

# Fast Forward to Fragmented Futures: The Likely Futures of Governance and Civil Society

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*Alternative futures of civil society are posited. Two sets of oppositions - the capitalist-materialistic and the ecological-spiritual - are used to understand the nature of the conflict ahead. Also crucial in understanding the future are two central forces - technological fundamentalism and violence towards others.*

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Predicting the future is always a hazardous task. More so when the subject under consideration is a problematic conceptual-empirical construct like 'civil society', whose very meaning, constitution and significance is a matter of much disagreement and debate among scholars. Before I put forward - with some trepidation - the outpourings of my imagination on the futures of governance and civil society, I would take the help of Gurpreet Mahajan<sup>1</sup> to outline, briefly, the ideological history of 'civil society'.

### *Civil Society: Past and Present*

In the thirteenth century, when the Roman Catholic Church dominated socio-political life, the concept was coined to refer to a zone free from papal influence, governed by laws that were not of divine origin. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the term became part of general political discourse, and was invoked to define a democratic form of government rooted in the rights of citizens. This, primarily, was the way in which the term was used till the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the democratic state was seen as 'a symbol of public freedom, challenging closed systems of stratification and traditional forms of organisations rooted in the principle of hierarchy and exclusive privileges'.<sup>2</sup>

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writes Mahajan, has witnessed a loss of faith in the state and a reconsideration of the concept of civil society, in three different contexts. These three newer ways of looking at the state and civil society, which she discusses, are relevant for us in understanding the present and the future of civil society. In the Marxian framework, civil society, which sanctions the right to private property, represents the interests of the ruling classes rather than the universal interests of society as a whole. Gramsci developed this idea further, associating the state with instruments of direct coercion and civil society with the creation of hegemony.

The champions of 'associative democracy' have looked at civil society in another way, investing hope for democracy in the agencies of civil society, against the centralised and highly bureaucratised modern state. Strong, voluntary communities provide, in their view, the means of 'delivering a decentralised welfare state and regenerating regional economies'.<sup>3</sup> A third conception of civil society and the state has emerged in socialist societies faced with totalitarian regimes. In this conception, a variety of bodies and associations, from labour unions to the catholic church, are put under the category of civil society and are seen as contributing to the struggle for political democracy, against the totalitarian state.

But Mahajan cautions us that voluntary associations of people and inter-

mediary bodies between the state and the individual can, by themselves, not assure the universality of law and upholding of rights, which can only be done by a democratic constitutional state.

This understanding of the intellectual lineage of civil society and its current avatars (manifestations) is, as we shall see below, valuable for us in trying to figure out the likely futures of governance (the function that the state performs) and of civil society.

### *Market and Civil Society*

While the relationship between state and civil society has been adequately discussed, the relationship between civil society and the market has not been considered adequately. For instance, in one recent definition of civil society, the existence of the market and of classes are considered as two of the essential dimensions of civil society, the other dimensions being individualism, privacy and pluralism.<sup>4</sup> Whatever may have been the historical usefulness of such a conception, this certainly seems to be an inadequate and distorted notion of civil society today, and from the point of view of the future. The central thrust in the idea of civil society has been the autonomy and rights of the individual vis-a-vis the state. However, the reality of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is the rise of large economic corporations, which have become the new threats to the autonomy and rights of individuals and communities. In the developing world, one of the most significant political phenomena is the rise of people's movements to protect their livelihoods, natural resources, knowledge systems and human rights. The oppressors in such situations are, very often, business corporations, particularly MNCs, in association with the state. Consequently, it would be absurd to collapse powerful economic actors and ordinary citizens associating to protect their rights or interests, within the single conception of civil society.

Writes David Korten, for instance, "Political rights belong to people not to artificial legal entities. As instruments of public policy, corporations should obey the laws decided by the citizenry, not write those laws. Corporations' claim to the same constitutional rights as natural born persons is a gross distortion of the concept of rights."<sup>5</sup>

### *Futures of Governance and Civil Society: The Roots of Fragmentation*

Based on the above, it appears useful to conceptualise civil society as the third system<sup>6</sup> or sector of society, as against the state and the market. This is

not to say that civil society has necessarily to be antagonistic to the state or the market. Indeed, as mentioned above, a democratic state, which upholds the rights of individuals and the universality of law may be essential for a healthy civil society. Similarly, the market or economic system, by generating wealth, may facilitate the voluntary pursuit of interests and ideas by associations of individuals.

