

# The Idea of Civil Society in Gramsci and Havel

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Can I stress that this was not originally intended as a full-length paper, but as a short reflection for a 15-minute slot. Accordingly you will have to forgive me for expanding the argument with a number of quotations.

The subject of our conference is 'civil society' and my aim is to look at the contributions of two of Europe's most influential thinkers - Antonio Gramsci and Václav Havel - to our understanding of this concept. It seems to me that the idea of civil society has never been more necessary, as a tool for decoding our cultural practices. But at the same time it is under enormous threat in the current climate. Let me offer three examples from the *Guardian* newspaper of 4 October 2011.

Hegemony is central to Gramsci's explanation of the working of civil society. In an article entitled 'On the world stage, Obama the idealist has taken fright', Simon Tisdall comments:

At home, Obama is primarily associated with hard times: only 34% of voters approve of his handling of the economy, according to a recent poll. Abroad his presidency has come to stand for impotence and incompetence. He promised new beginnings; what he has delivered, for the most part, is waffle, dither and drift. If this verdict seems harsh, take a quick tour round the globe. Everywhere the pillars of American superpower are crumbling. The old habit of hegemony, formed in the post-war decades and confirmed in 1989 as soviet power imploded, is fading as fast as a Honolulu sunset.

The second quotation, from an article by Luke Harding, is about the hegemonic tendencies within Russia that resulted from the implosion of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. It has led as we know to a small number of oligarchs exploiting legal and structural loopholes to enrich themselves. Unsurprisingly two of them have fallen out over this, and this has been played out in a London courtroom. On the one side, Boris Berezovsky; on the other Roman Abramovich. Harding reports Berezovsky's barrister's comments:

The two men were good friends until Berezovsky, who has adopted a high political profile in Russia, not least through his control of certain media outlets, fell out with those in the Kremlin and was forced to leave his home and create a new life abroad... Abramovich was left with the choice of remaining loyal to his old friend or seeking to profit from his difficulties... Abramovich picked the latter route, and told Berezovsky that he had to sell his interests in the Russian oil company Sibneft at a knockdown price. If he refused, people in the Kremlin led by Putin would expropriate them, Abramovich allegedly warned.

Attacking such corrupt political patronage was an essential part of Havel's reflections on the post-Prague Spring Czechoslovak communist regime in his plays and writings.

It is easy to be critical of other societies, and point to the USA's excessive influence on weaker states in international affairs, and well-connected individuals seeking to profit from structural inequalities in both communist and postcommunist societies. What of our own society? The third quotation comes from an article by Professor Peter Scott entitled 'This enthusiasm for inequality will undermine us all'. He writes:

Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson's *"The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better"*, published two years ago, hit neo-liberal economics and neo-conservative politics where it hurt... More equal societies were not just fairer but more efficient - and everyone, rich as well as poor, did better. But still the message has been resisted. Maybe there are two reasons for this. The first is that wealth generation, growth and efficiency were always a cover story. Instead of being a cruel necessity, the sad price that had to be paid, inequality, is the end, not the means. Power, privilege, hierarchy - they are the whole point.

These three extracts are examples of a particular form of power, which some have described as 'the Banking Industrial Complex'. Sadly, when Bob Diamond, former CEO of Barclays, dismissed criticism of his remuneration package with the words 'No apologies, no restraint, no shame', he appears to give credence to such a critique. But it is more than that: it seems as if 'civil society' and its guardians, notably the liberal professions, are powerless to reverse the current trend.

I witness this in my day job as Rector of a commuter parish just outside the M25 in Essex. When the Bishop of Chelmsford and his Roman Catholic colleague, the Bishop of Brentwood, offered pastoral support to the traveller community of Dale Farm in nearby Basildon, they were condemned by many local people. The phrases 'criminal underclass', 'terrified neighbours' and 'a blighted local school' were all used in the press. I have also been struck by the enthusiasm for the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove's, plans for Academies and Free Schools, which have captivated numerous parents, many from church schools. This has been much to the chagrin of some churches, teachers and an ever diminishing number of local educational officials, who fear that scarce resources are being shifted from pupils in disadvantaged areas to more affluent ones. It is difficult to disentangle motivations here. There is much talk of 'the Christian ethos' and a 'good educational environment'. But I sense that beneath this is a form of sacralising of children in our current climate, a desire to give them the best possible chances in a precarious future employment market by keeping them away from those who might restrict their opportunities. This despite evidence that shows that mixing of children from different backgrounds actually enhances their educational potential.

