

The Politics of 'Civil Society' in South Africa

The Privatisation of Public Power

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical exploration of the emergence of the concept 'civil society' in the political debates surrounding South Africa's political transition to democracy since 1990. In tracing the processes of its revival in the Cold War politics of the Polish Solidarity movement, its reification as a panacea for democracy and development in Africa, an analytical framework is developed for understanding what I term the politics of 'civil society'. Building on and incorporating the critical analyses of authors such as anthropologist Chris Hann, political theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood, and African scholar Mahmood Mamdani, this thesis questions the theoretical and practical usefulness for promoting progressive political change that it has been afforded by the South African left. Adopted as a slogan of the civic movement during the initial stages of South Africa's transition from apartheid in 1991, and welcomed, largely uncritically, by an increasingly marginalised left-wing as key to promoting the transition to a socialist society, 'civil society' is examined here to illustrate how a concept which is widely perceived to speak of social empowerment in fact serves to militate against it.

A critical analysis of the South African debates on 'civil society' published throughout the transition process in journals such as *Theoria*, *Mayibuye*, *Work in Progress*, *The African Communist* illustrates the strategic importance 'civil society' came to have for the left's struggle to define its political identity and policy programme after its unbanning in February 1990. However, in its political and ideological retreat to 'civil society' and democratic socialism, the left have unwittingly served to ensure that poor and working class struggle in South Africa becomes not a direct assault on state power or even a critique of capitalism, but an accommodation to it; a counter-hegemonic struggle in the market place of ideas where the power to influence social policy will be determined by the ability to organise, gain access to financial and material resources, mediums of communication, and to compete with other powerful interests (such as internationally-funded NGOs and the institutions of capital) in this terrain. The central problem with the left's uncritical adoption of 'civil society' is that 'civil society' has not emerged within a vacuum. As the discussion of the Eastern European and African contexts in this thesis illustrate 'civil society' carries with it a conceptual and normative baggage defined by its historical relation to the development of Western capitalism. An analysis of the processes of 'civil society's' re-emergence in South Africa illustrates how this normative content shapes the character of South Africa's political transition.

Chapter One: Why 'Civil Society'?

Introduction

After almost three-quarters of a century of conceptual abandonment, relegated to the shelves of Western intellectual history, the idea of 'civil society' has re-emerged in contemporary political discourses with such a currency of usage around the world that not to give it reference in discussions of modern day politics would appear to be a misreading of historical and theoretical developments in the last quarter of our century. Beginning its revival as a political slogan under the Polish Workers Defence Committee (KOR), and later, the Solidarity social movement in that country during the late 1970s and early 1980s, 'civil society' has become key to a range of agents and forces – intellectuals, academics, social movements, political parties, NGOs, international financial institutions, even governments – their political self-understanding, and their political projects. Much faith, resources and expertise has been invested in the realm and idea of 'civil society'.

A result of the very practical success of the Eastern European 'agents of civil society', acting in their own autonomous capacity in this realm for socio-economic and political change, has led to a confident boom in the conceptual and analytical value of 'civil society'. At the core of this discursive debate is the idea that not only should it be fostered as an empirical reality in modern state and society relations, but 'civil society' should also be conceptually developed as a normative force, a 'Third Path' to change in contemporary political life. Although it is seen across the political spectrum as synonymous with the pursuit of democratisation and socio-economic development, particularly in the crisis-ridden nation-states of the 'Third World', primarily, 'civil society' is an attempt to revive the practical relevancy and efficacy of political theory to account for new developments in modern state and society relations.

Understanding the reasons for this historical process and theoretical trend in the revival of 'civil society', and thereby enabling an analysis of the concepts use and present significance to South African politics, is the central aim of this thesis. In the context of Central and Eastern European and African debates on 'civil society', this thesis presents an analytical framework not only for understanding what the revival of 'civil society' represents to modern politics in these regions, but, more importantly, how such trends and processes are reproduced and come to play a role in shaping the parameters of political debate and struggle in the context of South Africa's transition to democracy.

The South African political discourse on 'civil society' is thus part of a global, albeit Western, discursive reconceptualisation of the nature and purpose of the idea of 'civil society' in political theory and practice. Not only is it a reference to the different and contradicting intellectual traditions and ideologies which have historically informed its conceptualisation, but its revival derives

much of its impetus from the ensuing struggles which have emerged within the context of social and political change in South Africa. The aim of this thesis' exploration of 'civil society' is to show how and why, and with what results, the idea has become central to South African politics and democratic development. It aims to critically examine the concept's use and pertinence to addressing the problems of the new democratic dispensation. By demonstrating how the idea of 'civil society' is adopted and used by competing political interests – who recognise, as a result of the Polish experience, that the extent of their political power is relative to the character of their autonomy and independence and therefore support – I take issue with the general idea that the theoretical reconceptualisation of 'civil society' holds the key to democratic and progressive transformation in South Africa.

In South Africa today there is a level of public disenchantment with the new political order and frustration at the process and pace of change that seems to lead many to look back at the goals of the liberation struggle and question why the dismantling of apartheid has not translated into any substantial improvement in the quality of life. For some, this state of affairs – continuing high levels of poverty, homelessness and unemployment among the majority, the apparent inability to deal with escalating crime and violence, the impotence of the courts, the abuse of new-found power and wealth – is disappointing evidence of a 'revolution deferred'; for others, it means a continuation of struggle along new battle-lines. Certainly the optimistic levels of expectation sparked by South Africa's transition to democracy has not, further down the line, been matched by the ANC government's ability to deliver on its election promises. But how, in what is the deeply divided and unequal reality of South African society, could it be possible not to expect otherwise? South Africa, as André Brink suggested, is beginning to discover that "freedom is not utopia"¹: there are many socio-economic and mental legacies which remain obstacles to society's development, and thus many expectations which will likely suffer as a result. Unfortunately, despite the legacy of a public power which brought about political change, it seems that it will be the least privileged and, therefore, the powerless members of society who will lose out on enjoying the fruits of their labour.

As Monty Narsoo wrote during the initial stages of South Africa's transition from apartheid, in a "vision of a society where there are a thousand buds of power blooming, where there is a rich texture and depth of organisation, and where debate, creativity, innovation and self-expression abound", the coercive and unequal relations within this terrain constrain some interests while privileging others.² Eight years on this vision holds as much resonance. Despite a political struggle and discursive commitment to strengthening the autonomy and power of the least privileged in this sphere, theory has not translated into practice. The idea of 'civil society', afforded so much currency as a panacea for progressive reconstruction and democratic development in South Africa, because of

¹ A. Brink, *Reinventing a Continent*, 1996, p.254.

² M. Narsoo, 'Civil Society - A Contested Terrain', 1991, p.24.

its perceived magical quality in bringing about the collapse of Eastern European regimes and for promoting democracy and development in Africa (as in other countries of the 'Third World'), would appear to have failed those in South Africa in whose name it supposedly emerged to represent. Propagated and hotly debated as a theory of the left since the process of South Africa's political transition was initiated by the unbanning of political parties in February 1990, 'civil society' has not become a popular discourse enabling society to define its meaning and thus use it as a vehicle for their own empowerment. Instead, and strongly implying that its emergence was never conceived of as performing such a function, the idea of 'civil society' has remained the theoretical and practical domain of powerful private interests – of political parties, NGOs, well-organised and funded associations of interest groups, financial and corporate institutions of capital, intellectuals, academics, all competing to shape social policy according to their individual agendas.

This thesis is an attempt to understand and explain the reasons for these developments, to describe what I term as the 'politics of civil society'. It argues that it was in the pragmatic rush among competing political tendencies to fill the political power vacuum created by the unbannings and the subsequent demobilisation of the liberation movement, that efforts to define 'civil society', rather than the state, as the democratic expression of the common good, tended to accept uncritically the dominant liberal separation of the state from the conflated relationship of the economic and social spheres. An emphasis upon 'civil society's' autonomous and independent relationship to the state, to the extent of obscuring the critical importance unequal economic and social relations play in limiting freedom and opportunity in this so-called sphere of 'civil society', has unwittingly legitimated the dominance of a liberal democratic discourse and served to perpetuate the power of capitalist interests in shaping the new South African democracy.

Framework of the Debate

The rise of new social forces in South African society, of African struggles against the entrenched dominance of the political, economic and cultural interests of the Afrikaner white minority, made its indelible impact in the events unleashed by the historical Soweto Uprising in 1976. The period of popular struggle ignited by the organised force of previously apolitical and passive resistance since the mid-1970s reflected a conscious movement against the inequitable and exploitative structural basis of relations in South African society; an historical moment when the processes of change clearly belonged to the struggling forces in society. The positioning of anti-apartheid, liberation, democratic, workerist, and civic resistance politically challenged these relations of power, serving to undermine the apparatus of white hegemony and the legitimacy of the apartheid state. By the late 1980s the social and political order, imposed by the history of colonialism and fortified by the apartheid system, lay in turmoil. The movement of socio-economic and political forces of protest had effectively shaken the foundations of the state: creating a moment, to use Gramsci's words, "in which the conflicting

forces are formed, are assembled and take up their positions; the moment in which one ethical-political system dissolves and another is formed by fire and steel; the moment in which one system of social relations disintegrates and another rises and asserts itself".³ By the beginning of 1990 the ruling class had lost the source of its political power to the rise of public (and international) opposition, and the state could no longer govern authoritatively or legitimately because the distance between itself and society had finally become unbridgeable.

At this historical turning point, the crisis in South Africa was perceived to consist precisely in Gramsci's dictum that the old was dying and the new could not be born without the creation of a 'new civil society' and a certain type of state. What was at stake was not simply a rotation in government, but a fundamental reordering of state and society relations. It necessitated a determined intention to reconceptualise the frameworks which give meaning and analytic content to the nature and direction of political life; it required a redrawing of the social, economic and political spheres of activity; and the restoration of the means by which to regulate the divided and conflictual relations in society towards some inclusive and coherent vision of the goals of progressive change. It was in this context of social and economic division and ambiguity, of the struggles between the new social forces in the post-apartheid dispensation, that the idea of 'civil society' manifested itself in South African politics.

The refashioning of the theory 'civil society' and its use in the context of South African political analysis and debate is not as easily explained as it first appears. On the one hand, it is essentially an historically and contextually relative concept defined by its theoretical and historical relation to the development of the modern state and Western capitalism, as well as its re-emergence in analyses of developments in Eastern Europe and Africa. On the other hand, 'civil society' has been adopted strategically as normative ideal, advocated principally by the South African left-wing as a theoretical and practical vehicle for securing its socialist agenda in the transition from an 'apartheid society'. Thus, while its conceptual meaning has largely been shaped by external theoretical and political developments, its usage in South African political struggles speaks directly to, and is formulated within, the context of South Africa's political transition and the left's attempt to engage practically in the politics of socio-economic and political reconstruction and development. Understanding and explaining this reciprocal interrelation between its use in different geopolitical contexts is the central methodological aim of this thesis, for it seeks to describe how the theoretical frameworks, set out by its re-emergence in Eastern Europe and its reification in Africa, imposes limits upon 'civil society's' practical use as a progressive theory of the South African left.

In describing this trend a few preliminary points need to be made in order to place the South African debate on 'civil society' in its contemporary contextual and theoretical framework. Contrary to the theoretical and empirical predominance afforded to the state in modern political thought, which has enabled dominant groups to maintain their hegemony through exclusive concentration of political

³ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 1971, p.119

and economic power in the institutions of the state, it is widely becoming acknowledged that 'civil society' is where the authority of the state derives its legitimacy and power. The movement of subaltern social forces against the monopolisation of power by the apartheid state challenged this statist preoccupation in ways which required a fundamental revision of the theoretical and analytical frameworks in political thinking. In South African political discourse there was not only a theoretical need to reconceptualise our understanding of the processes of change, but a practical aim of reformulating the conditions – political, socio-economic, cultural – which provide the basis for order, freedom and progress. In essence, in adopting a neo-Gramscian perspective⁴, it became increasingly clear to South African intellectuals, particularly on the left, that the reconstruction of the post-apartheid order, the establishment of a new state authority, would be determined by the relations of power between the main forces in society and their ability to mobilise sufficient political and ideological power to impose their respective frameworks of the goals of change on society.⁵ Therefore, the basic premise underlying the emergence of 'civil society' in South Africa was that the identity of the new state depended upon the outcome of struggles between emerging groups in society, as the driving force of historical change.

Thus the idea of 'civil society' became central to redefining the relationship between state and society and the relationship between groups in South African society. In their endeavour many intellectuals have sought to revise the theories of either Locke, the Scottish Enlightenment, Hegel, Marx, de Toqueville, Gramsci, or combinations of these philosophies, not only, as Maxine Reitzes suggests, to "assess the contemporary validity of the tenets which inform these discourses themselves; discard those which are not appropriate, and try to accommodate those which are relevant to the re-imagining of civil society",⁶ but largely for eurocentric reasons. Most, if not all, contemporary theories of 'civil society' are largely guilty of adopting a particular classical model of 'civil society' on the dubious premise that the contemporary phenomenon under analysis can be explained in terms of a particular historical and theoretical context in European and Western development.⁷ As a result, according to Narsoo, the refashioning of the concept in South Africa (and paralleled in Africa, Latin

⁴ The use of 'civil society' among the contemporary left take Gramsci as their theoretical standard-bearer, the following statement on the politics of the subaltern forces provides the theoretical basis for this 'new revisionism': "The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political ... the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and 'civil society'. The subaltern forces, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State': their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States". See *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁵ For the most articulate presentation of this view see Mark Swilling, 'Living in the Interregnum: Crisis, Reform and the Socialist Alternative in South Africa', 1987, pp.408-36.

⁶ Maxine Reitzes, 'Civil Society, the Public Sphere and the State', 1994, p.95.

⁷ As I shall show, particularly in the African debates on 'civil society', the eurocentric and unilinear frameworks which dominate theoretical debate, tend to describe contemporary African politics and society as reflecting stages in Western historical development. Lockean, Hegelian and Tocquevillean theories of 'civil society' appear as models, according to whether analysis suggests configurations in African society should or could be described, for example, as an 'emergent pre-industrial bourgeois' (i.e., a Lockean model is assumed) or an 'emergent

America, Asia, and Eastern Europe) is “becoming ‘all things to all people’... depending on what they are trying to punt”.⁸ The South African debate over the meaning of ‘civil society’ is both a descriptive and prescriptive endeavour, it appears, as has been called in African intellectual circles, “as so many postures and prescriptions”,⁹ rather than actually seeking to examine the forces of change in South African society and on that contextual basis, developing new intellectual frameworks for theorising the redistribution of power and eliminating the relations of exploitation in society.

Here African scholar Mahmood Mamdani’s telling critique of Africanist ‘civil society’ literature holds much resonance for South African intellectuals. Mamdani argues that ‘civil society’ theories have become essentially ‘turn key projects’ of state managers or powerful interests in society who aim to consolidate political (state) power by reconstructing the authority of the state over and above subaltern interests in ‘civil society’.

(T)he real abstraction that mars the writing of the whole corpus of Africanist theory is its tendency to side-step the process of popular resistance. A marked tendency in Africanism is to consider its object as incapable of making history as of comprehending it ... Thus, the process of state formation is reconstructed in abstraction from the history of popular struggles; it is either seen as the realisation of the will of state managers or as a supra-historical realisation of some universal ethical idea, Hegel fashion.¹⁰

‘Trapped’ by the ideological frameworks developed in Western political thought, South African discourses of ‘civil society’ are theoretically framed outside of the empirical context of the social struggles in which they were born. Not only does this methodological orientation serve to lift a phenomenon out of context and process, but tends to reproduce and idealise Eurocentric universalism, “presenting European history and society as a mirror ... a universal path that all subsequent development is fated to tread”.¹¹ Such an orientation, as I shall illustrate, has a restrictive and parochial effect upon the character of ongoing struggles in South African society and politics, particularly given its uniquely diverse, rich and established cultural heritage. On the one hand, this Western liberal bias in South African political thinking ignores a whole corpus of local ideas emerging from the African continent on the issue of ‘civil society’. Mainly African, but some more critical Africanist literature on ‘civil society’ has raised many fruitful issues for analysis. They have exposed many significant contradictions and conceptual problems with adopting an historically Western concept for reconstructing the African socio-economic order, as well as for understanding the context and processes of change in the African continent.

On the other hand, but systematically related to this cultural parochialism and Eurocentrism is the ‘retreat’ of the intellectual left, who, it is argued, have abdicated their traditional role as critics of capitalism in favour of accepting established liberal traditions and institutions. In effect, by adopting

pluralist’ (i.e., a Tocquevillean model is assumed) society.

⁸ M. Narsoo, ‘Civil Society – A Contested Terrain’, 1991, p.24.

⁹ M. Mamdani, ‘A Critique of the State and Civil Society Paradigm in Africanist Studies’, 1995, p.611.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.611.

¹¹ Ibid., p.608.

'civil society' as a principle part of the left's 'new revisionism', they conveniently forget the historical relationship between liberal development and capitalist expansion. As E.M Wood argues,

Just when intellectuals of the left in the West have a rare opportunity to do something useful, if not world-historic ... What we are getting is an army of 'post-Marxists' one of whose principle functions is apparently to conceptualise away the problem of capitalism.¹²

Significantly, this incoherence and ideological retreat among the Western left, coupled with the Western liberal bias also underlies current discussions of 'civil society' in South Africa (as well, and not unsurprisingly, as in other 'developing' countries). It represents a fundamental problem upon which this thesis is based – implicit in the re-emergence of 'civil society' is the fact that the elusiveness of new notions and values underpinning 'development' and 'progress' continues to be "paralleled by ongoing insufficiencies in our theoretical understanding of what is occurring (including modern, non-Western political societies) and how to effect constructive change".¹³ In other words the dominance of Western cultural developments overshadow and tend to marginalise, restrict or suppress the innovative ideas and visions which emerge from alternative sources of development such as local or popular discourses.

Indeed these issues are all part and parcel of the problems of reformulating 'civil society' in South Africa, and for that reason alone should we pay more attention to its use in the present. Current use (and 'abuse') of the concept 'civil society', in my view, cannot be ignored or passed off as an intellectual fad, for although the re-emergence of 'civil society' represents a timely and serious reflection upon the relevance of established theoretical and conceptual knowledge as frameworks for conducting political and socio-economic life, there are many disturbing and frankly 'non-progressive' elements which its usage serves to reproduce. Importantly, however, manifested in the current revival of 'civil society' is a new intellectual reflection and rethinking process (which abounds with possibilities) in which the time-honoured frameworks that have underpinned the contemporary social and political order – whether the state-centred perspectives, ideological conflict, eurocentrism – are hopefully being overturned in the process.

However, while the time is indeed ripe for renewed intellectual reflection and theoretical reconstruction to fit the context of local struggles in an environment where the organic unity of the globalisation process has finally replaced the boundaries between nations and cultures,¹⁴ this thesis argues that we must re-examine the revival of the idea of 'civil society' in contemporary South African political discourse as denoting a new ideologically-grounded terrain of political struggle; one which increasingly tends to blur not only the distinctions between local and international struggles, but public and private sources of power; and one which tends more towards an accommodation to the pressures of an expanding capitalist economy and liberal democratic hegemony, leaving the basic

¹² E.M Wood, 'The Uses and Abuses of Civil Society', 1990, p.60

¹³ J.W. Harbeson, 'Civil Society and the Study of African Politics: A Preliminary Assessment', 1994, p.285.

¹⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm. *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*, 1976 p.66.

local and international relations of power and exploitation largely intact.

Aims and Structure of the Thesis

The vast majority of the South African 'civil society' literature can be seen as politically motivated attempts to engage in a debate over the nature of the country's transformation. The positions in this debate are representative of the character of South Africa's post-apartheid political re-alignment, in which sectors of the liberation movement have sought to establish a level of autonomy and, therefore, power in the political process as independent forces seeking to represent their particular interests and agendas. Thus we see that the actors engaged in this debate consist of interests from across the political spectrum – liberal, social-democratic, socialist - and represent the diversity of groups which formerly comprised the collectivity of the liberation movement – academics, ANC, SACP and civic leaders and activists, etc., - but who now find themselves positioned as political opponents rather than as allies. This in itself is an interesting phenomenon which can be seen to inform the character of South Africa's emerging political environment, but what is of interest here is how and why, and with what practical consequences the idea of 'civil society' is adopted by these groups of interests to further their political agendas. Indeed, what are their political agendas? Furthermore, how and why, and with what consequences their political agendas are constrained or strengthened by their particular theory of 'civil society', therefore enabling certain interests' discourses to dominate the debate and dominate the restructuring process.

Rather than join in with this debate and attempt to define and conceptualise some normative meaning of 'civil society', I suggest that an examination of the debate is a fruitful and interesting way of approaching and understanding South African politics and society. This inquiry seeks to illustrate how the dynamics and processes of change, formed within the context of local struggles in society, are bound by the parameters of ideological conflict over the production and reproduction of meaning in our conceptual frameworks. It seeks to uncover the theoretical and practical implications and consequences which the adoption and use of the concept has upon the direction of South African socio-economic and political development, as well as the character of future struggles which will emerge from this contested terrain. It attempts to show the historical and theoretical context – local as well as international – in which the debate over the idea of 'civil society' finds its way into South African political struggles; to illustrate how the different and contradicting ways in which the idea of 'civil society' is constructed within the paradigms of competing ideological discourses and used by competing groups of interests in society to promote their particular programme or agenda. In essence, this thesis is a critical examination of what underlies the revival of 'civil society' theory; what its strengths and limitations are for understanding South African politics and society; and to what extent, if any, an analysis of the reification of the idea of 'civil society' in its contemporary use can contribute to new ways of thinking about and promoting the conditions for progressive socio-

economic and political change.

In order to examine these issues, therefore, this thesis begins, in chapter two's examination of the Eastern European 'revolutions', by tracing the roots of 'civil society's' re-emergence in Eastern Europe, and proceeds, in chapter three, to describe its conceptual and theoretical development in the African political context. The aim of chapters two and three is to provide a methodological and analytical framework for understanding the nature of the contemporary discourses in which the South African idea of 'civil society' is embedded; to expose the relationships, largely ignored or taken for granted in South African uses, between the political and theoretical developments embedded in the contemporary revival of the idea(s) of 'civil society' as it has travelled, via the expansion of discourse, from the very specific political struggles of Polish dissident intellectuals and their Western collaborators to be regarded as internationally significant to current development initiatives around the world. Importantly, it emphasises that any idea of 'civil society' emerging in South Africa, and therefore any level of consensus on the 'perennial questions' of what values underpin notions of freedom, progress, order, development, etc., are dialectically tied to political, economic and theoretical developments beyond South Africa's borders, and how they interact with, alter, or reinforce etc., the dynamics of South African struggles.

From this perspective it is possible to understand that the contemporary emergence of 'civil society' in South Africa does not only reflect the continuing historical relation between the influence of Western political discourse, capitalist expansion, international developments, and local South African and African struggles, but it also enables us to examine how and why the debate, a problem particularly for the South African left and African intellectuals, uncritically embodies and serves to reinforce the dominant capitalist system of economic relations in South Africa to the detriment of cultivating new visions from the basis of its own cultural development.

It is impossible to present one common perception of the process of the re-emergence of 'civil society' in South Africa. This is largely due to the value afforded to 'civil society' as a normative concept by the contributors to the discourse - presenting it with their own philosophical and political preferences and expecting as such that it will both carry and implement their own values.¹⁵ Not only within, but between the Eastern European, African and South African geopolitical contexts, 'civil society's' emergence, usage's and meanings alter markedly due to the specific context and values these 'agents of civil society' struggle under or for. Consequently, although the re-emergence of 'civil society' in political discourse and theory derived its original impetus from the intellectualisation of the Solidarity social movement in Poland, the path of its revival has taken divergent but not unrelated courses as it has been adopted and applied in Eastern European and in African (we may also include Latin American, East Asian) politics. Despite this seemingly complex web of usage's between

¹⁵ This is a widespread concern among many commentators and critics - that the revival of civil society and its widespread use is due to it being available for normative use - see Z. Rau in the introduction to his edited book *The Re-emergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 1992, p.17

different agents in differing contexts, it is possible to discern a semblance of political logic, a common pattern or process behind the revival of 'civil society' in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and South Africa; a process common to these three political contexts, although with radically different emphases and results, in which 'civil society's' practical and theoretical usage evolves discursively and analytically alongside and in response to the moment of political crisis and the events 'on the ground'.

Following Chris Hann's development Adam Seligman's methodological discussion of 'civil society's' modern usage¹⁶, I suggest that these 'developments' surrounding the processes behind the revival of 'civil society' can be delineated into three general stages or phases. The first phase relates to the revolutionary events, the rise of social movements or the moment of struggle in which the masses of the population join together long enough to form and express both a critical analysis of the old political system and an outline of its program of changes. This required the creation of a language or conceptual framework in which the political reality could be described and explained by these actors which begin to articulate their aims and interests and invoke new images and visions of the world around them. Essentially, the creation of a new conceptual framework in which to formulate the basis of struggle emerges from the rejection of existing frameworks which they were struggling against, for they either describe "a reality existing somewhere else and at some other time, or ... represented some fictitious reality, namely the postulated but non-existent ideological reality"¹⁷. In other words, the formulation of viable new conceptual frameworks depended heavily upon the values which underlie the struggles in society.

To those social agents, in particular academics, intellectuals and dissident activists, familiar with the history of political thought, and, in particular, those 'politically' conscious of the gravity of Gramsci's recently published works, the very existence and operation of these autonomous institutions and activities in a repressed or bureaucratic public life - mass movements, trade unions, magazines, publishing houses, civic associations, professional groups, independent media, etc., - was heralded as evidence of an empirical 'civil society'. Furthermore, because the essence of meanings and ideas embedded in its conceptual history - as a key determinant of society relations and, therefore, state-society relationships - had some philosophical bearing upon attempts to capture the nature of the changing political reality, the concept 'civil society' served primarily, alongside 'anti-statism' and 'democracy', as an organisational slogan directed towards gaining support, and thus delegitimizing the authority of the state and its removal of those in power.

