From Confrontation to Collaboration: Contemporary Discourse on the State-Civil Society Relational Models

Dr. Tanvir Anjum

Abstract

In the contemporary development discourse, the concept of civil society is as much popular as debated and contested by activists and development practitioners as well as scholars and academicians. Presently, there are multiple and often conflicting understandings of civil society, especially in relation to the state, which have brought to the fore a wide range of state-civil society relational models. The present paper is aimed at identifying the characteristic features of these models. The study is an attempt to explore the varied strands and patterns in the relationship between the state and civil society, which impact on the functions and nature of both the sectors.

Civil society is considered to be one of three spheres that together constitute the triadic paradigm of social order, the other two spheres being the state (the upholder of legal values) and the market (the economy or exchange values). Since the state and the market are referred to as the first and the second sectors respectively, civil society is referred to as the ‘third’ or ‘independent’ sector. The concept of civil society has been employed to identify, locate and explain various social structures and institutions, which impact upon the relations between the state and society. Presently, non-government organizations or NGOs, also referred to as civil society organizations or CSOs, are identified as expressions of civil society. The term civil society has become a catchword in the contemporary discourse on development, liberalism and modernism. The theory and concept of civil society is as much popular as debated among activists and development practitioners as well as scholars and academicians. It has variously been used in diverse theoretical positions and political agendas.

In the contemporary discourse, the conceptual construct of civil society is characterized by much theoretical ambiguity as well as complexity in its usage and application. There are multiple understandings of it, with difference in emphasis on its characteristics and nature, and hence no single model of it. Sometimes the concept of civil society is understood as a sphere of polity having an oppositional relationship with the state, and sometimes viewed in constructive and co-operational relationship with the state. It is also perceived as an intermediate institutional space, or a mediating sphere between an individual and a state, as well as a sphere completely autonomous from the state, neither having conflict nor collaboration or association with it. In addition, it is also envisioned as a sphere which counter-balances the state’s hegemony and

* The author is Assistant Professor at Department of History, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad – Pakistan.
domination, and sometimes seen as a means of delivering services to people, which a state is ideally supposed to deliver.

Recent European and European-inspired literature on civil society offers its syncretic and contradictory typologies. According to Adam Seligman, for instance, in contemporary times, the concept of civil society is being used as: (i) a political slogan for criticizing various government policies at the hands of activists; (ii) a normative philosophical concept and utopian ethical ideal guaranteeing good life; and (iii) an analytical tool or model to explain various socio-political phenomena. For Wayne Hudson, currently civil society is being identified with a philosophical concept, a political slogan, a set of institutions, a sector (‘third’ or non-government sector), a space for action in which social groups can exist and move; and a realm of civil solidarity, cooperation and trust.

The contemporary literature on the subject reveals that there is little common in various definitions and understandings of the concept of civil society. For this very reason, it has been suggested that civil society cannot be seen as a static concept, rather as a concept in flux, with changing meanings, norms, actors and adversaries. None the less, despite its multiple understandings, the concept of civil society is relevant in analytical terms, as it raises a wide array of research questions pertaining to the relationship of various social groups and institutions with the state and political authorities.

Keeping in view the multiple and often conflicting understandings and functions of civil society, a number of state-civil society relational models have been brought to the fore, which can broadly be classified under the following four heads: (i) Confrontational Model; (ii) Collaborative/Associational Model; (iii) Autonomous Model; and (iv) Mediational Model of Civil Society. The present paper is aimed at identifying some of the contested understandings of the concept of civil society by highlighting the characteristic features of the above-mentioned state-civil society relational models. The study is an attempt to explore the varied strands and patterns in the relationship between the state and civil society, which impact on the functions and nature of both the sectors.

