
REVIEWS

Civil Society and its Enemies

*Eva Cox, A Truly Civil Society: 1995 Boyer Lectures,
ABC Books, Sydney, 1995*

Reviewed by Patrick Morgan

THE idea of 'civil society' has been revived to explain developments in Eastern Europe over the last few decades. Communist regimes had dissolved the myriad voluntary, non-political associations which in normal times act as a cushion between citizen and state, and replaced them with a few artificial, state-controlled bodies. This resulted in an absence of civil society — the state and its quangos combined in an alliance to dominate the citizenry. Then Solidarity in Poland and similar bodies elsewhere set to work to resurrect the natural, intermediate associations which exist in normal societies. In this new situation, citizens and civil society combined to thwart the tyrannical state structure, which, soon revealed as a hollow shell, collapsed.

In her 1995 Boyer Lectures, Eva Cox appropriates the term 'civil society' in a peculiar way. She launches a wide-ranging attack on the family, private life and the notion of individuality, while supporting an alliance between intermediate organisations and government. Thus she supports the very arrangement that civil society was developed to counter: an alliance of the powerful that can render ordinary people powerless. The meaning she gives the term is, therefore, not just misleading, but the opposite of that which is usually intended.

The post-war Western welfare state also had the problem of an over-loaded public sphere. It built up a network of government-sponsored, government-financed organisations, such as (in Australia) the ABC and the Australia Council, which made the public sector top-heavy. Concomitantly, voluntary community organisations, traditionally strong in Australia, are in decline, as a recent survey conducted for the *IPA Review* (Vol. 48, No. 2, 1995) reveals. Cox states quite unequivocally 'the state is the best hope for positive change' (p.47). This is hardly the position of an advocate of 'civil society'. What we need, given that the executive and bureaucracy have too much clout, is an alliance of the private sphere and civil society to curb such power.

Cox's main public policy position is that of state intervention. For this reason she strongly opposes the small government and deregulatory policies in favour in the past few decades. Her term of universal demonisation is 'Economic Rationalism'. Like Marxists who condemn our society as 'capitalist', this term is used mostly by opponents of these policies, and its blanket nature makes it possible to avoid detailed refutation of what is a complex series of policies involving the dis-

mantling of large government and quasi-government bureaucracies. Instead of arguing against any of these in detail, Cox simply dismisses them as aggressive, competitive and therefore masculine, the products of Economic Rational Man (the additional term of denigration being included to confirm her feminist preoccupations).

Cox sets up an opposition between the social and the economic spheres of life, as if they are necessarily competing entities, though there is no argument to show this. She favours enhancing the social side by increasing 'social capital', as she calls it, following the sociologist Robert Putnam. Social capital is the trust built up by cooperative, communal activity. This is to be a new social initiative, feminised because trusting, cooperative and inclusive. But she doesn't show how social capital operates in economic terms, except for a negative example. Advocates of law and order wrongly see crime as increasing, she believes, and advocate more goals and crime prevention measures; but this is a waste of money, because the real problem, in her view, is that the law and order advocates suffer from social distrust themselves. She concludes, 'We are left with the contradiction that a government's failure to spend on enhancing social capital will actually reduce the level of financial capital. Indeed, high social capital may well be the prerequisite for economic growth' (p.26). On the contrary, if the wheels of community life are well oiled by voluntary activity — if a community has, in Putnam's terms, high social capital — then there is *less* need for government intervention, financial or otherwise. In a recent article 'Notes on Australian Intellectual Decadence' (*Adelaide Review*, December 1995) Kenneth Minogue has shown what happens with high levels of government intervention:

Where unreality really begins to bite is in the ubiquity of politics. In Australia, wherever two or three are gathered together in any activity, a politician will infallibly pop up into their midst and cry, like Richard II: 'I will be your leader'. Aesthetic endeavours cannot be left alone, but must be subsumed under Paul Keating's creative nation. Backpackers cannot trudge along the roads of Australia without the Minister for Tourism announcing, in Cairns, a national strategy on backpacking. Wherever a special interest lobby can set up some plausible claim to justice or virtue, government will ride over it to extend its power.