The re-emergence of 'civil society' or, in the words of one independent Czechoslovakian intellectual, a "parallel polis"¹⁸ in the consciousness and autonomous institutions of public life

¹⁶ See C.Hann's 'Introduction', in the text he co-edited with Elizabeth Dunn, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, 1996, pp.1-26.

¹⁷ Quoted in Krzysztof Podemski, 'The Nature of Society and Social Conflict as Depicted in the Polish Press in 1981', in Rau, *op.cit.*, p.52

¹⁸ Dissident activist Vaclav Benda uses the term 'parallel polis' to describe the establishment of social

constituted a following phase in which it emerges as an analytical concept used to describe and explain the unfolding political trends. The flourishing of independent institutions and movements - largely due to the crisis of authority of the state and relaxation of state policy - had created a fragile autonomous space in which features of society could be expressed. Their emergence and diversity indicated the general direction of the retreat from a state-regulated society and economy characterised by the hegemony of a certain elite or class and a 'lack of pluralism' or freedom and rights. The most fundamental aspect of this retreat, it is argued, was the 'diversity' of socio-economic, political and cultural communication of values, extending beyond the existing public and formal spheres - this became especially visible in the range of political institutions, professional associations, co-operatives, informal trading associations, NGOs, students and women's groups, environmental and human rights groups, civic and community organisations etc., in both the Central and Eastern European and African experience during the late 1980s and 1990s. These groups accumulated varying amounts and types of resources, and consequently political power, independent of government institutions, and which altered the dynamics of politics in these societies.

Thus the spectrum of organisational life that expressed this phenomenon could no longer be limited to the overly simplistic notion of 'society' or 'social movement' in political discourse; there was a conceptual need to describe this so-called 'pluralistic' exchange and interaction, and to provide an explanation for the range of social, economic and political activities being undertaken in this sphere. As chapter two illustrates, in the Central and Eastern European context agents of 'civil society' depicted a trend for market arrangements and the development of a liberally-orientated pluralism constituting a foundation for a politically and economically sovereign nation-state. In African society, as chapter three describes, the movement of social forces which varied substantially from place to place and country to country, yielding quite distinct trends of self-empowerment, was characterised as an 'incipient' or 'nascent civil society'¹⁹ which, if cultivated, could have the power to mould new patterns of state-society relations. As such 'civil society' develops from a catchword or political maxim to gain currency in intellectual and political discourses as a descriptive analytical concept. Part of this process involved a return to the classic statements on 'civil society' in political philosophy in an attempt to penetrate some of the murkiness which surrounds the concept, and a search for the contemporary validity of the tenets and common elements expressed by the intellectual traditions which inform its modern-day revival.

From all this theoretical manoeuvring, a fundamental question arises between the agents of 'civil society' (dissident intellectual's and activists in the European context, Africanist academics in

organisations created independently of the state system and outside of its structure in which groups of individuals derive their status as citizens. In other words, the 'parallel polis' or the rebirth of 'civil society' is a civic formation which enables the old system to be overcome or, if people reject their previous status in the latter, leave its structure, and create their own. See Jan Benda, 'Parallel Polis', in H. Gordon Skilling, ed., *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*, 1981.

¹⁹ Cited in Chazan, N., Mortimer, R., Ravenhill, J. and Rothchild, D. (eds). *Politics and Society in Contemporary*

the African): despite its conceptual history, or perhaps because of it, is the idea of 'civil society' still a conceptually useful or viable tool for describing the changing political reality? Or, in sociologist Keith Tester's words, should it be assumed "that the category simply and perfectly represents some determinate reality existing 'out there'"²⁰? In fact the revival of the idea of 'civil society' begged the question: what, in actuality does 'civil society' include to represent or refer to? If its conceptual past holds no empirical relevance for the present context, does not its usefulness, in terms of political values and strategy, lie in its descriptive and prescriptive capacity? To be re-imagined anew as a normative concept?

Among those different agents of 'civil society' who have shared their definitions and understandings of the part 'civil society' plays in conceptualising the historical processes in their region - whether at conferences, research workshops, public debates, in journals and other publications - there has been widespread disagreement. Few, it would appear, whose own political understanding and values are embodied by this concept are unwilling to relinquish the basis of their new found autonomy and empowerment. In particular, losing or sharing this to competing groups of interests in 'civil society', who also share in the dispersion of power its revival offers. The dilemma of the transition period, which marks a heightened sensitivity to the future role of 'civil society' and its agents in political debate, is that many interests forged in the struggle against the 'state' are likely to be subsumed by others, injured or ignored in the process.

Herein lies a paradox which characterises the revival of 'civil society' and the nature of the debate which carries the struggle forward into its normative dimension: in order to preserve freedom of autonomy and relative power, agents of 'civil society' are aware that they risk losing or resigning it through forging tactical alliances with other interests, in order not to loose out during the transition process. More often than not, however, it is the least powerful interests in society which are left out, as is demonstrated in the re-emergence of 'civil society' in its third phase, as a normative concept. In theory, it is assumed that the rise of public power, in which the take-over of the structure of the state by the institutions of 'civil society' in most Eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union - and, it is hoped, in Africa as a whole (although this seems a more long-term project) - makes it possible for independent political forces to form in public life seeking to address the main problems in their region and come to terms with the new political realities prompted by these historical trends and processes. In essence, this new found autonomy and political power is thought to open up public life

Africa, 1994, p.316.

²⁰ Tester, K. *Civil Society*, 1992 p.124. Tester's compelling and original exploration of the history of the idea of 'civil society' in social and political thought complimented what many already understood as the pluralism and difference in societies. For Tester the history of the concept 'civil society' is an exploration in how the idea has been produced and reproduced in intellectual history precisely because it captured an essential sameness about ideas of European modernity, which are no longer shared in the 'post-modern' era. Some even went to the point of arguing that Tester's writing actually contributed to lifting "the debate to an entirely new level, from which heretofore unseen aspects of modern society and culture become visible and open to scrutiny". Review by Zygmunt Bauman (on back cover of this edition).

to a 'free-play of ideas' and 'creative initiatives'. Broadly put, it constitutes a transition period whereby the establishment of a normative order on which to lay the foundations of new state-society relations becomes a major source of contention among those seeking to preserve and promote their values and interests. However, in practice, as chapters two and three aim to demonstrate, normative usage of 'civil society' has tended to subsume public power to increasingly privatised interests.

In Africa, the perceived weakness of 'civil society' there has opened up society to transnational efforts to reconfigure African socio-economic structures through the direct involvement of international aid and development agencies and NGOs. In Central and Eastern Europe, where the normative force of 'civil society' was first initiated, its revival has been marked by a rejection of the state/Party system; a political and theoretical anti-statism, however vague; a rise in nationalism's, ethnic rivalry, and individualised interests; and the claims for 'democracy', 'autonomy', 'rights', and 'sovereignty'. All of which have prompted a shift to the right, but a movement towards the 'least chauvinistic' and more 'neutral' traditions in European political thought.²¹ This has meant a retreat, both politically and philosophically, particularly among the traditional left, towards a liberally-orientated 'civil society' and an accommodation to market relations as the only pragmatic strategy available. In the words of E.M. Wood, "despite the appeal to [Gramsci's] authority which has become a staple of the 'new revisionism', the concept in its current usage no longer has this unequivocally anti-capitalist intent."²²

The refashioning of the concept in Central and Eastern Europe and Africa in the 1980s and 1990s has placed renewed, although not essentially uncritical faith in the perceived 'democratic' and 'transformative' capacity of society, rather than the state, and tended "to glamorise civil society and present it as non-contradictory".²³ It presents a view of society where socially constructed differences, as sources of conflict and division, and as ascriptive bases for membership in the nation-state, can be brought harmoniously together to form some notion of a homogenous and unified whole. This approach has involved the liberal gesture of proclaiming pluralism, consent, citizenship, social contract, and the protection of 'recognised' individual or human rights through the imposition not only of traditional (i.e., Western) legal and political institutions, but internationally-based NGOs, aid and development agencies. Thus, 'anti-statism', 'civil society' and 'democracy' have become internationally regarded as mutually reinforcing symbols of freedom, and their meanings synonymous with the legal and moral notion of 'legitimacy' upon which the obligations of society to govern itself are based. However, ironically – or not so ironically – it is liberalism rather than Marxism/socialism which has been rediscovered in the revival of 'civil society'. In the words of Wood,

²¹ A brief glance through the Eastern European literature illustrates that many of the theorists of 'civil society' use such terms to describe the popular sentiments within the region, see R. Dahrendorf, 'Europe's Vale of Tears'; 1990; and Z. Rau, 'Human Nature, Social Engineering and the Re-emergence of Civil Society', in Rau, 1991, pp.25-50.

²² E.M. Wood, "Uses and Abuses of Civil Society", p.63.

²³ M. Mamdani, 'A Glimpse at African Studies, Made in USA', 1989, p.23.

We are being asked to pay a heavy price for the all-embracing concept of 'civil society'. This conceptual portmanteau, which indiscriminately lumps together everything from households and voluntary associations to the economic system of capitalism, confuses as much as it reveals.²⁴

The point outlined by chapter two and three's examination of the 'civil society' theories emerging in Central and Eastern Europe and Africa is that it is essential, if not methodologically realistic, to base our understanding of the South African revival of 'civil society' *in* the wider historical, theoretical and political trends and processes – what in reality its revival is perceived to represent, by whom and for whom. As such, the revival of 'civil society' in contemporary political thought is contrasted well by the politics of the Eastern European and African contexts, providing a comparative framework on which to describe and explain how, and with what consequences, the South African idea of 'civil society' works in this historical process. It is from this approach, rather than from some abstract or normative definition (of which abound), that we can better understand not only the dynamics and processes, but the intellectual, cultural, political and ideological agendas behind its revival; the progressiveness or insufficiencies of the values contained in its articulation; what vision of development its conceptualisation seeks to promote; and, therefore, the possibilities for examining its potential for providing practical strategies for reconstructing a progressive social and political order in South Africa.

Thus chapter four seeks to place the South African idea of 'civil society' in its own historical and political context to describe the social dynamics and processes, structural changes, and theoretical and political struggles which underlie its revival in South African political debate at the turn of the 1990s. In the light of chapters' two and three's line of analysis, the basic premise of chapter four is that if we are to understand the character of the emerging post-apartheid order, it follows that our analysis should begin with an understanding of the changing nature of relations and arrangements in society, and how theories of 'civil society' seek to alter, reproduce, justify or inadvertently reinforce these relations. In exploring the political debates in which the idea of 'civil society' came to have such theoretical and practical currency on the left, this chapter attempts to provide an overview of the struggles over the nature of the transition to socialism which took place within the former liberation movement during the transition process. Viewing South Africa's political transition from a perspective which centralises the activities and struggles between the different social groups in the liberation movement we are better able to interpret the positioning of these diverse interests in the debate over reconstructing the basis for the new socio-economic and political order.

To a large extent literature describing the liberation movements' anti-apartheid struggle tends to define the ANC as the embodiment of the struggle, when in fact it represented a part, albeit a predominant part, of an ideologically and politically diverse whole. Comprised of African nationalist organisations such as the PAC and ANC, an 'independent' black trade union movement led by

²⁴Wood, *op.cit.*, p.65.

FOSATU, the ANC aligned SACP, Black Consciousness Movements and militant student groups, disparate civic organisations and local community associations, it would be wrong to assume that simply by virtue of being the oldest and largest liberation movement the ANC would inevitably become the cohesive thread which seemingly united a black political majority. Yet, importantly, it is this assumption which predominated the politics of the transition movement - an assumption that other organisations within the liberation movement sought vigorously to contend, and which and gave rise to the theory of 'civil society'.

The promotion of the more 'moderate' ANC, as it came to be perceived to represent the new inclusive South Africa, depended largely on its ability to legitimate the language of liberation and African nationalism to fit the conventional and hegemonic language of liberalism, speaking in terms favourable and less ideologically threatening to liberal democracy. The civic movement in contrast, which played a key role in providing for an organic mobilisation of black society to challenge the apartheid state, was perceived as a transitory political force to be subsumed to the normalisation of party politics where a 'vigorous' and independent citizenry should take up the civic issues of development. Similarly, in ways that the negotiation process was bounded by the extent to which the range of interests in society were powerful enough to seek to be accommodated within this language of liberal democracy, the 'civil society' debate is constructed by the need to legitimate the contesting discourses of reconstruction and order in South Africa within some accepted theoretical framework. Hence the idea of 'civil society' emerged as a reflective forum of intellectual and political debate outside of, but interrelated with, the process of negotiation which differentiated between politics and society and sought to establish the basis of society's new 'developmental' role in contributing to the creation of a new order.

The positioning of intellectuals, academics and former political activists in the debate over 'civil society' is the main analytical focus of this chapter which sees the period beginning in the 1990s as the continuation of struggle, but one which is no longer based in the struggles of the popular masses. The refashioning of the idea of 'civil society' was due, in part, to the organic mobilisation of civic and community activity and political resistance, and, importantly, due in part to the uncertainty surrounding the role of its legacy in the post-apartheid democratic future. Concomitantly, it is also due to the crisis of political theory, practice and identity, particularly among the South African left, in reflecting upon both the implications of South African political re-alignment and the restructuring of power relations in an environment in which the failure of state socialism stood in stark contrast to the 'stability' of Western capitalist states. Of central importance was the fact that the legacy of a mobilised and politically conscious grass-roots participation in the struggle was in danger of losing its collective voice and plurality of interests to the elite-driven power struggle at the negotiating table. The issue of popular struggle was no longer contained by the broad image of political resistance; the transition had opened up a political power vacuum in which the goals and interests of forces in the liberation movement had altered dramatically, leaving civics and other marginalised parties in a

position of whether or not to follow the ANC's directive. Subsequently, a diverse range of political actors, civic leaders, analysts and intellectuals urged the revival of the concept 'civil society' in order to provide a vigorous citizenry with a character independent of any other coercive or powerful interest. Essentially the term 'liberation movement' became largely redundant, losing much of its analytical meaning (and therefore political power) and was transposed with the highly contentious concept of 'civil society'.

This reflected a philosophical turning point in South African political thought and practice; it reflected the creation of a new medium through which struggles for development could take place, but one which follows closely the paradigms of Western ideological conflict in the new political dispensation. An analysis of the main positions upheld in the 'civil society' debate since 1990 goes some way to show that the conceptualisation of 'civil society' in South Africa is the site of a political power struggle between the competing strands of liberal, socialist and Marxist thinking represented by the intellectual milieu in debate. Although there is fundamental agreement that 'civil society' should be separate from the state and/or politically independent if stability, development and democracy is to be promoted, the debate continues to provide competing and critical visions of how this ideal is to be constructed in reality and what vision its nature is to be informed by.

In South Africa democracy has become a politically motivated socio-cultural endeavour in which democratic development is perceived to originate in 'civil society' itself. By arguing that an empowered and independent 'civil society' is responsible for building democracy in South Africa, the subject positions in debate are based on the idea that it is in the institutions, relations and activities of 'civil society' where acquiescence is won or lost, and where political power and hegemony originates, is legitimated and sustained. Essentially the South African debate on 'civil society' does represent a crisis in political thought, particularly for the left. Given the historical, political and economic development of South African society it would not be wrong to assume that capitalist interests are dominant, and the 'civil society' debate tends to represent little more than an accommodation to the hegemonic dominance of capitalist interests in South Africa.

Part of the problem lies in the left's lack of ideological coherence concerning the future of South African socialism and its reliance upon reconceptualising the idea of 'civil society' as the site of a new struggle for hegemony. Simply put, the South African left appears to have no alternative strategy but to attempt to put into practice the theoretical prescriptions suggested by Gramsci. However, I argue, in their haste for political power the left tends uncritically to assume that 'civil society' can be re-imagined anew, as a level terrain of ideological struggle – an 'independent' and 'autonomous' vehicle for the transition to socialism. In contrast to the historical context in which Gramsci was writing, capitalism has undergone many changes by which its ideological hegemony has become ever more sophisticated, naturalised and hidden and, therefore, more powerful.²⁵ In fact, the

²⁵ This is an argument taken from Norman Fairclough's analysis of discourse in which he notes the rise of

left appear to have misread Gramsci. The fundamental point Gramsci was making in his *Prison Notebooks* was that the sphere of 'civil society' does not exist independently of the development of capitalism, but was the fundamental expression of it. The historical development of a society, he contended, places limitations upon some interests or classes, is more conducive to others, for gaining power and hegemony in society – the playing field is far from even. The Gramscian idea of 'civil society' as "a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one state to the next",²⁶ is fundamental to understanding the limited capacity of the left to establish a hegemonic position in South African politics and society and to shape the goals of progressive change. There is a widespread failure not only to overcome, but acknowledge, the basic fact that the institutions of capital are an essential part of South African 'civil society', "having the most resources in which to engage in ideological and other battles on this terrain."²⁷

Thus the basic premise which underlies this thesis is that the idea of 'civil society' does not emerge within a vacuum. It is not possible to conceptualise it in abstraction from the historical context of South Africa's socio-economic, political, cultural and theoretical development, or from political developments outside its borders – it is an 'imagination of society' which receives its impulse from reflections upon existing structural relationships, arrangements and social struggles, and ultimately upon existing paradigms in political thinking. However, the re-imagining of 'civil society' in South Africa, above all, tends to be based on the received ideas of the dichotomy between liberalism and socialism/Marxism rather than from new ideas emanating from South African society itself. It reflects the continuing historical inter-relation between the influence of Western political discourse and development upon South African development, one which embodies and serves to reinforce the dominant capitalist system of economic relations in South Africa.

The point is that if the idea of 'civil society' is to have a progressive influence upon socio-economic and political change in South Africa, it necessarily requires critical reflection: historical development both makes possible and requires a new approach which can serve as the basis for re-founding contemporary political thought and of reorganising social, economic and political arrangements rooted in long term oppressive structures, institutions and relations which are manifested in South African 'civil society'. The problem, however, is that short-run political gain *vis a vis* the emerging power structures and relations in South Africa appears to guide theories of 'civil

multinational corporations, consumerism, and various forms of bureaucracy as tendencies which increase the ability of economy, market and institutions of the state to impinge on people's private and public lives. See N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 1989, pp.31-36, 199-213.

²⁶ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.238.

²⁷ Narsoo, 'Civil Society – A Contested Terrain', pp.26-27.

society'. Historical and theoretical developments in South Africa and globally have made this reflection on 'why civil society?' an imperative, but so far have combined to produce little more than a theoretical impasse than a realistic or coherent strategy which fits the context and needs of South African society.

Chapter Two: Theories of State and Society Relations: ‘Civil Society’, Antistatism, and Autonomy in Eastern Europe

(O)ne can see how, when the impetus of progress is not tightly linked to a vast local economic development which is artificially limited and repressed, but is instead the reflection of international developments which transmit their ideological currents to the periphery - currents born on the basis of the productive development of the more advanced countries - then the group which is the bearer of new ideas is not the economic group but the intellectual stratum, and the conception of the state advocated by them changes aspect; it is conceived of something in itself, as a rational absolute.

(A.Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 1971)

Eastern Europe: The ‘Re-Emergence’ of ‘Civil Society’

The contemporary revival of the term ‘civil society’ has a variety of empirical and theoretical roots¹, but its increasing currency and significance as a political discourse is manifested in the ‘revolutionary’ events in Poland in the early 1970s and 1980s. The Polish uprisings of 1980-81, and, in particular, the democratic opposition of dissident Polish intellectuals to the Soviet-type system’s near total monopoly of public and private life marked a radical sea-change in contemporary political thought and practice. The political trends unleashed by the pressure of mass social resistance against the Communist Party-state in Poland, and reproduced by the wave of other opposition movements in the former Soviet bloc, revealed a crisis in modern social and political thought. Both participants and observers of the East European events, after decades of experiencing and approaching change as a top down process from the perspective of the Soviet leadership, were conceptually ill-equipped to understand the determination and capability of a self-organised society which aimed not at social revolution but at structural reform from below.

Far from providing evidence in support of the universal appeal of Western institutions and values, or, at its most extreme, as “the end of history”², this crisis consisted in the fact that no language or conceptual frameworks existed by which the unfolding political reality could be adequately described or explained by both participants and observers. The empirical orientation of what was termed as ‘society against the state’, the ‘people against the authorities’, the ‘nation against the Party-state’ etc., represented an entirely original phenomenon. The two dominant paradigms in modern political thought - liberalism and Marxism - were unable to capture what was new in this form

¹A civil society discourse was evident in the early 1970s among a group of anti-totalitarian left-wing intellectuals in France, radical left critics of the modern interventionist welfare state particularly in West Germany, and from the early 1980s liberal democratic analysts of political transitions from authoritarianism in Latin America. See Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* 1992; A. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, 1992; K. Tester, *Civil Society*, 1992.

²F. Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 1989 pp.3-18.

of collective action. In his seminal book *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980-82*, published in 1983, Timothy Garton Ash describes the nature of this intellectual turning point by suggesting that the crisis in Poland was in fact a catalyst for a political and theoretical crisis in the West: academic reflection upon what was happening in Poland meant that mainstream political analysis in the West had to put its own experience into perspective. Simply put, the very range of support for Solidarity in the West challenged the established 'East-West', 'socialism v. capitalism', Left and Right frameworks.³ "What happened in Poland", he argues, "does not fit into any of these pre-formed Western moulds ... rather than manipulating the Polish revolution until it fits into our categories, we might do better to adjust our categories until they fit the Polish revolution".⁴

On the one hand, the legitimisation failure of 'actually existing socialism', together with the subsequent rhetorical discrediting of Marxism and socialism, signalled a political and ideological retreat, particularly on the left, but one which has tended toward 'radical reformism', 'self-limiting revolution', or 'self-limiting radicalism' as an alternative 'third path' from the established models of social and political change - liberal reform and Marxist revolution. On the other hand, the Eastern European struggles for social autonomy and democratisation dislodged the state as centre-piece in political theory, presenting a conceptual and political problem: alongside the rise of ethnic nationalism's and political pluralism, the emergence of a so-called ideological and theoretical 'anti-statism' - the defence and expansion of a variously described societal realm - forced the search for a conceptual replacement for the theory of statism. In essence, one of the main consequences of the events of the 1980s and early 1990s has been the fact that established moral, social, political and theoretical visions have been irrevocably altered in the process, requiring a fundamental revision of commonly-held understandings of the historical process.

This has involved attempts to thematize a philosophical program to fit the Central-East European experience, which integrates and incorporates the diverse conceptual and theoretical strands in modern political thought; to strategically adopt, rather than throw out, the 'progressive' normative principles held by both rights-orientated liberalism and democratically-orientated post-Marxism; to formulate, in the words of Cohen and Arato, "a project within the universalistic horizon of critical theory rather than within the relativistic one of deconstruction".⁵ This universalistic resolution, as we

³ In his chapter 'Under Western Eyes' Garton Ash writes of this crisis: "The *range* of support for Solidarity was unique. No other movement in the world was supported by President Reagan *and* Mr Carillo, Mr Berlinguer and the Pope, Mrs Thatcher and Tony Benn, peace campaigners and NATO spokesmen, Christians and communists, conservatives, liberals and socialists. Yet this chorus of admiration was itself a source of embarrassment for many.

... Much time was therefore spent in distinguishing *our* kind of support from *their* kind of support: *our* support, said the Eastern socialist, has nothing in common with the 'hypocrisy' of Mr Reagan - *our* support, said the Reagan adviser, must not be confused with the fraudulent pretence of Mr Berlinguer. The Right, without a good word for trades unions at home, celebrated the Poles' heroic struggle against the tyranny of 'socialism'; the Left, the workers' heroic struggle for a 'true' socialism. Each side projected its own fantasies on to that far away country about which so little was known". T. Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*. 1983, p.307.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.309.

⁵ J. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 1992, p.2

shall see, is deeply prejudicial to the liberal strand that has become almost hegemonic⁶ in recent political and theoretical debates. As is illustrated by the general admission that universal values have precedence over class values, a characteristic development of this view can be found in the writings of the Soviet philosopher, Eduard Arab-Ogly in his epilogue to Francis Fukuyama's article "The End of History?" in which he writes:

in accordance with [Hegelian] law, the socialist society is a denial of capitalism, its antithesis, after which the negation of a negation must follow, resulting in a unique synthesis, which sustains the universal and progressive achievements both of the capitalist and of the socialist phase of world history, i.e., the preservation of socialist institutions of representative democracy, a state based on laws, and economic relationships based on market forces in capitalist countries, and at the same time, a social guarantee of the socialist society, which are called upon to instil in life both social justice and people's faith in the future.

... So the discussion centres, not on the victory of the West over the East, or of a liberal democratic society over a socialist one, but of the victory of the new thinking over the old one, from a movement away from ideological and social confrontation to co-operation on a planetary scale, through mutual enrichment and through universal values.⁷

While it is argued that the move away from the so-called 'reductionism' of Marxist class analysis towards the idea of pluralism leaves little room for the exploration of alternative forms of societal organisation to those assumed by liberal-individualism, and of culturally specific patterns in non-Western communities,⁸ it would seem that there is an eagerness to demonstrate the comparative compatibilities of the West with the rest. What is at stake, it seems, is nothing less than the goal of justifying and legitimating the political and theoretical utility of established Western values, norms and institutions in an increasingly complex and heterogeneous world order. A staple part of this 'new revisionism' and 'universalism' in Western political thinking has been to reconceptualise the historical process in Central and Eastern Europe - rather unoriginally, but strategically - in terms of the 're-emergence of civil society'.

Despite the development of alternative terms among East European thinkers,⁹ the idea of the

⁶ Whilst the recent literature draws on the Marxist strand which was reworked by Gramsci, it is the liberal strand which has become almost hegemonic in recent debates. Grounded in the Hegelian dichotomy between 'civil society' and the state and influenced by the work of the Scottish Enlightenment and, in particular Alexis de Tocqueville, the dominant modern tendency in contemporary notions of 'civil society' tend to emphasise the liberal models which lay stress on the virtues of a pluralism that is founded on equal and autonomous individual citizens.