In contemporary times, there are multiple conceptions of civil society in Euro-American intellectual tradition, which are contested on a number of counts. The theory of civil society is said to have acquired ‘conceptual polymorphousness’, owing to its several forms and strands, as well as its ever fluctuating conceptual frontiers. Not only the state-civil society relationship ranging from opposition to collaboration, and from mere distinction to complete autonomy of civil society from the state is being contested, the relationship of civil society with the market and the society at large is also being debated.
State-Civil Society Relational Models

As pointed out above, four broad state-civil society relational models can be identified in the contemporary discourse. The characteristic features of these models are discussed hereunder:

1. Confrontational Model of Civil Society

As earlier discussed, the Enlightenment era in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was characterized by the emergence of modern state system along with highly centralized and absolute monarchical rule. As a response and reaction to the political developments of the times, the concept of civil society emerged as a critique to absolutism or monarchy. In particular, the writings of Montesquieu and Kant projected civil society as a sphere meant to contain and check the arbitrary powers of monarchical rulers. In fact, the concept of civil society is defined through its opposition to the state in the entire liberal tradition of European political philosophy. Liberal European political thinkers have assigned polar positions to the state and civil society.

Continuing the intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment era, from 1970s onwards, the political and academic discourse on civil society became more focused on the differentiation of civil society from the state. In other words, the undercurrent of the modern idea of civil society is the accent on the separation between the state and civil society, and therefore the characteristic to be ‘non-state’ is deemed as the most crucial marker of a civil society. Not only this, for some the state-civil society dichotomy is characterized by opposition and contradiction between the two. The state-civil society dichotomy is much more pronounced in the writings of continental thinkers than Anglo-American scholars. In fact, in the neo-conservative tradition, civil society is understood in opposition to the state, and seen as a depoliticized sphere of market activity and other activities including those relating to religion and family. In short, the confrontational model of civil society views it in opposition to the state.

Vaclav Havel, a dissident socialist intellectual and political activist, for instance, sees the relationship between the state and civil society as oppositional and contradictory. To him, civil society represents ‘the domain of anti-politics; it was a vision of society not simply independent of the state but opposed to it.’ This is because civil society is perceived as a sphere of social order that provides defense against the atomization of society by the state.

According to the confrontational model, civil society is also a counter-balancing mechanism vis-à-vis the state. In view of Ernest Gellner, civil society is a set of diverse non-governmental institutions, which counter-balance the state but do not prevent the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests. Civil society prevents a state from dominating and
atomising the society.\(^9\) Some other theorists such as Şerif Mardin also perceive civil society as ‘a set of equilibrating social mechanisms’.\(^{10}\)

The confrontational model of civil society which sees it as an expression of societal self-organization in opposition to the state is said to have a negative view of civil society. Countering this negative view, theorists have attempted to focus more on its positive functions. John Hall, for instance, brings out the positive characteristics of civil society, as he defines it as a ‘complex balance of consensus and conflict’\(^{11}\). In a similar manner, Hann and Dunn also argue for ‘a more inclusive usage of civil society, in which it is not defined negatively, in opposition to the state, but positively in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life’.\(^{12}\)

2. Autonomous Model of Civil Society

The confrontational model of civil society is based on the assumption of inveterate opposition between the civil society and the state. This dichotomous view of civil society vs. the state is the basis of the modern conception of civil society, but it has been challenged by many theorists. Neera Chandhoke and Judith Tendler contend that the two sectors cannot be delinked as separate and completely exclusive spheres at conceptual level.\(^{13}\) To Björn Beckman, this dichotomous view obscures the dialectics of their relationship as it focuses on separateness, rather than on interrelatedness. Moreover, this analytical bias against the state is associated with an anti-statist ideological agenda.\(^{14}\) Therefore, many of the contemporary civil society theorists have avoided taking such a dichotomous view of state and civil society, and instead highlighted the distinction between them. For them, civil society is merely distinct from the state, and not necessarily in conflict and opposition to it. Such a position has been taken by Robert Hefner,\(^{15}\) Keith Tester,\(^{16}\) David Anderson,\(^{17}\) and Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato.\(^{18}\) These civil society theorists view the autonomy of civil society from the state as a defining characteristic of civil society, and consider it as an autonomous sphere independent of control by political institutions. Others who support the autonomous model of civil society include Charles Taylor, Larry Diamond, Gordon White, John A. Hall and He Baogang.

