

What Makes It Civil Society?

1. Introduction

In his draft for this international seminar, Cor Van Beuningen has put his optimistic confidence on civil society or vital society. As a process at hand, he explains “a vital society is not made by autonomous individuals.” It is a society in which the people “will develop their creative, moral and social skills only in connection with other people, when they have subject matter and motives to engage and join hands.” That kind of optimistic mood has been a winning streak. But, as he puts it further, it can hardly be explained in terms of moral considerations or in terms of a revival of traditional values of liberty, equality, and integrity if the State is still playing its role as the subject of the society itself.

So far, we understand that within the boundaries of the nation-state, living society is sustained by the beliefs in the rights of man, the equality of citizens, the integrity of the person, and the freedom of belief. These values of membership and participation in collective life, become the new model for representing the values of both autonomy and mutuality, both the private and the public in the nation-state. Such norms, however, are not every thing to explain the existence of living society. The most telling and perhaps tragic example of this process is in the realm of racial equality in the US. It was ultimately through the court system and such Supreme Court decisions as the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* on school desegregation that black American citizens entered the civil polity and became recognized as legally free and equal citizens. A generation later we are witnesses to the fact that the extension of the formal, legal, and abstract rights of citizens to the black population of the US has not solved the more interpersonal problem of racism.¹

Whatever analysis can be given, this failure is inherent to the very premises of modern, liberal-individualistic interpretation of rights and citizenship. In such interpretation we exclude the informal terms of solidarity and mutuality that we have come to associate with the idea of civil society.

This paper is dealing with a very simple question: what makes it a civil society? Is it a democratic society which connects the people in an open dialogue, inclusiveness of interests and economic justice in terms of principles for socio-political change? Is it also similar to the idea of society which is based on local tradition and culture? What is the fundamental

¹ Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 131

principle that guides a civil society? Is it a democratic way of life which grows out of community life?

2. Community of Life

Basically, civil society is a community of life in which the people live in the same values and share the common interest. John Dewey's concept of community² can help us to understand this basic element of civil society.

In his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey defines community as a way of living in which people are bound together by 'mutually interpenetrating' interests, where 'each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own.'³ Since the actions of each individual or group in a community have consequences that bear upon the interests of others within the context of community each agent must act not just in their own interests but in ways that are congruent with the interests of others and which actively reflect and enhance them. At least, this must be the case if the community is urged to achieve outcomes that are coherent and maximally inclusive of everybody's interests.

Such a community is not authoritarian and hierarchical. Change within community is not directed from above, but communicated in many directions by individuals and social groupings. It is reciprocal because it is shaped by the interests of all those who would feel its effects. This means that the members of a community are actively involved in building community, and share responsibility for its growth and development. This is empowering. The constant adjustment of individuals to each other, and of social institutions and arrangements to continuing efforts to be inclusive of the interests of all, liberates the powers of the individual. Thereby it provides opportunities for the development of distinctive capacities and individual contributions which themselves are a means to further growth, and it gives force to that tie between freedom and culture which is one of the great promises of democracy.⁴

² My interpretation of John Dewey follows Philip Cam, "Philosophy, Democracy and Education" in In-Suk Cha (ed.) *Teaching Philosophy for Democracy* (Seoul: Seoul University Press, 2000), pp. 158-181

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1966), p. 87

⁴ John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963)

As far as the civil society concerns itself as a shared body of common interests or community of mutually interpenetrating interests Dewey adds two criteria for evaluating the extent to which forms of association are civil. These are, first, the extent to which they give conscious expression to a full range of humanly significant common interests, rather than to the interests of the few, or to a small range of, say, narrowly economic ones; and second, the degree of free interplay and cooperation involved, whereby the possibilities of cohesive development are enlarged.⁵ These criteria reflect the nature of community; that is to say, the maximization and cohesion of interests and the creative freedom of open interaction. The two are inextricably entwined. A community cannot hope to maximize the interests of all its members without their full and free participation, just as it cannot hope to secure the willing cooperation of its members unless it strives to honour their interests.

Those two criteria are intimately connected to the concept communication. The Latin *communicare*, from which the English word ‘communicate’ derives, means to share, just as the word ‘community’ derives from the Latin *communitas*, meaning ‘common’. For Dewey, communal life is not just a matter of associated activity. It involves a consciousness of its consequences on the part of the participants, as well as a shared desire to sustain that activity for those ends. This is consciousness not merely as an individual awareness, but as a social consciousness in the sense of joint or mutual knowledge, which effectively implies both community and communication. So when Dewey speaks of full and free interplay, there is a conceptual tie between the communication involved and the kind of sharing and commonality of purpose that goes with community. We make this point because a democratic approach to the problems of community life requires open communication and freely entered into conjoint effort directed at the pursuit of common ends.

