Interview with Michael Edwards

This Way to the Good Society

In recent months a new wave of democracy has swept the world from Iraq to Lebanon to Ukraine. Underlying many of these breakthroughs has been the development of more robust civil societies. But what exactly is civil society and why is it important? Michael Edwards, who directs the Ford Foundation's Governance and Civil Society programs, examines this question in his new book, *Civil Society* (Polity Press/Blackwell, 2004). Following are excerpts from a conversation Edwards had with the Ford Foundation Report.

What does the term "civil society" really mean?

The term goes back to Aristotle, but dates in contemporary times to the fall of the Berlin Wall. People in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union latched onto it as they struggled to find a new vision for their societies. They believed that independent citizens can change the world and that freedom and democracy could grow around small circles of dissidents—an idea that dates to Alexis de Tocqueville. When he came to America in the 19th century, Tocqueville saw groups of American citizens coming together voluntarily to fashion a new society in a new world. In the former Soviet bloc, small circles came together, gradually formed wider circles of resistance, and finally overthrew an authoritarian state.

But the other meanings of civil society are also important—Aristotle's ideal of the "good society," that citizens should always be striving to create, and, more recently, the notion of the "public sphere," in which citizens argue about what makes their societies "good."

Why is it important to understand these different meanings?

Much confusion has been generated because these three understandings are often mixed together. Voluntary associations are conflated with the "good society" and the notion of the public sphere is ignored. That's a bad recipe for effective public policy.

TIM GRAJEK/VEER

Has the size and the scope of civil society changed?

The exponential growth in the number of voluntary organizations worldwide has helped bring the concept of civil society back in fashion. Over the last 10 or 15 years, they moved from relative obscurity to center stage in international debates. Nearly 90 percent of today's transnational non-governmental networks were formed in the last 30 years. We've seen the same trend in almost every country apart from authoritarian states. Money going to these groups also rose dramatically, partly driving the process and partly in response to it.

What other trends have given civil society traction?

We're in a new phase in terms of how societies think about and organize themselves. In the 1960's and 70's, we were very much government led, both in the West and in developing countries. It was the era of the welfare state in the North and state-led development in the South. In the 1980's and early 1990's there was a countertrend, and many saw market-led growth and development as the solution. It was the era of Reaganomics and Thatchernomics in the North and structural adjustment in the South.

In the early to mid-1990's there was another countertrend, which held that the previous phases had left us with either the deadening effects of too much state intervention, or the inequality of too much reliance on the market. "We need a third approach," people said, and civil society became the missing ingredient—the new solution on the grand scale of political ideas. Civil society would rescue us from the state-led and market-led models of the past. The third approach—a combination of the state, the market and civil society—is supported by liberals and conservatives alike.

Let's go back to voluntary associations. How important are they?

Acting alone, voluntary associations have never achieved the good society—a society with political equality, low levels of poverty and discrimination, respect for human rights and a sense of peaceful coexistence. These have come about when all of a society's institutions—voluntary associations, government and the market—have worked in partnership and pulled in the same direction. That's the path to the good society.

Is that happening now?

Absolutely. International donor policy on civil society is almost entirely about building nongovernmental organizations that are just a means to an end. The end—the good society—is what should be motivating us. Otherwise the debate gets buried in ideology: Big government is bad, voluntary associations are good. Business is good, government is bad.

What role do voluntary associations play in a democracy?

There's no simple equation. You have to consider the context and the times. Many people assume that the more opportunities people have to participate, the better. But there's no proof that more civil society organizations will necessarily deliver a better democracy. Rwanda, for example, had Africa's highest density of voluntary associations at the time of the genocide. During 20 years of civil war, Lebanon had very well-developed voluntary associations, but many fomented conflict instead of mitigating it. In the United States, we've got no shortage of voluntary associations—a strong environmental lobby, women's rights lobby, gun lobby, and so on, but they're all focused on a narrow agenda. We have few bridges across the lines of party affiliation, race, gender or identity, and little sense of the common interest. So even though single-issue advocacy groups provide routes to public participation, some say they can lead to gridlock in the system.

In your book, you emphasize the school of thought that prioritizes the public sphere in civil society. Why?

You almost never hear the words "public sphere" uttered in most discussions about civil society, even though it's one of our most important ideas about democracy. Embedded in the idea of the public sphere is the conviction that, by talking to each other, groups of citizens can invent a new political consensus. The reality of today, however, is that public discussion is eroded and impoverished, and the public interest is therefore impossible to create and maintain.

Investing in civil society: false hope or new horizon?

How is public discussion eroded and why?

Discussion is polarized before it even starts, and not just in the United States. You're a Republican, I'm a Democrat; you're a faith-based person, I'm a secularist; I'm an environmental advocate, you're an advocate for industry. We reinforce our different opinions, but rarely change them. But if we want to solve the big policy problems like health care, welfare and the future of public education, we have to challenge our views in order to come to a sense of what we hold in common.

What would that look like?

Perhaps a new political party or a new, cross-party consensus within the current system. People crossing the aisle, supporting a common platform and taking it through Congress. That's the virtue of civil society thinking. It doesn't ignore or dismiss politics, but it says there is something above and beyond partisanship that good citizens should always strive for.

You've written extensively about the rights and responsibilities of NGOs. Why this focus?

When we talk about the increasing role of voluntary associations we have to face the reality that not all of them work for the public good. So, although every citizen has the right to associate with other citizens—that's part of living in a free and democratic society—the responsibilities that go with those rights should also be acknowledged and monitored. To some that sounds like a constraint to the freedom to associate, but I think it is just an acknowledgement that the more you fulfill your responsibilities, the more legitimacy you have in claiming your rights.

What is the best way to enforce the idea that those rights come with responsibilities?

Some argue that self regulation is best because government intrusion is always politically motivated. I think self regulation is vital but has its limits. We don't trust business, the media or government to police themselves. Civil society needs checks and balances too—meaning some government oversight in case the system of self regulation goes wrong.

I like the idea of a formal compact between voluntary associations and government. It's being tried out right now in the U.K., Australia and Canada. The parties are sitting down and hammering out a regulatory framework that's acceptable to both of them.

In your book, you ask if civil society is the big idea for the 21st century or a false horizon. What do you mean?

We all have a tendency to grasp for big ideas that will solve, once and for all, the dilemmas of the last 2,000 years—poverty, discrimination, citizenship, rights, democracy and peace. Because the alternative—a never-ending struggle to experiment and try things out and learn—is too painful, we're always searching for the next big idea. Part of the current vogue for civil society is simply that. People have latched onto it as the new magic bullet. Inevitably, they're going to be disappointed, because there is no big idea out there that will liberate us from all our ills. But that doesn't mean civil society holds no promise. If we are clear-headed and rigorous, it's a good framework for doing useful things for the world over the next 20 or 30 years, and that's good enough for me. ■