⁷ Eduard Arab-Ogly's epilogue to Fukuyama in *Za rubzhom*, No.51, 1989. Cited in M. Ryabchuk, 'Civil Society and National Emancipation', in Rau (ed). *The Re-Emergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 1991, pp.109-10, n.10.

⁸ See the argument by anthropologist C. Hann who argues the notion of hegemony in social science discourses, suggesting that political science's monopoly - particularly liberal discourses - on development and democratisation issues needs to be remedied: "Contributions from anthropologists have been few and far between, and it is not hard to say why. There is something inherently unsatisfactory about international propagation by Western scholars of an ideal of social organisation that seems to bear little relation to the current realities of their own countries; an ideal which, furthermore, developed in historical conditions that cannot be replicated in any other part of the world today". C. Hann, 'Introduction: Political Society and Civil Anthropology', in Hann and Dunn (eds). *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, 1996, p.1.

⁹ During the late 1970s opponents of the communist system changed their resistance strategy from dissidence to 'opposition' or the creation of a "parallel polis". This shift of strategy was made possible by the theoretical

're-emergence of civil society' tended to gain more currency in political discourse. Importantly, the point being made is that the re-emergence of 'civil society' was conceived, not in the language of the Eastern European people's own consciousness, but from academic observers and activists of these social movements in the West.¹⁰ Usage of the term 'civil society' emerged, despite misgivings from certain prominent intellectuals in the 'West' and 'East'¹¹, as an euphemism - an organisational slogan of vague conceptualisation - which attempted to describe the nature of Polish dissidents' struggle against the Soviet-type system. Due to the sheer lack of alternative conceptual frameworks by which to describe the unfolding empirical reality, 'civil society' is appropriated and debated; quickly becoming a descriptive and prescriptive concept; and utilised as an organisational principle for furthering a range of political and theoretical agendas.

So, for what purposes and reasons did the language of 'civil society' in Western, and subsequently East European political discourse re-emerge? What, purportedly, did the concept mean to represent, and why did it gain so much currency in describing, and subsequently prescribing, the changing Central and East European political reality in the 1980s and 1990s? This chapter aims to critically discuss the processes of 'civil society's' re-emergence in Western and Eastern European in three distinct although related forms: as slogan, analytical, and normative concept. These usages, laid out in Adam Seligman's writing on the concept,¹² represent three procedural stages by which 'civil society' is appropriated in political discourses, and which serves to develop the conceptual and theoretical content of the term, illustrating the heightened theoretical and practical political value

groundwork laid by philosophers such as Gyorgy Bence and Janos Kis, writing under the pseudonym Marc Rokovski in Hungary; Vaclav Havel and others associated with Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia; and Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik in Poland. See M. Rakovski, *Towards an Eastern European Marxism*, 1978. In particular, the chapter "The Intellectuals" (pp.39-72), on the possibility of a *samizdat* "counter-public sphere" created by critical intellectuals. See also Czechoslovakian and Slovakian development of the idea of a "parallel polis" alongside, but outside of the existing system. The term was coined by Vaclav Benda in an article written in 1978 and adopted by others such as Havel in his essay "The Power of the Powerless", in J. Keane, (ed.). *The Power of the Powerless*. 1985 pp.78-81.

¹⁰ See for example, M. Markus, 'Crisis of Legitimation and the Workers Movement: Understanding Poland', *Thesis Eleven*, 1981, p.3; Jan Tomasz Gross, 'Poland: Society and State', in Milorad M. Drachkovitch, (ed.). 1982. *East Central Europe, Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow*; A. Arato, 'Civil Society Versus the State: Poland, 1980-81', *Telos*, 1989; and Jaques Rupnik, 'Dissent in Poland, 1968-78: The End of Revisionism and the Rebirth of Civil Society', in R. Tokes, (ed.). 1979. *Opposition in Eastern Europe*.

¹¹ In the West, Michael Foucault offered some thoughts on the Polish Solidarity movement - and empirical objections - arguing that the explanation of Solidarity, in terms of a movement of civil society against the state, seriously oversimplifies complex relationships in Poland. He suggests that "when one assimilates the powerful social movement that has just traversed that country to a revolt of civil society against the state, one misunderstands the complexity and multiplicity of the confrontations ... it is not only against the State-party that the Solidarity movement has had to fight". See Foucault, M *Politics and Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-84*. L.D. Kritzman, (ed.). 1988, p.18. Among Eastern intellectuals see for example M. Rybachuck, 'Civil Society and National Emancipation: The Ukrainian Case' in which he argues that "in this context, the term 'civil society' is defined primarily as an antipode to étatism, the opposing factor in binary opposition; that is everything which is not étatic society is civil society. As a first step along the road to freedom and democracy, such simplifications are unavoidable and, perhaps allowable. Ultimately, however, such an approach will likely prove insufficient: the end of tyranny does not necessarily mean a flourishing of democracy; the liquidation of slavery does not yet equal freedom; and the rejection of étatism does not automatically lead to civil society" pp.99-100.

¹² A. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, 1992.

which has been invested in the modern realm and idea of 'civil society'. A result of the very success of the Central and Eastern European 'agents of civil society', acting in their own autonomous capacity for socio-economic and political change in this realm, led to a confident boom in the analytical and conceptual value of 'civil society'; at the core of this discursive debate is the idea that not only should it be fostered as an empirical reality in modern state and society relations, but 'civil society' should also be developed as a normative force, a 'third path to change', in contemporary political life – a more advantageous and desirable vision of the social order. Understanding the reasons for this historical process and trend in the revival of 'civil society', thereby, enables an historically specific analysis of the concepts use and present significance to South African politics.

Central-East European Intellectuals, Dissidence, and 'Civil Society' as Opposition Slogan

According to Andrew Arato,¹³ the term 'civil society' emerged in the context of Central and Eastern Europe from the literature of Polish dissidents and their scholarly characterisation of their struggle against the Communist Party-state in the late 1970s. At first reading of some of this dissident literature¹⁴, Arato is quite correct; the re-emergence of the concept is predicated on Central-East European intellectual's conception of the fundamental dualism between 'the authorities' and 'society'. However, he tends to dismiss the lack of clarity and consistency surrounding the concept's use in these early texts, and explicitly attributes a well-developed theoretical link between its articulation and the pre-Solidarity opposition movement's overall political strategy. He argues quite emphatically that the Polish democratic opposition are "united" by "the viewpoint of civil society against the state – the desire to institutionalise and preserve the new level of social independence ... Only in Eastern Europe ... do social movements themselves see their struggle in these terms".¹⁵ Quoting a number of social-democratically-orientated Polish authors either writing in exile in France and West Germany or working with Western European pro-democracy organisations, Arato interprets their writing as evidence in support of an emergent 'civil society' perspective, a language previously

¹³ Andrew Arato is a Professor of Sociology in the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of numerous articles on the critical sociology of Soviet-type societies and their transitions to democracy, which have appeared in journals such as *Telos*, *Praxis International*, *Theory and Society*, *Transit*, *Szazadveg*, and *Mozgo Vilag*. Importantly, since the publication of his 1981 article, 'Civil Society Against the State', in *Telos*, he is one of the current prominent writers among the New Left on, one could say a forerunner in the propagation of, the concept 'civil society' and its perceived role in democratic transitions in the former Soviet bloc since the publication of his 1981 article, 'Civil Society Against the State', in *Telos*, (Spring) 47:23-47.

¹⁴ I have relied on the following: M. Drachkovitch (ed.). 1982. *East Central Europe, Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow*; J. Kuron. 1977. 'Reflections on a Programme of Action'; M. Markus. 1981. 'Crisis of Legitimation and the Workers Movement: Understanding Poland'; A. Michnik 1976 'The New Evolutionism'; M. Rakovski 1978. *Towards an Eastern European Marxism*; J. Rupnik 'Dissent in Poland, 1968-78: The End of Revisionism and the Rebirth of Civil Society', in R. Tokes, (ed.). 1979. *Opposition in Eastern Europe*; and S.J. Trojan 1981. 'In Defence of Politics'. See also the overviews of these intellectual positions in Arato, A. 1981. 'Civil Society Against the State: Poland, 1980-81'. *Telos*,; and M.H. Bernhard's chapters on KOS intellectuals in 1993. *The Origins of Democratisation in Poland*.

'absent' from the anti-communist movement in Poland.

Indeed, basing the development of his own academic analysis and propagation of 'civil society' as a political discourse upon these dissident's texts, Arato contends that "the categories of civil society are not extraneous to the Polish events".¹⁶ This, I argue, is an oversimplification of the discursive process. Arato's argument presupposes a degree of theoretical coherence and finality which does not always occur in the real world of politics. As I shall illustrate, it is clear that a more complex set of political needs, motives and pressures played a part in the re-emergence of the concept. It is more plausible to suppose that the term 'civil society' is appropriated strategically as a slogan, only to develop through a process of academic and political debate and discursive analysis into a political theory.

Whether or not Polish dissidents imagined themselves as the 'heroic underdogs' opposing the totalitarian state, their choice of articulating their struggle in Western terms as "the existence and vitality of civil society in a country ruled by a communist party", or as society organised "as a democratic movement ... active outside the limits and institutions of the totalitarian state"¹⁷, is significant. The term 'civil society' begins its revival as an organisational slogan of vague conceptual content with the purpose of legitimating the Polish opposition movement to observers in the West - as an extension of the Cold War and the rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism.

In the 'East-West' consciousness of the Cold War context, raising the international profile and evoking support in the West for the social struggles in Poland, Polish dissidents have explicitly needed to represent themselves within the language of Western conceptual frameworks. As evidence of 'real motivation', their appeals had to be framed in such a way as to balance or overcome the 'East'-'West', 'socialism' v. 'capitalism', 'Left' and 'Right' conceptual moulds; while at the same time insisting on the struggle's 'non-political' agenda for fear of inciting State repression, or worse, Soviet intervention in the region. Describing this discursive trend Ukrainian writer Mykola Rybachuk raises an important point in which he stresses that in the context of a Soviet-type society, the re-emergence of civil society most likely stemmed from political expediency rather than analytical necessity. The idea of 'civil society' was a *means* to the liberation of society from the burden of étatism, before it became an analytical and normative *end* in itself:

As we can see, the published discussion on civil society is tightly interwoven with severe criticism of the étatism ... Moreover, this discussion is secondary to the criticism itself. It is not difficult to understand such a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, decades of totalitarian Party-state monopoly over social studies have resulted in their deteriorating and becoming dogmatic, which in turn accounts for the current intellectual impotence in grasping the concepts known to the old, pre-totalitarian system. On the other hand, the current circumstances of political struggle do not provide stimuli for analytical research, since political interests supersede analytical ones.¹⁸

¹⁵A. Arato, op. cit., pp. 24-5.

¹⁶Ibid., p.23.

¹⁷ Smolar, and Kuron quoted in Ibid.

¹⁸ M. Rybachuk, 'Civil Society and National Emancipation: The Ukrainian Case', p.99

Seen from this view, then, originally, 'civil society' emerged as little other than a political slogan, Ernest Gellner's "shining emblem",¹⁹ a largely ideologically-neutral concept capable of characterising the dynamics of a self-proclaimed anti-communist, human and civil rights movement in a communist country. It symbolised an important shift of strategy from 'dissidence' to mass 'opposition' under the Soviet-type system²⁰, prompting a theoretical social-democratic 'Third Path' between reform and revolution. 'Civil society' is intellectually appropriated by dissident scholars attempting to preserve their new found social and political autonomy by describing to its Western European audience what is inherently new in the strategic *thinking* behind Eastern European social movements.

From the 1960s in Russia, then in other Soviet republics, the Ukraine, Lithuania in the 1970s, in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary in the late 1970s tiny dissident groups of intellectuals had sought to reform the Party-state from within.²¹ However, in the post-1968 repressive climate in the bloc, dissidents were either marginalised within the ruling parties or forced into exile. Furthermore, and more importantly, dissidence-inspired reform began to lose its strategic and philosophical appeal. As Hungarian philosophers Gyorgy Bence and Janos Kis observed, "even those people who have criticised the policies of the apparatus in the name of the working class have in fact addressed themselves to the apparatus and not to the working class".²² The failure of 'dissidence' as a strategy lay in the fact that it represented "nothing more than the articulation of an agenda of change without any concrete program to implement it except the hope that those in power would listen".²³ From the mid-1970s an intellectual shift of focus took place which broke with this 'top-down' approach. It emphasised 'oppositional pressure from below' as the best way to effect change, precisely because the existing system was able to maintain itself only by denying society the ability and right to resist state action.²⁴

Importantly, the shift in strategy did not mean a violent overthrow of the existing system, but an 'unceasing popular struggle' for reforms aimed at the "evolution" of civil liberties and a guarantee of respect for human rights - a strategy which neither challenged the Party nor the state, and which

¹⁹ E. Gellner, 1994. *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*, p.1.

²⁰ See Bernhard, 1993. *The Origins of Democratization in Poland*, pp.7-9.

²¹ For example, in the USSR Aleksander Solzhenitsyn (traditional, religious and nationalist in orientation), Andrei Sakharov (liberal and civil libertarian in orientation, and Roy Medvedev (in-party and appealing for a return to a 'true' Leninist orientation). In a number of countries there were important dissident revisionists. In Hungary, the Budapest School of Humanist Marxism was influential. In Yugoslavia, the Praxis Group continued in this vein, as did Rudolf Bahro and Robert Havemann in East Germany. In Bulgaria and Romania, local conditions did not allow for a very visible or effective dissidence. Due to the exceptionally repressive nature of the Ceausescu regime most dissidents there had to flee. In Poland and Czechoslovakia dissenters remained on the defensive in the wake of post-1968 repression. For a fuller discussion of the intellectual dissidents see *Ibid.*, p.212 and n.23.

²² M. Rakovski, 1978. *Towards an Eastern European Marxism*, p.105.

²³ Bernhard, *op. cit.*, p.9

²⁴ Leading intellectuals of this 'dissidence' to 'opposition' shift of strategy included Jacek Kuron, 1977. 'Reflections on a Programme of Action', in *The Polish Review*; and Adam Michnik, 1976. 'The New Evolutionism', in *Survey*.

aimed at limiting the risk of Soviet intervention. Instead, the strategy of opposition represented a so-called “new evolutionism”. As its author, Adam Michnik emphasised,

Such a programme of evolution should be addressed to independent public opinion and not just to the totalitarian authorities. Instead of acting as a prompter to the government, telling it how to improve itself, this programme should tell society how to act. As far as the government is concerned, it can have no clearer counsel than that provided by social pressure from below.²⁵

Culminating in the birth of Solidarity this intellectual shift of focus and strategy envisioned a society that organised itself independently of the state: as Kuron demanded, a societal pluralism organised on the basis of “corporations, co-operatives, consumer associations, economic self-management; different self-management; different cultural associations, sponsorships, etc.; and organised farmers movement, a movement of citizen’s initiatives, of discussion clubs designed to work out certain concepts, centres whose task it would be to integrate individual programmes. And, of course, also unions”.²⁶ The political efficiency of such a strategy, it was agreed, lay in the development, throughout society, of the twin principles which characterised the intellectual dissident’s own organisational method - autonomy and solidarity.

At this stage solidarity is more important than demands. If the authorities were to concede the demands and then, soon afterwards dismissed the workers’ leaders from their jobs, they could easily go back on their promises as they have done in the past.²⁷

Built intellectually, upon the foundations of this shift of focus to an espousal of ideas of ‘self-liberation’ and direct, ‘self-managing’ democracy - a shift which became evident throughout Central and Eastern Europe - the Solidarity social movement represented a working-model of this strategy, to be reproduced in the societies across the region. Like ‘civil society’, the social movement Solidarity and the concept it represented emerged as an organisational slogan. Composed of an estimated 10 million members the movement caused a great deal of interest. Indeed, the efficacy of Solidarity and the ideology upon which it developed stemmed from perceptions of the character of the region’s social structure under the Soviet-type system - one which was perceived to be subordinated to the dichotomy between two diametrically opposed classes: the ‘tri-lords’ or representatives of the Party apparatus, and the ‘people’s class’ or ‘society’.²⁸ Indeed, this conception of Poland’s social structure (and by implication other countries’ in the Soviet bloc) as the basis of conflict, is crucial to understanding why the term ‘civil society’ gains so much relevance and currency of usage in describing the character of a mass movement which is neither captured by the term ‘social movement’ or Marx’s ‘class revolution’.

According to Rau, the Soviet-type system’s programme to change both societal organisation

²⁵ A. Michnik, ‘The New Evolutionism’, p.274.

²⁶ J. Kuron, quoted in Bernhard, op. cit., p.94.

²⁷ J. Kuron, ‘Reflections on a Programme of Action’, p.67

²⁸ See K. Podemski, ‘The Nature of Society and Social Conflict as Depicted in the Polish Press in 1981’, in Z.

and human consciousness through a process of social engineering - a mutual interaction of political control and repression, economic planning and control, and ideological indoctrination - had resulted in a society devoid of social, economic and political class cleavages and factions. As employees of the state, society represented an 'unconsolidated mass society', distinguished only by its subservient relation to the ruling class who were members of the Party-state administrative machine. Encompassing all the basic groups of the working population - workers, farmers, intellectuals, and craftsman and their families - Polish society was deprived of political power, economically dependent upon the state, and intentionally geographically isolated from one another. Despite society's functional heterogeneity and the economic inequalities between each strata, the opposition movement held that the interests of these groups were basically identical in their contribution to the good of the nation, and were morally obliged to be in solidarity with each other in their common fight for sovereignty and citizenship. Thus the source of social conflict was not inter-class, because all four economic strata in society were conceived to be of a single class, but perceived as a conflict between the authorities and society - the powerful and the powerless - the latter, whom aimed to restore their civil and human rights through a combination of autonomy, civil disobedience, and support.²⁹

The fundamental source of social conflict was perceived to be manifested in this étatic³⁰ relationship between state and society, whereby the state sought to dissolve all independent socio-economic, political, and cultural institutions in public life - political parties, business institutions, trade unions, learned societies, religious organisations, and publishing houses - and to replace them with state-controlled ones. All institutions were supposed not only to follow but also to implement the normative order imposed by the state, thus a state controlled public life functioned to reproduce the hegemony of the Marxist-Leninist system. Importantly, part of this process involved the eradication of an independent intellectual life. All those who were considered by the state to be actual or potential adherents to pre-communist (pre-Marxist-Leninist) ideas - such as the intellectual elite - were deprived of any influence in public life and were often physically eliminated.³¹ The synthetic connection between intellectual life and public life meant that whole areas of intellectual activity were systematically destroyed or brought to conform to the state ideology, leaving little room for attempts at independent thinking.

However, despite the Party-state's far-reaching attempts to indoctrinate the social consciousness, it is widely acknowledged that it was the state's failure to eliminate independent

Rau, 1991, pp.51-75.

²⁹ It is important to note the similarities of such a strategy with Gramsci's writing on the twin principles of autonomy and support in his discussion of studying the history Risorgimento in Italy: "The subaltern classes by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they become a 'state': their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society", or as he writes, "the phases through which they acquired autonomy and support". See pp.52-5. I return to and develop this discussion of Gramsci's theoretical and strategic influence on usages of 'civil society' in the South African debates in chapter four.

³⁰ This term is used by Rybachuk in 'Civil Society and National Emancipation', see pp.99-100.

³¹ See Jüri Luik, 'Intellectuals and Their Two Paths to Restoring Civil Society in Estonia', in Rau, 1991. pp.77-93.

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and human consciousness through a process of social engineering - a mutual interaction of political control and repression, economic planning and control, and ideological indoctrination - had resulted in a society devoid of social, economic and political class cleavages and factions. As employees of the state, society represented an 'unconsolidated mass society', distinguished only by its subservient relation to the ruling class who were members of the Party-state administrative machine. Encompassing all the basic groups of the working population – workers, farmers, intellectuals, and craftsman and their families – Polish society was deprived of political power, economically dependent upon the state, and intentionally geographically isolated from one another. Despite society's functional heterogeneity and the economic inequalities between each strata, the opposition movement held that the interests of these groups were basically identical in their contribution to the good of the nation, and were morally obliged to be in solidarity with each other in their common fight for sovereignty and citizenship. Thus the source of social conflict was not inter-class, because all four economic strata in society were conceived to be of a single class, but perceived as a conflict between the authorities and society - the powerful and the powerless - the latter, whom aimed to restore their civil and human rights through a combination of autonomy, civil disobedience, and support.²⁹

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³⁰ This term is used by Rybachuk in 'Civil Society and National Emancipation', see pp.99-100.

³¹ See Jüri Luik, 'Intellectuals and Their Two Paths to Restoring Civil Society in Estonia', in Rau, 1991. pp.77-93.

thinking and activity in public life, which set the 'revolutionary' events in East and Central Europe in process. Drawing heavily on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, in particular his conception of the role of "organic intellectuals",³² academic observers such as Rau contend that this process was endemic to the re-emergence of an independent civil sphere: "the point of departure for the re-emergence of 'civil society' began at the point where the destruction by the state had stopped".³³ Indeed, the very existence of an autonomous intellectual life independent of, and in opposition to, the state in Central and Eastern Europe was heralded as evidence of a 'civil society'.

While throughout the 1970s most Western academics and Central-East European scholars generally spoke of a human rights movement in the region³⁴, early references to 'civil society' which began to emerge at the end of the 1970s was a reference, not to social movements or societal organisation, but explicitly in terms of the 'unofficial' activities and political strategy of the intellectual's themselves. Manifested in the intellectual shift of focus and the transformation of Polish dissent as an end to 'revisionism', the concept 'civil society' was used to describe the existence and independent voice and activities of dissident intellectuals and scholars (rather than of mass society) as the source of an alternative public authority to that sanctioned by the state. In the preface to a book published in France in 1978, *La Pologne: Une Société en Dissidence* it is the volume of writings by Polish dissidents themselves which are heralded as "manifestations of the existence and vitality of civil society".³⁵ Simply put, in Western and Central European academic circles it was generally assumed that members of communist societies were atomised and unable to form an 'authentic civil society'.

While this view, according to Michal Buchowski,³⁶ was due more likely to the lack of information about community and associational life in societies such as Poland at the time, it is important to note that the idea of 'civil society' emerges as a *justification* of the activities and interests of the actors engaged in the struggle, as well as a *legitimation* of the intellectual dissident agenda as an *unofficial* political discourse shaping and advancing opposition hegemony in public life. As a first stage then, resulting from the political and social activities of the Polish intellectuals and dissident activists and Western academic reflection upon the process and dynamics of the revolutionary process there, the concept 'civil society' emerged as a political slogan. It was at one and the same time a banner of 'autonomy' for the revolutionary opposition, and, for participants and observers, perceived as instrumental for characterising the organisation of the intellectual's opposition

³² Gramsci's discussion of "organic intellectuals" – the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class - is central to his central premise that the advancement of working class hegemony and, therefore social revolution, derives its impetus and direction from intellectual activity.

³³ Rau, *op.cit.* 1991, p.12.

³⁴ In particular, references were made to the opposition movements in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Poland, see Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratisation in Poland*, pp.1-23.

³⁵ See Arato, 1981, p.23.

³⁶ M Buchowski, 'The Shifting Meanings of Civil Society in Poland', in C. Hann and E. Dunn, *Civil Society*. 1996, pp.79-98.

against the status quo thereby generating domestic and foreign support.

The Empirical and Analytical Uses of 'Civil Society' in Political Science

As an organising slogan among participants and academic observers the term 'civil society' lacked an essential element for it to have some purchase on social reality – a common understanding of its meaning, or what in reality it was supposed to represent or refer to. The premises for adopting the concept 'civil society' were not articulated clearly or consistently when used as an organisational slogan, and in the light of the impotence of existing theoretical frameworks to describe the unfolding reality, its use and utility required critical analysis and examination. The concept had been of central importance in much of the literature of Western political philosophy since the emergence of the modern nation-state, and its unexamined revival in the late 1970s and 1980s generated much debate. Undoubtedly, its re-emergence is largely owed to the English publication of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in 1971, but seeking justification for its use in the Eastern European context raised some fundamental philosophical questions which went to heart of political theory and practice.

The concept 'civil society' had reappeared at a point in history when the capabilities of existing nation-states to minimally satisfy human needs had never been more in question. Many academics began to ask whether its revival in political discourse was a coincidence or unexamined prescience? Was it a critical, forgotten dimension of legitimate rule in the past whose significance has been subconsciously remembered at a timely juncture? Did 'civil society' hold the key to understanding and addressing the political and socio-economic crisis-ridden nation-state in the Soviet bloc, and providing the theoretical and empirical basis for conducting progressive change? Certainly, 'civil society' forced political science to reflect upon the long forgotten dimension of the relationship between society and state so fundamental to the foundations of political theory. Theoretically, it provided a new framework with which to approach and better understand the rise of societal opposition and pressure for change; it spoke in terms of the changing nature of relations between economy, society, and polity; and, at a deeper level, 'civil society' was seen to open up new avenues for political analysis particularly in the processes of state reconstruction and the fundamental problem of the basis of the legitimacy of the state itself.

However, an underlying problem has arisen from these emergent 'civil society' debates; a problem which, subsequently, has generated further debate and greater normative usage of the concept. As Arato puts it, what was at stake was defining the "relevance to the East European context of a category of early modern Western political theory".³⁷ Thus, it seemed, the revival of 'civil society' became premised on its analytical usefulness - it was perceived as something more than just a passing terminological fad. Although it was widely acknowledged that existing theoretical, conceptual

³⁷ Arato, op.cit., p.24.

and methodological frameworks were in crisis and had been overtaken by events on the ground, the centrepiece of debate has surrounded the issue of its empirical and contextual relevance outside the Western European historical process: whether or not 'civil society' is inescapably bound up with Western political philosophy and practice and therefore inapplicable to Eastern European circumstances; and whether or not the idea of 'civil society' is so enmeshed in theoretical analysis that it can be of little or no use in empirical analysis or in practice on the ground. Despite, or rather because of these theoretical and methodological debates, 'civil society' grew in currency.

