What Is Civil Society?

Civil society is a term that's increasingly popular with government ministers, academics, diplomats, aid-workers, international agencies, teachers and a host of other professions. It's an idea that affects everyone in every nation.
What Is Civil Society? aims to discover what the term actually means.
Rahul Sarnaik sets out to explore the many different aspects of the concept and investigates how it has been put into practice in both the developed and the developing worlds.

Talk Of A Civil Society

Civil society is a term that's cropping up more and more amongst those concerned with the changing shape of modern society.
Politicians talk about the needs of a civil society; in fact next to the state and the market, advisors to the US Government have suggested that it is 'the ultimate third way' of governing a society.
In his inauguration speech US President George W Bush stated that:
'A civil society demands from each of us good will and respect, fair dealing and forgiveness.'

Diplomats also talk of the value of a civil society. Addressing a conference recently UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan said:
'The United Nations once dealt only with Governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving Governments, international organisations, the business community and civil society. In today's world, we depend on each other.'

Even journalists reflect on the likelihood of a civil society; the British journal The Economist recently commented:
'After decades of totalitarianism and centuries of autocracy, it would be silly to expect Russia to sprout a strong civil society.'

There may be a lot of talk about a civil society – but what does it actually mean?

Diversity

Consider a selection of images - anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrators clashing with the police in capital cities across the world; volunteer rescue-workers from the developed nations helping to save victims of the Gujarat earthquake.
Eco-warriors fighting to protect whales and dolphins; children being saved from a life of bonded labour in the carpet-factories of South and South-east Asia; millions of TV viewers across the world watching rock stars perform in Live Aid in 1985 to raise funds for famine-relief.

What they have in common is that they're all aspects of civil society.

Definition

The paradox about civil society is that it covers a vast range of activities - yet it's very hard to define.
One description puts it quite succinctly:
'A civil society is a public space between the state, the market and the ordinary household, in which people can debate and tackle action'.

So that could include any voluntary collective activity in which people combine to achieve change on a particular issue - but not political parties, even though civil society has a political dimension.
By this definition, civil society includes charities; neighbourhood self-help schemes; international bodies like the UN or the Red Cross; religious-based pressure-groups; human rights campaigns in repressive societies; and non-governmental organisations improving health, education and living-standards in both the developed and developing nations.

Civil Society For All

A key feature of civil society is its universality - it affects everybody, in every nation on earth.

What Is Civil Society? looks back at how the concept originated around 2500 years ago in ancient Greece and Rome, how it developed in Europe during the Enlightenment, and how it's applied today across the globe.
The series also examines examples of civil society in action worldwide - at the street, community, national and international level, and on a host of different issues. And asks whether civil society is - as its supporters claim - an essential feature of a free society?
Does it provide a social structure in nations where government is non-existent or rudimentary? And if so, should criminal networks like the Mafia's of Colombia and Russia be considered as part of civil society?

Future Societies

It's also a term that we're all going to hear much more often in future.
But what role will civil society play in a world where globalisation and marketisation are driving social, economic and political change?
What impact will the rapidly changing field of information technology have on civil society? And how will phenomena such as the greenhouse effect, international migration, population growth, and the fight against HIV and Aids all shape our ideas of civil society in the future?

These are diverse issues, but they affect everyone and they will continue to define the way that we all live.

civil society, n, polemic •
1. place where people are well behaved, considerate, active citizens; the public zone between the state and private life.
2. ADDITIONAL DEFINITION: used as a political phrase by President George W Bush and Conservative leader William Hague, to mean inter alia the adoption by religious and voluntary organisations of social work. Hague plans an Office of Civil Society.

CONTESTED USAGE: in neutral sense, civil society is unopposable, like motherhood and apple pie (even the most brutal dictator would doubtless like to claim his society was a civil one). But not everyone agrees with it in the specific political sense.

QUOTATIONS: 1. In neutral sense: "After decades of totalitarianism and centuries of autocracy, it would be silly to expect Russia to sprout a strong civil society." Economist, Nov. 2000.

2. In specific sense: "A civil society demands from each of us good will and respect, fair dealing and forgiveness." George W Bush inauguration speech, 20 Jan 2001.