Taylor, for instance, contends that civil society exists in a minimal sense where there are free associations which are not under state tutelage and in a stronger sense ‘only where society as a whole can structure itself and co-ordinate its actions through such associations that are free of state tutelage’.\(^{19}\) Taylor’s view is also shared by other civil society theorists and scholars such as Larry Diamond and Gordon White.\(^{20}\) Hall considers ‘societal self-organization’ as the most important characteristic of civil society, which is the ability of people to regulate their affairs without interference from the state.\(^{21}\) Baogang also assumes autonomy from the state to be a necessary condition for the existence of civil society.\(^{22}\)
This view of civil society as an autonomous sphere from the state has been shared by the voluntary social movements paradigm, but here this sphere is conceptualized as a *politicized* arena, unlike the neo-conservative paradigm wherein civil society is seen as a *depoliticized* sphere. However, the theoretical position of civil society's autonomy is not without conceptual problems, which have been pointed out by critics. While urging for broadening the concept of civil society, Beckman argues that the boundaries between state and civil society may get blurred in practice, and the autonomy of civil society organizations is variable or changeable. Moreover, in addition to autonomy in relation to the state, civil society may also be independent of other interest groups. A similar argument is forwarded by Tendler, who observes that the assumed neatly drawn boundary between the government and non-government sectors is quite blurred in actual.

The autonomous model of civil society is considered to be in line with the neo-traditionalist and communitarian view of civil society, which is characterized by the collective rights and autonomy of communities. It suggests that civil society is based on a shared set of values which are embedded in public and civic institutions within a pluralistic framework. In addition, the role of community has been stressed in the autonomous model of civil society.

### 3. Collaborative/Associational Model of Civil Society

At a theoretical level, in recent years the role of civil society has been viewed as expanding beyond confrontation with the state, and collaborative models of state and civil society, wherein they both collaborate with each other to overcome problems like poverty, have come up. Theoretically, the collaborative model of civil society is more in line with the welfare state view of civil society, which does not pose challenge to the state. Deemphasizing the political dimension of civil society in conceptual terms, the state-civil society collaboration is also in line with the neo-conservative paradigm wherein civil society is understood as a depoliticized sphere. Therefore, in practice, the collaborative or associational model of civil society is increasingly being adopted by NGOs and CSOs around the world. As a result, civil society and the governments in many countries have evolved a broad range of ways to collaborate and complement each other's activities. A number of models and approaches to it have developed ranging from complementary partnership with considerable degree of autonomy of civil society organizations from government, to financial support of the latter to the former with regulatory mechanisms.

In some cases, the collaborative model is considered to be better than the confrontational model; rather seen as a preferred model so that civil society could survive and be able to carry out its function. Empirical evidence suggests that in contrast to most of Europe, the state in Asia has often played a pivotal role in establishing civil society. Though the state has the power to contain civil society, sometimes the state itself concedes space to civil society groups in order to stay in power and pursue its own goals. Many empirical studies suggest that
civil society is not necessarily a realm in opposition to the state; it may also be a sphere of interaction, cooperation and compromise with the state. The studies by P. C. C. Huang and H. B. Chamberlain on civil society in China, for instance, prove this point. The studies by Robert Weller and Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao reveal the complex forms of interlocking of civil society with different forms of state power, and suggest that despite these ties, civil society can exert a transformative power in politics.

In a similar manner, Said Amir Arjomand’s study on the institution of charitable trusts as the mode of agency of civil society in premodern Persia, reveals the complex and at times complementary relationship between the state and civil society in premodern Muslim polities since there existed the historical tradition of the involvement of public authorities in philanthropy. He views the involvement of public authorities as a source of empowering civil society and strengthening its autonomous agency.

