

# Too good to be true? Six dangerous assumptions of a civil society solution

By *Mark Creyton*

"Objection, evasion, happy distrust, pleasure in mockery are signs of health, everything unconditional belongs in pathology" (Nietzsche, *yr*, p. 154, *Beyond Good and Evil*).

While we may not wish to go as far as Nietzsche in his promotion of a critical, perhaps scornful attitude, the concepts and theories around citizen participation do require careful and particular attention. Why such caution?

Terms such as citizenship, civil society and social capital are now commonly used terms by politicians, academics and civic and business leaders, yet the terms are used in such a broad range of contexts and usages that they sometimes conceal opposite points of view. Active citizenship and a third way politics have been used by a range of political parties, with very different policy implications. There is also confusion as to whether these civil society discussions refer to an ideal (normative) view of civil society or to a practical definition.

These terms are used to avoid the more difficult questions around the tension between individual and community interests, between the conflicting interests of different social groups and the role of political action (Foley and Edward, 1997; Hefner, 1998; Seligman, 1993). In political discourses these concepts are often simplified. What is often concealed is the importance of power and the challenging realities of inequality and how this impacts on the competing need for resources.

Civil society is suggested as a panacea for all sorts of community problems. A quick search of the literature indicates it can revitalise traditional family structures, radicalise democracy, encourage corporate philanthropy, promote individual business enterprise, end social isolation, eliminate the tensions of a pluralist society and reduce greenhouse emission. It is difficult to imagine that civil society can do all this... or at least all at once! In line with this, citizen participation is often considered as a form of involvement in which only good things can happen. Many have taken on a distinctly moral and at times evangelical tone in speaking of the virtues of civil society and volunteering.

Philosophies and ideas of citizen participation revolve around our very fundamental conceptions of who we are. They invoke questions concerning the individual's rights and responsibilities within society, the benefits and restrictions of community and questions of how can we live together in pluralistic society. Civic engagement is often proposed as a single solution or ultimate answer to what are complex issues. Too often there is an unconditional element which suggests that this approach will solve all our problems.

Let us examine six common underlying assumptions in the work of many who stress the value of civil society. My aim is to demonstrate that each of these assumptions is at best a little too simplistic and at worst distorts or manipulates the truth.

## 1. Civil society is a place in which citizens work together toward a common good for all society

Many of the actions which occur in civil society, as in other spheres of our society, do not benefit all society. Many non-profit agencies have encouraged models of paternalism and stressed conservative values while others work exclusively for the benefit of their members without



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considering the broader social context or impact of their work. Voluntary activity has often been encouraged as helping the "less fortunate" and encouraged dependent, disempowering relationships.

We need to acknowledge the dark side of civil society. The Klu Klux Klan, cults and groups which promote violence and racism also operate within civil society. Hitler's rise to power during the Weimar Republic, was at a time of a very active civil society within Germany. At a less obvious level many organisations can be authoritarian, community work can be dull and monotonous, access to decision making, debate and deliberation within such organisations can be nonexistent. Many questions remain about the role of associations in promoting trust and community values (see Rosenblum, 1999 and Keane, 1988a).

There are also doubts about the very possibility of reaching agreement on a common good. Different groups in society may well have fundamentally disparate views on certain issues, and we may have to recognise and accept that there are areas of conflict and disagreement. Groups which have opposing visions and aims such as pro-life and abortion rights groups and the pro and anti gun lobby operate in the same civil society. Deliberation may well be more about determining and further developing the views and interests of different groups than coming to a decision about the common good (Fraser, 1992; Uhr 1998).

We may need to see a truly active civil society as a "multicultural cacophony" (Walzer, 1997: 104) reflecting the vast interests and needs of diverse groups of people.

## **2. Engagement in civil society is driven by altruism and devoid of individual self-interest**

Research into the motives for involvement in volunteering and civil society consistently indicates a range of reasons why people become involved and why they stay involved (see Baldock, 1990, 1998; Bates, 1999; Rochester, 1999; Yates and Youniss, 1999). While altruism, the desire to make a difference, feelings of solidarity and moral purpose are common motivations, equally, there are aims for personal development, self-interest, enhancement of employment prospects and social interest.