While Dewey’s ideal of community life can be applied to a local civil society, where face-to-face fact of life is characteristic for the community, it is important to note that Dewey also speaks of the “great community.”⁶ Such community is not reflecting on mutual ties and commonality of purpose but on cosmopolitan interests. Here is Dewey’s expression of common interests: “The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of other, and to consider the

⁵ Ibid., p. 83

⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Chapter 5, “Search for the great community” (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991)

action of other to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the import of their activity. These more numerous and varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action. They secure liberation of power which remains suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial, as they must to be in a group which in its exclusiveness shuts out many interests.”⁷

By emphasizing the connection between the civil society and the community life and decouple it from the nation state, Dewey sees the possibility of the full import of the ethical vision of a civil society and of the democratization of our world. In such vision, Dewey permits us to give meaning to the idea of global community as a democratic ideal. Such a global community is one which is based on an all-encompassing sphere of interests, rather than exclusively national interest or the interest of the powerful and the few, and that relies upon the inclusiveness of the interest served to give point and the direction to what we do. It is one involving the full and free interplay of all involved, rather than economic dictation or coercion and rule by the forces of political or cultural hegemony. In this sense, democracy cannot be forced on anyone, but must be freely entered into and sustained just because it is recognized as the best of all; and by the same token social and economic arrangements that militate against our full and free engagement with one another are to that extent anti-democratic. In this context it is worth recognizing that economic life is not a zero-sum game. In fact, Dewey’s claim is that the development of community leads to the liberation of our powers and the maximization of our engagement.

With this concept of community, Dewey has his own target that civil society should be based on the principle of democracy as a way of life. In each society, democracy is nothing but a projection of those extant patterns of associated life that are characterized by joint and mutual effort, sustained by common assent and undertaken for the good of all. It exists just to the extent to which our forms of association encourage and sustain community. As Dewey wrote, “Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself ... Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who partake in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect the energetic desire and effort to

⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Op. Cit., p.87

sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.”⁸

Dewey’s version of democracy could be described as a precursor to discursive democracy, later elaborated by Jurgen Habermas as it is concerned with the deliberative process in which each individual is recognised as a potential participant in public discourse.⁹ Locating the emergence of such public sphere in the context of a unique historical configuration (in the European Middle Ages), Habermas argues that under the “authority of the better argument” the public sphere can be the means to private citizens to create a public forum. As a democratic action, public sphere requires three primary elements. Those are:

- (1) The public sphere requires a forum that is accessible to as many people as possible and where a large variety of social experiences can be expressed and exchanged.
- (2) In the public sphere, the various arguments and views being confronted through rational discussion. This implies that rational political choice is possible only if the public sphere first offers a clear insight into the possible alternatives from which one can choose. At the same time, the media should offer the widest possible range on interpretation frames, so that the citizen is also aware of what he did not choose.
- (3) Systematically and critically checking on government policies is the primary task for this public sphere.

3. The Decline of Social Capital

Robert Putnam states that in the US “ since 1965 time spent on informal socializing and visiting is down (perhaps by one-quarter) and time devoted to clubs and organizations is down even more sharply (by roughly half). Membership records of such diverse organizations as the PTA, the Elks club, the League of Woman Voters, the Red cross, labor unions and even bowling leagues show that participation in many conventional voluntary associations has declined.”¹⁰

⁸ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Op. Cit., pp. 148-149

⁹ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, transl. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 72

¹⁰ Robert Putnam, “Bowling alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” *Jurnal of Democracy*, vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 65-78

What Putnam says about the US is increasingly true of other countries, even in Asian Countries that claim to be more communitarian than the generic west. As far as we consider what makes up a community, an organic view would insist that we do not think individually about individual components but really the whole organic system, including the members and the community parts welded and integrated together. When a part is taken away, the community changes, the sense of life and togetherness can be dissipated or at least modified.

It is often cited that the main rationale for this is that the current political institutions, actors and practices in most liberal democracies do not enjoy the trust and respect of people. An important assumption is that it is desirable to have a sense of national purpose. Its articulation can marshal the needed collective sense of working towards goals that will serve collective goods and benefits, equity and justice. To enable this collective of working towards collective goods requires the kind of leaders at the base that can govern well, generate participation and involvement of citizens. Furthermore, as a continuing practice, a style of local governance that is democratic and participatory conducts processes that are more responsive to the needs of the local population. Effective leadership and adequate support for local governance makes the local communities substantial bases for the creation of economic and development plans.