For Easterners ... civil society is the central concept for thinking about their political reality. For the Westerners on different sides of the political spectrum ... civil society is the main concept for understanding the developments in the region. The reason for this common approach is the enormous vitality of the institutions of civil society in the region.³⁸

As Adam Seligman observed 'civil society' became a positive, analytical term for the social sciences, with concrete referents that could be investigated through empirical research. Thus its utility and propagation was predicated on the fact that it opened up new avenues for analytical and empirical research which were absent in contemporary political discourses³⁹. However, 'civil society's' appropriation in both Western and East European political analysis has led to two distinct strands of theoretical 'civil society' discussions: a Western one (headed by social democratic theorists such as Andrew Arato) which posits the re-emergence of the concept 'civil society' on the intellectual and ideological reflection process which took place within the opposition movement and led to the development of radical democratic and social democratic theory; and an Eastern European discourse (led by East European and Soviet academics such as Zbigniew Rau) which adopts the concept as a means of describing and understanding the reconstitution of an independent public sphere based on the values of liberal democracy. It is these two analytical perspectives which subsequently lead to two alternative theories (liberal and social democratic) in which 'civil society' is developed as a normative force, a new theoretical strategy or blue-print for socio-economic and political change in Eastern Europe.

Writing in 1981, Andrew Arato is one of the first Western scholars to defend and further the use of 'civil society' in political analyses of the phenomenon of the Solidarity social movement in Poland. In an article referred to above, titled 'Civil Society Against the State: Poland 1980-81', Arato carries forward the slogan usage of 'civil society' developed amongst East European scholars, into the analytical dimension. The basic premise underlying his appropriation of the concept is that the opposition movement in Poland could and, more importantly, should be characterised as a struggle of 'society against the state':

the participants themselves and their Western collaborators have characterised their struggle in terms of society against the state ... KOR (an acronym for Worker's Defence Committee) is renamed KSS-KOR (Social Self-Defence Committee-KOR) to indicate its support of all

³⁸ Rau, 1991, p.17.

³⁹ Seligman, 1992. *The Idea of Civil Society*, pp.201-6.

initiatives for both interest representation and the defence of civil rights. In one form or another, the idea of the reconstitution of civil society through the rule of law and the guarantee of civil rights, a free public sphere and a plurality of independent associations is present in all of the opposition documents.⁴⁰

Indeed, a year after its original conception describing the context of 1980 in Poland and the rise of Solidarity, Arato re-interprets the German term *Zivilgesellschaft*, (originally meaning members of society not in uniform) to refer to “the organisation of a plurality of interests outside of the state in an increasingly independent social sphere”.⁴¹ Despite this vague, and rather construed reading, Arato’s explicit aim is to analyse events in Eastern Europe to prove their compatibility with re-emergence of the concept ‘civil society’, and, thereby, prove the relevance of the concept to East European developments.

To achieve this mutually reinforcing agenda, Arato intends to expand the established Western meaning of ‘civil society’, particularly revising Habermas’s notion of an institutionalised bourgeois public sphere, to incorporate the idea of new forms of social autonomy and the phenomenon of heterogeneous social movements⁴². In the discursive process Arato develops a new theoretical approach to ‘civil society’ in which he distinguishes society from both the state and economy as a sphere which should be autonomous of dominant political and economic interests. This, he argues, is a direction in which modern societies appear to be heading: “The differentiating, rationalising tendencies of modernity as well as the need for new forms of social integration may favour the autonomy of society from both the state and economy”.⁴³ The historical and theoretical development of modern nation-states in the West has led to an institutionalised differentiation between the political and social dimensions - the state and ‘civil society’ - whereby the state’s economic and cultural tutelage had effectively made the institution of society weak in comparison, and the term ‘civil society’ largely redundant.

In East Europe, by contrast, this relation was considerably different in that the ‘overwhelmingly powerful’ institution of the state had led to the destruction of social autonomy and the absorption of society and economy by state structures. From this perspective Arato contends that the rise of social autonomy, in the form of social movements, in both East and West can be seen as compatible with the re-emergence of the term ‘civil society’. Following “Second Left” intellectuals in France, Arato agrees that “at any rate, contemporary self-management movements in the West can be seen as a means for the re-emergence of civil society”⁴⁴ Concomitantly, in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union the social, economic and cultural prerogatives of the Soviet-type Party-state prompted a third path which “dramatically released energies ‘from below’ that captured the ruling party ‘from

⁴⁰ Arato, 1981, p.23.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² J. Habermas, 1989 *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [1962].

⁴³ Arato, op.cit., p.25.

⁴⁴ Arato gives reference, in particular, to the work of Alan Touraine. See n.12 in Ibid.

within', threatening to reconstitute civil society".⁴⁵

Arato's central point is that the Polish Solidarity movement - aiming at structural reforms from below and the reconstruction of the societal realm - is *at least* a 'potential model' of a new type of 'civil society', and can be analysed and understood as such, as well as promoted as a third path to change under state socialism: "Thus, the rediscovery of society under state socialism can lead to an opposition program ... a 'partnership' between the opposition and a section of the party, leading to a new social compromise between state and society"⁴⁶. But, he asks, providing the key stimulus for heightened debate on the concept, "can a social movement achieve a workable model of civil society alone, through structural reforms from below? And if so, what kind of civil society will result, given a formally intact, authoritarian state?"⁴⁷

The key issue to be considered in Arato's text is how the concept 'civil society' can be redefined and applied to the Eastern European context in order to become an analytically and theoretically useful ideal – not just an organisational slogan, but an organisational principle, and, ultimately, an organisational ideal. According to Arato the rediscovery of the concept 'civil society' in Eastern Europe, at bottom, has been the major source of inspiration for a new theoretical realignment on the ideological left. The further development of a socialist society in Eastern Europe, Arato argues, is impossible and unrealistic simply because of the nature of the opposition movement's political strategy and agenda under the realities of the Soviet-type system:

All of this is highly unrealistic, since the independent union has not proposed anything along these lines. Although it has insisted on participation in the ratification of plans presented by the state on the basis of proposals worked out by its own experts working with its 'research institute', Solidarity has made few specific demands relating to structural economic reforms ... its reticence is motivated by something more fundamental. It would be difficult to preserve the independence of the social sphere if the leading social institution assumed responsibility for state proposals which will necessarily be biased against some social interests – including some of the workers' interests. The institutions of Polish society cannot accept responsibility for present dysfunctions or for the dysfunctions that will inevitably arise from attempts to reform it.⁴⁸

As a normative and strategic program which would have a grave impact upon the reconstruction of the Western Left by 1989-1990, 'self-limiting revolution' and 'evolutionism' as the democratic opposition's third path to change in Poland was premised on the geo-political constraints and the negative lessons of 1956 and 1968. However, the rejection of radical revolution was also based on the implicit recognition that all revolutions, from the French to the Russian, had not only demobilised the social forces on which they originally depended, but also established authoritarian conditions that were meant to block the re-emergence of such forces at their very roots.

The program of the Polish opposition movement, as Arato illustrates, developed the opposite

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.26.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp.30-1.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.27

goal: namely the construction from below and the long term defence of a highly articulated, organised, autonomous, and mobilised social sphere – in Arato’s words, a model of ‘civil society’. Thus according to Arato’s perspective, the re-emergence of the concept ‘civil society’ has been part of a unique historical and theoretical process in which East European intellectuals, “deeply tired of all future-orientated social experimentation (and wary) of those who are critics of both past and present economic liberalism”⁴⁹, have sought to transcend the conscious geo-political and ideological boundaries imposed by the Cold War.

From the Western academic perspective then, the analytical use of the concept ‘civil society’ is perceived as highly relevant if we wish not only to describe and explain the dynamics and processes behind the course of events in Poland and Eastern Europe in the early 1980s, but also if we are to understand what is really new and common in contemporary forms of social struggle in the West, as well as in the East. The very hegemony of the democratic civil rights movement in Polish society with such quantitative and diverse support was coupled not only by the need for economic liberalisation, but also by a philosophical retreat from theorising a fundamental class as the universal revolutionary subject. This has prompted a theoretical move toward an insistence on the creation of independent social institutions, interest representations and the advocacy of pluralism, and consequently contributed to the emergence of a radical democratic theory in the West. It is the East European analytical discussions and usage of ‘civil society’ are illustrative of this process. Whether economic liberals or social democrats, or whether they have directly participated in or been observers of the region’s revolutionary events, Central and Eastern European scholars can all be seen as ‘agents of civil society’. Their discussions have brought the concept to bear, not just in Poland, but in analyses of the events in all the countries of Central and East Europe.

In the Introduction to *The Re-Emergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (1991), a compilation of East European and Soviet writings on the revolutions in the former Soviet bloc originally presented at a Conference at the University of Texas in April 20-21, 1990⁵⁰, the editor Zbigniew Rau explains, “the purpose of this volume is to analyse the developments in the former Soviet bloc from the perspective of the *ruled*. The key explanatory tool in this analysis is the

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.47.

⁴⁹ A. Arato, ‘Revolution, Civil Society, and Democracy’, in Rau (ed.). 1991., p.163.

⁵⁰ The book was the product of the conference convened by Rau at the University of Austin Texas where he teaches Soviet Government and the politics of Eastern Europe. Sponsored and funded by the University’s Centre for Soviet and East European Studies, the Soros Foundation, the College of Liberal Arts, the Government Department, and the LBJ School of Public Affairs, the conference aimed at something rather original: the participation of Eastern European and Soviet activists and prominent public figures and the contribution of their writings and perspectives. However one may argue that despite the originality of their contributions the theme of the conference ‘civil society’ had been conceived by Rau. Hence we see that of the five East European contributions, only two actually mention the term in their texts; Journalist and now political officer in the Estonian foreign Ministry Jüri Luik uses ‘civil society’ to describe the process of intellectual re-alignment in the restoration of Estonian public life; Ukrainian intellectual and scholar Mykola Ryabchuk, on the other hand, is sceptical of ‘civil society’s’ use. It is Rau’s interpretation of these texts content which enables him to promote the use of ‘civil society’ as an analytical concept. It is also interesting to see how his analysis compares with Western academics’ Andrew Arato and John Gray’s contributions to this volume.

notion of civil society”.⁵¹ Thus the term ‘civil society’ is retrieved from the history of political thought and rediscovered in the contemporary to actually mean or refer to the empirical social reality which re-emerges outside of state structures and institutions throughout the 1980s; due largely to the growing influence of the writings by Arato and other Western analyses of the concept, ‘civil society’, in Rau’s view is no longer an ambiguous political slogan, but located in

a historically evolved form of society that presupposes the existence of a space in which individuals and their associations compete with one another in the pursuit of their values. This space lies between those relationships which result from family commitments and those which involve the individual’s obligations toward the state. Civil society is therefore a space free from family influence and state power. The absence of family influence and state power in civil society is expressed in its characteristic features – individualism, the market, and pluralism ... There are at least five spheres of social life that are open to civil society’s activity and where its characteristic features are expressed and applied. These are the economy; communications; politics; education, science, and culture; and religious life.⁵²

Rau begins from the theoretical premise that the history of social struggles can be understood within a conceptual framework which highlights the fundamental interaction between ‘civil society’ and the state. Historically, he suggests, ‘civil society’s’ interaction with the state has been characterised as either a Hegelian relationship in which the state is based upon a system that enjoys normative superiority over the system upon which ‘civil society’ is based, or a Lockean one in which ‘civil society’ is founded on a system that enjoys normative superiority over the system upon which the state is founded.

This picture of state and society’s reciprocal relationship, one based on the philosophical issues of legitimacy, power and right, notions of political obligation, civil disobedience and ideological hegemony, enables Rau not only to place the East European state-society experience firmly within European philosophical and historical processes and traditions, but also to argue that state-society relations create two prototypical possibilities: either the interests of state and society converge, or they are in conflict. Hence, Rau aims to illustrate that under the Soviet-type system, state-society relations resembled the ‘Hegelian constellation’ in which the Party-state enjoyed normative dominance because it sought, through authority of law, ideological coercion, and force, to destroy the normative basis upon which he conceives a pre-communist sphere of public life or ‘civil society’ existed as an independent entity. However, he suggests, the state largely failed in its endeavour; the Soviet-type system was unable to displace completely the ‘pre-communist’ values upon which East European and Soviet societies are purported to be founded.

According to Rau, the re-emergence of ‘civil society’ resembled a ‘Lockean constellation’ whereby “individuals decided in their consciousness against the normative order promoted by the state and in favour of the pre-communist one in which civil society had been based. Having reached a consensus in the necessity of implementing the values of that order in public life, the individuals

⁵¹ Rau, p.3

⁵² Ibid., pp.4-5.

created the first institutions of civil society, that is independent groups and movements outside the structure of the state. Gradually, these institutions took over the structure of the state".⁵³ As an expression of an alternative value-system to that of Marxism-Leninism imposed by the Party-state, 'civil society' is accordingly utilised, by Rau, on the basis of an idea that certain normative values and interests are shared by its members, whom act as a distinct entity in their relation to the state and its imposed normative order. The question whether or not participants of the events were acting consciously in the name of 'civil society' is omitted by Rau, but, he explains, they shared a number of common interests and values - nationalism, sovereignty, autonomy, independence, rights, democracy, economic reform and security - which needed active representation, and which precipitated a 'civil society'. Rau contends,

The point is, however, that this impressive victory of the independent institutions of civil society over the Soviet-type system did not necessarily mean a triumph of the values of a liberally-orientated civil society in public life⁵⁴

It was nationalism, according to Rau's analysis, which was the dominant characteristic which promoted social solidarity in each of the countries of the Soviet bloc and led to the re-emergence of institutions of 'civil society':

it was nationalism that managed – better than any other political current in the region (such as social democracy or liberalism, which were traditionally weak there) – to maintain the pre-communist ties among the masses of the population. Moreover, nationalism preserved the pre-communist political values and patterns of political behaviour, offering an alternative to those promoted by the Soviet-type system.⁵⁵

The efficiency of nationalism as an organising principle, it is argued, rested on the doctrinal premise that its promotion of national self-determination, a sovereign nation-state, and national unity and uniformity was a long term goal: a "rational political preference of societies which in the last two centuries have faced, first, the loss of independence and, second, the imposition of the Soviet-type system".⁵⁶ Indeed, nationalism was the dominant expression of the main social opposition forces in non-Russian society. In the case of Poland, Solidarity was almost always projected in the underground press as the representative of the nation and its interests, whereas the authorities were described as representing particular class interests and those of the Soviet Union, and in many countries of the Soviet bloc opposition forces were described in terms of nationalist movements; the Catholic Church, on the other hand, explicitly stressed nationalism as a principal ethical and moral value. Alongside liberal democratic and humanistic values the nation was presented as a cultural and moral community united by a common history, tradition and culture, and a system of ethical and cultural values arrived

⁵³ Ibid., pp.16-17.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.140.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.133.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

at by common effort and tested through ages of common experience.⁵⁷ Thus the value-system of nationalism was seen as both an organisational driving force in public life and an alternative to the institutions and patterns of behaviour imposed by Sovietization: “those who privately identified themselves with these values were ready to implement them in political practice. This caused an expansion of the awareness of civil society’s values from the privacy of the individuals consciousness ... to the sphere of public life”.⁵⁸

Importantly, analysis of the re-emergence of ‘civil society’ as both a concept and a perceived empirical reality, in terms of a flourishing nationalist consciousness, has laid analytical stress on an opening of public life to non-Russian political cultures. In other words, the normative values and interests upheld in ‘civil society’ are described explicitly in this analysis as explicitly anti- or non-Soviet in character. According to Mykola Ryabchuk, this has led East European discussions of ‘civil society’ to further embrace and reproduce its affinity with European historical and cultural heritage and political traditions:

In fact, rejecting Russian influence, non-Russian nationalisms put less stress on their own ingenuity than on their own Europeaness – on their membership in a spiritual European entity, with its liberal, democratic traditions. Indeed, ‘a Europe of imagination, of delusion, of hope’ becomes all the more appealing for these peoples, and such European concepts as democracy, freedom, and civil society take on idealistic, almost magical qualities.⁵⁹

The upshot of all this analytical debate has been an East-West dialogue in which the concept ‘civil society’ has come to play an instrumental role in developing new political and analytical discourses. On the one hand, Eastern intellectuals and activists seek to learn from the institutions, political and socio-economic organisations of Western Europe, past and present, explicitly re-establishing the East’s geopolitical, historical, political and cultural roots in the European experience as a whole. On the other hand, those Western intellectuals, particularly on the Left, who observed the 1980-81 events in Poland had begun to learn to “appreciate what we already have (and) wish for what we have left behind”.⁶⁰ At the end of the day, this dialogue, of which analysis have spoken in terms of ‘civil society’, has led to an affirmation of the liberal values of political pluralism, interest representation, civil liberties and individual rights, free-market economics, and democracy. In turn, this dialogue has led to ‘civil society’s’ use, across the contemporary political spectrum in both the East and West, as a normative concept.

The Normative Uses of ‘Civil Society’: Political Strategy and Visions of a Desirable Social Order

Slogan usage of the concept ‘civil society’ has led to analytical debate of its use in describing the

⁵⁷ See, K. Podemski’s analysis of the Polish press in his article in *Ibid.*, pp.70-2.

⁵⁸ Rau, *op. cit.*, p12.

⁵⁹ M. Ryabchuk, ‘Civil Society and National Emancipation’, in Rau, p.102. See also n.21, p.111.

⁶⁰ Arato, ‘Revolution, Civil Society, and Democracy’, p.163.

Eastern European revolutionary dynamics and processes. In turn, analytical usage has led to important empirical research. It has also reinforced a normative usage in which the concept has become both agent and object of democratic visions of a desirable order - an intrinsically positive objective. Both Western and Eastern analytical discussions described above have come to similar conclusions, albeit through different analytical approaches: the theoretical development of the concept 'civil society' is crucial to promoting socio-economic and political change in the region (and, subsequently, around the world). Indeed, it is argued that addressing solutions to the rise of ethnic nationalisms and economic crisis in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union will largely depend upon the future model of relationships between society and state, which in turn will depend upon the shape and character of the 'civil society' sphere itself. Thus as Rau argues,

in the last three decades civil society in Eastern Europe has re-emerged from nothingness and managed to overcome the Marxist-Leninist system ... This spectacular success of civil society of civil society leads to a strong belief in its force as a normative concept that might give new shape to social relations in the region.⁶¹

Not only has this normative interest been sparked among intellectual activists in other areas of Central and Eastern Europe who began to explicitly demand the 'restoration of civil society'.⁶² but, as one commentary concedes, 'civil society's' use as a slogan, as well as a term of analysis has given rise to the view that,

Under communism the nations of East Europe never had a 'civil society'. A 'civil society' exists when individuals and groups are free to form organisations that function independently of the state, and that can mediate between citizens and the state. Because the lack of civil society was part of the very essence of the all-pervasive communist state, creating such a society and supporting organisations independent of the state - or NGOs - have been seen by donors as the connective issue of the democratic political culture - an intrinsically positive object.⁶³

However, Western and East European contributors to this debate project very different visions of what this normative ideal of 'civil society' is to encompass, although both expect that the concept will carry and implement their philosophical preferences and values in the East European context. As Adam Seligman contends, "in Eastern Europe an attempt appears to be underway to reconstitute civil society, and with it an autonomous public domain".⁶⁴ I begin with a critical examination of the East European theoretical model of civil society in order to discuss the hegemony of liberal discourses in the regions political and economic development, and then contrast it with a discussion of Western Left discourses to illustrate how these two normative theories interact and compete for political power

⁶¹ Rau, 1991, p.17

⁶² For example within the East German peace movement some activists began to direct their activity explicitly toward reviving 'civil society' as an essential means to achieve their aims. Similar concerns were expressed by Petr Uhl in Czechoslovakia. See Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'Nascent Civil Society in the German Democratic Republic', in *Problems of Communism* 38. P.2-3.

⁶³ J.R. Wedel, 'US aid to Central and Eastern Europe, 1990-94: an analysis of aid models and responses', quoted in C. Hann and E. Dunn (eds), p.1.

⁶⁴ A. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, p.6

in the empirical sphere of Eastern European and Soviet 'civil society'.

Among Eastern European academics (Rau, Luik, Seutova and Ryabchuk) it is easy to find a common normative vision of their model of 'civil society'; one which is rooted in analyses of pre-communist political traditions and founded upon nationalist consciousness, and, as such, involves the endorsement of a politically and economically sovereign nation-state constituted on the foundation of liberal-democratic values, institutions, and traditions. According to these Eastern European analyses the very mutually reinforcing issues which led to the re-emergence of oppositional civic society in the region - economic crisis, the burden of étatism on the social consciousness, and nationalism - ironically, have become fundamental obstacles to furthering the development of the type of independent and autonomous institutions and activities of public life which are thus perceived to promote democratisation in the region. Solving the economic crisis and overcoming the burden of an étatism in social and political life, it is argued, cannot be addressed on the basis of a nationalist-orientated consciousness and political culture in the societies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Nationalism is perceived to be an additional barrier to democratic transition, to which only a liberally-orientated model of 'civil society' is seen as the only alternative.

Despite its efficiency as an organisational principle in political practice, which established its position as the strongest political current in the region, nationalism is also the prime source of inter-ethnic conflict within and between the heterogeneous societies of the region. Moreover, given the shift to the right in public opinion (particularly in the rise of neo-nationalist movements in the former Soviet Union), it is argued, nationalist sentiments can easily give way to conservative and chauvinistic policy in which the rights of individuals and, in particular, ethnic minorities and displaced peoples are subsumed to those of the 'nation' in which they cohabit. European and North American history and political philosophy is illustrative of examples of the dangers of nationalism when some form of system of recognised and legalised rights does not exist, or when there inhabits a population 'uneducated' in the language of human and civil rights. According to these East European scholars, the experience of the West, and confirmed by the Soviet-type system in the East has illustrated that the dangers of nationalism threaten the autonomy of interests and the plurality of public life which currently exist in the region and should be promoted.

In the societies of Eastern Europe and Russia where there exists a mixed population within the boundaries of a state, and where there are also no commonly accepted rules or fundamental provisions for the protection of equal rights, nationalism, it is argued, "will always consider the claims of members of other nations to their own national identity as the result of the rights of other nations competing with his own, not as the result of the rights of individual human beings"⁶⁵. In this context, Rau contends that nationalism will also consider its efforts to deprive resident non-members of the nation of their own identity, by imposing upon them its own national consciousness, to be the proper

⁶⁵ Rau, pp.134-5.

execution of the rights of the nation.⁶⁶ Given the ethnic composition of most of the states in the region, founding 'civil society's' in these countries on the political and organisational premises of nationalism would lead to national and ethnic conflict within and between them.

Thus Rau contends it is necessary to find a foundation for political unity, economic and political democratisation in Eastern Europe other than in the nation-state. The arrival at the notion of a liberally-orientated 'civil society', coupled by a neutral state which it creates, as the alternative foundation, it is thought, can begin to address the main problems in the region – economic crisis, ethnic conflict and intolerance. Indeed, according to their line of analysis and liberal democratic objective there exists no realistic or demonstrated alternative other than to construct a 'civil society' based on individual rights, tolerance, pluralism, a free-market economy, and autonomous voluntary associational life.

However, destroying the Soviet-type system and quickly constructing a democratic system in its place is not enough to support the long-term goal of creating a stable, liberal democratic order which can cool the passions of nationalist fury and allow the region to finally flourish. If this is indeed our goal, then the values upon which a liberally orientated civil society is based must be nurtured and must replace the values of nationalism in the minds of individuals. Such a civil society will then underpin the liberal democratic order, providing it with citizens who are aware of the value of the liberal order and who will be diligent in its defence.⁶⁷

'Civil society', therefore, is projected as an ideal model of societal organisation in which the values of, and therefore interests and activities conducive to, liberal democracy can flourish. Although Rau's normative vision of this desirable social order is based on the Lockean conception of tolerance as an operational principle, this theoretical construction of 'civil society' is not adequately explained. Rau seems to assume that this ideal consensus and structure emerges by virtue of changing people's consciousness and changing the political values on which their interests and activities are based. To many critics this normative dimension of 'civil society' has many problems: importantly, should we necessarily expect the values and ideals espoused in the texts of intellectuals to correspond closely to the reality and practices of society? Is a Western model of an ideal of societal organisation applicable to the current realities of Eastern Europe, especially when developed in historical conditions that cannot be replicated in any other part of the world today? Despite these fundamental and largely unanswered questions, the normative appraisal and use of 'civil society' in scholarly literature has generated what Steven Sampson has called the 'social life of projects' - Western assistance for building the institutions of 'civil society' as a key to Eastern Europe's transition to liberal democracy.

With the rise of party politics, in Eastern Europe this shift in usage of 'civil society', from analytical concept to normative or prescriptive project, is also marked by its decline as an emotive popular slogan. By the turn of 1989-1990 when the institutions of civic life had begun to take over the

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.143.

structure of the state (assisted by the policy of *perestroika*), the Party-state fundamentally changed its character and retreated from cultural and scientific life, and permitted pluralism in these domains. It shifted from a centralised state economy towards a free-market with an increasing role for the private sector. However, these economic changes were not sufficient to allow the emergence of the type of 'civil society' envisaged by East European social scientists such as Rau. The core problem lay not in the articulation of interests, but in the difficulty in forming groups, associations and organisations united by economic, political, material interests. The fall of communism not only brought a number of former dissidents to the fore as national political leaders and state officials leaving civic organisations without leadership, but its defeat meant that the very symbolic reason - national, anti-communist values - for organising had also faded away with it. However, as a result of increased Western attention to 'civil society' in analyses of Latin American transitions to democracy, the empirical sphere of what constitutes a theoretical 'civil society' - the independent institutions and associations in East European public life - has become a key subject and agent of Western funded transition efforts towards a liberal market economy and democratic polity.⁶⁸

The East-West divide formerly based on Cold War has now been replaced by the West's concerted effort to 'modernise' the East and to 'integrate' the former communist states into European economic, political and security frameworks. Spearheading this effort is a gamut of Western aid programmes aimed at helping the Central and East European states achieve 'privatisation', 'agricultural reform', 'higher education restructuring', 'democratic institutions', 'legal reform', and a 'developed civil society'.