2a. "Civil society is all the more important at a time when it is assumed by many that the welfare state alone can look after the needs of the vulnerable." William Hague, Nov. 2000. "Creating the responsible society" - His party's current slogan.

INDICATION THAT IT COULD BE IMPORTANT GENERAL ELECTION ISSUE: "This is the ultimate Third Way." Don Eberly, adviser to George Bush.

RELATED CONCEPTS: communitarianism (a buzzword of 1990s political ideology) - ie. emphasising needs of society and individuals' obligations to it rather than individual rights (see homepage of guru of communitarianism, Dr Amitai Etzioni on Internet links).

INTERESTING COMPARISON: "There is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women, and there are families." Margaret Thatcher, 1987, quoted in Woman's Own.
Source: www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/highlights/010705_civil.shtml

Civic vs. communitarian moral ideals

Any liberal democratic civic culture must provide resources for motivating persons who enjoy the legal status of citizens or nominal citizenship to develop the capacities proper to full cultural citizenship. What I have called the rhetorical turn in postmodern liberal political philosophy speaks to matters of intelligibility. Citizens cannot aspire to the realization of ideals they don't understand. The rhetorical turn opens the way to a new understanding of the moral ideal of citizenship, one no longer encumbered by analogies and metaphors drawn from now discredited traditions of modernist epistemology and metaphysics. But the issue of motivation remains.

Once we have gained a new understanding of the moral ideal of citizenship, one no longer burdened by the multitude of confusions produced by modernist liberal political theory, we still must generate from this new understanding resources for motivating citizens to pursue realization of that moral ideal. What sort of motivational resources might a postmodern, post-metaphysical interpretation of liberal doctrine offer?

To answer this question, we must keep in mind the general features of the characteristic way this issue was addressed by modernist liberalism. Modernist liberal political theory generated two primary motivational visions of the normative standpoint of citizenship -- what I have called the civic ethics of authenticity and the civic ethics of autonomy. These two civic moral ideals must be distinguished carefully from the sort of moral ideals generated by particularistic cultural world views -- or, what we might call communitarian moral ideals.

These modernist civic moral ideals differed from communitarian moral ideals in an number of noteworthy ways. Perhaps most importantly, they differed in the way that all civic moral ideals differ from communitarian moral ideals, i.e., by virtue of the very different cultural tasks civic and communitarian moral ideals perform. Let us briefly examine here these two very different cultural tasks.

The secondary moral language of civic culture

Modernist civic moral ideals must be distinguished from communitarian moral ideals in general because, like all civic moral ideals, they had a very different sort of cultural task to perform. The task of a civic moral ideal is to present the normative standpoint of citizenship -- the standpoint of free and equal individuality -- as an ideal worthy of realization, an object of desire worthy of attainment. This is a tougher sell than it might seem.

Liberal democratic civic culture is always a countervailing culture. It is addressed to citizens who have already been shaped in their desire and self-understanding by the moral standards of the particularistic cultural communities to which they belong. The inculcation of communitarian moral ideals begins virtually at birth, in the context of family life. Because families generally belong to larger ethnic, class, and religious communities, the values and world views proper to those communities are transmitted by the earliest processes of socialization. They are learned along with the learning of a first language and begin to shape desire, feeling, and self-understanding long before powers of critical reflection develop.

By comparison, civic educational processes generally begin to be felt (if at all) relatively late. The language associated with civic moral ideals is always a second moral language and, as is always the case in the learning of a second language (unlike the learning of a first language), the effort involved in learning it requires special justification. Thus, civic moral ideals are a tough sell because they always address an audience previously and continuously shaped by diverse and conflicting communitarian moral ideals.

But they are a tough sell also for a more important reason. Civic moral ideals are not designed to replace communitarian moral ideals. The process of adopting and internalizing civic moral ideals is not a process of conversion from one totalizing conception of the good life to another. Rather, civic identity exists only as a modification of communitarian identity. The secondary moral language associated with civic moral ideals is parasitic upon the primary moral language associated with communitarian moral

ideals. The secondary moral language presupposes and remains dependent upon the primary, but renders that primary moral language richer, more complex, and more ambiguous.

Full attainment of a civic identity requires the adoption of a standpoint and a set of norms that remain in a more or less permanent state of tension and conflict with the standpoint and values proper to communitarian moral ideals. For liberals, this state of tension and conflict is good. Explaining to non-liberals why it is good is something else.

