



Beautifully Imperfect: Applying the Western Civil Society Model to Africa

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is to show how theories of civil society may be altered by the inclusion of the case of Africa. In order to have a nuanced understanding of the subject matter, the article first traces the concept to some classical scholars, illustrating its dynamism by presenting postulates on the subject matter, and operationalizing it for discussion. It then provides some background to the African civil society, describing how it differs from the global North's, thereby having the potentials for altering the crude Western model when the case of the continent is included. Citing examples from Nigeria (West Africa), Egypt (North Africa), Somali (East Africa), and Zimbabwe (Southern Africa), the paper posits that the theories of civil society that are historically Western secular are beautiful and best fit in the societies where they were embedded; yet, they alter by inclusion of the case of Africa. This is due to a number of factors including differences in history, nature of the states and their role, regime type, value-orientation, worldviews of the citizens, autonomy of the civil society, and the living conditions of the people. The essay concludes by demonstrating how expanding the study of civil society beyond Europe and North America changes how we look at African contexts and why it matters for societal outcomes. Thus, while studying civil society in the global South, we need to recognize multiple modernities, complexity of the target society, as well as differences in histories and cultural values.

Key Words: Africa, Civil society, Model, Military, Democracy, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

The term civil society has a pedigree in Western efforts to grapple with fundamental problems in the shape and direction of modern societies (Foley and Hodgkinson, 2000). Furthermore, debates or theorists' positions revolve around the condition of citizenship and the character of the society: about what shapes the citizens and contribute to civic virtue, the role that the ordinary occupation and preoccupation of citizens play in building the society, and about the functions and roles of associations that made up modern societies in the polities that govern them. Some of the fundamental questions worthy to ask here are: How generalizable are postulates of civil society whose origins are Western, secular, and mainly capitalist? How do they fit when applied to African case in particular and the global South in general? What accounts for variations in the global south and global north vis-à-vis civil society? What take-home or 'so what?' In other words, why does it matter to us? This article attempts to provide clue to these questions by citing examples from some African countries. Africa is huge with different historical, social, economic and political backgrounds, thereby having distinctively unique civil society. For the purpose of this article, a case each from the western, eastern, northern, and southern Africa will be cited to illustrate the dynamic nature of civil society on the continent. These cases together show how including an African case changes the way we view the subject matter from its original Euro-American model, with several lessons to learn from.

Foley and Edward (1998) traced civil society debate to Plato and Aristotle, asserting Plato argues that the good society was one in which human nature reached its perfection through the practice of the arts of civic responsibility. On the other hand, Aristotle was concerned with the nature of the best sort of political system and its relations to the elements of society that made it up, as with civic virtue- which he conceives went hand in hand. There seem to be two main strands of thoughts when discussing the conditions of citizenship due to the peculiar problems of modernity. Those that concern with the moral compass of citizenship in the modern context, and those concerned with the conditions of participation in a

modern polity or, more profoundly the arenas for meaningful active citizenship. Adam Ferguson traced the origin¹ of the term to the Latin *societatis civilis*, which he uses to mean an ordered and peaceful society governed by law. Yet, in the modern usage, the definition, role, and function of the term are changing.

For early modern thinkers like John Locke, there was no distinction between civil society and the state. Civil society was a type of state characterized by a social contract agreed among the individual members of society. But Hegel (1820) defined civil society as the intermediate realm between the family and the state, where the individual becomes a public person and, through membership in various institutions, is able to reconcile the particular and the universal. For Hegel therefore, civil society was the achievement of the modern world- the territory of mediation where there is free play for every idiosyncrasy, every accident of birth, and where waves of passion gust forth, regulated only by reason glinting through them. By this definition, economy is included. For Marx and Engels (1844), they saw civil society as ‘theatre of history.’ In the twentieth century, the definition narrowed as it was understood to be the realm between the state and the family as well as occupying the space outside the market, state and family. This is mainly associated with the works of Gramsci (1999). The above narrative shows not only variations in theorists’ conception of the term civil society, but equally a significant alteration in its definition, contents, various ways of consent generation at different historical epochs, as well as the burning issues of the times.

