

**BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY EAST OF ELBE:  
Perspectives, Problems and Prospects in Transitional Societies.**

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## Concept Paper:

Despite the real and ideological denotations of the concept of "civil society", basic confusion about the meaning and implications of the concept remains, mostly excluding the Mafia and including stamp collectors as well as bowling clubs. Concepts actually form not only our perception of social reality but to some extent social reality as such. Thus social science tends to become a battlefield for the interpretation and launching of concepts. "What is civil society?" must be one of the most frequent titles for book chapters and articles during the last decade.

To Hegel it meant the public sphere at large, while in modern welfare state research it rather refers to something small scale with visible responsibilities and interpersonal links for social control, the parish, village or even family, or *Gemeinschaft* rather than *Gesellschaft*, to invoke Tönnies's classic terminology. In Poland both magnitudes might be viable, since the Polish nation survived because the church substituted a legitimate national state structure, yet the social movement of Solidarity sometimes is spoken of as the beginning of civil society in Poland. What the concept meant to the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers remains a matter of interpretation, while the American notion has been inspired by diverse sources, such as Greek Antiquity, Samuel Pufendorf, as well as Habermas (Allan Wolfe) - and American pragmatist philosophy.

There are reasons to scrutinize the "communitarian" notion of civil society, how parties and civil associations on the sub-state level might be understood as part of an intermediary structure in the process of democratization. There is something lacking in a democracy implemented "from above" by a strong state. How is this lacuna to be filled?: by more liberal constitutionalism, interpersonal trust, and/or various civil associations (NGOs).

What is slowly eroding West of Elbe is now being built East of Elbe. There is no necessary contradiction involved, from a perspective of historical relativism. If the parties did not exist we had to reinvent them, or some similar intermediary structure between the people and the legislature. In the USA the political parties as such have for long been without power, yet filling their basic function well in election times, in what appears as a well functioning democracy on the local level, albeit more or less crippled on the national level, quite in line with the hegemonic creed (American Exceptionalism, as described by S M Lipset [1996]). In countries such as Germany and Sweden party membership has dropped dramatically the last decade and the big parties are "under fire" for oligarchic tendencies (only to mention Richard Weizsäcker and Wilhelm Hennis).

In post-Enlightenment Modernity the incommensurability of ultimate values is a painful insight, "the seamy side of scientific value relativism" (Arnold Brecht 1959). Yet, the value deficit in increasingly fragmentaristic societies must find remedies or substitutes, a basic problem area of democratic society. In most places around the globe Democracy has replaced Christianity or various totalitarian ideologies as the common value community ("overrideology"), although with a variety of transitional arrangements. Already de Tocqueville was painfully aware of a totalitarian element in mass democracy, which is moreover verified in the Soviet experiment (and previously in the French Revolution). Yet some common "body of beliefs" (Shils) constituting a basic consensus is required for civic culture and civil society. Often these common values are embodied in religious traditions, as a medium for legitimacy.

There are obstacles along the route to a democratic culture. Trust in just institutions is crucial in order to bring about a democratic ambience, something that requires: - trustworthy institutions. Democracy is a plant to water every day and constantly under threat also West of Elbe, from uncontrolled experts, "iron triangles", oligarchic tendencies, etc. Yet the legitimacy of any stable order has many sources, including the individual, thus creating a tension between utilitarian "free riders" and the civility and citizen creed that makes society hang together and "tick".

For one thing, the new post-communist nations East of Elbe have been victims of invading (sometimes invited) Western intellectuals in search for a cause, trying to export shock therapy of a utilitarian liberal kind - or various notions of civil society. In Northwestern Europe social engineering peaked between the 30s and 60s, when contacts between power and intellectuals were still intense (Eyerman 1985) and with a considerable personal overlap. The intellectuals - domestic and foreign - form a pivotal stratum with a dubious role in relation to the political power.

**What are the main obstacles for the pursuit of successful transitions to pluralist democracy (or polyarchy)? How are corruption and "rent seeking" to be purged from public institutions? What is the role of "civil society" in such endeavors? These questions should be addressed from a comparative perspective.**

As a comparative case Russia appears as crucial, for a number of reasons. Russia has twice been victim of macro scale social experiments, trying to implement ideological visions of first collectivism and state interventionism vs a rather extreme form of liberal market orientation in the early 90s. From a traditional Russian perspective both communism as well as liberal capitalism must appear as foreign penetration, violating a domestic legacy with deep roots. However, the mir-tradition for local participation never promoted innovation and development.

The decomposition of the Soviet empire is the first time in world history in which an empire leaves the scene without preceding lost wars, which makes the Russian experience unique. The communist collapse, however, is nevertheless indicative of a more general proposition, namely that modern societies cannot rely on merely ideological legitimacy, with preserved stability - this is in fact recurrently confirmed, ever since the short reign of Savonarola in Florence, in the 1490s.

The Russian situation remains not only momentous but also opaque. In media reports we read time and again about the clouds over Moscow now finally gradually evaporating. However, most scholars express deep pessimism, due to the lack of civil society and intermediary structures. Democracy is merely a "theatre" with little popular support, albeit necessary to satisfy the creditors and secure foreign investments and World Bank loans. However, the capital that escapes Russia probably outnumbers the inflow 5 to 1.

It is now time for a retrospective evaluation of post 1989 events. What are the problems and prospects for Russian plebiscitary rule to result in a polyarchy and legal order with calculability and respect for individual rights, with citizens instead of subjects and a functioning legal system? What risks are there for a "reverse shift" (which to some extent has already occurred)? Russia was never a Rechtsstaat and democracy has a bad name (compare demokrad and dermokrat). No stable party system is in sight.

The Russian experience from a comparative perspective provides fuel for historical "long lines", also involving cultural (religious) factors, such as the famous and very momentous "1054-divide".

"Post 1989" has ceased to be a recent concept; rather it is now turning into "recent history". It is unclear if the unification of Germany and the implosion of the Soviet union means the end of history or the return of history; confusingly there are numerous indications for both interpretations. The many secessions and nation buildings demonstrate the power of old forces in history. Liberal constitutionalism has been victorious to death and has few articulate enemies, in sharp contrast to the situation in the 20th century, with many cases of weak democracies in which the dominant political actors were opposed to the very system (cases such as the German Weimar-republic and France after WW2).

Die Wende 1989 and the sudden Soviet implosion, as well as the - after all - relatively peaceful ensuing secessions, taught us that prediction is not the strong side of scholarly endeavors in history and sociology. As Lord Dahrendorf once remarked, the bankruptcy of the communist system did not bring modern Western capitalism - but an open society and an open future.

*The organizers of the First Edmund Mokrzycki Symposium*