

Carme Melo-Escrihuela  
Book Review  
IN-SPIRE  
© May 2007

## The Languages of Civil Society

by Peter Wagner (ed.). *European Civil Society Series*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006, 264 pages. £42 ISBN 978-1-84545-118-9 Hb., £17,50 ISBN 978-1-84545-119-6 Pb.

(Reviewed by Carme Melo-Escrihuela, SPIRE, Keele University, May 2007)

The civil society discourse has experienced a renewed interest since the end of the century, with a definite proliferation of academic and public debates over the past two decades. *The Languages of Civil Society* presents itself as a contribution to those debates. It investigates the possibilities of civil society and its relation to other political concepts. Edited by Peter Wagner, this volume is the result of a European Union funded research project –“Towards a European Civil Society”- which brought together scholars from different countries under the framework of the “Civil Society Network”, supervised by Dieter Gosewinkel and Jürgen Kocka.

The aim of the book is to shed light on the background of the concept of civil society and its evolution in order to address some of the key associated issues. The contributors' main point is that the study of civil society in different contexts in Europe since antiquity, together with further developments in other regions of the world, can be presented as a way to address the political problems posed by modernity. In addition, the volume seeks to explore the role that civil society played –and still plays- in historical and current debates about the conditions for liberty, democracy and collective self-determination. Both overarching arguments, although developed throughout the book, are further elaborated in the last chapter, which offers a unified and linear reading of all the individual chapters.

As many contributors to debates about civil society claim, the concept is a deeply historical one. The present volume is organized so as to reflect this historical dimension and its relevance for the analysis of contemporary societies and polities. The first part traces the history of the term 'civil society' in the light of classical and modern political writings, starting from Ancient Greece and finishing in the period of democratic revolutions. The work of authors like Aristotle, Aquinas and Leonardo Bruni (Chapter 2), and Adam Ferguson, Hegel and Tocqueville (Chapter 1) is discussed not just with regard to their contribution to the notion of civil society, but also taking into account the context in which their writings were produced and the purpose for which they were used and reinterpreted. The study of the impetus given to the concept by contemporary political theorists – such as Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis - (Chapter 9) concludes the politico-theoretical analysis of the historical development and different rebirths of civil society.

The volume examines interesting settings which have not found much attention in mainstream debates on civil society, but which have shaped, in one way or another, its contours, namely the transformations and re-interpretations the concept experienced in the context of eighteenth-century Sweden (Chapter 3), liberalism's crisis during the nineteenth-century and its subsequent transformation (Chapter 4), and Germany, both before and after the Weimar Republic (Chapter 5). Although isolated and unconnected at first sight, these three episodes provide the authors with empirical evidence to support their thesis about the chronology of the concept of civil society; that is, that the eighteenth century witnessed an expansion of the notion, followed by a period of crisis in the nineteenth century, and a decline in the early twentieth century - where it became a marginalised political discourse. The contributors point at two rebirths of civil society: the first one during the Renaissance, where it re-emerged from Ancient Greece, and the second one in the 1980s, after a period of decline in the nineteenth century. In doing so, they identify strong connections between civil society and the demands for democracy and collective self-determination, which is one of the main points made in the different essays of this collection.

Chapters 6 and 7 aim to explain the circumstances surrounding the return of the concept of civil society after its decline in the early nineteenth century. As is commonplace for most civil society theorists, the struggle in Eastern European countries during the 1980s and 1990s is claimed to have been a key site for this renewal. The contributors believe that, due to the political

disillusionment in that region, there was soon a shift towards the European Union as the polity to articulate the demands of civil society. The prospects for a European civil society and a European public sphere are, then, analyzed in Chapter 6. However, the book does not confine its analysis of the contemporary re-emergence of civil society to Europe; it also examines the use of *the languages of civil society* beyond the European socio-political spectrum. Thus, for the authors, the transformations produced in Eastern Europe soon spread to other parts of the world, such as Latin America and East Asia, where similar demands for democracy and civic liberties were being made (Chapter 7). All those transformations - referred to by the term 'civil society' by the political actors themselves - led, in turn, to the idea of a global civil society. Chapter 8 looks at this expansion of the vocabulary of civil society, as well as at the way in which previous debates were detached from the nation-state to increasingly be associated with cosmopolitan forms of governance and discussions about the democratic deficit at a world scale. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 could thus be conceptualised as showing a transition from nation-state based to global understandings of civil society, since they show how the concept was "regionalised" or related, respectively, to the European Union, East Asia and Latin America.

Overall, this is an insightful book, which will be of relevance to academics and students in the fields of political theory, philosophy and history. Besides a fine example of historical and theoretical analysis, those interested in civil society debates will find in this volume a wide range of arguments for reflection. The essays raise controversial questions, such as the lack of legitimacy and representation of civil society actors (Chapter 8), or the issue of statehood and the relationship between civil society and both the state and non-governmental organisations. Contrary to other positions held by civil society theorists like John Keane and Sunil Khilnani, the contributors advocate the separation of civil society and the state, and argue against the identification of civil society exclusively with associational life. They also warn against the use of the civil society discourse as an instrument of power and dominance and against the danger of its co-option by political elites (Chapter 6). But the most distinctive feature of their approach is the way the discussion on civil society is attached to the return of the "political problématique" of modernity, and related to the quest for collective self-determination. Although the rebirth of civil society is not enthusiastically taken for granted, as it is in other contributions to the topic, the authors present civil society as one among the possible answers to the question of legitimacy posed by political modernity.