... These objectives may be articulated in a variety of ways: as 'strategies', 'indicative programmes', or 'plans'. At the basic level, however, they exist as concrete activities called 'projects'. The transition in Eastern Europe is a world of projects. This chapter focuses on how one such project, to develop civil society, is being exported into Albania. It describes how a Danish-funded civil society foundation attempts to assist Albanian NGOs. In short it is the story of how the term takes on a social life.⁶⁹

The picture Sampson paints is not entirely positive. Because the 'development of civil society' is seen in terms of increasing the amount of NGOs in society, not only is democracy understood quantitatively, but its future existence has become dependent on concepts, organisation and funds from Western agencies. The point being made is that East European discourses and their propagation of a liberally-orientated 'civil society' as a normative project in the Eastern European and Russian transition process has its consequences, to which these authors remain largely unaware of. The transmission from West to East of 'models' for development by which the East is supposed to replicate (if not imitate) a Western experience, which ultimately is only a representation taken out of context, has left political transition in the region heavily reliant on Western resources and management. The normative use of 'civil society' is not restricted to the development of the social sciences, but has taken on a prescriptive and strategic life in the politics of Eastern Europe in which

⁶⁸ S. Sampson, 'The Social Life of Projects: Importing Civil Society to Albania', in Hann and Dunn (eds) *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, pp.121-42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

foreign interests are particularly dominant. As Sampson suggests, “underneath the magical world of projects lie mystification and power”.⁷⁰

On the one hand the Western left’s development of a normatively motivated theory of ‘civil society’ is a critique of these liberal-dominated Eastern European ‘civil society projects’, but on the other hand, the Left who have been forced to retreat from socialist experimentation, have had to adapt and use ‘civil society’ as the basis of developing a new left theory of politics and society. The concept of ‘civil society’ is not rejected, but, as I have described above, on the basis of the argument that the major inspiration for radical democracy came from the rediscovery of ‘civil society’ itself, the Western Left have made it a centre-piece in critical theory, generating the creation and development of ‘new’, democratic and liberal institutions. According to Arato, “it is my normatively motivated hypothesis that the theory of civil society not only helps to describe at least some of the transitions from Soviet-type systems, but also provides a perspective from which an *immanent critique* of all these processes can be and should be undertaken”.⁷¹ Or, as John Keane has written:

More precisely, my argument is that questions about democracy and socialism can be posed fruitfully only by rethinking the relationship between state and civil society ... This relationship between the state and civil society must be rethought in a way that affirms the necessity and desirability of drawing stricter limits upon the scope of state action, while expanding the sphere of autonomous action ... From this revised perspective, socialism involves maintaining - not abolishing - the division between political and social spheres by making state policy more accountable to civil society and by democratically expanding and reordering non-state activities within civil society itself.⁷²

In developing a normative, social democratic theory of ‘civil society’ to fit the context of the unfolding Eastern European reality - as opposed to, and a critic of the dominant liberally-orientated one - the Western Left has had to theoretically come to terms with and reflect seriously upon the changing nature and dynamics of the historical process in the contemporary era: “Contemporary movements and their theorists operate with frameworks that presuppose and even defend structural differentiation as well as social spaces in which action orientated to meaning and solidarity can form. They do not seek the abolition of the formally democratic modern state and they accept some version of a modern economy. They thus transcend the opposition of ‘reform’ vs. ‘revolution’ typical of earlier democratising movements”.⁷³ What is perceived as ‘new’ about these contemporary movements, according to this perspective, is that they transcend or cannot be explained by existing conceptual and theoretical frameworks - they do not fit old or established processes or models of change whether Left or Right, Marxist revolution or liberal reform. The problem for the Western Left is that Eastern European opposition movements had not only broken from the burden of ‘actually existing socialism’, but had done so in a way that broke with the Western revolutionary tradition so

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.142.

⁷¹ Arato, ‘Revolution, Civil Society, and Democracy’, in Rau, p.163.

⁷² J. Keane, 1988. *Democracy and Civil Society*, p.3.

⁷³ Quoted in Arato and Cohen, 1984. ‘Social Movements, Civil Society, and the Problem of Sovereignty’, *Praxis*

fundamental to Left thinking. What was so radical and new, and therefore enabled theorists from across the political spectrum to join in with the debate and use it for their own normative purposes, was that events in Eastern Europe were neither a liberal nor a left-wing phenomenon in the Western sense of the terms. Indeed, particularly for the Left, these social movements irrevocably challenged the dualistic and oppositional premises of these Western political identities, and the notion of the antipodean incompatibility of the values on which they were historically based. The overthrow of communism and the legitimisation failure of 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern Europe, as well as these social movements' adoption of the Western liberal-democratic model, had left many on the Western Left without a name for their alternatives, let alone a vision of what they were and how to achieve them.

Adopting and adapting the theory of 'civil society', the Western left set about addressing their unease, by constructing a theory out of the East European social democratic experience and its relation to historical and theoretical developments in the West.⁷⁴ In this Western Left scenario 'civil society' has replaced 'revolution' and 'reform' indicating not only the new battlelines of conflict, but also a shift concerning the object of democratisation - from the entire social and political system to the non-state institutions of society - in which democratisation comes not from elite bargaining but from the pressure for reform among an autonomous, pluralistically organised and structurally differentiated 'post-bourgeois society'. It is clear that this theory of 'civil society' is not just an attempt to reproduce, on a societal scale, the model of organisational politics provided by social movements in Eastern Europe, but to take over the democratic transition process from where the social movements themselves left off. While the new social movements began where existing, large scale, formal or state organisations failed -expanding, redefining, and democratising social spaces in which collective identities, new meanings, new solidarities and forms of democratic association could emerge - reacting against the reduction of politics to administration, of political association to interest organisations intent solely on influencing state redistributive policies, an organised 'civil society' works to provide the legitimising and normative framework needed to dismantle the étatic state in the context of democratisation. However, claims Arato, this legitimising and normative framework for reconstruction cannot come from 'mechanical imitation' of the West's past or present, nor from the alternatives provided by either economic liberalism or Eastern European social democracy. Thus, rather strategically, it seems we are left only with one alternative - the role of a 'civil society' normatively based in the theories currently being worked out by the Western left: "the framework for common discussion is beginning to be constructed among those who have sought to develop post-welfare-state-leftist strategies in the West, counterpoising models based on social autonomy to both

International, p.270.

⁷⁴ Much of their theoretical discussions of 'civil society' have been influenced by Western analyses of the social movement phenomenon, in particular the writings of Jürgen Habermas, Alain Touraine, Andre Gorz, Karl Schmitt, Harold Laski for example.

state interventionism and unregulated markets".⁷⁵

It is only until now that we can appreciate how critical the discursive process of the re-emergence of the concept 'civil society' - from organisational slogan, analytical principle, to normative ideal - has become to 'agents of civil society' from across the political spectrum, but, fundamentally to the future of a left theory which has distanced itself from Marxism and further contributed to its demise. At root, we see that the concept of 'civil society' and the sphere of public life its re-emergence is seen to represent has become a feeding frenzy for liberal and democratic socialist attempts to influence the course of transition politics in the former Soviet bloc. 'Civil society' has become a metaphor for the free clash of ideas, a technical term invoked largely to justify and legitimate the universalism of Western values and institutions, rather than to enhance democracy, economic justice, civil and human rights in any substantial way as it is suggested in theory.

I wish to conclude this chapter by noting that the issues which are raised by the propagation of the language of 'civil society' in Eastern European politics should not necessarily be seen as the politics of 'society against the state'. In my view this limits our understanding of the dynamics and processes, and the actors themselves involved in contemporary politics; by speaking in terms of an empowered and autonomous society against the institutionalised power of the state not only promotes a myth of social empowerment, but obscures the fact that less privileged groups of interests in society are simply unable to organise and influence the language of progressive socio-economic and political change

The Eastern European politics of 'civil society' illustrate that discourses of transition politics, democracy, and economics are dominated by concepts, ideas and theoretical frameworks conceived largely in the language and experience of Western political and ideological struggles. The discourse of 'civil society' is clearly conceived and propagated by a small, but influential, sector of society - namely intellectual activists, academics, policy analysts, from across the political spectrum - whom are educated and articulate in the hegemonic language and knowledge of Western politics and society, and have privileged access to sources of communication (telecommunications, media), funding and other material resources, and whom also have connections with elite networks and powerful interests in political society. 'Civil society' is, thus, an elite discourse rarely known or understood by the mass society in whose name it is supposedly meant to represent. If it is known or used, it is in the form of a slogan which tends to reproduce the dominant meanings articulated by the debates undertaken among the elite in their own autonomous and organised capacity to influence the policy making process. The discourse of 'civil society' tells us more about the ideological manoeuvrings, power and interests of intellectuals and organised society in public life, rather than the needs and interests of the disempowered and unprivileged masses. Involving a paradigmatic shift from concentrating on the politics of the state and the political and economic leadership to the political interaction of organised

⁷⁵ Arato, 'Revolution, Civil Society, and Democracy', in *op.cit.* p.177.

society and the state, the language of 'civil society' hides as much as it reveals.

As the following chapter aims to explore, in Africa and other democratising nations of the world, 'civil society' is a reified concept; it has become key to Western academic and international governments, development agencies, and other organised forces seeking to influence the politics of democratic transition. Sampson's notion of the 'social life of projects' captures the nature of 'civil society's' reification in the African context, whereby the concept's use serves to perpetuate the hegemony of liberal democratic discourses and thus Western policy attempts to reconfigure African politics and society. As Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, "the new concept of 'civil society' signals that the left has learned the lessons of liberalism about the dangers of state oppression, but we seem to be forgetting the lessons we once learned from the socialist tradition about the oppressions of civil society. On the one hand, the advocates of civil society are strengthening our defence of non-state institutions and relations against the power of the state; on the other hand, they are tending to weaken our resistance to the coercions of capitalism".⁷⁶ The political retreat of the left into the sphere and idea of 'civil society', it would seem, is a neo-Gramscian strategy which aims at an accommodation to, rather than a critique of, the hegemony of modern capitalist democracies. It signals a reliance upon the logic of the free market, whereby it is argued that the idea of socialism (rather than the oppressed and working classes themselves) "will either win out in a free clash of ideas or not win at all".⁷⁷ However, what the Western Left tend to ignore in their search for inroads to political (and state) power is that Gramsci understood only too well that the playing field, even after dramatic upheaval, was far from even; the historical development of a society places limitations upon some interests, and is more conducive to others to gaining influence and power in society.

Such a conception may lead one to dismiss the term as irrelevant, or of interest only as a slogan, politically potent perhaps, but quite useless for the analysis of political change. Yet, as I have aimed to illustrate, the propagation and use of 'civil society' is highly significant to our understanding of the historical process, and if we are to understand the processes and dynamics involved in the contemporary dialectic between political theory and practice. It is these historical and theoretical processes which are illustrated by the reification of 'civil society' in the African context, to which I now turn in order to provide a contrast by which a clearer understanding of the politics of 'civil society' in South Africa can be gained.

⁷⁶ E. M. Wood, 'The Uses and Abuses of 'Civil Society'', *The Socialist Register* 1990, p.63.

⁷⁷ Daryl Glaser, 'Putting Democracy back into Democratic Socialism', *Work in Progress*, 1990, p.28

Chapter Three: 'Civil Society', Democracy and Development in Africa

If discourse can be midwife, then civil society is well and truly born ...

(Crawford Young, 'In Search of Civil Society' 1994)

The would-be universalists are those who adhere to a relatively 'hard', analytic definition of civil society and believe it is useful to apply this definition cross-culturally. The only plausible candidate for this core definition is the liberal-individualist understanding that has emerged in the modern West. Universalists tend to see this civil society as a concrete and quantifiable thing, usually with the implication that a large dose is indispensable in the general quest for good government. They often confuse what is with what they think what ought to be, according to the specifications of their model.

(Chris Hann, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models* 1996)

African Politics and the 'Reification of Civil Society'

The previous chapter has shown that the re-emergence of the concept 'civil society' has a specific currency in the dissident politics of Central and Eastern Europe and, in particular, for the theoretical shifts in strategy among the Western left. It is less clear, however, that the concept is an applicable or even useful one in understanding the social and political realities in Africa; let alone whether it is available for advancing the process of political change initiated by the wave of social protest movements which appeared throughout the continent during the 1980s. Yet this is precisely what the reification of 'civil society' in the African context has come to represent. The emergence of 'civil society' in academic and political discourses of African democratisation and development stems from the premise that the concept has analytical and empirical relevancy both for understanding the nature of African state-society relations, as well as an instrument for promoting new models of governance, democratisation and development. 'Civil society' emerges as a 'prescriptive panacea'; an academic slogan of universal validity to be promoted and incorporated into popular African discourses and struggles for 'democratisation'.

Given the number of books, journal articles, conferences, workshops, and the amount of international financing devoted to the idea, it is no exaggeration to say that the notion of 'civil society' is enjoying wide circulation and vogue in the continent. What E.M. Wood calls the "new cult of civil society"¹, to describe the ideological retreat of the Western left in the wake of the Soviet and Eastern European revolutions, is clearly gaining support from the concept's usage in Africanist academic discourses. It appears that most contributors to the debates in Africa are willing to "try 'civil society' on for size"², to see if it is either plausible, desirable, or even useful to their projects. Others,

¹ E.M. Wood, 1990. 'The Uses and Abuses of Civil Society', p.63.

² See J.W. Harbeson, co-editor of a theoretical and empirical analysis of 'civil society' in African politics, *Civil Society and the State in Africa*. 1994. pp.285.

sensitive to its attendant historical and ideologically specific baggage, however, have resisted joining the 'civil society' bandwagon altogether. Notably, these dissenting voices express the opinion that given 'civil society's' ancestry, not only does it contain certain analytical flaws when applied to the African experience, but underlying its normative and prescriptive capacity is a deeply ingrained ethnocentric and Western bias.³

So, for what reasons and purposes did 'civil society' emerge to attain such currency and controversiality? In order to understand 'civil society's' emergence and reification in the African context, and, therefore, to gain a clearer comprehension of what its usage represents to the politics of the continent, it is necessary to turn a critical eye to the dynamics and processes behind its appropriation. Although today the popularity of the term is now fading in Central and Eastern Europe with the rise of party politics and democratic government, in Africa (as well as in Latin America and Eastern Asia) 'civil society' continues to be extensively deployed explicitly in terms of the expansion of democracy. What this chapter on 'civil society' in Africa intends to illustrate, in comparison with its emergence in Eastern Europe, and for the broader purpose of analysing the politics of 'civil society' in South Africa, is that the term has become a political slogan among those whose interests and agendas are served by its revival in the public consciousness. In the African context, unlike the Eastern European one, 'civil society' is not a popular or localised discourse, but an internationally imposed one dominated by Western academics and reproduced by international aid and development agencies active in the continent.

In essence, 'civil society' can be seen as a means for legitimating and justifying foreign arbitration in African politics, society and economy, in keeping with the West's policy of political and economic liberalisation – the goal of enlarging the world's free community of market democracies. Far from promoting the conditions for progressive structural change needed to empower Africa and its peoples, the dynamics and processes behind its reification tends to reproduce the dominance of liberal democratic interests in the development of the continent. The process of 'civil society's' emergence, as I will show, bears this out. 'Civil society' does not emerge as an organic response to African intellectual and activist priorities for characterising and defending events on the ground, or from the philosophical or strategic problems they have faced coming to terms with the processes of social movement organising in opposition to the one-party state. The emergence of the idea follows a less coherent and organically-driven path. 'Civil society' is an imported *academic* slogan, brought to bear on the politics of the continent, firstly, by Africanist analytical discourses in the West seeking alternative conceptual and methodological frameworks for understanding and overcoming the phenomenon of the one-party state; and, secondly, largely in response to these discourses calls for a

³ See for example, T.M Callaghy, 'Civil Society, Democracy and Economic Change in Africa: A Dissenting Opinion'. In J.W. Harbeson *et al.* 1994; C. Young, 'In Search of Civil Society' *op. cit.*; M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. 1996; 'A Glimpse at African Studies, Made in the USA', 1989; 'A Critique of the State and Civil Society Paradigm in Africanist Studies', *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy*, 1995.

'strengthening of civil society in Africa', by the transnational efforts of aid and development agencies, NGOs and human rights groups. Unlike its emergence in Eastern Europe, or, moreover, because of the visible success of the concept's use and relevancy to the processes of change there, 'civil society' arrives in Africa as a 'universal' concept, a preconceived model or vision of a desirable social order to be promoted as a normative principle in African society and politics.

It would be terribly naive, as well as historically incorrect to treat the emergence of 'civil society' in African political and academic discourses merely as an extension of those articulated in Eastern European contexts. Certainly, they are interrelated via the expansion of discourse, but the reason for their juxtaposition here serves a central purpose: to illustrate the different interests and agendas its usage is meant to serve in different geopolitical contexts; to show that the emergence of the idea of 'civil society' in African politics parallels the Eastern European models, but serves a distinct descriptive and prescriptive purpose, particularly after the end of the Cold War. According to Crawford Young, the incorporation of 'civil society' into the language of democratisation in Africa was a "largely unconscious process".⁴ On the contrary, by critically examining the literature, I attempt to show that the lexical shift from 'society' to 'civil society' was a deliberate and conscious undertaking, initiated by the 1986 publication of Jean-Francois Bayart's seminal essay, *Civil Society in Africa*,⁵ in which he aimed to revive the theoretical and practical relevancy of African studies from a state of impotency in analysing current events in Africa. Ironically enough, the inspiration for this paradigmatic shift from a vision of African politics as primarily state-centred to one of the relationship between 'civil society' and state came, not from African events or the discourses from which they derived their meaning, but from Europe and, particularly, post-Marxist theoretical debates in France.⁶ Bayart's adoption of the term for characterising the politics of African society was greatly influenced by the 'civil society' discourse articulated by the 'Second Left' in France since the mid-1970s. Supportive of dissident opposition in Eastern Europe, the French discussion of 'civil society' was embedded in a social democratic critique of a totalitarian statist tendency in French political culture (particularly within the left-wing) which, it was feared, suppresses and absorbs many dimensions of an independent socio-economic and political life.⁷

⁴ C. Young, 'In Search of Civil Society', p.36.

⁵ J-Francois Bayart, 'Civil Society in Africa', in P. Chabal (ed.), *Political Domination in Africa*. 1986, pp.109-25.

⁶ In France a 'civil society' discourse had emerged in the mid-1970s among a prominent group of left-wing intellectuals, sympathetic to developments in Eastern Europe as a reference to theoretical democratic projects in French politics and society. These intellectuals include Claude Lefort, André Gorz, Alain Touraine, Jacques Juilliard, Pierre Rasanvallon, and Patrick Viveret. Heavily influenced by the events of 1968 in Eastern Europe, these "Second Left" intellectuals sought democratic and liberal solutions to France's 'statist-Jacobin' political culture in an attempt to redefine the status of the Socialist Party against the dominant left tradition in France in the 1970s. For a fuller description see J.L Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1992) pp.36-42.

⁷ The inspiration for this perspective was undoubtedly linked to the post-Marxist theoretical debates of the period. Some of the more important texts included for example, H. Arendt's critique of fascism, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951; *On Revolution*, 1963; her essay 'The Crisis in Culture' in *Between Past and Future*, 1963. T. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, 1969; L. Althusser, 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses', 1968; Jurgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1989; and obviously

In describing the nature of the one-party state in Africa, Bayart chooses to distinguish and contrast the 'liberal' state tradition found in Great Britain, United States, Switzerland and Netherlands to the type found in France (including Prussia, Italy and Spain), where, he argues, "a heterogeneous state, either imposed by colonial rule or created by revolutionary will ... has been deliberately set up *against* civil society", he declares that "the African post-colonial state is undoubtedly of that [French, totalitarian] nature".⁸ Although Bayart stresses that the concept 'civil society' is not necessarily applicable outside European history, he is happy to contend that "in sum, the concept civil society seems best able to explain – by its absence – the continuing existence of African autocracy".⁹ According to Bayart's formulation then, unlike liberal democratic states in the West where the "organisation of civil society makes redundant the emergence of a powerful state or a dominant bureaucracy", in post-colonial Africa there "is a hegemonic imperative which drives the state and the self-proclaimed dominant social groups to seek to control and shape civil society".¹⁰ Understanding 'civil society' in rather broad and inclusive terms as "the 'social space', large or constrained, as it is shaped by historical forces, other than state power"¹¹, the logic behind Bayart's comparative 'civil society' analogy is seemingly to stress the relation between 'totalitarianism' in Africa and the absence of the conditions for democratic development there.

Critical of the 'top-down', 'state-centred' approach which has dominated Africanist analysis, Bayart argues that "the question of democratic governance cannot ... be fully analysed in only institutional terms. Nor is authoritarian rule to be explained solely by Africa's [economic] dependence."¹² Until now, he laments, there is no substantive methodological criteria for explaining the phenomenon of the so-called rise of 'autonomous space of mass expression' in authoritarian regimes, and their impact on forcing regimes to seek new forms of legitimacy. In this synthetic process he promotes 'civil society' as the hitherto 'missing key' in approaches to African studies, claiming rather vaguely and ambiguously that the concept is 'central' to understanding many key factors in African economic, political and social life. Acknowledging and confirming the conceptual relevance of this 'civil society' perspective, Patrick Chabal declares in his introduction to the 1986 text,

Civil society matters because the state seeks to act upon it and in doing so it provokes self-conscious or even spontaneous reaction. Successful states devise *modi operandi* which adopt to and respond to civil society: political accountability. Unsuccessful states either dissolve, absorbed piecemeal by civil society, or they turn to absolutism, tyranny, in opposition to civil society. There are examples of all three in Africa today.¹³

Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, 1971.

⁸ Bayart, 1986 p.112.

⁹ Ibid, p.119.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.112.

¹² Ibid., p.110.

¹³ P. Chabal, p.15.

In essence, the emergence of 'civil society' in Africanist discourses is premised on the idea that it explains "society in its relation to the state ... in so far as it is in confrontation with the state or, more precisely, as the process by which society seeks to 'breach' and counteract the simultaneous 'totalisation' unleashed by the state"¹⁴. Thus 'civil society' emerged as an academic slogan, carrying with it the vague promise, by which the process of its reification is stimulated, that its use could open up new possibilities for methodological and analytical research. Importantly, this stands in contrast to 'civil society's' emergence in the Eastern European context. In African political discourses 'civil society' is devised as a slogan for the terrain of academic debate, and as such the concept acquires a specific analytical and normative purpose. 'Civil society' emerges as a slogan of academic of debate not only, in the words of M. Bratton, "because it embodies a core of universal beliefs and practices about the legitimation of, and limits to, state power",¹⁵ but because it offered a new analytical and prescriptive agenda for African studies.

Africa's potential for democracy is more convincingly revealed by the creation of small collectives established and controlled by moral rural and urban groups (such as local associations) than by parliaments and parties, instruments of the state, of accumulation and of alienation. These new political mediations will be evolved by Africans themselves, on their own. The task of the foreign analyst of these societies is simply to contribute to their understanding.¹⁶

From such a romanticised picture of the possible contribution a 'civil society' approach is thought to offer the prospect of democratisation in Africa, should one be surprised at the subsequent interest the idea has spawned within the Africanist imagination? One thing becomes very clear, however; importing a Western concept to the African reality involves greater, not less, participation by the foreign analyst, as well as from other foreign 'experts'.

Africanists, however, have been mindful to the task set by Bayart, and in the process two distinct paths to the reification of civil society in Africa have subsequently taken place. The first more analytical and critical discussion of 'civil society' emerged from Africanist academic discourse, and the second more normative and prescriptive propagation of the idea developed by liberal and democratic analysts. Despite Bayart's well-meaning supposition that the process of democratisation will come from within African society itself, it is clear that the reification of 'civil society' has given the latter group, based on the observations of the former, a monopoly on 'civil society' and therefore democratic definition and its construction in Africa. Accordingly we have witnessed a flourishing of direct international assistance, investment and interest via NGOs and charitable organisations in mediating the development of African 'civil society', in the name of democratisation. Such trends, according to some African and Africanist commentators, have revealed the concept 'civil society' to be culturally and ideologically suspect.

¹⁴ Bayart, p.111.

¹⁵ M. Bratton, 'Civil Society and Political Transitions in Africa', in Chabal, 1986, p.52.

¹⁶ Bayart, p.125.

The theoretical failings and empirical inadequacies of earlier schools of 'development' thinking – liberal 'modernisation', Marxist 'dependency', or as by the mid-late 1980s, the predominant 'statist' combination of both – prompted a search for new conceptual frameworks that would afford a fuller insight into the dynamic processes – particularly, the rise of social movements in opposition to the one-party state - unfolding in the continent. This quest, however, has been marked not necessarily by anything that resembles an entirely new theoretical framework or approach, but more a synthetic borrowing or 'recycling' of what was 'valuable' in the old approaches. This tautological approach, however, was thought to place new emphasis upon what John Dunn has called 'political understanding'¹⁸: a 'good political science' which defended the imperative of democracy, a move away from African particularism (or Third World modes of analysis), and a theoretical and empirical concern with the relation between state and society. What emerged, and is still evolving, in Africanist studies, of which attention to 'civil society' has become a central part, is a 'political interaction' approach – a perspective which, in the words of its authors, is "multidisciplinary in conception and multi-layered in design [which] better reflects the intertwining of social, economic, and political processes on the continent, and also conveys the close connection that has emerged between domestic and international dynamics".¹⁹

The role that the reconceptualisation of 'civil society' plays in this so-called 'new' Africanist schema is perceived as significant because the concept is thought to open up new theoretical and empirical avenues for analysis. According to Michael Bratton, 'civil society' marked a "welcome corrective" to the previous preoccupation with the state in Africanist studies since African independence.²⁰ 'Civil society', it was argued, because it spoke to Africa in terms of the historical dialectical relationship between rulers and ruled, state and society, legitimacy and accountability, democracy and capitalism – albeit in the Western experience – appeared to provide an in-road into the much touted priority of 'developmental democracy'.²¹ The primary problem, however, was defining 'civil society' to *fit* the African context. In order for 'civil society' to be a valid or useful conceptual and analytical tool, there was a need to describe and understand it in terms of the nature of society and its relation to the state in Africa.