In line with the above, Mary Kaldor defines civil society as “the process through which individuals negotiate, argue, struggle against or agree with each other and with the centers of political and economic authority” (2003:585). She further argues that through associations, movements, parties, unions, the individual is able to act publicly. In the early modern period, the concern was civil

¹ Foley and Edward (1998) traced the modern use of the notion civil society to have arose at the dawn of the liberal state in the efforts to rethink the basis of social order against the claims of both absolutism and important versions of modernity to establish a direct relation between state and citizenry, free of the multiple intermediaries of the late medieval, corporate order.

rights; in the nineteenth century, political rights was the issue with emerging bourgeoisie as actors in the civil society; while in the twentieth century, economic and social emancipation was the issue with workers' movements challenging the state. By implication therefore, this indicates a process or shift in focus and meaning of civil society. Against this background, this essay adopts Kaldor's (2003) definition and approach to civil society as a conceptual frame. Having laid this foundation let us have a glimpse at the nature of African civil society with a view to illustrate how it differs from the West's.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN AFRICA: NATURE AND ATTRIBUTES

The origins of civil society and related literatures could be traced to America and Europe with a democratic model, but might not necessarily be compatible with the African realities. The United States has a long diverse history of local groups of volunteers coming together to address social, cultural, educational, and human needs (Ritvo and Holland, 2012, 108). Civil society in Africa and perhaps in the developing democracies is differently conceived and interpreted by various scholars. For instance, Keane (1988), Bratton (1989) and Makumbe (1998) argue that civil society in Africa is a composite of counter hegemony, a pressure on the state from without, and a social base for pressure on the state institutions. By implication therefore, it is a force for societal resistance to state excesses and the centerpiece organizationally, materially and ideologically of the social movements and protests for reforms and change. Similarly, Bratton (1992) notes that civil society is society in confrontation with the state, and existing only in so far as 'self-consciousness' of its opposition to the state. Nevertheless, this conception of civil society could be reducible- conceiving civil society in an African sense to be constantly in confrontation to the state despite that there could be situations when the conflict is minimal and negotiable.

Mamdani (1995) posits that the depiction of antagonistic relations with the state is certainly typical in the circumstances of the postcolonial state in Africa, especially with its authoritarian, absolutist, personalistic, corporatist, and

hegemonic patrimonial characteristics. Concurring with Mamdani, Chazan (1988) had pointed to similar attributes endemic in the postcolonial African states. On the other hand, Azarya (1992) views African civil society in terms of the organization of citizens for the moderation of bourgeois and state hegemony. Herskovits (2010) corroborates this view, asserting that the African state is prone to abuse, lawlessness, predation and a tendency to appropriate and exploit on behalf of office holders, clients, sectional and ethnic constituents. Consequently, the political, social, and economic space for autonomous action is very constrictive². Verily, this condition differs widely from Europe and North America's, and therefore will alter civil society theories and models when a case from Africa is included. Much of civil society discussions on Africa have been related to the democratization project of the post-colonial state³.

In line with the above, Augustine (2001) observes that civil society has been associated with much of the transformation of sub-Saharan nations towards democratic, transparent and accountable governance. As Diamond (1997) notes, the activities of active civil society in the democratization and anti-statist projects are various and include among others building a culture of civic engagement; enhancing state responsiveness to societal interests and needs; as well as building constituency for socio-economic and political reform. In the same line of thought, Mamdani (1995) considers democratization process in Africa as synonymous with the coming to life of civil society⁴ and that the process facilitates protection of values of pluralism, accountability, responsibility and participation. Considering the periods when many African states got their independence therefore, Mamdani points at the 'amateur' nature of the civil society.

² Tar (2009) believes that prolong military regimes in Africa have been responsible for most of the human rights abuse, and argues retards civic engagement.

³ Many states in Africa got their political independence in the late 50's and early 60's, thereby having embryonic "democracies" that are not yet matured and fertile for effective civil society compared to Europe.

⁴ Mohammed (2010) argues that there had been informal civil society prior to colonization but was later disrupted and retarded.

In an attempt to explore the dynamics of civil society and democratization process in Nigeria, Aiyede (2003) broadly classified civil society into two groups. The first group is comprised of pro-democracy civic associations such as civil rights organizations and political reforms movements that emerged in opposition to authoritarianism and arbitrariness of the military junta. While the second⁵ group includes interest groups, labor unions, students, women and professional associations as well as NGOs that advance their interests and values. Mohammed (2010) describes African civil society as having informal and formal associations. The informal are mainly self-help associations that mostly do not register with the government but strikingly, have positively impacted on the lives of members and nonmembers. For the formal, he cautions, except for the professional associations and few others, many of them are elitists and urban-based⁶. Notwithstanding, the aspect of the Nigerian civil society that promotes democracy remains one viable class that fights the military regimes and the democratic ones that insisted on self-succession during the 2007 elections.