Civil society involves a vast spectrum of organisations whose primary function is to service individual interests. A prime example is the self-help movement experiencing a rapid increase in numbers during the past thirty years. A significant proportion of groups are formed around mental or physical health issues or substance abuse problems, although there is a vast diversity of issues. While a proportion of these groups engages in political action, coalition building and community education, many groups are formed to provide support for members. These groups may in fact limit broader community participation, and encourage members to focus on themselves rather than the broader community (Wasserman, 1999).

In a similar vein, civil society is often portrayed as closest to the qualities of a family or a small town with its mutual caring, solidarity and care for others. Yet for many people families are rather the places in which they learn about "power and hierarchy, and sometimes, violence and fear" (Cox, 1995: 32). While small towns and communities may offer tight social networks, neighbourliness and personal connections, they can also be rigid, conventional and intolerant to difference (Barber, 1999; Putnam, 1995). There is often a romanticising of community and family life and a demonising of institutional or business life in many of the theories concerning civil society.

It is essential to recognise that self-interest and care for others are neither mutually exclusive nor contradictory. For most people there is a commitment to their role within civil society, which is



likely to have both instrumental as well as more noble motivations. Some may begin with self-interest as a key consideration but in connecting with a broader community they discover the benefits of cooperation are greater or they may be willing to forgo their own interests for the greater good (Sullivan, 1999). Many come to realise that their interests and the interests of their families depend on issues which involve a greater range of interests including a safe neighbourhood, a sustainable environment and an active and vibrant community life.

### **3. Civil society is a separate sphere of activity uninfluenced by the outside world**

Civil society is often depicted as a pure realm outside the influences of the rest of society. The history of community involvement shows that the values and approaches taken very much reflect the current trends of the time. The very nature of what is community, what is a just order and who should be included in civil society all reflect historical political discourses (see Arato and Cohen, 1992; Evers, 1995; Habermas, 1987).

The growing professionalisation and bureaucratisation of many organisations within civil society and the impact of economic rationalism and contractualism on changing the roles and rationales of many community organisations are obvious examples. The impact of a contract culture has meant that the role of volunteers has become increasingly structured and specified; there is an increase in supervision and performance review, and a decrease in autonomy and flexibility (Russell and Scott, 1997). The focus in community organisations becomes standardisation, performance measures, good record keeping and efficient systems. In addition to this, organisations and groups become increasingly focused on involving only the most skilled and the most efficient people to achieve the outcomes of the organisation.

Community participation becomes prescriptively defined as people being managed to achieve goals in structured settings. A substantial amount of funding available is accessed by the large non-government organisations through the efficiencies of scale and developing expertise in tendering processes, while many small and diverse community organisations and groups lose out and are overlooked (Murphy, 1996). The vast diversity of citizen participation whether it is formally or informally organised, whether it is as self-help, social action or community development, is unrecognised and unresourced. The elements of civil society which are spoken of so highly - of people being able to participate in their community, of personal empowerment and transformation, of time for deliberation and developing networks, and of engaging in meaningful public work - are overwhelmed by the needs of service provision.

If we are to support an active civil society we need to recognise its complexities, its impact on other spheres and its limitations.

### **4. Civil society is an inclusive public space in which we all have an equal voice**

The history of citizenship, the public sphere and citizen participation is a history of exclusion on the basis of education, gender, class and ethnic background (Fraser, 1992). Alexander (1998b) suggests that there is "no civil discourse that does not conceptualise the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who don't." In defining our rules for membership and who we are, we exclude others. While we may consistently work toward inclusion, we need to recognise the great challenges in this. Primarily we need to recognise the issues of power and inequality.



