

Between State and Market

*Ernest Gellner, Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals,
Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994*

Reviewed by Mark Lyons

THE collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has led to a renewed interest in civil society. As articulated by intellectuals in Eastern Europe before the 1989 revolutions, civil society is that public space outside the state where people can freely associate to pursue shared interests. It was a space which communist regimes sought to extinguish. Civil society barely existed, and hardly at all publicly, under those regimes.

The late Ernest Gellner, who was a distinguished philosopher and social anthropologist, and Research Professor at the Central Eastern European University in Prague since 1991, argues that civil society is a condition of liberty and seeks to explicate it by reviewing its three rivals. According to Gellner, civil society emerged as a fortunate consequence of the Protestant reformation and industrialisation in Western Europe. Its prototype could be found in the commercial city states that emerged in the late middle ages. In these city states, one of the essential characteristics of civil society was established: tolerance. The pursuit of wealth through trade generally discourages domination by either priest or prince. In the division of labour of emerging capitalism and industrialisation, ruling, soldiering and preaching became merely forms of employment, with their own rewards. Continual and exponential economic growth meant that these rewards were sufficient to weaken the temptation to dominate a whole society. A crucial creation of this emerging world, one which established the basis of civil society, was 'modular man', people who had a capacity to police themselves and to associate for the pursuit of limited goals without needing to refer to an overarching total world view or ideology (pp.99-100).

Another essential precondition of civil society, according to Gellner, was nationalism and the emergence of strong nation states. Western European nationalism created, and was created by, language communities that spread a common 'high culture' within the boundaries of the nation. Civil society institutions were important creators and creations of this nationalism. Strong but not dominant regimes protected the nascent institution of civil society within each nation, despite some occasional other disastrous consequences.

Gellner contrasts these liberal societies with three other social formations that do not permit civil society. The first contrast is with the various segmentary communities of isolated tribes and villages. These societies, more common in the past than now, were characterised by highly prescriptive sets of mutual obligations, producing a 'tyranny of cousins' (p.7). Another form of tyranny was that produced by communist regimes with their totalising secular ideology. Gellner's third threat to civil society is Islam, with its strong tendency towards establishing an *umma*, an overall community based on shared faith and implementation of its laws, inter-

preted by its theologian-jurists, the *ulama*. The expansion of Islam, Gellner argues, represents the main modern threat to the spread of civil society.

Conditions of Liberty is a challenging and sometimes frustrating book. It reads more like a series of overlapping essays rather than a single, fully considered and articulated thesis. It has at least two important gaps. One concerns Islam. Gellner is certainly familiar with the Islamic societies of North Africa and the Middle East. Yet the followers of Islam are more numerous in south and south-east Asia. Indonesia is the world's largest Islamic nation. It is not at all clear that the social and economic conditions of the Middle East that encourage an intolerant fundamentalism and the kind of fundamentalist regime that is found in Iran are present throughout the entire Islamic world.

The second gap concerns the relationship between civil society and the economy. Most East European writings about civil society define it in terms of associations that act separately from the state; civil society thus includes private firms as well as unions, sports clubs and churches. Other writings about civil society, especially from the Asian region, distinguish civil society from both state and market, conceiving of it in terms of private non-profit associations which occupy the public space between state and market and which are needed to prevent the domination of either.

Gellner seems to share this latter position, but he does not explore it as fully as he might. He writes at one point about the importance of economic decentralisation in the development of western, capitalist, civil society. But later he acknowledges that capitalist economic development is so powerful that it produces its own distinctive tyranny unless it is checked by state institutions. He says, clearly, that successful economies will be mixed economies. This seems correct. Yet the power of capitalist development poses another problem that he does not address: the way economic globalisation is reducing the power of the nation state. This process might, as some suggest, create a democratic deficit, a disillusionment with national states and a revival of regional and local concerns and interests. Such a new local democracy movement could be characterised by a growth in local groups and associations, fuelled by and fuelling a stronger civil society. But the growing global reach of a few huge corporations and the extraordinary if undirected power of the money traders who share a common ideology pose new challenges to both the state (particularly international state institutions) and to civil society.

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