Do Gramsci and Havel offer significant insights into modern cultural phenomena? In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci says this:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or the State. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to those of

'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'judicial' government. The functions in question are precisely organisational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant groups' 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.

Three points need to be stressed about Gramsci's model. First, he operates within a crude base/superstructure Marxist framework. Second, when he talks of a private ensemble called civil society, this does not strictly equate with the late twentieth-century understanding of what the private sphere means. Families, churches and trade unions are not private in the later sense of civil society, indicating a shift in meaning. Implicit in the private is the sense of 'individualism', a key but hidden component in recent, especially post-Thatcher debate. Third, there is the stress on confidence. In the post-war consensus in which the welfare society was central, the respect afforded to the liberal professions reflected the central role they played. Today, the dominant grouping centres around financial institutions and includes some in the legal profession who help legitimate their position. Never have the markets in general or credit rating agencies in particular had such a hold on political and societal choices. In this changed balance of power, the liberal professions - church, education, health, social work - which seek the common good are viewed as do-gooders who have lost touch with the overarching financial realities. The private sector is seen as energetic, positive, forward-looking and the public sector as burdensome, unrealistic and opposed to change.

Gramsci anticipates this argument in *The Modern Prince*:

Too much...political realism often leads to the assertion that a statesman should only work within the limits of 'effective reality', that he should not interest himself in what 'ought to be' but only in what 'is'.

Earlier he had noted that

the more the individual is compelled to defend his own immediate physical existence, the more he will uphold and identify with the highest values of civilisation and of humanity 'in all their complexity'.

Gramsci's view of the State is instructive here and ironically appears to conform with the neo-liberal or more accurately neo-conservative positions of today. The expression 'the State as *veilleur de nuit*' corresponds to the Italian expression 'the State as policeman' and means a state whose functions are limited to the safeguarding of public order and of respect for the laws. However, as in Marx before him, this may not be permanent: 'the State will progressively reduce its own authoritarian and forcible interventions - in other words will wither away.'

Writing two generations later and sobered by the experience of 'Really Existing' socialism, Václav Havel offers a more nuanced and ethical perspective on the individual in civic society. As Jan Vladislav comments in the introduction to the book of essays *Living in Truth*,

At the heart of this wide-ranging paper [Havel] places the question of living in truth and the higher responsibility of all individuals wherever they are, but

above all in those parts of the world where the human identity is most at risk, not only from those in power but from individual human beings themselves.

In *Anti-Political Politics*, Havel contrasts Gramsci's singular notion of hegemony with 'a process of...depersonalisation of power and its reduction to a mere technology of rule and manipulation, which has a thousand masks, variants and expressions'. This process is irrational, impersonal and alienating. Against this

we must not be ashamed that we are capable of love, friendship, solidarity, sympathy and tolerance. On the contrary; we must set these fundamental dimensions of our humanity free from their 'private' exile and accept them as the only genuine starting point of meaningful human community.

This is the kernel of Havel's understanding of civil society.

Finally Rowan Williams' reflections in *Lost Icons* on the meaning of civil society today are fruitful, especially when he discusses the question of choice in education. He does not underestimate the *'Realpolitik'* and how it makes a value-based approach look fragile.

Choice in this context looks remarkably like the successful assertion of will when you analyse it; and the supposed goodness of free choice in education is not very different from the desirability of my being able to defend and sustain my interest - although through another party, the child, whose interests are seen as an extension of mine.

Can I end with something personal. Last month a family solicitor living in mid-Essex talked to me at some length about his worries for the future. At the heart was his concern that a City-dominated culture is creating a new generation of commuters and consumers who do not understand or value the state sector, particularly the NHS, and local government and its provision of education and social care. He feared that the very foundations of civil society were being dismantled. Looking openly at the dynamics of power-broking relationships and the importance of individual human responsibility, as do Gramsci and Havel, gives us rich veins of analysis. Lasting change will only take place when we break out of what Rowan Williams calls our 'culture of concealment', and have the energy and determination to confront power with truth.

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