¹⁷ Chabal. 1986, p.3

¹⁸ J. Dunn, 'Politics of Representation and Good Government', in Chabal (ed.). pp.158-74.

¹⁹ See N. Chazan, R. Mortimer, J. Ravenhill, D. Rothchild (eds). 1992. *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, pp.31, ix.

²⁰ M. Bratton, in Chabal, 1986, p.58.

²¹ According to Richard Sklar, African 'developmental dictatorship' since independence had failed (and largely contributed to) the problem of economic underdevelopment, social and political stagnation. The absence of democracy had not served Africa well economically. Furthermore, because of the inherited weakness of the post-colonial state, the imposition of the institutions and systems of the liberal democratic ideal has not provided the basis for legitimacy or accountable government. What was required was an organic growth of democracy from within society. Development, although an imperative, according to Sklar, could only come from a type of democracy conceived in terms of a relevant historical analysis of the relation between state and society i.e. 'civil

Recognising the existence and political relevance of civil society is not, however, necessarily to apprehend it. As yet we far too little, though African history is giving us better information on colonial and pre-colonial societies than we often have for post-colonial societies.²²

Throughout the late-1980s, therefore, Africanist writing on 'civil society' was an attempt to describe the historical dynamics, changes and continuities of the so-called 'pre-colonial', 'colonial', and 'post-colonial society' through an analysis of the nature of its relationship to the state. This is circular reasoning. Indeed, this circularity exists as the very condition of the concept's appropriation. It assumes the existence of an empirical 'civil society', and then uses this assumption to prove the validity of the concept's use and the conclusions warranted by it. On this basis we can understand why and how Bayart is able to contend that in 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' Africa it has been the state which was driven "to seek to control and shape civil society ... to enlist the dominated social groups within the existing space of domination and to teach them to be subject to the state".²³ Conceived largely in terms of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, African society's dialectical relationship to the state is characterised as one which combines "co-operation and conflict in ever-changing measure. The state protects and provides while it dominates and extracts; civil society responds with exit, voice or loyalty".²⁴ In other words, a usage of the concept 'civil society' began to describe a precarious equilibrium – a disharmonious state-society relationship, paradoxical or rather the antithetical to democracy:

... revolts, refusal to grow certain crops, declining productivity, strikes, abstention from elections, migrations, religious revivals and even the creation of theocratic communities outside state control, smuggling, the flourishing of informal exchange, distribution of information outside the official media, satirical, religious messianic or revolutionary attacks on the legitimacy of the state, and sabotage of the instruments of political control. There is a long list of popular actions which undermine and reduce the scope of state power. Civil society takes its revenge on the state and attributes in no small measure to its economic failure.²⁵

Clearly, what the use of the concept 'civil society' enables Bayart to do is to suggest that a more harmonious, and therefore desirable, pattern of state-society relations is contingent upon the 'rebirth' of an African 'civil society'. Thus, primarily, these types of popular protest were taken to mark the emergence of 'nascent civil society', "awakened from years of slumber under authoritarian rule" to take their future into their own hands: "a vast ensemble of constantly changing groups and individuals whose only common ground is their being outside the state and who have ... acquired some consciousness of their externality and opposition to the state."²⁶

One fundamental aspect of the emergent debate on 'civil society' in Africanist studies in the

society'. See R. Sklar, 'Democracy in Africa' in Chabal, pp.17-29.

²² Chabal, pp.15-16.

²³ Bayart, pp.111-4.

²⁴ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, p.6, 7.

²⁵ Bayart, 'Civil Society in Africa', in Harbeson *et.al.*, pp.113-4.

²⁶ Chabal, p.15.

late-1980s, however, was the insistence among scholars that 'civil society' spoke in terms of the involvement of African people in the making of their own history. This has been as much to do with a growing awareness of an embarrassing eurocentrism which prevails in Africanist studies in the West, as the visible rise of social forces and movements of protest in the 'wave of democratisation' which swept across the continent in the past decade. According to Africanists, from a situation of 'absorption' by and 'exclusion' from the state in the post-independence era, African socio-economic and political protest in the 1980s represented a shift in this 'colonised' relationship of society by state.

Adopting recent European conceptual trends, this shift was perceived to be one of increased societal 'independence', 'autonomy' and indirect 'penetration' of state power. In characterising this shift Africanist scholars have talked loosely in terms of these social movements as 'organised forces of civil society' – middle class entrepreneurs, workers, students, women, peasants – 'against the state'. Complex, diverse and hybrid, differing from country to country, these organisations, groups and associations were perceived to constitute the emergence of an African 'civil society' which was, initially, seen as associational in composition and interest-orientated in nature²⁷ According to Michael Bratton's interpretation, African 'civil society' is "an arena where manifold social movements ... and civic organisation from all classes ... attempt to constitute themselves and advance their interests".²⁸ Both of these definitions are illustrative of the Africanist attempt move away from the all-embracing and vague concept 'society' to account for the existence of a diversity of activities and interests as either directed in opposition to the state, or as a phenomenon of autonomous voluntary associations and activities which have sprung up - whether of an economic, social, cultural, or para-governmental nature.

Although the replacement of 'society' with the terms 'social movement' and, eventually, 'civil society' may not have contributed to any greater conceptual coherence, it is paralleled by a growth of empirical studies into the nature of this 'nascent' civil society. To name but a few, the works of Africanists such as Nelson Kasfir, E. Gyimah-Boadi, Aili Mari Tripp, Janet MacGaffey, Jennifer A. Widner, Jane Guyer and Naomi Chazan have all attempted to describe the dynamics of the so-called 'civil society' phenomenon. In the process they have created a diverse picture of community-based or '*Harambee*-type' rural and urban associations, mutual assistance networks, religious revivalist movements, a thriving popular culture of market literature and street theatre, various service-orientated, occupational and professional groups, informal trade, co-operatives and economic self-help organisations.²⁹ In sum, from Bayart's original depiction, the increasing interest in

²⁷ The publication of works on Eastern European 'civil society' and the pluralist definitions to have emerged as dominant there, have greatly influenced this viewpoint or perspective in the Africanist field at this time. In particular Michael Bratton makes wide reference to John Keane's 1988 social democratic analysis of state and society relations, see M. Bratton, 'Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa, *World Politics* 41 (April 1989).

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.147.

²⁹ The examples of their work, and of other contributors, is too vast to be listed here, but for examples of their literature and references to other works in the field see the empirical section in J.W Harbeson *et al.* 1994. *Civil*

and use of the concept 'civil society' began to describe a diversity and wealth of organisational life in African society, and raised hopes that 'civil society' was not simply a slogan, but an identifiable fact on the ground, and a universal term available for opening up the empirical field of democratic study.

Despite the existence of organised grass-roots activity, politically active and enterprising associations of empowerment, by the turn of the 1990s and at the end of the Cold War Africanist scholars were led to ask why these social forces had little impact upon a transition to democracy in the majority of the countries of Africa. As Gyimah-Boadi asserts, "on the whole, civil society appears to be too weak to help rebalance state-society relations in favour of the latter".³⁰ For all their effervescence and political momentum, according to Naomi Chazan, this 'rich and varied organisational tapestry'³¹ had not translated into a force powerful enough to consolidate a transition from autocracy. As such, Africanist scholars began to question whether or not this sphere of so-called autonomous activity and independent expression could, in reality, be called a 'civil society'. For example, despite the allusion to pro-democratic and anti-state sentiments traced among social groups and movements, Africanists shared Bayart's disappointment that there appeared to be no central and unifying 'organisation principle'³² – such as in Poland under Solidarity for example – which could bring together the disparate organisational elements in society.

Thus, if the phenomenon of social movements in Africa had raised democratic optimism and initiated the reification of civil society, it was because they were perceived to be part of the broader pro-democratic, pro-liberation and anti-state trends evident around the world. In the light of the Central and Eastern European revolutions, and the success of a defined 'civil society' sphere in forcing political change, Africanists were seemingly led to ask why this trend had not come to fruition in Africa. As an academic slogan the concept had successfully served to re-orientate Africanist studies towards a more empirically-grounded focus upon the interrelation between state and society. It provided a new conceptual framework by which to engage analytically in the politics of contemporary Africa; enabling a new paths of investigation to understanding the multiple forces and dynamics that have shaped the post-independence reality.

However, as an analytical concept, 'civil society' clearly did not transfer as a model so easily into the African empirical reality. Simply put, Africanist analysis of 'civil society' was premised on the universalistic assumption that the concept was a concrete and quantifiable thing, identifiable by a range of elements common to the historical development of modern democracies. Thus when the African reality did not conform to 'what ought to be', according to the specifications of their model, these Africanists did not question the validity of the concept itself, but presumed it a paradox of

Society and the State in Africa.

³⁰ E. Gyimah-Boadi, 1992. 'Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Africa', Paper presented to the Woodrow Wilson Centre for Scholars and the American University, Washington DC, p.6.

³¹ N. Chazan, 1992. 'The Dynamics of Civil Society in Africa'. Paper presented to the International Conference on Civil Society in Africa, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, January 1992.

³² Bayart 1986. p.117.

African society.

In contrast to the Central and Eastern European context where 'civil society' came to represent a creation "through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilisation ... institutionalised and generalised through laws, and especially subjective rights, that stabilise social differentiation"³³, African 'civil society' was thought to reflect more the 'primordial' and 'gelatinous' type spoken of by Gramsci.³⁴ If anything, the analytical use of 'civil society' in Africanist discourse had illustrated the dislocated and heterogeneous character of African society. Furthermore, and with rather racist undertones, it was conceded that most African social formations were embedded in cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious conflicts. As Bayart suggested, "there is no common cultural frame of reference between dominant and dominated groups, and sometimes not even among the dominated. In Africa there are no one-dimensional or homogenous societies, but rather a collection of time-spaces like so many poles, created by various social actors".³⁵ Apart from reproducing ethnocentric images of a conflict between the 'modern' and 'traditional' in African society, the central point that the 'civil society' discourse raised was that the sphere its revival was perceived to represent in reality was not only less than ideally stable, homogenous and unified in its interests as previously theoretically assumed, but that African 'civil society' was something quite different to the type(s) presented by the history of political philosophy (for many obvious reasons).

As a philosophical or ethical idea, the concept 'civil society' has largely been historically presented as a *collective* entity existing outside the state, which sees 'civil society' as fostering a shared political culture of generalised norms and values incipient to society in its relation to the state³⁶; in the African context this Western perspective simply had little resonance. As a result, Africanist scholarship has been at pains to reformulate the concept to *fit* the African reality. As Robert Fatton contends, in Africa 'civil society' should therefore be seen as

... potentially a highly subversive space, a space where new structures and norms may take hold to challenge the existing state order. This is not to say that civil society is necessarily revolutionary; on the contrary, it may be the prime depository and disseminator of reactionary forms of knowledge and conduct that confine subaltern classes either to old, unchanging behaviour, or to ineffective, disorganised patterns of collective resistance.³⁷

In essence, Africanist scholarship has had to struggle with the realities of importing a Western concept, derived of European and North American historical processes and theoretical developments, to the African experience where the heritage of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial presents

³³ J. Cohen and A. Arato, 1992 *Civil Society and Political Theory*, p.ix.

³⁴ A. Gramsci, p.238.

³⁵ Bayart, pp.117-8. Whether or not Africanists actually expected there to be a homogenous and unified society speaks volumes of the eurocentric preconceptions about African societies and African peoples. Nationalism, class, etc in Europe are systemic groups of identity shaped by its historical and theoretical development, the fact that scholars expect a kind of parallel consciousness or unifying interest among Africans is perhaps not only a cultural bias but may also be illustrative of an underlying racism.

³⁶ For example see the historical analyses by A. Seligman, K. Tester, J. Keane and J. Cohen and A. Arato listed in the bibliography.

an entirely different picture of state-society relations and social relations than produced in the West. The historical process in Africa, simply put, did not conform to this ideal model of trans-historical change. As a result, however, they have tended to posit 'civil society' as an unsteady combination of a struggle between the 'old' or 'reactionary' versus the 'pro-democratic' or 'oppositional', or, by implication, a struggle between 'traditional' and 'modern' values in Africa. Furthermore, many have questioned the basis of whether 'civil society' should be conceived in terms of a democratic panacea when the movements and protests born of the 1980s and 1990s (which gave 'civil society' in Africa its empirical credibility) have had a limited impact on generating political reform or promoting sustained democratic change.

In the Africanist debate there is the contention that what constitutes 'civil society' may not necessarily contain democratic features. As Fatton argues, 'civil society's' perceived democratising role is limited by class and ethnic struggles, having no visible nationalist vocation³⁸ and is ill-equipped to supplant the state in the provision of goods: "how can human beings truly share a community of interests when they are divided into classes of perpetrators and victims of exploitation? ... the growth of civil society may contribute to an extension of existing inequalities".³⁹ The social, cultural and economic power structures which are embedded in African society, attributed to by the consequence of colonialism and reinforced by the seizure of the post-colonial state by military and class elites, have tended to fragment and suppress collective movements for change. The circumvention of nationally-orientated democratic change to local and grass-roots democracy and empowerment, promoted by theories of 'civil society', appeared unlikely to have a radical impact upon established and systemic power structures for the foreseeable future. Indeed, rather ironically, the process of a civil society-orientated democratisation in Africa, and, in particular, its phase of consolidation has exposed grave weaknesses in the link between the theory of 'civil society' being elaborated and the capability of the phenomenon its elaboration professes to represent. The theory of 'civil society' may have proved useful for analysing African state and society relations, but its empirical applicability and usefulness in promoting democratic change (or even in explaining the lack of democratic change) remained highly elusive and practically uncertain at this stage.

Voicing this empirical predicament in Africanist discourses of 'civil society' in the early 1990s, Mahmood Mamdani has suggested insightfully that "it is necessary to move away from the presumption that ideal tendencies are immanent in social groups, and that these tendencies come to fruition with the flow of events and the heat of battle ... analysis must unravel real tendencies in the movement of social forces".⁴⁰ Such an understanding, contained in Mamdani's argument that "the

³⁷ R. Fatton, *Predatory Rule*, p.6.

³⁸ This view is perhaps due to the fact, argued by Mamdani, that Africanists do not tend to read African literature or study the ideas of African intellectuals.

³⁹ Fatton. *Ibid.*, pp.2-8.

⁴⁰ M. Mamdani, *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy*, p.9.

crisis of Africa is indeed the crisis of movements that organised to transform Africa"⁴¹, stands in stark contrast to the socio-political context in which the Central and Eastern European (and, historically speaking, European and North American) discussions of 'civil society' emerged and gained analytical and normative ground. As such the Africanist 'civil society' discourse has had to turn to developing understandings of these African 'reformist' or 'transitional' failings. Importantly, Africanists have had to seriously reconsider their original premise – that 'civil society' in both fact and as a theoretical perspective is the hitherto missing key to sustained political reform, legitimate states and governments, improved governance, viable state-society and state-economy relationships, and the prevention of the kind of political decay that brought about its revival almost a generation before.

The edited volume of contributions to the International Conference on Civil Society in Africa held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in January 1992, is an example of this reflection process in Africanist studies. The resulting publication *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (1994) is a renewed attempt to assess seriously the status of 'civil society' in African studies and its contribution to the agenda of developmental democracy in African countries. Despite the relevance of certain problems and flaws in the concepts' usage (which I will return to later in my discussion), the book is an overwhelming reaffirmation of 'civil society's' continued analytical and empirical importance to studies of African society, economy and politics.

Importantly, among Africanists there is a growing awareness of Samuel Huntington's premise that there is nothing inevitable or predictable about the direction and merits of political change in the countries of the 'Third World'.⁴² This perspective has made the gains offered by a revised theory of 'civil society' that more bearable than its apparent limitations. Africanists are simply unwilling to cast aside the concept, as John Harbeson explains:

An underlying premise of this volume is that the idea of civil society speaks to an important gap in social science theory regarding African problems of political and socio-economic development on the ground. That theoretical shortcoming has been reflected in less-than-successful policy formation by African governments and donor development assistance agencies. The missing dimension supplied by the idea of civil society is that, in process terms, working understandings concerning the basic rules of the political game or structure of the state emerge from within society and the economy at large. In substantive terms, civil society typically refers to the points of agreement on what those working rules *should* be.⁴³

The theoretical rejection of the Hegelian dialectic is explicit here; the Africanist intention is to promote the idea of 'civil society's' 'inherent' self-sufficient and rational capacity, rather than its inevitable reliance upon the ethical state: "to recognise that civil society, like government, is not fully autonomous and self-sufficient must be nurtured by both government and society as a whole".⁴⁴

The goal of 'strengthening' 'civil society' in Africa is based on the notion of autonomy and

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² see S. Huntington, 1965. 'Political Development and Political Decay', in *World Politics*, pp.386-430.

⁴³ J.W Harbeson, p.3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.20.

independence from the state, a creation of a vision similar to that of a 'parallel polis' as conceived by East European intellectuals, precisely because it is perceived to be the 'type' of state, its institutions and practices in Africa to which society is opposed. In this model of argument, then, it is the creation of a 'strong civil society' which will undermine the state, forcing democratisation and liberalisation from below. The grounds for asserting such a theory of 'civil society', has as much to do with the Eastern European experience, as it has to do with Africanist's interpretations of the character of Africa's 'nascent civil society' described above. However, (as the next section illustrates) it also has to do with the West's policy of political and economic liberalisation in the continent.

The contributors to the volume detect two overwhelming features of the autonomous and independent potentialities in African 'civil society': its potential for 'self-sufficiency' and 'self-mobilisation' *against* predatory rule. In considering the former, the contributors stress the second economy and other informal networks providing scarce resources, shelter, alternative forms of information and public discussion (music, theatre, literature, etc.) and other services as representing the means to an alternative livelihood as well as protection from the state, even if in defensive form. In the words of Fatton this sphere of activity can be seen as a 'survival strategy' – an 'internal frontier' or 'interstitial zone' thought common to so-called traditional African kinship structures and dynamics.⁴⁵ In addition to this characteristic, African 'civil society' shows signs of the capacity for autonomous self-mobilisation. Bratton, Tripp, and MacGaffey all stress an 'entrepreneurial spirit' pervading African social and economic life. The second economy, they argue, is a potential source for 'embourgeoisement'; whether in the form of informal trade networks, co-operatives, black markets, smuggling, etc., self-mobilisation has been not simply a key to economic survival, but a fundamental source of political consciousness. As Tripp observes in the case of women's associations in Tanzania: "new forms of societal organisation and interaction ... are challenging existing institutions and norms" and yielding "tangible changes in consciousness".⁴⁶

In considering both of these characteristics, it is largely recognised that the concept 'civil society' has contributed to an African 'civil society' theory. However, a central problem arises. If empirical study has contributed to theoretical formulation of 'civil society', why has the translation of this theoretical 'civil society' into constructive change on the ground proved so elusive? This is a key theme in Africanist discussions precisely because they are articulating 'civil society' in terms of institutionalising a 'collective consciousness', and more so because 'civil society' is being conceptualised in terms of a Gramscian counter-hegemonic critique. Although Bratton argues that "while political resources, organisations, and ideas may be observed, none can capture the quality and complexity of civil society as a whole",⁴⁷ Harbeson asks whether this is not the central analytical

⁴⁵ Fatton, pp.56, 74-5.

⁴⁶ Aili Mari Tripp, 'Rethinking Civil Society: Gender Implications in Contemporary Tanzania', in Harbeson *et al.* pp.149, 152. See also the works of other authors in this volume for examples of political consciousness derived in their self-mobilisation activities.

⁴⁷ Bratton, p.57.

agenda of African studies of 'civil society':

To what extent do those organisations and groups that analysts find to be performing civil society activities develop consciousness of their collective identity? And what might be the form, content, and depth of that consciousness where it exists? ... In short, these studies have suggested the possibility of empirical consciousness of agendas resembling activities associated with our concepts of civil society. The what, when, and how of such consciousness remains for subsequent research to explore.⁴⁸

In awaiting further research, the Africanist discourse appears to settle on two fundamental problems associated with translating 'civil society' theory into practice. While there is general consensus on the concept's theoretical, analytical and empirical utility for research, the problem remains how useful or viable 'civil society' is for constructing change in the continent.

The first problem – the politics of transition – is best articulated by Bratton and Gyimah-Boadi who argue that while a theory of 'civil society', as an alternative source of political culture, may have been instrumental in describing Africa's vibrant associational life, and its key role in forcing the democratisation agenda, this same 'civil society' appears to fail to demonstrate the same capacity for democratic consolidation in the continent. They ask not whether the theory is flawed, but whether or not it is properly grounded in the political, social and economic realities of African life. Gyimah-Boadi suggests there are two broad contextual and systemic factors impeding the growth and development of 'civil society' in practice, making it unlikely that it will "automatically lift itself from the doldrums, or be able to do so in time, to play the key role it is expected to play as an agent of democratic consolidation".⁴⁹ He suggests:

The predominance in the African associational realm of traditional, neo-traditional and primary types of organisations that hold non- or anti-democratic values, that are not interested in political pluralism or are apolitical, and the prolific number of modern interest-based associations that are not available for political mobilisation; and the debilitating organisational, material and legal handicaps imposed on the organisations of putative 'democratic civil society' by the prevailing structures and cultures of African neo-patrimonial, authoritarian and hegemony-seeking states and regimes, combined with the weakness of the private sector and the absence of a viable non-state means of subsistence.⁵⁰

Similarly, but on a more theoretical line of analysis taken from liberal accounts of political transitions and democratic consolidation debates,⁵¹ Bratton concludes that the role of 'civil society', both in

⁴⁸ Harbeson, p.298.

⁴⁹ Gyimah-Boadi, pp.21-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ For example see Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986, volume 4. The issue of differentiating a political and a civic sphere, or 'depoliticising' the civic to the political in theories of democratic transition is a central issue in the South African 'civil society' debate. This idea is caught up with the debates on the perceived nature of the 'civil' sphere, (i.e., whether or not they are weak, conflictual, nascent) and therefore, whether, in the eyes of observers, they are capable or conducive to the democratising role afforded to them in theory. In contrast to the Eastern European context, both in Africa and South Africa, as I shall illustrate in the following chapter, 'civil society' is analysed as weak, unequal and conflictual and therefore perceived as 'unable' (and sometimes 'incapable') of performing the ideal democratising function. Promoting democratisation

theory and in practice, is “circumscribed to a short-lived interlude:”

Civil society gives way to political society and is itself transformed during the process of political transformation. In the early stages, before and after the first elite concessions, civil society performs as a refuge of last resort for partisan opposition groupings. The announcement of ‘founding elections’, however, brings about a rebirth of political society and a concomitant transformation in the role of civic institutions. ... Ideally, civic organisations, whose members usually remain committed to political change, are freed to redefine their roles in more neutral terms – for example, by taking on tasks of voter education, election monitoring, or human rights monitoring. Once political parties are available to promote partisan politics, civic organisations can adapt or regain roles that are truly civic.⁵²

Thus Bratton and Gyimah-Boadi are stressing a central theme which runs throughout Western political philosophy on the idea of ‘civil society’ – the problem on which Gramsci based his work, and that faced by post-Marxists ever since – that ‘civil society’ may simply be a bourgeois or elite concern, seeking to expand their material interests over and above the impoverished masses of the population. Hence, can ‘civil society’ become a source of counter-hegemonic struggle of collective society against the state? Or, is it ultimately a space where powerful interests seek to co-opt or colonise society in its search for hegemony and, eventually, political (state) power? Does Fatton’s earlier assertion that the *petit bourgeoisie* plays the fundamental role in the resurgence of ‘civil society’, signal an inherent flaw in theories of ‘civil society’ as applied to the masses? Or, alternatively, is ‘civil society’ so embedded in Western historical and theoretical developments that, as an explanatory model for change in Africa, it subsequently limits our conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding the African reality? The question why the concept ‘civil society’ has to date largely failed the Africanist strategy is therefore a key paradox in the field, raising a second and important problem surrounding Africanist debates of the usefulness of the concept.

Therefore, perhaps the most interesting element of the book’s contribution to the reification of ‘civil society’ in African political is that explicit in all the contributions is the notion of the need to step critically away from the concept’s inherent eurocentric bias, and to concretise the concept in the African historical and cultural process. Whether or not this agenda is achieved is worth consideration. Implicit in this aim is a tension between its availability as both a descriptive and a prescriptive panacea; among Africanists there is a latent anxiety about promoting ‘civil society’ as a normative concept. They argue that if ‘civil society’ is to be of practical use in improved policy formation, it necessarily has to be stripped of its Western heritage and reformulated in an ‘African’ mould. ‘Civil society’ in the African context, Harbeson contends, “must be derivative from underlying cultural values”.⁵³ In a different vein Victor Azarya stresses the need to recognise the possibility of such a

in these countries, it is therefore widely asserted, should be the domain of political parties, whilst ‘civil society’, in the light of the structural and fiscal weakness of the state, is reduced to a ‘developmental’ role. Furthermore, in contrast to South African debates, the African civil sphere is perceived to be so structurally weak and unstable (i.e. the implication is ‘uncivil’ and ‘intolerant’ in Locke’s sense of the term) that it requires direct international intervention in developing the sphere through private and non-governmental organisations.