The crucial question is whether Cox favours government sponsored top-down organisations or voluntary private ones. Some idea is given by the title of her third lecture: 'The Dark Side of the Warm Inner Glow: the Family and Communitarians'. She reveals her position when she says: 'The state needs to be part of creating tolerable social structures' (p.46). She is not really in favour of many community groups, who are, she believes, like the family, inner-directed, based on fear of the outside, fear of the Other, and so huddling in unhealthy intimacy. This is the dark side she alludes to. The family is damned as an agent of over-bonding, and she is scornful of 'mothers who want to experience child bearing and rearing as a continuous ecstatic experience' (p.33) (another straw target).

Any group must have a *raison d'être*; there is nothing wrong or necessarily inner-directed with this. If one set up a chess club, it is legitimate to exclude poker players. This is not being 'non-inclusive'; it simply follows from the integrity of the particular institution. Cox does not allow individuals and groups to have their own identity; she is so wholly oriented to societal aspects as to deny individuality. She says: 'I act for others so I can live with myself' (p.5), a psychologically dubious proposition. Those who do not possess personality equanimity will not acquire it from other-directed activities; they just become perpetual critics. Cox sees everything in terms of groups, classes and genders, and passes judgment on them in this generalising way. 'We define ourselves through how others see us' (p.70). This is the social reconstruction of reality.

Cox's policies have already been tried in Australia under the Cain-Kirner, Burke-Lawrence and Bannon State Labor governments in the 1980s and found wanting. These governments formed alliances with powerful, often government funded, unelected lobbies like women's groups, social welfare lobbies, and arts and multicultural outfits, who captured the ear and the purse of these governments. This is the public behaviour Cox favours. Look at the results. These neo-Keynesian hand-out governments eventually ran into fiscal crises, with adverse consequences for the genuinely needy. The lesson here was that everyone loses power when economic policies are ruinous. The low esteem politicians are now held in by ordinary Australians results from their being seen to be captives of unrepresentative groups like those Eva Cox supports.

Cox claims that she is inclusive, that she wants debate, discussion and dissent. But the word 'inclusive' is simply a rhetorical device to gain support. Who would not want to seem 'inclusive'? But is Cox really inclusive and interested in debate? She condemns but does not discuss what she opposes, such as smaller government. She pushes for compulsory policies, like government child care for all children, not because parents want it, but because it is good for children to be away from the over-bonding she alleges is associated with families. She is not tolerant of other views: those with whom she disagrees are derided as 'merchants of simple solutions' (p.27) and 'ill-informed nostalgia merchants' (p.43). As an activist for child care she says: 'We learned that translating what we did into bean counting terms meant that we could talk to the animals and make some progress' (p.77). I take it that the 'animals' are the government economists she had to convince. This is hardly inclusive language designed to increase 'social capital'.

Her views are a throwback to 1930s utopian socialism, but presented in new rhetorical guise. She wants to politicise all issues, and she looks to governments for solutions. She wants increased taxes and, like many people in protected industries like universities and social welfare lobbies, more government protection. She claims to support Hannah Arendt's notion of the *vita activa*, but this is not at all the same as Cox's *politique d'abord*. Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* made clear the dangers of politicising everything. At the beginning Cox says she wants 'to persuade those in high places' (p.1). This is the aim of the lobbyist. Ordinary Australians are not addressed. Cox aligns herself with Arendt as Jew, refugee and

woman, and therefore as a pariah figure, a perpetual outsider. This is to turn herself falsely into a victim figure. She wrongly says that Arendt's 'dissenting views were often ignored because they were different from the prevalent male writings of that time' (p.7). The *Times Literary Supplement* of 6 October 1995 published a list of the 100 most influential books since World War II, and two of Arendt's were on the list. Cox was constantly called upon for her opinions during the recent federal election and was invited to give the Boyer lectures — hardly a case of marginalisation.

These lectures set up lots of polarities: women versus men, public versus private, social versus economic, inclusive versus exclusive, always with the former favoured and latter denigrated, so that the argument is determined in advance. This is a self-enclosed ideological merry-go-round with diminishing contact with reality. When she looks for an example of 'social capital', she lamely turns to the writing of her own Boyer Lectures and the group of women who helped her prepare them. This reveals the self-referential nature of her enterprise. One of her helpers was Geraldine Doogue of the ABC, the sponsor of the lectures. This is an example of the blurring of functions caused by networking, which makes independent views impossible. It is not surprising that the views expressed here are those beloved of the ABC.

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