The main worry is that, because there is not enough skilled and competent leaders at the base, not only is the delivery of basic services hampered and impeded, there will not be much opportunity and occasion for there to be the kind of consultations and political participation that precisely improves local governance because the sense of community and collective purpose is not cultivated and enhanced.

While it might be easy to blame the political system and politicians for all the misgivings, we need to note that this is also due to the neo-liberal agenda that is being actively pursued both at the global and national levels. Distant body such as the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services), WTO (World Trade Organization), and IMF (International Monetary Fund) have become supra national bodies and made the involvement of the people negligible. The IMF's policy in the East Asia Crisis 1997 can be taken as a case. The IMF is an international institution that came into existence toward the end of World War II in response to the need for global economic stability in the aftermath of war and the global depression of the 1930s. Nowadays, under the influence Washington Consensus (consensus between the IMF, the

World Bank and the U.S. Treasury), the IMF prescribed policy elsewhere in East Asia including financial and capital market liberalization, cutting government expenditure, aggressive economic restructuring, and raised interest rates. The effect of this policy, however, is shameful. Stiglitz puts the matter succinctly when he says: “the net effect of the policies set by the Washington Consensus has all too often been to benefit the few at the expense of the many, the well-off at the expense of the poor. In many cases commercial interests and values have superseded concern for the environment, democracy, human rights, and social justice.”¹¹

To the extent to which this criticism is justified, the distribution of benefits and lack of concern for a range of humanly significant interest is actually antidemocratic in Dewey’s terms. When countries in need of IMF assistance have relatively little say in the policies affecting their interests, and when the interests of impoverished populations are made subservient to those that are wealthy, we do not have activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all those who partake in it, with a conscious desire to sustain it just because it is a good share by all. And when a full range of humanly significant common interests is replaced by narrowly economic ones, we do not have that richness of concern that marks community life.

Beside political actors and international agencies, global market, one of the most sanctified terms today, advances individualistic rather than social goals, in that, the consumers speak the language of ‘me’. In the market, irresponsibility developed into a system. Milton Friedman writes: “So the question is, do corporate executives, providing they stat within the law, have responsibilities ... other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible? And my answer is, no, they do not.”¹² He explains the logic of market is ingenuously supple and complete, self-sustaining and forward-looking. As a matter of principle, it cannot take society’s interests into account. In practice, corporate accountants will correctly reject any liability for intangible cost to society, the ruptures to family life or the loss of stability and equable relationships, the broader social injuries that will require expensive remedial action by society in the distant future but do not represent costs for the company’s present day production. So, as the private sphere flourishes the

¹¹ Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 7

¹² Citation taken by William Greider, *The Soul of Capitalism, Opening Paths to a Moral Economy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 36

public sphere crumbles. In addition, as more and more people seek happiness in their family, works, religion, or leisure, politics in general and political participation in particular is seen as burdensome.

Politics is either condemned as fit only for the unscrupulous and every attempt is made to depoliticise the situation. So in Indonesia we are witnesses to a situation where President and Ministers would prefer to look upon themselves as Chief Executive Officer and run the government like a public limited company and it is hardly surprising that they look upon public as a client rather than a vibrant citizen. Though we agree that passive citizens who prefer the joy of family and career to the duties of politics are not necessarily misguided, it cannot be denied that the absence of debates and rich contestations does undermine the vitality of democracy. There is a growing disconnect between citizens and state and a serious gap between people's actual and desired levels of influence in decision making. What is worse, many of legitimate instruments of democracy, such as a protest meeting is being looked upon with suspicion.

It is in this context that Dewey believes that the future lies in the existence of community both local and global as a space of meeting, of communication, and even of common interests. As the decline of the social capital rises from exploitation and egoism, relations in a community based on inclusive dialogue and an enlargement of the sphere of interests can form of economic, political and social justice in a democratizing world. Let us consider two parties engaged together in economic activity. If one party were able and willing to exploit the other for economic gain, the exploited party would become merely the means of the other's economic advancement, and the exploited party's interests would need to be met only to the extent necessary to satisfy the exploiter's interests. This does not mean that the exploiter can entirely neglect the interests of the exploited. Even a slave's interests must be met to some extent if the slave is to be productive. The problem, however, the slave is still the slave. He is simply a means to his master. He is never treated as person. For Dewey, economic relations are obviously significant forms of association. As consequence, economic justice can only be measured by the extent to which the forms of association involved approximate the condition of community.