⁵² Bratton, p.64.

⁵³ J.W Harbeson, p.15.

Western bias. But in order to avert it, he argues, we cannot afford to avert the concept of 'civil society' just because it is not generic to the culture it is trying to explain; that, he contends, would be the end of comparative study. Alternatively, Azarya draws a distinction between analytical and normative uses of the concept. On the analytical hand, he argues that

It is true that civil society is rooted in Western philosophy, but this is hardly the first time that a concept of Western origin would attain more universal connotations and widespread use beyond the Western context. After all, terms such as 'bureaucracy', 'bourgeoisie', or 'democracy' are no less Western in conception ... we should strive to standardize and universalize our conceptual tools as much as possible ... we should try not to define a concept too narrowly in order to retain its cross-cultural applicability.⁵⁴

On the normative hand, the construction of 'civil society' as an African reality, he also argues, should necessarily come from the interests and activities of African society itself, in its autonomous capacity outside of state or other cultural tutelage. Azarya, then, calls for the reconstruction of public responsibility, engagement and participation of African society.

In theory, this seems to suggest that 'civil society's' construction in Africa may indeed challenge Western models, but, in practice, leaves open the important question of how and by whom and in whose interests its boundaries might be imposed or maintained. As the Africanist literature itself has illustrated, the sphere of 'civil society' is not an even or equal terrain, it contains economically and culturally powerful, as well as non-democratic interests. I return to this point later and go on to develop this criticism in the next section's discussion of the liberal usage of 'civil society', but first I wish to clarify some of the implications of the Africanist reification of 'civil society'.

Firstly, the issue of the euro-centric bias in Africanist 'civil society' theory is a problem particular to studying the so-called 'post-colonial' societies of Africa (and other 'developing' countries of the Third World). It was not, with the exception of the anthropological viewpoint expressed by the volume edited by Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, (1996) a highly visible political issue in the Central and Eastern European 'civil society' debates. Indeed, as I have shown in the Central and Eastern European context, the emergence of a 'civil society' discourse was premised, among other factors, on the idea that the region is widely assumed to be geographically, geopolitically, historically and culturally rooted in European development as a whole. While many contend that the Soviet-type system was a digressive 'excursion', an ideological division between East and West imposed by the Iron Curtain and politics of the Cold War, the historical process in Central and Eastern Europe over the past decades was still conceived to be a part of the wider European experience. The theory of 'civil society', above all, was an attempt to come to terms with the East-West mind set, and proved efficient in pulling these two time-frames and processes together to show the continuities, rather than the disruptions, in the continent's historical development.

Africanist discourses, by contrast, are acutely aware of the cultural bias, both implicit and explicit, in adopting a Western concept to describe the African experience, and on which to formulate policy prescriptions for Africa's malaise. But the overwhelming impoverishment of theoretical and analytical alternatives has left Africanists in the West with little alternative but to attempt to reformulate 'civil society' to 'fit' the African reality. As a result, much of their usage of the concept is in fact merely academic. Africanists are at pains to illustrate that 'civil society' can overcome its eurocentric heritage by taking on some kind of universal or ubiquitous quality. If the emergence of 'civil society' is enjoying wide vogue and currency in the African context it is largely because the concept has taken on so much meaning for defending the credibility of the current state of affairs in African studies. Although John Harbeson is intent on stressing that Africanist theories of 'civil society' "by definition, roots political values in culturally specific value systems and is thus singularly valuable in *overcoming* and countering ethnocentrism"⁵⁵, there are many hidden flaws in such a generalised and vague assertion.

African scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani, E. Wamba-dia-Wamba and others have been particularly vocal and acid in their criticism of these Africanist studies in African 'civil society'. In particular, Mamdani is critical of the type of token gestures, 'mythologising' and 'caricaturing', as expressed by Harbeson above for example, and he contends that this is little more than a romanticisation dressed up as a 'turnkey project'.⁵⁶ Harbeson's aim of 'overcoming' and 'countering' ethnocentrism, is, in the words of Mamdani, a 'universalistic pretension':

For in the amalgam of diverse processes that is contemporary Africa, is not the discourse of 'civil society' a restatement of an earlier perspective that of 'modernisation' theory, with its notion of the 'traditional' as the problem and the 'modern' as its salvation?⁵⁷

In fact, African criticism argues that this 'unilinear evolutionism' which is inherent in Western thinking on Africa cannot be overcome by the state-society paradigm precisely because "the Africanist is akin to a person learning a foreign language who must translate every new word back into his/her mother tongue, in the process missing precisely what is new in the experience".⁵⁸ In translating this experience, then, is the tendency to find the appropriate analogy in Western historical processes in order to describe or capture the African reality for its, largely Western, audiences to comprehend. As I illustrated at the opening of my discussion of Africanist 'civil society' discourses, the reification of the concept was premised on the idea that the African state-society relations were analogous with the totalitarian statist tendency in French political culture; and certainly, the rise and relative successes of Central and Eastern European social movements would have been deeply engraved on the minds of Africanists in the West. Mamdani's criticisms, therefore, are crucial if we

⁵⁴ V. Azarya, 'Civil Society and Disengagement in Africa', in Harbeson *et al.* p.87.

⁵⁵ Harbeson, p.220.

⁵⁶ M.Mamdani, pp.602-3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.608.

are to understand the implications Africanist theorising and prescription will have on our knowledge of African politics and society, as well as on policy which will evolve from the reproduction of such paradigms. Premising the emergence of ‘civil society’ in Africa on how the African phenomenon reflects a particular stage in European or North American social, economic and political development – ‘embourgeoisement’, ‘associational pluralism’, or ‘totalitarianism’ – only serves to lift the phenomenon out of context and process, and to reproduce eurocentrism. “In this sense”, argues Mamdani, “eurocentrism mutilates the experience of both the West and of the rest, mythologising the former and caricaturing the latter”.⁵⁹

The problem, therefore, is that in alluding to promote the capacity of the African masses to strengthen ‘civil society’, Africanists are guilty of restricting them; in only recognising some generalised sectors of society – petit bourgeoisie, women, students etc., to the exclusion of say Islamic fundamentalist groups for example – as potential members of this ‘civil society’, the picture of African social relations becomes distorted and deliberately one-sided. Furthermore, and central to Mamdani’s argument, is that there is a general tendency among Africanists to “consider its object as incapable of making history as of comprehending it”.⁶⁰ Africanist description of the popular struggles in African society, it is argued, are not based on a reading or comprehension of the values and self-reflections of those engaged in those struggles themselves, but on abstract interpretation of whom they perceive to be the actors and what their interests to be. Reading the works of African scholars such as Funso Afolayan, Julius Ihonvbere and Olufeni Vaughn for example, a different picture of popular struggle and social movement politics is presented, one which is based on the popular and cultural expressions in African society. As Mamdani asserts, these perspectives challenge the very basis of Africanists universalising pretensions, exposing their eurocentric bias and, therefore, their analytical and theoretical weaknesses. As Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba ask:

For when revolt and criticism are expressed outside the parameters of (recognised) organised group life, is not that simultaneously a critique of the very nature of organised life? ... To speak of a critique of existing organisations is to speak of a critique of existing civil society; not a welcome prospect for those (Africanists) who see civil society in programmatic terms.⁶¹

To review the African literature on social movements and ‘civil society’ is beyond the scope and aims of this discussion, but I think the point – the limitations and possible dangers of Africanist eurocentrism – is clear for our purposes. Africanist theories of ‘civil society’ are marred by abstraction, analogy, and blindness to actual historical processes and dynamics in African society. In essence, the reification of ‘civil society’ is premised on a eurocentric bias which presents a view that African social, political and economic development follows, or rather should follow, the path taken by the West. This has serious implications for African scholarship, especially for reproducing the type of

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.609.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.611.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.5.

paternalistic and culturally effacing policy prescriptions which have hitherto emerged from international governments and aid agencies such as the World Bank and IMF.

The second issue I wish to raise with the Africanist use of concept 'civil society' is linked to the problems of eurocentrism raised by Mamdani and others, but leads us more to the problems of its normative usage being developed as a result of the liberal and democratic discourses in the West. Among Africanists there is a general assumption that "with an end to the Cold War confrontation between Marxist and liberal ideologies on the African continent, the climate for focusing on evolving African value systems may have improved, and with it the possibility for African political and socio-economic orders to become more viable and legitimate".⁶² While this may be a well-meant statement, in the light of contemporary international politics, it is perhaps a simplification and a romanticisation of the political reality in post-colonial Africa.

Are we to presume that a theory of 'civil society' embedded and constructed in the Western political discourse for the purpose of analysis and policy formulation in Africa will automatically and inevitably lead to the promotion of African value systems and political and socio-economic orders – the type of which Africanists lament at being so ill-equipped to promote democratisation and development? Perhaps, but not in the way Africanists may expect – the rabbit may indeed 'turn poacher': the promotion of African value systems will more likely arise from criticism of the type of eurocentric paradigms, such as 'civil society', which dominate our understanding and knowledge of African politics and society. One needs only to illustrate the irony in the fact that Western campaigns for structural adjustment were in part responsible for the rise of African social protest in the 1980s and 1990s, which, in turn, gave impetus to the emergence of 'civil society', which is ingrained in the same classical liberal philosophy as the structural adjustment programs. As a result of this dominant discourse, the much touted 'strengthening' of African 'civil society' has prompted the rise of the role of international NGOs in the continent, as well as becoming the new strategic motto of the World Bank and IMF.

A common problem, therefore, running through the Africanist debates is the tendency to emphasise the methodological and analytical usefulness of the concept, at the expense of avoiding the normative or prescriptive outcomes its theoretical and empirical use subsequently promotes in reality. They tend to uncritically accept the promotion of the idea of 'civil society' in Africa as a bulwark to democratisation and grass-roots empowerment, because these are issues central to their academic concerns, but they overlook, or tend to gloss over the important fact raised by Jane Guyer that international organisations and interests also inhabit and act within the territory of these African 'civil societies'.⁶³ Indeed, while the emergence of a 'civil society' discourse is due to reflections upon the ability of political theory to account for the rise of so-called autonomous movements, associations and organisations in African society, its increased currency and vogue is concomitantly directly related to

⁶² Harbeson, p.27.

the growth of the international NGO industry.

While it is not my aim here to deny the achievements of Africanist scholars in expanding our knowledge of the African reality – their work is an important source of cross-cultural and intellectual debate – but to critically analyse the theoretical processes by which ‘civil society’ emerges in Africanist studies and to demonstrate the normative political consequences inherent in its reification in the African context. From so-called unconscious process, I have shown that the emergence of ‘civil society’ in Africanist discourse and its reification with regard to analytical priorities in the field of African studies has become a conscious, if not deliberate, concern. Implicit, then, in all analytical discussions of ‘civil society’ is a normative or prescriptive element which comes to play a direct hand in the development process in Africa. The consequences of this ‘pro-civil society’ trend are quite revealing seen from this perspective. As agents of ‘civil society’, acting in their capacity as academics, intellectuals, professors, authors, policy analysts etc., their endorsement of the idea is premised not necessarily on the material interests and needs of the African population they endeavour to represent, but on the basis of values and norms derived from their own political culture. In essence they become players in that which they seek to describe. This point is made more explicit in the discussion of the liberal discourses of civil society in Africa.

The Normative Agenda in Liberal Discourses: Between Strengthening and Commissioning ‘Civil Society’.

The previous Africanist discourse has shown that the growth of ‘civil society’ institutions has been paralleled by, and received much impetus from, an intellectual appropriation of ‘civil society’ in the West. While the Africanist discourse is largely academic in orientation, and is indicative of the shift in left-wing politics and strategising, the liberal discourse of ‘civil society’ can be seen to represent a continuation – albeit in a new approach - of international efforts to rehabilitate African politics, economies and societies. Largely as a result of the end of the Cold War, US foreign policy, for example, has shifted from that of “containment” to a policy of “enlargement” of the “world’s free community of market democracies”,⁶⁴ and has led to a huge growth of foreign specialists – policy analysts, consultants, organisations, academics, evaluators – and with it, a flow of Western technical, financial and administrative resources into Africa. This transfer of resources and agents is also matched by a flow of Africans travelling to Europe and United States for education, job and training opportunities. Importantly, however, while this flow is unidimensional, the result is largely one-sided; tending to promote Western currencies, languages (particularly English), knowledge, values and discourse at the expense of cultivating and spreading those of African origin. The business of

⁶³ J. Guyer, ‘Spatial Dimensions of Civil Society in Nigeria’, in Harbeson *et al.* p.223.

⁶⁴ See T.L. Friedman, ‘US Vision of Foreign Policy Reversed’, *New York Times*, September 22, 1993, p.A4, cited in T. Callaghy, ‘Civil Society, Democracy, and Economic Change in Africa’, p.239, ff29.

'strengthening civil society', therefore, becomes not only a Western academic and policy export, but a direct strategy of engagement and management in the realm of African 'civil society' itself.

The emergence and development of a 'civil society' discourse in the African context should, therefore, be seen in terms of the transnational politics in the continent. To speak, as many Africanists do, of 'civil society' as representing the notion of 'state-society relations' in Africa is overly simplistic; not only does it distort the picture of an increasingly internationalised African society, but it tends to misrepresent the politics, dynamics and processes behind the phenomenon of the movement of social forces in Africa, of which the articulation of 'civil society' is assumed to be born. In other words, the articulation and use of the concept 'civil society' should be understood in terms of something more than a postulated or theoretical idea of state and society relations in the discourse of African politics, society and economy, but more as a political strategy in Africa; an ideological means to an end, which is utilised in ways which serve to legitimate and justify large-scale foreign (and, therefore capitalist) intervention, via the grass-roots, in the politics and economies of African countries. As Victor Azarya notes,

There is something spectacular and perhaps ironic about the way in which civil society has burst into social sciences literature in recent years after lying dormant for so long. An important component of Western political thought, the concept was neglected in the West for most of the twentieth century while it gained more common use in Marxist terminology and some of its derivatives. Its new surge, however, occurred just as socialism declined and a capitalist market-orientated socioeconomic order began to spread around the world ...

... Strengthening civil society has now become a deliberately designed and targeted activity of international donor organisations. The attraction of the concept is undoubtedly a result of disillusionment with the state and a vindication of sorts for society-centred approaches. It has been increasingly used by those looking for ways to reach societies more directly, circumventing state channels that proved corrupt and inefficient in the past. The existence of an "active" civil society, manifested in nongovernmental organisations that claim to represent various groups in society but also claim to act with some public purpose, on behalf of an entire collectivity beyond family, provides international donors and their political backers with the nongovernmental counterparts they are looking for on the recipient side. With such motivation, it is not surprising to find a flurry of academic activity engaged in the same direction.⁶⁵

The 'commissioning' and 'patenting' of the idea of 'civil society' in Africa should alert us to questions such as who, in reality, is acting within this hypothetical arena, what their interests and motivations are, and what the institutionalisation of this 'civil society' will come to mean for the process and direction of African development. In the type of 'civil society' presently under construction in Africa, where membership is no longer determined by citizenship, what critical analysis should be asking is whether this 'new approach' to African development will result in 'africentric' or African-initiated and controlled policy, which will empower and represent the destitute and impoverished masses. Or will 'civil society', in theory and practice, function to reproduce the type of elite-centred, racist and eurocentric biases which have dominated the continent's historical

⁶⁵ V. Azarya, 'Civil Society and Disengagement', pp.85-6.

development since colonialism? Understanding the usage of the idea of 'civil society' by these actors is therefore crucial if we are to critically analyse the nature of evolving socio-economic and political struggles in Africa, both internationally and locally determined, as well as the process by which certain interests will be enabled to participate effectively in socio-economic and political norm setting and change.

Since the end of the Cold War it is no exaggeration to say that it is liberal discourses which are dominant in the promotion of the idea of 'civil society' in Africa, both in theory and on the ground. Indeed, while the collapse of the socialist state in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe provided the external stimulus for its appropriation with regard to implementing strategies for political and economic liberalisation in Africa, the prominence and economic dominance of former white settlers and international capital in African countries themselves provided the internal ethnographic basis upon which it could be institutionalised. Importantly, though, the commissioning of a liberal vision of 'civil society' in Africa has received its greatest impetus from the pre-eminence given to democratisation as a means of ending statist, inefficient, and corrupt political economies.

From the 1950s, liberal approaches to African development were dominated by theories of modernisation. They were premised on the notion that African societies were in the process of becoming modern rational entities in which efficiency and scientific logic replace traditional values and belief systems. In economic terms, modernisation was seen as commensurate with mechanisation, rapid industrialisation, and growth; in social terms, its goals were defined as increasing individual mobility, controlling the political importance of communal identities, and establishing procedures for equitable resource allocations. In political terms, modernisation implied institutional expansion, the rationalisation of the government apparatus, power concentration, some measures of political participation, and an augmentation of capacities in order to meet growing demands.⁶⁶ Modernisation was seen as providing a foundation for African countries to achieve, first, some measure of stability and autonomy and, ultimately, a pattern of convergence with the Western industrialised world. Therefore, development in Africa was conceived and perceived of as a stage by stage process whereby the developing society gradually approximated the development of societies in Europe and North America which were characterised by stability, consensus, equilibrium and harmony.

This unilinear approach in Western political science – which stressed that social and economic 'modernisation' had generated political democracy in Western Europe - was premised on the notion that this model of development leading to democracy, as well as the way in which it had been studied, could be replicated in the Third World.⁶⁷ However, the course of events in post-colonial

⁶⁶ For an overview of this literature see Samuel P. Huntington, 1971. 'The Change to Change: Modernisation, Development and Politics', *Comparative Politics* 4(3):55-79.

⁶⁷ Some of the more influential writers adopting this view include, W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960); G. Almond & J. Coleman (eds) *The Politics of Developing Areas* (Princeton University Press, 1960); G. Almond & B. Powell,

Africa has not matched this premise: institutionalised democratisation based on Western models was to be far more complicated than theoretically assumed. Indeed, as many African scholars have argued, “it is this Western-type development model that has been the major source of the one-party state in Africa ... narrow and romantic leftism has invariably been the cause of as much autocratic and authoritarian rule as rightism has produced in Africa”.⁶⁸ Old Western certainties and models of development and democracy have proved to be ill-matched in the context of the African continent, and have forced many observers to not only reconsider the role of democracy in this process, but to return to the meaning of democracy itself.

Since the mid-late 1980s political and economic liberalisation, or more familiarly, ‘democratisation’, has become the key research agenda, not just in studies of African politics and society, but on a global scale. The current perception of a global movement towards democracy – what Samuel Huntington has dubbed the “Third Wave”⁶⁹ – has led to a mushrooming of comparative studies of the preconditions for and the consolidation of democracy. According to liberal analysis the mere existence of multi-party competition and elections do not alone guarantee genuine democracy, and that what is purportedly required is vaguely (if not mystifyingly) referred to as a ‘widespread and complex process’ involving the strengthening of ‘civil society’. With its roots in the modernisation school, liberal analysis and strategising has received a new lease of life.⁷⁰ Initiated and funded by the United States since the mid-1980s, there was a deliberate effort among liberal and democratic analysts to tackle the problem of unconsolidated transitions to democracy from authoritarianism and the phenomenon of the one-party state around the world.⁷¹ It was an attempt to combine almost all existing explanations of democratisation and to formulate ten dimensions for the analysis of democratic consolidation in developing countries, but one (in true liberal fashion) in which the relationship between capitalism, development and democracy was still taken for granted.⁷² The logic of this approach is premised on the notion that,

The ideological hegemony of democracy in the world has flourished on two foundations: the clear moral and practical superiority of the political systems of the established democracies;

Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach (Boston: Little Brown, 1966).

⁶⁸ Ibbo Mandaza, ‘The State and Democracy in Southern Africa’, in Anyang’ Nyong’o, P. (ed.).1992. *Thirty Years of Years of Independence in Africa: The Lost Decades?* p.66, 79.

⁶⁹ S. Huntington, *The Third Wave – Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991)

⁷⁰ See the four volume series edited by L. Diamond, J.J. Linz & S.M. Lipset, *Democracy in Developing Countries* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989)

⁷¹ According to Diamond et al., there were no studies of Communist countries: because of the “little prospect among them of a transition to democracy (sic!) How false this rather parochial assessment turned out to be!” Ibid., p.xix.

⁷² The authors sketch ten theoretical dimensions of democratisation: political culture; regime legitimacy and effectiveness; historical development; class structure and the degree of inequality; national structure (cleavages); state structure, centralisation and strength; political and constitutional structure; political leadership; development performance; and international factors. Ibid., xv. Interestingly, this so-called ‘integrative’ approach is also evident in emergent Africanist contributions to theories of democracy and development in Africa. See for example the recent edition of Chazan, Mortimer, Ravenhill, and Rothchild’s text, *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* in which they develop what they call a ‘political interaction’ approach.

'traditional' formal and state-led political and economic structures. Liberals emphasise such characteristics in African society as constituting a 'civil society' because of their visible "dual autonomy from both the state and primary social units of production and reproduction; their capacity for collective action in defence of their interests and passions of their members; their self-limitation with regard to governing the polity as a whole; and, their willingness to act in a 'civil fashion', i.e. within pre-established and mutually acceptable rules of exchange and influence".⁷⁶ In essence, the two concepts of 'civil society' and democracy were seen as two sides of the same 'development' coin.

According to Philippe Schmitter there is an explicit historical and philosophical relationship between democracy and 'civil society', and in an effort to define 'civil society' in its democratising role he proposes ten general links⁷⁷. Firstly, the presence of "some degree, distribution or type of civil society", acting alongside other institutions and processes contributes positively to the consolidation of democracy. Second, the transition to democracy is "almost invariably accompanied by a resurrection of civil society, even where none may have existed before". Third, we should no longer perceive that democratisation comes about through formal party structures, but that other forms of collective action in "neo-democracies" are expressed through 'civil society' organisation. Fourth, democracy is facilitated by citizenship which is not confined to periodic voting, but can also be exercised "by influencing the selection of candidates, joining associations or movements, petitioning authorities, engaging in 'unconventional' protests". Fifth, the rise of plural associations and interests require a democratic process and system to have their needs and interests represented efficiently and equally. Sixth, a civil society comprised of class, sectoral or professional associations - essentially, a middle class as the "governing class" - plays a more significant role in the consolidation process than a multiplicity of narrowly specialised and overlapping organisations. Seventh, the development of a middle class also provides congruence within civil society as a whole, and contributes positively to mutual agreement on the rules of the democratic game, and therefore the stability of the political transition. Eighth, because associations in civil society serve to provide information to its members, thereby "stabilising expectations", inculcates civic behaviour and collective consciousness, enables self-expression, and provides avenues for potential resistance against arbitrary or tyrannical rulers (in the Lockean sense), its presence contributes to the consolidation of democracy. Ninth, the creation of a civil society in neo-democracies is a political strategy aimed at protecting rights and obligations. While a civil society is "not an automatic or unreflexive product of capitalism, urbanisation, literacy, social mobilisation, and development, although it is encouraged by all of the above ... its emergence requires explicit policies by public authorities and implicit practices by private (re)producers".

⁷⁶ See P. Schmitter, 'On Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy: Ten General Propositions', p.35

⁷⁷ The following is taken from his paper which was delivered at the International Conference on "Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Trends and Challenges" at the Taipei Institute for National Policy Research, Taipei. Although it was presented as a discussion of 'civil society' and democracy in Asia, it provides an overview of the general liberal position in linking democracy and 'civil society' as inimical to and an explanation of the social and political changes occurring in the Third World.

and their increasing use of pressure and conditional assistance to promote democratic development around the world. If the world's wealthy, established democracies have the wisdom and energy to preserve those two foundations, more democracies will become 'established' ... and cultural arguments that liberal democracy is a Western, ethnocentric concept will become increasingly perverse and untenable.⁷³

On first appearances this statement by one of the leading democratic analysts seems to contain a well-grounded argument; democracy, compared to the one-party state or military regimes, etc., is clearly morally and practically superior for its protection of rights, freedoms and civil liberties. However, as an argument which serves to legitimate the hegemony of liberal democracy as the sole and authentic model of development, not only distorts reality, but smacks of an arrogance not easily swallowed in post-colonial Africa (particularly in light of the fact that the West has frequently supported so-called 'no-party states' such as Uganda simply because of their pro-market policies). To suggest that liberal democracy above all other regimes and systems of 'democratic' government is the only legitimate or universally applicable model which will provide for stability, economic growth and development in Africa is a Western and ethnocentric bias which appears to guide current conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Thus there seems a semblance of logic to the argument that Western intervention in Africa will be justified on the pretext of 'promoting the wave of democracy'.⁷⁴ Or, perhaps, as Ibbo Mandaza suggests,

In other words are we witnessing a return to the Cold War, in a new way? ... Evidently, despite the so-called rapprochement, the West is agog with excitement ... the hysteria and frenzy are no different from the Cold War, except that now the West is in jubilation.⁷⁵

Essentially we are led to believe that democratic development in Africa can be characterised as choice between two polarities: Western liberal democracy on the one hand, or 'illiberal', 'authoritarian despotism' on the other, in which systems that do not appear to fit closely either definition should be considered 'semi-liberal', 'pseudo-democratic' 'deviations' from the unilinear norm. From such paradigmatic origins, the re-imagining of the idea of 'civil society' in Africa becomes conditioned by the concept's historical relation to the development and meanings of democracy in Western political thought. Indeed, the process of democratisation in Africa is widely perceived to be analogous with the development of 'civil society' and vice versa.

On the one hand, the wave of social movements of protest in many African countries throughout the 1980s and 1990s were heralded as bringing an end to entrenched authoritarian rule, and the beginning of formal democracy in Africa. On the other hand, these pro-democracy developments displayed new patterns of political participation and self-organisation outside of

⁷³ L. Diamond, 'Is the Third Wave Over', *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 7(3) July 1996. p.35.

