role of associations and people's movements in the collapse of European communism. These groups have shown that civil society can play a significant part in resistance and political change and can act to bring down government.

Perhaps, as Tester (1992) and Seligman (1993) argue, the reason it is so difficult to gain a clear definition is that civil society is best understood as an ideal. Traditionally, it was concerned with the way humans should live in harmony together and advocated a social order based on civility and a particular moral code. More recently it has been used as a shorthand for ideas about inclusion, the power of ordinary people to get together to change things in their community, of individual autonomy and social justice, and of the power of society over the state or the markets (Hefner, 1998; Keane, 1988a).

What is central to all these models of civil society is the set of voluntary associations, organisations, informal networks and social movements through which people meet by choice. These associations are the heart and the institutional core of civil society (Habermas, 1992a: 453) and those who volunteer sustain these institutions. All the concepts of greater citizen engagement revolve around an active civil society. Let us examine some of these concepts.

Active citizenship

In 1949, T.H Marshall delivered his extremely influential lecture on citizenship and social class, in which he identified three forms of rights within citizenship: civil, political and social. Civil rights were those relating to individual freedom such as personal liberty and justice, while political rights were the right to participate in the political process. Social rights were the right of economic and social security (in Rees, 1996; van Steenbergern, 1994).

Since that time, the idea of modern citizenship as the full participation of individuals within the community has continued to develop. Within that discussion has been a recognition that to achieve this for all people will mean addressing issues of inclusion and social disadvantage so that everyone may be able to fully participate and have a deal of autonomy in controlling their own lives (Jayasuriya, 1996).

Active citizenship suggests that individuals not only have a set of rights and entitlements but have a responsibility to contribute back to and participate in society. During the 1990s, governments across the political spectrum have encouraged the concept of "active" citizenship. Policy makers have encouraged or required people to participate through public work, community service during schooling and particularly volunteering (Boyte et. al, 1993; Chanan, 1997; Sheard, 1992). Governments have also used the idea of active citizenship to justify a range of mutual obligation approaches as part of welfare reform. This requires those who receive benefits to provide service back to the community.

Yet the concept of active citizenship is broader than mutual obligation. The act of meaningful participation in the life of community is not only to achieve results or pay back the community but simply as a good in itself (Clarke, 1996; D'Entrevres, 1992). Active citizens are engaged in building



and developing their society through their involvement in a range of networks and associations occurring within civil society. They are involved in the act of deliberation about the issues which impact on their lives and they attempt to influence the decisions of governments and policy makers.

Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is a term "of recent origin which has been devised to focus attention on the importance to effective democracy of fair and open community deliberation about the merits of competing political arguments" (Uhr, 1998: 4). Deliberation involves broad public discussion around issues of importance for the community.

In the ideal world, deliberation would mean that issues of public importance are rationally discussed and all who are effected by the decision have the opportunity to take part. These discussions would be free from any type of coercion from either external or internal forces and lead ideally to an understanding and consensus of what is in the "public good" (Benhabib, 1996; Habermas, 1996).

Such an approach has the potential to:

- inform and involve people in community issues
- encourage critical reflection about these issues
- facilitate political debate
- encourage tolerance and
- assist people to work through conflict and disagreement toward consensus.

(Benhabib, 1996; Giddens, 1996; Uhr, 1998).

Uhr (1998) has suggested that in our current multicultural society deliberative democracy may not always produce right solutions or consensus, but it does encourage participation and promotes much greater political debate. In practical terms, civil society provides a range of public spaces and places for such deliberation. Voluntary organisations, associations and networks already provide forums for discussion, input and deliberation, although there may not be effective processes to ensure these ideas are incorporated into social policy making process. As we work together and discuss issues we build social capital.

Building social capital

There is an increasing acknowledgment that in addition to focusing on financial, physical and human capital, societies must also focus on social capital. "Social capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit" (Cox, 1995: 15). It is argued that in communities with high social capital, people are more inclined to act with and trust others, even those they don't know personally. In modern, diverse and complex democracies, governments must rely on this type of public trust to govern and be effective. While expressing their concerns about declining social capital, Putnam (1995) and Cox (1995) are clear that we need to avoid romanticising the loss of the tight-knit community or the traditional family.

While many people develop their networks and connections through the paid workforce, for those who are excluded, through disability, unemployment or other circumstances, civil society is important. This is made more critical in a society which places high value on a person's role within the paid workforce. Associations, neighbour groups and voluntary organisations provide an avenue



for those who are excluded to have a voice, be fully active and be valued (Alexander, 1998: 10). Civil society provides the opportunity to develop networks, develop social trust and develop public work.

Public work

Boyte and Kari (1996) have argued that to build social capital and address the issues of community, much of what is required will be public work. This is the work of ordinary people who work together on a range of projects which build, sustain or rebuild their communities. Public work "solves common problems and creates common things" (3).

The authors argue that the process of deliberation and discussion can often lead to further disputes and divisions as people seek consensus while having different values and frameworks. Public work provides chances to meet, work and talk with people with very different values and life experiences. Working together on public work projects "allows groups to put aside divisions for the sake of combined effort toward common ends... [with its] pragmatic, problem-solving dimensions that bring people together" (Boyte and Kari, 1996: 12). It occurs within civil society and assists the community to build its own capacity.

Community capacity building

The work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1987, 1993) on community capacity building has generated enormous interest from both those working in community and in government. These writers have argued that in response to community problems, there has been a focus on the needs of the community rather than on the capacity of the community to solve those problems. This has led to a costly service-oriented environment, creating clients out of citizens and setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy of social exclusion and client neighbourhoods.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have argued for a capacity-focused approach which concentrates on identifying the assets of a community in the form of individuals, associations and institutions, and then regenerating community through developing these capacities "into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control and new possibilities for production". The role of government in community capacity building is to assist in facilitating and resourcing this process so that government is not working from a top down approach, but operating in partnership with civil society (see Cavaye, 2000).

We have examined a range of theoretical concepts relating to how to engage citizens in the post-modern era. All of these concepts revolve around a vibrant and engaged civil society. In such a civil society people are active citizens, they deliberate on issues, they develop the capacity of their communities, build social capital and engage in public work.