4. Mediational Model of Civil Society

Transcending the state-civil society dualism implicit in the debate on civil society, some theorists conceive of it as a mediating sphere between the state and society or an intermediate institutional space between them. In voluntary social movements’ paradigm, civil society is understood as an intermediate institutional space between private and public. Many civil society scholars and theorists advocate the mediational model of civil society. For instance, Augustus R. Norton considers civil society as a mediating structure between the society and state, which acts as a buffer between the state and citizen. According to İlkay Sunar, civil society is the ‘intermediate domain between the state and the individual, in which deliberation and association take place without constraint and coercion’. Isagani R. Serrano, who identifies voluntary organizations with civil society, defines them as ‘groups, organizations and movements freely formed by citizens not for profit, but to advance groups interests or the common good. They mediate between the private citizens on the one hand and state and corporate structure on the other. They are building blocks of sense of belonging and develop solidarity with others’.

As mentioned earlier, Anderson, Cohen and Arato have stressed on the autonomy of civil society from the state. To them, it is this characteristic feature of civil society that enables it to perform a mediational function. Therefore, Anderson refers to the ‘mediating institutions’ of civil society, while Cohen and Arato define it as a sphere of associations (especially voluntary ones), social movements, and forms of public communications that ‘mediate between economy, state and society’.

It is important to note that the mediational model of civil society assumes civil society to be distinct both from the state and society. As pointed out above, the distinction of civil society from the state has been asserted in both the
confrontational and autonomous models of civil society. The distinction between civil society and the society at large which is implicit in the meditational model distinguishes it from other models. None the less, it may be argued that civil society is not something apart or completely distinct from society. Civil society may be seen as something internal to society. In other words, it is comprised of politically conscious sections of a society which organize and regulate themselves in order to contain and resist the high-handedness of the state.

The contemporary discourse on civil society not only reveals the shifting emphasis on the varied characteristics and functions of civil society, it also betrays the multiple understandings of civil society in relation to the state. In the light of these contested understandings, four state-civil society relational models can be discerned, namely the confrontational, collaborative/associational, autonomous and mediational models of civil society. The study proves that the varied strands and patterns in the relationship between the state and civil society impact on the functions and nature of both the sectors.
References

1 The author acknowledges her gratitude to the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, for awarding Post-doctoral Fellowship, which enabled her to undertake research on various aspects of the concept of civil society at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, during 2007-08.


7 This is the model of self-regulating civil society of non-profit voluntary associations reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. Islamoglu, “Civil Society, Concept and History of”, in International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, p. 1895.


15 Hefner, “On the History and Cross-Cultural Possibility of a Democratic Ideal”, in Democratic Civility, pp. 15-19. Hefner also stresses the need of a state for civil society to function effectively.
Tester defines civil society clearly distinct from the state, which entails all societal relationships. However, these relationships exclude familial relations and political relations of state. Keith Tester, *Civil Society*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 8.

David Anderson, “Bringing civil society to an uncivilised place: Citizenship regimes in Russia’s Arctic frontier”, in *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, p. 112.


Baogang sees the interaction and compromises of civil society with the state in China as a sign of its being nascent, and for this reason, he labels it as ‘semi-civil’ society. He Baogang, “The Making of a Nascent Civil Society in China”, in *Civil Society in Asia*, pp. 131-33; for details see pp. 114-39.


David C. Schak and Wayne Hudson, “Civil Society in Asia” in *Civil Society in Asia*, p. 3.


Robert Weller and Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao, “The Transformation of Chinese Civil Associations in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South China”, in *Civil Society in Asia*, 160-79.


From Confrontation to Collaboration

39 David Anderson, “Bringing Civil Society to an Uncivilised Place: Citizenship Regimes in Russia’s Arctic Frontier”, in Civil Society: Challenging Western Models, p. 115.
40 Cohen and Arato, Civil Society and Political Theory, p. ix.