Ensuring equity and full participation in civil society is not simply about creating an inclusive environment. It also involves creating equal opportunity and full participation in society at large. Proponents of civil society often fail to recognise or accept that there are social, structural and political factors which limit choice and make for unequal life chances. The associations which work to effect change will have different access to government and the policy process depending on a range of factors including power. The promotion of civil society has often been used to disguise issues of social inequality and the need for a greater state involvement (Alexander, 1998a, Cohen, 1998). Effective participation in civil society will require the political power to redistribute resources and to support equal access to work, health care, associational involvement and education (Giddens, 1998; Walzer 1992).

There has been a constant tension between the issues of liberty, equality and tolerance throughout history and civil society will not alone be able to address this tension (Hefner, 1998).

## **5. Being involved in civil society will create citizens who trust each other and government**

Citizen participation is obviously one key element in creating an effective and democratic community. More difficult to answer is what kind of involvement, how much and how should it be organised, if it is to be effective? There appear to be many instances in which participation will not generate social capital, including work in groups or organisations with exclusive membership or with hierarchical structures; where the aim of the organisation is to erode civic trust; or where one works only with those from similar cultural and value backgrounds (Cox, 1995, 1997; Lehning, 1998).

The benefits of social participation appear to require involvement in a broad range of inclusive democratic and autonomous associations (Hadenius and Ugglå, 1998). Yet for many people engagement in civil society is for a few hours a week and in one particular membership setting. Such involvement is a very minor aspect of their lives and it has a particular focus of interest.

Three central questions continue to surround the debates around social capital. Firstly do social networks develop high levels of trust or do high levels of trust generate social networks, or is there no causal relationship at all? (Newton 1997). Secondly is social capital really declining or are the methods by which we generate our social capital changing? Thirdly what are the most appropriate ways for developing social capital? While civil society may be one sphere in which social capital can be developed and enhanced, there are a number of commentators who regard work, schools, government and economic policy as more critical (see Foley and Edwards, 1997). These are serious research questions which challenge any simple assumptions about social capital and civil society.

In addition to this there are serious doubts about the role of social capital in creating effective democracy. Cohen (1998: 5) suggests that the metaphor of social capital allows theorists "to blur the distinctions between at least five very different things: individual trust, general norms of reciprocity, belief in the legitimacy of institutionalised norms, confidence that these will motivate the action of institutional actors and ordinary citizens and the transmission of cultural traditions, patterns and values." As we work together on a community project or in our club, we generate trust for one another and perhaps those connected with the project. The extent to which this trust can be generalised to a point where we have a greater trust in strangers and government is highly questionable.

More pointedly is how does social capital impact on political participation and civic engagement without engaging specifically in political issues? (Foley and Edwards, 1996: 42).



The vast bulk of effective sustainable community change relies on people engaging in political activity. There are many factors which impact on how citizens develop trust in government and institutions. Civil society does appear to play an important part, but not the only part.

## **6. An effective civil society can replace many of the roles of government and other institutions**

Whatever the role of civil society, strong and central government at national and local level is necessary to support it. It "cannot replace effective social policy, it is a prerequisite for, and in part, a consequence of it" (Lehning, 1998: 37). Voluntary agencies and community groups have an important role to play but have clear limitations as well. Voluntary agencies do not have the legitimacy, the resources, or the capacity to replace the fundamental roles of government. The state creates the very conditions and resources which fuel and support civil society.

When governments stress competition, focus on only economic outcomes and curtail services, service provision moves to the voluntary sector. Citizen participation lends itself to being used by those governments focused on economic rationality and control. Furthermore the very communities and social infrastructure required to provide these services are often depleted and worn down in the process of rationalisation.

Government has some essential roles within our society. It provides representation for, and acts as arbiter of, the diverse interests of its citizenry; it regulates the market; it ensures there is a public forum for, and a focus on, questions of public good; it provides a diversity of public goods including collective security and welfare and can utilise legislation, public education and tax policy to encourage opportunity and address structural inequality (see Giddens, 1998; Walzer, 1992). Courts and other public institutions also have essential roles to play in ensuring effective democracy.