From the fore going, it is evident that, the inclusion of the case of Africa alters civil society theories for a number of reasons. First, the history of Africa is characterized by colonization which disrupted the existing traditional values of many colonies, replacing them with some alien ones not compatible with the people's realities (Chazzan, 1988). During the period, different people with great variations like Nigeria⁷ were forcefully brought together as "one." Instead of peaceful coexistence, social bonding, and trust, what you find is ethnic and tribal clashes. Under such circumstance, adopting the 'crude' version of Putnam's social capital theory that posits "Trustworthiness lubricates social life" (2000:21) may not work or at best will require alteration. This then proves "the dark side" of social

⁵ This second group looks at other silenced but important aspects of civil society organizations, notably non pro-democratic associations, i.e. nongovernmental organizations -NGOs.

⁶ Elite control of the relationship between Nigeria and international development donors contributes to the fabric of corruption and the maintenance of inequality in Africa's giant (Smith, 2010:255)

⁷ With over 300 different tribes and more than 170 million people (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>)

capital due to absence of trust, civic participation, and so on. More so, Beckfield (2003) asserts that strong powerful nations easily form new INGOs, dominate existing members, and exclude less powerful ones, thereby increasing global inequality. This renders African states an appendage position with negative attendant consequences on the countries' political, economic, and social institutions.

In addition, the ideal liberal society that the civil society theories propose is a modern secular industrialized one, whereas most African societies have economies that are yet to be industrialized, traditional, and religious or "spiritual" and as such, there is a tension (Stephen and Ellis 2004). Again, the autocratic nature of post-colonial African state does not facilitate political participation, making the civil society very weak, lacking autonomy, and in many cases relying on foreign aid or government sponsorship. In line with this, Omofomwan and Odia (2011) argue that when the government denies the people, especially in rural areas the basic necessities of life, the people are not only poor in material sense but equally in ideas. Consequently, their attention will be on how to survive rather than how to form a formidable civil society.

Buttressing the above position, Adedayo (2004) argues that ethnicity, tribalism, and sectarianism are detrimental to civil society⁸ and these are common in many African nations. Now consider applying Tocqueville's notion of civil society in Zimbabwe, where the repressive regime does not allow forming civic associations, which in Tocqueville's notion of the term breeds values such as commitment, trust, protection, solidarity, love, and companionship. Rutherford (2004) had raised questions on intersections of power, desire, and fear involved in the promotion of civil society vis-à-vis the racialized and gendered politics of Zimbabwe. He was wondering how farm workers would practice the ideal "civil society" that could emancipate them from tyranny. Certainly, adopting Tocqueville's theory to study people living in these societies will require alteration. Another example will be

⁸ These situations do not warrant civil society theories to be applicable exactly the same way they are in countries with stable democracy, improved health care, security, human rights protection, and respect for the rule of law.

including Somaliland⁹- the African failed state. Lewis (2011) describes the Somalia's civil society as what has grown into a self-governing outpost of democracy, which is a de facto personality that is still officially unrecognized internationally. When considering Marx's notion of civil society as protecting the interest of the bourgeoisie, surely, there will be alteration due to the fact that in Somali, it is not the state as a government that controls many towns, but rather, factions or rebels. Having said this, the next section will illustrate how expanding the study of civil society beyond the initial study of Europe and North America change how and why civil society matters for societal outcomes.

Several authors have pointed out the virtues of civil society. Persell (1997) views civil society and social justice as interdependent "because the three major arenas in modern society- economy, state, and especially civil society –offer somewhat distinct conceptions of social justice, or normative orders, based on their dominant values" (p.150). As a result, when we turn a blind eye on civil society, these vital arenas, particularly the political sphere where justice has many sources, values, and rights, the society might be in anomie. In Persell's rendition therefore, societal outcomes will be affected by how healthy all of these arenas are, and consequently how healthy the citizenry will be.

Again, Scholzman, Verba, and Henry (1999) argue that we care about civil society because civic engagement helps in improving individual capacities, creation of community, cultivation of democratic values, as well as equal protection of interests in public life. Huge amount of money is been sent to other parts of the world, notably developing nations, some of them are tax-payers'. Are there no resources- human and material in those societies? There are but due to structural factors including lack of strong civil society in these countries, that will guarantee justice, fairness, democratic values and build human capacities of the societies, these problems persist. If we change our thought about civil society in these nations and help build their capacities, perhaps the aids money will be used for something

⁹ Somali is usually separated from Somaliland, yet, in this context, both are referred to as 'Somalia'

else because through mobilization, we may overcome inequality. As a result, we may have to change the way we think about civil society beyond Europe and North America.