The totalizing character of communitarian moral ideals

Civic moral ideals are not designed to replace communitarian moral ideals because the normative standpoint and moral language proper to citizenship pertains only to membership and participation in the public sphere of a liberal democratic political community, a community that encompasses a multiplicity of diverse cultural communities.

Such a political community comes into existence in order to achieve and maintain the conditions for a just and free pursuit of happiness. It would be pointless for such a civic community to come into existence only then to force upon its members a particular ideal of happiness. A liberal democracy leaves that question largely undecided. It does not require its members to pursue any specific totalizing conception of the good life.

On the other hand, the opposite is true in the case of particularistic cultural communities. They are defined by a global way of life, governed by an encompassing conception of the good, united by a common sense of what is important in life and what is not. Their traditions of belief and practice provide an interpretive framework within which the fundamental issues of human life -- sex, friendship, work, suffering, sin, death, and salvation -- are given specific order and meaning.

From the viewpoint of the civic community, such cultural communities exist in order to nurture, direct, and support the pursuit of happiness. Such communities generate moral ideals, ranking systems, hierarchies, virtue concepts, and standards of excellence that shape and order human desire. It is always to an audience whose desire and self-understanding has previously been and is continuously being shaped by such communities that civic moral ideals must persuasively speak. The message that they must successfully deliver is not an easy one either to hear or to accept.

The members of particular ethnic, class and religious communities are first of all, say, French, bourgeois, and Catholic. Such communitarian identities are inseparable from the communitarian moral ideals and local traditions that have produced them. The moral language proper to such identities and moral ideals is teleological — i.e., it defines the most basic and encompassing perspective of life as a field of aspiration, in terms of a hierarchy of ends. It assigns meaning and rank to human qualities and actions by referring these to a final good. This moral language provides the vocabulary and generates the descriptions that guide everyday life.

Civic identity as the capacity to externalize communitarian moral ideals

Civic identities and civic moral ideals differ above all in this respect. The civic community exists in order to secure the conditions for a just and free pursuit of happiness. The moral language associated with civic moral ideals is a moral language that provides the vocabulary and generates the descriptions appropriate to this political purpose. It is the moral language proper to the public sphere of a liberal democracy. Within the public sphere, citizens, who are otherwise members of particularistic cultural communities, meet and cooperate in order to realize and maintain the conditions for a just and free pursuit of happiness.

As participants in the liberal democratic public sphere, citizens must not understand themselves primarily as French, bourgeois, and Catholic (or whatever), but rather as free and equal individuals. In

order to become citizens who are qualified to participate in the public sphere and to act positively to achieve the goals proper to it, they must learn to treat themselves and one another as free and equal individuals -- i.e., as persons whose identity and rank is not wholly or finally determined by identities and ranks assigned to them within particularistic cultural communities. The task of civic moral ideals is to provide the motivational resources that nurture, direct, and support this civic transformation of desire and self-understanding.

As we have noted, this is a large order. The dispositions and attitudes that a civic moral ideal must nurture and support require of citizens a complex moral, intellectual, and linguistic balancing act. While affirming and remaining deeply committed to their communitarian identities and moral ideals, they must be able to externalize or put aside those identities and ideals sufficiently to speak to, respect, and act in concert with fellow citizens whose communitarian identities and ideals differ greatly from theirs.

Attainment of this capacity to put aside or to unplug the primary moral language and moral identity that give meaning and direction to everyday life is an extraordinary moral and linguistic accomplishment. The struggle to achieve the insight and judgment necessary to develop this capacity fully is fraught with danger and difficulty. This struggle is the source of the moral pathos of citizenship. The rhetorical task of a civic moral ideal is to produce in citizens a desire for this accomplishment strong enough to permit them to persevere in this struggle.

Source; Philosophy and Civil Society (Tom Bridges)
Professor of Philosophy
Montclair State University (Upper Montclair, NJ, USA)
Website: http://www.civsoc.com/nature/nature3.html

Reader Mike Burton adds: *Politicians should study politics. The term "civil society" has been in use for many years - I always associated it with Gramsci, but I think others used it before him. If it is now being used to denote "place where people are well behaved, considerate", ie society where people are civil, then the dumbing down process has gone further than I thought.*