Thus, there are two sets of oppositions within which the nature and vibrancy of civil society may be located. The first opposition is between democracy and dictatorship. The second opposition is between a social order that privileges economic activity, profits and the material aspects of living, on the one hand and one that emphasises ecological sustainability, sharing and a spiritualist orientation towards living, on the other. The dichotomy between a capitalist-materialist orientation and an ecological-spiritual orientation is elaborated in the table below. It is further reinforced by the remarkable advances in technology and by the manner in which these have been exploited by the capitalist economies - developments whose consequences for governance and civil society have been discussed below.

Capitalist-materialist orientation	Ecological-spiritualist orientation
Profit oriented	Subsistence oriented
Spiralling wants	Limited needs
More material choices, less meaning	Less material choices, more meaning
Instantaneous satisfaction of needs	Restraint and time-lag in need satisfaction
Increasing interaction with intelligent animals machines/ human surrogates	Interaction with human beings and
Outward, expansionist orientation	Inward orientation
Dominated by zealots <sup>7</sup> and technological fundamentalists	Dominated by mugs and technological restraint
Religious-ethical principles ignored	Religious-ethical principles important
Mediated relationships; virtual reality	Face-to-face relationships

It is not the case that such an opposition is completely a black and white affair; that one society can be classified as completely materialist while another as completely spiritualist; yet these oppositions are important to understand the dominant tendencies in a society or a section of people. Thus, besides the clash of civilisations that Huntington<sup>8</sup> has predicted, there may well be the clash, within each society and within global society as a whole, between the capitalists-materialists and the ecologists-spiritualists. And there may well be strong links between these two kinds of clashes. The overriding success of the materialists in some societies will fuel the cultural clash between different civilisations.

Also, based on these two sets of oppositions - democratic/dictatorial and spiritual/materialist - it is possible to draw up a simple matrix, which points towards the nature and vibrancy of civil society in different societies. It is my hunch that civil society is likely to be the strongest in societies which fall into the first quadrant, followed by the second and third quadrants, and is likely to be the weakest, or non-existent, in societies that fall in the last quadrant.

Again, it may be difficult to neatly classify nations and societies into the four categories, but perhaps it is of some use in trying to understand the future of governance and civil society in different nation-states. India, and most nations of South Asia, for instance, would fall in quadrant one and will nurture strong civil societies in the future. Their gigantic neighbour, China, is quite likely to fall in quadrant four - and have the weakest form of civil society - although it cannot be labelled unambiguously as a materialist-capitalist society. Witness the strong religious-spiritual yearnings, with a long history, of the Chinese; the latest instance being the 70 million strong following of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which is being suppressed by the Chinese government.<sup>9</sup> The United States and most of the developed countries of Europe would fall in the second quadrant in this framework; thus they are likely to have vibrant, but not the strongest, civil societies in the future.

1. Democratic/spiritualist	2. Democratic/materialist
3. Dictatorial/spiritualist	4. Dictatorial/materialist

What will be the relationship between the different societies that fall into the four different quadrants? Clearly, the matrix points towards fragmented futures for human societies; the two sets of oppositions represent fundamental values and socio-economic-political characteristics so different that there seem to be very bleak possibilities of the emergence either of a global political authority or of an inclusive global civil society.

*The Key Forces Shaping the Future*

Alongwith the two sets of oppositions described above, there are two central forces that will shape the future of human societies, including the nature of governance and civil societies. One is technological fundamentalism - which has risen its monstrous head only in this century; the other is the ancient human proclivity to indulge in violent, armed conflict. Indeed, it is the dreadful

combination of these two, which might prove to be the nemesis of human civilisation.