4. Trust to Human Capabilities

In the last chapter of his book, *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen exposes the atheistic question of Bertrand Russell. The question sounds: what would we do if, following our death, we were encountered God after all. Russell is supposed to have answered, “I will ask him: God Almighty, why did you give so little evidence of your existence?”¹³ This atheistic question assumes that the appalling world in which we live does not look like one in which an all powerful benevolence is having its way. It is hard to understand how a compassionate world order can include so many people afflicted by acute misery, persistent hunger and deprived and desperate lives, and why millions of innocent children have to die each year from lack of food or medical attention or social care.

Sen’s concept of responsibility is related to the concept of freedom and justice. Based on his concept of freedom, he proposes, on the one side, the idea that people themselves must have responsibility for the development and change of the world in which they live. He argues that dependence on others is not only ethically problematic, it also practically defeatist in sapping individual initiative and effort, and even self-respect. The concerns that give force to this line of reasoning can indeed be very important. Putting the burden of looking after a person’s interest on another person can lead to the loss of many important things in the form of motivation, involvement, and self-knoweldge. Any affirmation of social responsibility that replaces individual responsibility cannot but be counterproductive. Responsibility then requires freedom. Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it.

On the other side, responsibility has its relation to the idea of justice. Rather than exposing an exposition of an ideal concept of justice, Sen attends to the question of acceptable society in which an unjust society can be well clarified. A society, for example, that allows famines to occur when prevention is possible is unjust and that kind of society can be found everywhere just because it is accepted as taken for granted. Extreme inequalities in matters of race, gender, and class often survive on the implicit understanding that ‘there is no alternative’ (Thatcher). But by focussing on the unjust society, Sen is assuming that responsible person must be in charge of their own well-being; it is for him to decide how to use his capabilities. But the capabilities that a person does actually have depend on the nature of social arrangements. Without the acceptable social arrangement,

¹³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 282

there will be no civil initiative and empowerment. That means there is also no actual freedom and responsibility.

The social commitment to freedom and responsibility need not operate only through the state, but must also involve social organizations, community-based arrangements, non-governmental agencies of various kinds, the media and other means of public understanding and communication, and the institutions that allow the functioning of markets and contractual relations. In line with this argument, Sen proposes his ideas on the empowerment of women. He writes : “The empowerment of women, through employment opportunities, educational arrangement, property rights and so on, can give women more freedom to influence a variety of matters such as intrafamily division of health care, food and other commodities, and work arrangements as well as fertility rates, but the exercise of that enhanced freedom is ultimately a matter for the person herself.”¹⁴

Sen’s arguments of responsibility presupposes the meaning of civil society as community of life as defended by Dewey. For Dewey, civil society is basically a human community in which each person is connected to other persons and is responsive to the interests of others. Herewith we reach Dewey’s criterion for judging forms of association to the full array of humanly significant interests of all its members. Civil society is a human community that based on personalistic solidarity, a kind of solidarity that connects among free and responsible persons. In such society, we believe in the human capability, the ability of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have.

5. Conclusion

So far I have discussed the theory of civil society based on the thought of John Dewey. By following Dewey we can easily to say that civil society is a community of life in which each person is in communication. Such kind of society is an alternative to understand the initiative, creativity, and responsibility of human person.

For Frans Seda, such kind of society has its own values. Firstly, he believes that in that kind of society we can understand the freedom and capability of human beings. In his article entitled “People of Sikka Who Drank Banana Water” Frans Seda gives praise to the initiatives of people living in the villages.¹⁵ They have their own endurance in their struggle for life.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 288-289

¹⁵ Frans Seda, Simfoni Tanpa Henti, Ekonomi Politik Masyarakat Indonesia (Jakarta: Grasindo, 1992), p. 304

Even though they are completely excluded from the development planning, implementing, and communication, they never exclude themselves from the life and unity of the nation.¹⁶ What they need is the improvement in capabilities.

Secondly, since civil society is the community of human persons, he believes that the only way to develop is to improve communication. That is why, from the beginning, Frans Seda is adamant to defend democracy. This includes freedom of the press, freedom of information, open discussion, the open expression of a plurality of views, and a commitment to thinking rather than rote learning in education. In practice, this means a commitment to such things should be carried out in the spirit of inquiry. In practice this means a commitment of such things as investigative journalism, public inquiry, unfettered political debate, and inquiry-based learning. In all of this, the acknowledgement of alternative possibilities and different points of view brings with it the need for dialogue. Dialogue is the quintessential form of communication in democracy.

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¹⁶ Ibid.