Importantly, expanding the study of civil society beyond the global north will provide alternative or best called complementary explanations to the theories of civil society. As the field is multi-disciplinary, it will enrich and expand existing theories and theorizing. Consider for instance how the “Arab Spring” that started in Tunisia and Egypt – in North Africa through the help of information technology.¹⁰ That led to regimes change and what is now spreading across the Arab world. Although, Egypt is a non-Western, not industrialized, not “democratic,¹¹” predominantly Muslim, and not secular, it nevertheless has made history in its own sense. The recent uprising in Egypt is a combination of factors that serve as food for thought, including a civil society that has for long agitated for democracy, and got it. Yet, only but recently, the prolonged military dictatorship returned, with somewhat support from the Western capitalist nations that “advocate” for “democracy.” The biggest take-home goes to scholars of civil society, sociology, social movement, political science, international relations, and so on. This is undoubtedly the role of what scholars in the civil society field like Kaldor (2003) will call “global civil society;” Keck and Sikkink (1998) “transnational advocacy network”; Bourdieu (1984) action as “strategies;” Swidler¹² “cultural kit” and Tarrow (2005) “transnational activism” by a key player “rooted cosmopolitan.”

Another way to view how and why we care for societal outcome is through what Tarrow (2005) calls “internationalization” as a distinct type of global integration. Put differently, individuals as bridge between local and global politics can utilize strategies to produce outcomes that can be positive (as in Tunisia or

¹⁰ This includes using social media: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.

¹¹ Because the countries have for long had regimes that are not democratic. Even the present crisis in Egypt indicates that the “democracy” is in flux.

¹² Although Swidler is not a civil society scholar, nevertheless, referring to her idea is not harm because according to her, actors actively draw on, select from, modify shared cultural models, principles, and identities. The outcome of Tunis and Egypt’s action spread with modifications to the Arab world and now the wind of change is blowing.

Egypt) or negative “the dark side” as in religious extremists. The outcomes of these can be on the public and perhaps the international community- example: the 9/11 attack, the Niger-Delta militants¹³ activities in Nigeria, the reported piracy cases in Somalia, the Boston Marathon Bombings, etc. These actions- positive or negative have short- and long-term effects on the immediate environment and the international community; on the economy, polity, social relations; and on all other human endeavors. Due to these societal outcomes, we care.

CONCLUSION

This essay shows how theories of civil society may alter by the inclusion of the case of Africa. It has adopted a civil society definition that is dynamic and that sees the term as a process which reflects change in role and focus. Civil society’s changing meaning reflects changing attitudes towards the relationship among economy, society, and state. Ferguson (1967) treated civil society as a political term, differentiating Western governments with Oriental despotism. The term likewise had an economic undertone, as civilization was distinguished from societies of ‘barbaric’ states where private property did not exist. This shows the different changing meanings, depending on a scholar’s rendition, and based on the reality of the moment when the meaning was given. In the recent past, we have witnessed how focus was shifting in the Americas and Europe, reflecting the immediate issues at hand. Using examples, the essay demonstrates how expanding the study of civil society beyond the initial study of Europe and North America changes how and why civil society matters.

Studies on and into Africa “need to search beyond the phenomenological issues at hand and place the theological ideas of the divine and the spiritual that inform the experience of the people they study into the context of their work” (Bompani and Frahm-Arp, 2010:243). Thus, the theories of civil society that are

¹³ Their activities which include kidnaps and asking for ransom had resulted to the closure of some oil companies like Shell- subsequently affecting oil production in the country, affecting the supply of oil to the U.S.A., and leading to raising the price of oil in the world oil market.

historically Western secular alter when including the case of Africa due to differences in history, nature of the state and its role, regime type, value-orientation, worldviews of the citizens, sources of funds and their availability, and the living conditions of the people. The idea of Western civil society model is indeed a very beautiful one, and could best fit in the societies in which the theories were embedded, yet, imperfect when the exact crude model is applied to Africa. As a result, we require a new set of orienting questions that span social contexts and level of analysis compatible with Africa. This kind of study must proceed with a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of civil society in Africa than the one articulated by the advanced democratic and secularized-dominant approaches. To paraphrase Edgell (2012), it has historically been the case that cultural approaches provide powerful tools to understand a phenomenon's role in our ever-changing world. This should begin with adopting a relativistic notion of civil society devoid importing and strictly applying a Western-specific approach. As Monga (1995) cautions, there are two challenges to the study of civil society in non-Western states: determining exactly its meaning, and general problem of transferring sociological concepts across time and space. By adopting a dynamic and flexible definition, operationalization, and considering the complexity and differences in the study area, these theoretical and methodological problems will be minimized. Instead of focusing on Europe and North America, the advancement of theory and methodology, not to mention other greater potentials for reflexive engagement with a discipline and cultural biases, will be enhanced by searching farther afield. There is the need to conduct systematic study of how faith-related agencies, as a distinct part of the civil society, transform the lives of the less privileged members of the society.

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