Any intelligent observer can see today that we possess technological over-capacity with regard to the numerous problems that plague humankind - poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease, even the destruction of our natural resource base. Prof. Ihsan Dogrmaci writes, for instance, 'Society has devoted considerable energy and resources to developing technical inventions, and patentable devices and processes in the conventional sense. Compared to advancements in this sphere, society's accomplishments in the area of social inventions fall quite short.'<sup>10</sup>

The remarkable developments in the field of information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular, have been widely touted as the harbinger of great advancement in human and social achievements. Indeed, the possibilities that ICTs open up - in the economy, governance, education, healthcare, entertainment and so on - are endless. But these technologies have as much potential to create new forms of exclusion, new systems of social stratification, and to destroy cultural diversity as they have of creating 'digital democracy'.<sup>11</sup>

What, for instance, will be the impact on governance and on civil society once we move from the realm of man-man-nature interactions to man-man-machine-nature interactions?! Kevin Warwick is a leading light in cybernetics, who, along with his wife, has implanted a chip in his arm to explore (in an ongoing project) cutting out speech and reading each other's minds. In his words, 'A human brain is a stand-alone entity, guaranteeing a unique human identity...But a link a human brain via the Internet to other brains, both human and machine, and what of the individual then?'<sup>12</sup> Very little attention has been paid to these issues, while technology continues with its onward relentless march.

I see in these developments newer forms of human-machine interaction and communication coming into being, but, for the same reason, also the possibilities of fragmentation in civil society, as we understand it today.

The liberal thinker Francis Fukuyama, however, seems to be very optimistic at such developments. 'The open-ended character of modern natural science suggests that within the next couple of generations, biotechnology will give us tools that will allow us to accomplish what social engineers of the past failed to do. At that point, we will have abolished human beings as such. And then a new, post-human history will begin.'<sup>13</sup>

I come now to the other main threat to the future of human societies. The spectre of nuclear war has haunted us for many decades now. With the proliferation of nuclear weapons, it has become an even greater possibility. Juxtaposed with ethnic and civilisational conflicts, it poses the gravest threat to the

perpetuation of humanity. And the forces of science and technology are being harnessed in the aid of newer weapons of conflict and violence.

For instance, the British Medical Association has recently warned that rapid advances in genetics will soon transform biological weapons into potent tools of ethnic cleansing and terrorism. Launching a report on 'Biotechnology Weapons and Humanity' in January this year, the BMA warned that weapons that could distinguish between ethnic groups by exploiting tiny genetic or cellular differences between them could be a reality within a decade. Although this is not a practical possibility today, growing number of scientists are issuing warnings that such methods would soon be possible. The manufacture of these biological weapons would require experienced scientists but detailed instructions were available on the Internet.<sup>14</sup>

The implications of these developments for human societies will be evident to anyone who cares to think.

### *The Future of Global Civil Society*

What, then, is the likely future of human societies, of the nature of governance and civil society within them, and of governance and civil society at the level of global society?

Robert Heilbroner,<sup>15</sup> in his examination of visions of the future, divides history into the distant past (from the birth of human civilisation to roughly the mid-eighteenth century), yesterday (roughly, the last two hundred and fifty years) and tomorrow. It is only in the period that he calls 'yesterday' that the three great forces of science and technology, capitalism and political will have appeared. The dominant mood of looking at the future, in the distant past, he says, was resignation, during yesterday, it was hope, and today, it is apprehension. This attitude of apprehension at the turn of the millennium is, I think, fully understandable and expected.

We see a world today that is economically integrated but politically disunited. The most intractable problems that we may face in the future relate to destruction of the environment, nuclear war, the persistent expansion and globalisation of capital, leading to distorted human relationships, on the one hand and increased economic inequalities - within and between nations - on the other. Since all these problems are of a global nature, the ideal way to be able to solve them will be the formation of a global government, which will have the political authority to mediate between and keep in check the nation-states of today.

If, through an expression of the political will of the people of the world, we





- tion" in Sohail Inayatullah and Susan Leggett (eds) *Transforming Communication: Technology, Sustainability and Future Generations*, Praeger, 2000. (forthcoming) See also Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, London, Verso, 1997.
12. Lyndsay Griffiths, "Dawn of Century Brings Gadgets, Fun Sex, Telepathy", in *The Asian Age*, November 5, 1999.
  13. Francis Fukuyama, "After "End of History", Mankind's End?' *The Times of India*, June 17, 1999.
  14. "Genetic Science Could be Used for Ethnic Cleansing", in *The Hindu*, January 23, 1999.
  15. Robert Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995.

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