⁷⁴ A more recent example of this and the problems it causes for internal stability of African countries, has been demonstrated by US intervention in former Zaire and their recent support for Laurent Kabila on the pretence of promoting democratisation.

⁷⁵ I. Mandaza & L. Sachikonye (eds) *The One Party State and Democracy: The Zimbabwe Debate*, (SAPES Trust, 1991) p.123.

Schmitter's final proposition, which reveals the eurocentric bias in liberal theories of democracy and 'civil society', adds that all of the above are based on models of 'civil society' which have evolved in an ideal form in the historical development of Europe and the United States, and that the range of these characteristics may not be viable or are restricted in the reality of any given polity. However, what emerges is that it is the norms and practices of the types of 'civil society' evolving in the 'Third World' – formal non-governmental and informal informational networks devoted to the promotion of human rights, protection of minorities, monitoring of elections, provision of economic advice, fostering of exchanges among academics and intellectuals – which are perceived to be relevant to the consolidation of democracy in all cultural and geographical areas of the world. However, he adds, with the fundamental stipulation, *provided* that the generic type of democracy that actors are seeking to consolidate "is modern and liberal"⁷⁸ in the values and norms it protects and supports. Thus the underlying schema of liberal analysis of 'civil society' is a need to revise our thinking of the process of democratisation, particularly, in ways which account for the phenomenon of so-called 'emergent' civil societies and the positive role they are perceived to play in this process of promoting transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in the Third World. The emergence of the 'civil society' phenomenon, according to Schmitter, means that "modern democracy should be conceptualised, not as 'a regime', but as a composite of 'partial regimes', each of which has been institutionalised around distinctive sites for the representation of social groups and the resolution of their ensuing conflicts".⁷⁹ The emergence of a type of 'civil society', regardless of its relative weakness or strength in terms of the characteristics laid out above, therefore, is seen as a precursor to, as evidence of, the process of democratisation, and for that reason should be cultivated and strengthened. Having established the relationship between these two conditions the fundamental question arises of what type of democracy is likely to emerge from the 'weak' African 'civil society'?

The basis of liberal discussions of democracy in Africa lies in the argument that the 'democratic ideal' - "rule by the people" as it comes from the Greek *demos*, meaning "the people" and *Kratos*, meaning "rule" or "power" – is still relevant but needs to be interpreted in the specific socio-economic and political context of African society. It begins from the simple logic that the criteria for democratic citizenship – who the people are who should govern – has historically been a major point of conflict between competing political groups of interests in the historical development of Western political society, but to which representative government has developed in modern times as a democratic answer to the appropriate form of popular rule.⁸⁰ The meaning of democracy, it is argued, is answered by its transformation over time, through the establishment of well-developed principles, procedures, bodies and political structures in modern theory and practice, in reaction to pressures for the gradual extension of citizenship to 'the people' in Western societies. The problem in Africa (and

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.20.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp.8-10

⁸⁰ A. du Toit, 'The Meaning of Democracy', *Die Suid Afrikaan*, February/March 1993, p.3-6.

other developing political societies) is that not only has the extension of democratic citizenship not followed the historical socio-economic and political developments (i.e., capitalist, economic class and the rise of party politics) which gradually brought about the need for representative government in the West, but unlike Europe and the United States, in African societies there is perceived to be a 'mass society' rather than well-defined class and political cleavages. Thus, however questionable this assumption is, in practical and theoretical terms, liberals are concerned that unreflectively transferring and applying the democratic ideal to African social and political context, where illiteracy rates are high and society is fragmented and 'colonised' by the regime in power, genuine democracy may fall prey to another round of 'populist' politics.

Underlying the democratic ideal, in normative terms, is the need to regulate or control competing interests towards some consensual notion of order, the rules of the game etc., to provide for security, stability, freedom and progress, and to bind citizen's obligations to one another. In the West these conditions have been promoted by the development of certain legal, moral and political principles such as the institutionalisation of rights, the separation of the private and public spheres of activity, the creation of institutions such as the separation of powers or parliamentary government, whereby the capacity for social conflict is regulated by established political procedures and norms, and developing the cultural, rational or ethical basis for conducting and constituting a common commitment to a political way of life. What becomes essential in the conflictual and fragmented African context, according to the liberal argument, is the creation of a culture of 'civility' in public life as the bulwark of democracy – the creation of a 'civil society', whereby the politics of popular rule are based on the exigencies of commonly held values and norms, providing for order, freedom and stability between relations and activities in society. As Philippe Schmitter laments:

Granted that colonialism successfully transplanted some of the practices of civil society to those parts of the world where Europeans established themselves as the dominant group, but what about those places that only suffered the effects of European imperialism? And, even more, what about those (few) peoples that escaped direct subjugation to such foreign powers and, therefore, retained more continuous control over their own institutions and values during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?⁸¹

The answer, implicit in the liberal attention to 'civil society', is to continue to strive to transplant these European practices and norms in African societies, almost as if it were thought that Africans were incapable of ruling themselves. Or, even worse, as the *International Herald Tribune* more blatantly suggested:

What about a declared, internationalised colonialism for Africa? A disinterested international interventionism? What about installing a frankly paternalist international authority in Africa and a continent-wide development structure and program? The idea may be outrageous in terms of the political pieties of the last 50 years, but those pieties helped put Africa where it is today. What is the alternative to neo-colonialism? Africa's condition demands desperate

⁸¹ Schmitter, pp.1-2.

measures.⁸²

The alternative, or “potentially novel contribution”, according to Schmitter, among others, is the idea of ‘civil society’:

What is relatively new and potentially highly significant is the emergence of something approaching a ‘transnational civil society’. These networks of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), most of which are headquartered in established civil societies, and funded and staffed by their citizens, have created a rather formidable capacity for intervening in neo-democracies ... now, there exists an extraordinary variety of transnational parties, associations, foundations, movements and networks ready to intervene either to promote or to protect democracy.⁸³

The idea of ‘civil society’, therefore, becomes a key theoretical instrument both for overcoming an autocratic state and for *constituting* a democratic polity through a strengthened public sphere. This subsequently involves, in practice, a normative vehicle by which to implement these values and norms in public and political life in African society. This may be all well and good on the surface, but perhaps what we should be asking is what kind of vision, or what norms, values and behaviours, will this transnational ‘civil society’ inculcate and comprise.

The basic premise shared by Africanist and liberal debates is the relative ‘weakness’ of ‘civil society’ in Africa. While the Africanist analysis is less than clear as to how to overcome this structural problem apart from making vague references to the need for more empirical analysis, liberal discussions are more programmatic and normative in their endeavour, choosing direct intervention and participation in the sphere itself as a means of strengthening ‘civil society’ from within. Reflecting upon the classic liberal democratic theories of ‘civil society’ in Western political philosophy and taking these theories as their standard-bearers, liberal analysts emphasise the weakness of ‘civil society’ in Africa, in particular, in terms of a weak and non-independent middle class or bourgeoisie coupled with the weaknesses of the predominant informal economy; the continued existence of a traditional (i.e. not ‘modern’) tribal realm alongside ethnic antagonism, religious tensions and unstable cross-cutting associations; thus the lack of a civil culture or consciousness based on the protection and promotion of individual rights and obligations; a colonised public sphere largely comprised of weakly funded and marginalised organisations dictated to by localised patron-client relations and which are limited in their financial and geographic scope.

In the liberal perspective, then, a strong and autonomous ‘civil society’ in Africa is one that best resembles public organisation and civic configurations in Europe and the West. However, it remains unclear as to which period in Western history, or even which societal model, be it early capitalist development in England, the European and Scottish Enlightenment, the liberal democratic revolutions in France and United States, or post-modernity, that Africa is being contrasted with.

⁸² *International Herald Tribune*, 24 April, 1990. Cited in Ibbo Mandaza, ‘The State and Democracy in Southern Africa’, in *Thirty Years of Independence in Africa*, p.65.

Certainly, the idea of 'civil society' as it has been articulated and developed in Western liberal democratic philosophy over the past two hundred years remains the reference point for discussion. Thus, three central historical developments or intellectual strands in the history of 'civil society' – embourgeoisement, 'civic consciousness', democratic pluralism and associational life – combine as key determinants of strengthening the African idea of 'civil society'.

Perhaps the most fundamental of these characteristics, according to the liberal argument, is the strengthening of an independent middle class, for this class is traditionally seen as the main protagonists of a 'liberal civil society' precisely because they are able to become materially independent, politically organised, ideologically assertive, and, therefore, prominent in founding and leading civic organisations. Importantly, they are also perceived to be central to articulating 'universal' values capable of building consensus on moral and political values or establish constructive linkages among political organisations. Ideally, the creation and nurturing of an independent bourgeoisie is perceived as the fulcrum on which African socio-economic and political development should rest. This has as much to do with the historical development of 'civil society' as a bourgeois creation (*bürgerliche Gessellschaft*) in the West, as it has to do with the West's contemporary policy of political and economic liberalisation; promoting an African middle class would be essential for the long term success of such a policy because African development depends heavily on the degree to which new wealth can be created. Although there are distinct groups of people with a middle class lifestyle, their money is usually derived from positions within the state, and not from independent productive activity.

In essence, the underlying liberal strategy is aimed at relinking the informal economy to a reinvigorated formal economy, thereby relinking Africa to the world economy in more productive ways by rehabilitating primary-product export economies. As Jane Guyer explains, this strategic trend is tending more toward opening up the African societies and economies to attract foreign investment and thereby create international linkages.⁸⁴ However, while it is agreed that there needs to be a democratisation of the economy, it must necessarily go beyond the creation of a black bourgeoisie. As Mandaza demonstrates,

The danger with structural adjustment and current liberalisation programmes ... is that they will strengthen the link between international capital and the emergent comprador black bourgeoisie. Such a development might in fact be an improvement on the prevailing dominance of white settlers throughout the economy in cohorts with international but without a commitment to the national project.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the creation of a black bourgeoisie may provide for black advancement, but it will not necessarily be translated into black control, or advance the interests of the rural population. 'Civil society' in this sense will be bifurcated, reproducing the rural-urban distinction inherited from the

⁸³ Ibid., p.18-19.

⁸⁴ J. Guyer, 'Spatial Dimensions of Civil Society', p.223

⁸⁵ I. Mandaza, p.82.

colonial state, whereby urban power will continue to speak the language of 'civil society' and civil rights, and rural power of community and culture.⁸⁶

However, the creation of an independent African bourgeoisie is also central to the promotion of the second characteristic for a strong and independent 'civil society' in Africa: as Edward Shils notes there is a need to 'civilise' both the vertical relationship between state and citizenry and the horizontal relationships between individuals, groups and interests in society.⁸⁷ Because liberalism is based on an individualistic, rather than group conception of human interests and activities in socio-economic and political life, 'civility' or the promotion of collective responsibility to the common good is a fundamental prerequisite of a functioning liberal 'civil society'. This, according to liberals, can be achieved by the internalisation of certain 'universal' norms and values in public life which are characteristically recognised as Western bourgeois in nature, such as individual rights and obligations, and citizenship. In the words of one liberal analyst,

To strengthen civil society, we need not limit the state. What we need to do is create a culture of civility and public life in both the sphere of 'civil society' and the sphere of 'the state'. We need to establish a culture of rights by opening the state to full popular participation and by creating a free and vibrant communal life ... In sum, genuine politics is a deeply communal activity – but based on individuality and difference, regulated by rights. It is only through people exercising their rights that community will be prevented from collapsing into totalitarianism ... if we address our attention to rights and genuine political conduct – both in government and in communal life – then 'civil society' will look after itself.⁸⁸

Therefore, in liberal analysis the idea of strengthening 'civil society' in Africa - through building an independent middle class with a developed sense of citizenship, and, therefore, promoting a consensual basis for political accountability - it is the pluralisation of autonomous associations and the broadening of the realms of representation and participation which become the essential vehicles for a 'civil society' to perform the classic liberal function of bolstering and legitimating democratisation. Thus liberal democrats have predominantly turned to the idea of 'civil society' as it has developed in the United States as the ideal model:

The United States would in fact seem a perfect case for exploring both the sources of the idea of civil society and its current problems ... There, more than anywhere else, the new idea of the individual invested with transcendental qualities emerged as the basis of the social order. Moreover, in eighteenth century America the relations between these individuals were seen to rest upon the foundation of a shared appeal to the laws of reason as exemplified by those natural law doctrines ... It was for this very reason that the United States provided for the philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and for many thereafter) the model of civil society, with its voluntary associations, separation of Church and state, federalist (as opposed to statist) concepts, and protection of individual liberties. More significantly, the singular lack of a salient socialist movement there in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would seem to point to the very "success" or achieved synthesis of civil society there. The socialist movement emerged in nineteenth century Europe from precisely the failure of the

⁸⁶ For a discussion of this rural-urban bifurcation see M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁸⁷ E. Shils. 1991. 'The Virtue of Civil Society', *Government and Opposition*, 26(1)

⁸⁸ D. Atkinson, 'Rights, Politics and Civil Society', in *Theoria* May 1992, p.35.

idea of civil society – as a protest against its inherently (class) particularism and positing in its stead a new (supposedly) universalism (of the working class). The absence of such a movement in the United States would seem to attest to the achievement of the classical idea of civil society there.⁸⁹

When associational life in Africa is compared to the highly developed model of pluralistic associational life in the United States, or the well cultivated sphere of cultural, political and socio-economic activity which balances the private and public in Western European societies, it is not perhaps surprising that both Africanists and liberals lament the weakness and fragmented nature of the sphere in Africa. The essential point is that the explicit lesson taught by the North American model of ‘civil society’ is the ideal of pluralism as providing for the mechanisms of participation, activity and the intermediation of groups, classes and sectors of interests in society to influence the course of public policy.

More importantly, however, is the fact that the US model of ‘civil society’ is fundamental to the historical development of a pro-capitalist social order. Thus implicit in the normative liberal conception of ‘civil society’ in Africa is the aim of promoting the structural basis of relations conducive to reproducing these conditions for capitalist development in the continent. Conceptualised in this way, ‘civil society’ is perceived to be synonymous with or even a precursor to the market economy in which it reproduces itself through individual action and interaction – it is perceived as reflexive, evolving and rational. In liberal thought, ‘civil society’ provides stability and order through consensus-building and homeostasis; change becomes a process of gradual and controlled ‘progression’, rather than a revolutionary or capricious permanence. Thus to use the words of Gramsci,

Naturally liberals (“economists”) are for the “state as *veilleur de nuit*” (the autonomous, educative and moral activity of the secular state), and would like the historical initiative to be left to civil society and to the various forces which spring up there - with the “state” as guardian of “fair play” and the rules of the game.⁹⁰

This gives us a clearer understanding of the ideological processes behind the ‘reification’ of ‘civil society’ in liberal discourse and policy: it is within the so-called sphere of ‘civil society’ that public opinion is formed, and it is through independent associations that individuals can develop their own independent economic interests, as well as have some influence on government decision making. Implicit, then, in liberal theories of ‘civil society’ is firstly the need to strengthen the independent and autonomous structures of public life, and, therefore, as a result of this recognised weakness, an intention or attempt in the African reality to stabilise social differentiation, to ensure conformity and obedience to a political authority. This is possible through the penetration of all organs and institutions of society by manufacturing consensus and acquiescence from within the sphere of this

⁸⁹ A.B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (1992) p.62.

⁹⁰ A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p.262.

so-called 'civil society' – in African society this strategy of political democratisation is being conducted through the medium of NGOs and associational activity.

The discourse of 'civil society' in African politics has increasingly centred on the role of NGOs as the prime source of community and social empowerment. Certainly, the growth of NGOs in African society has been engendered by ruling parties' shift towards neo-liberalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but, in particular, their proliferation is a localised reaction to the impoverishing effects of international Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) with its bias against the African state's involvement in development, its undercutting of general welfare subsidies, and the lack of confidence in official aid channels. Among African NGOs, their proliferation has been marked by immediate material, rather than political, needs; providing an invaluable minimalist welfare function rather than of generating development. As Richard Saunders writes in the context of Zimbabwe:

In absolute numbers, most organisations created in the late 1980s and early 1990s were founded with the intention of building a rudimentary bulwark for their constituents against the incursion of poverty and declining living standards. They included thousands of self-help, savings and income-supplementing groups – the most direct highly localised reply to the current economic and social crisis. As ESAP has led to accelerating poverty for most Zimbabweans, the number of variety and constituent membership of these groups increased. It is now unusual to find a shopfloor, office space, church organisation or other regular place of meeting which does not play host to a savings club, burial society or some other social insurance scheme set up by its members. In practice, they have very limited agendas, defined by the survival needs of the group.⁹¹

While these service organisations have also provided for professional occupational mobility autonomous of the state, the very growth of these local NGOs has led to increased competition for limited funding and, as a result, battles for occupational security. Despite, or rather because of these material weaknesses, the NGO sector has become the key site of the attention and funds of the major Western countries, international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, private international banks, and NGOs and Private Voluntary Organisations (PVOs) such as UNICEF and Oxfam.

The philosophy behind these policy efforts is accordingly the creation of a classic liberal civil society at the grass roots, one linking democratic participation in government with comparable participation in associations, and encouraging political and economic engagement with the state. Hence, NGOs, as the main type of association in public life, are promoted as mediators between the state and society, performing the double function of interacting and penetrating state policy, as well as increasing their independence from state and regime co-option. According to Schmitter,

To the extent that the international context promoting the consolidation of democracy has shifted from its habitual reliance on public, intergovernmental channels of influence towards

⁹¹ R. Saunders, 'Association and Civil Society in Zimbabwe', Unpublished Mimeo, 1996, cited in B. Raftopoulos, 'The State and Civil Society in Zimbabwe: Some Theoretical and Political Considerations', *Southern African Political and Economic Monthly*, 15, October 15, 1997, p.26.

an increased direct involvement of private, non-governmental organisations, it can help to foster the development of national civil societies where they might not otherwise have emerged or where they might have been absorbed by either public authorities or private (re)producers.⁹²

Assessing the power and implications of such an internationalising strategy would require a developed description of the actors and political processes involved, but seen from this viewpoint it is clear that we can no longer afford to uncritically accept that the emergence of 'civil society' in political and analytical discourse is without broader implications than merely the processes toward democratisation in Africa. Up until now, the 'civil society' debate has largely failed to take into account the transnational character and explicit political and economic agendas of the participants and agents of 'civil society' in the African sphere. Much of the debate has by-passed the role played by international organisations, preferring to depict African 'civil society' as an African initiative, supported by international assistance, and, thereby, failing to comprehend the nature and dynamics of political processes on the continent. The point is that the emergence of 'civil society' is not simply an analytical description of changing political trends in African politics and society, but an evolving political strategy which is promoted by direct international intervention and policy making.

In sum, as Jane Guyer incitefully contends, under the auspices of the idea 'civil society', for better or worse, "Africa is being reconfigured, as what had been public power is gravitating into private hands in varied ways".⁹³ 'Civil society' is not only rapidly becoming a Western political export, facilitated by private structures and socio-economic and political interests already established within Africa, but that the operations of all these Western agencies and companies, interacting with local associations in 'strengthening civil society', are a visible aspect of the politics of neo-colonialism in Africa. In particular, the reification of 'civil society' in Africa reflects the changing meaning of the term since its appropriation by Polish intellectuals in the late 1970s and 1980s, and has led to its oversimplification and abuse outside of the European experience. As Chris Hann suggests, "its recent reduction by governments and aid agencies to the world of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) represents an impoverished view of social life".⁹⁴

Conclusions

The fact that only a decade had passed since the English publication of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in 1971, and the historical concept of 'civil society', according to Africanist scholar Crawford Young, "crept unbidden into everyday usage with respect to Africa",⁹⁵ seemed to justify and legitimate the possibility of its universal applicability and contemporary contextual validity. However, despite 'civil

⁹² P. Schmitter, p.18-19.

⁹³ J. Guyer, p.225.

⁹⁴ C. Hann, p.22.

society's' emergence at a point in history when the legitimacy of the African state and the basis of political authority and social order is in crisis, 'civil society' is a point of much controversy in African political thought. African leaders and intellectuals are well aware, of course, that the revival of 'civil society' has not occurred in a vacuum; the incorporation of a 'civil society' discourse into African political analysis and policy formulation bears with it much Western ideological baggage. As a proverbial 'carrot and stick', not only the fact that the idea of 'civil society' is yet another 'prescriptive panacea' to emerge from international pressures for political and economic liberalisation in Africa, but its widespread employment by bilateral donors and the World Bank and IMF has ensured that the "strengthening of civil society" – conceived broadly as the expansion of associational and NGO life – becomes, alongside movements toward multiparty elections and market-centred economies, a condition of aid and investment in Africa. Thus as more cynical Africanist scholars have argued, is 'civil society' "yet another child of the anthropomorphic fertility of the social science imagination ... a metaphor masquerading as a player"?⁹⁶ Or, as Thomas M. Callaghy argues, is it no more than a "new buzzword of very vague and fuzzy conceptualisation" which "is an attempt to take African countries back to the early 1960s, both economically and politically, in order to start the development process over again and 'do it right' this time"?⁹⁷

This paradigmatic manoeuvre from a vision of African politics as primarily state (or institutional) centred to one of the relationship between state and society is perhaps not surprising given the 'top-down', 'pro-market', 'civilising approach which embodies Western political thought and practice. But, more fundamentally, civil society emerges as a 'turn-key project' of liberal democratic theory and international strategizing as the basis for new avenues of ideological manoeuvrings in African political society. Unlike in Central and Eastern Europe the call for the revival of 'civil society' in Africa does not emanate from the anti-statist language of the social movements themselves, or, as in Latin America where the idea of 'civil society' becomes a last-ditch effort "to defend ourselves from the monstrous state in front of us ... because we want freedom".⁹⁸ In Africa the idea of 'civil society' emerges as a supposedly societal-led interactive model of development, as an alternative to the now discredited state-led approach to development, but one which could provide the arsenal for new critiques of neo-colonialism in contemporary African political thinking.

While it is interesting to analyse the range of dynamics, forces and historical processes by which 'civil society' becomes incorporated into the language of African politics, what is more interesting for the purpose of this thesis is how differently 'civil society' is adopted and used (and by

⁹⁵ C. Young, 'In Search of Civil Society', p.36

⁹⁶ C. Young, quoted in T. Callaghy, 'Civil Society, Democracy and Economic Change in Africa: A Dissenting Opinion About Resurgent Societies', in J.W. Harbeson et al, *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (1994)

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.239. 'Doing it right', here, would seem to imply providing the structural basis of relations conducive to capitalist democracy – that modelled by the historical development of the US.

⁹⁸ F. Weffort, quoted in J. Cohen & A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1992), p.50

which political interests) in African compared to Eastern European and South African political thought. The comparison is a fruitful exercise which underlines the large area of incompatibility, in terms of cultural norms and orientation, between African, Africanist and Western intellectuals on the merits of 'civil society' and democracy infused in Western conceptions of state-society relations, but that South African theories of 'civil society' largely fail to acknowledge this incompatibility. It is indicative of a thrust in this thesis' argument that it tends to reproduce the idea that South African socio-economic and political development is culturally bound by developments in Western European and North American political thought, as if South Africa were a geographical and cultural extension of the West rather than of Africa. This, as we shall see, has many roots – both the penetration of industrial capitalism and the hegemony of a liberal discourse in South African politics etc., - but a problem, to twist the words of Rene Lemarchand, which “fails to take into account ... the infra-political dimension of the power phenomena: how ... new cultural idioms come into existence to structure the modalities of resistance and regeneration”⁹⁹ in the African Diaspora.

This point becomes all the more clearer once we look at what the concept 'civil society' represents for African intellectuals and why the term is rarely employed in their scholarship. The course of this chapter has demonstrated that there are fundamental, pragmatic and cognitive reasons for African scholars' avoidance or critique of 'civil society' as a theoretical and analytical concept. This has as much to do with the development of African or Pan-African political thought, as it does with the historical, political and socio-economic legacies of neo-colonialism in the African diaspora. It has little to do with Bayart's argument that “African intellectuals (with few exceptions) have failed to provide civil society with the original conceptual instruments required for its advance”.¹⁰⁰ Such an argument, I argue, is a misrepresentation of African scholarship, in which it is recognised that there is an inherent inadequacy with using tools designed for understanding the workings of Western democracies to analyse or to use in furthering African-led strategies for development and democracy. In as much as the 'state' in Africa is a Western historical concept, 'civil society' is a continuation of neo-colonial discourses and paradigms of strategic thinking, conceived in the language and cultural development of Western political thought and practice. Similarly, Dwayne Woods' assertion that African intellectuals have generally failed to appropriate the concept as a “counter-hegemonic strategy against the monopolisation of power in the state”¹⁰¹ fails to acknowledge the very content and nature of what contemporary African 'counter-hegemonic' struggles are or should be about. In the words of one African intellectual,

[I]f Africa is to join the march to economic prosperity and the social and economic progress of its humanity, it must establish its efforts on its own cultural usages, away from the smothering and suffocating embrace of Western economic hegemony and cultural

⁹⁹ R. Lemarchand, 'Uncivil States and Civil Societies: How Illusion Became Reality', in *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30(2) 1992, p.186.

¹⁰⁰ Bayart, 'Civil Society in Africa', p.120.

¹⁰¹ D. Woods, 'Civil Society in Europe and Africa', in *African Studies Review* 1992, p.87.

effacement.¹⁰²

The basis on which social and political solutions to African advancement and the establishment of democratic practice, according to Kwesi Prah, lies not in the fractional and insular counter-hegemonic struggles within the superficial geographical boundaries of post-colonial states, but in African unity and the involvement of a literate mass society. Solutions to Africa's malaise cannot be found in the imposition of external ideas which reproduce divisive neo-colonial structures and processes; which reinforce the Western paradigm of the nation-state; and which, on that basis, cannot cultivate "new democratic structures which relate to the cultures and histories of Africans"¹⁰³.

'Civil society', for all its empirical and society-orientated potential for analytical research, speaks to the politics of nation-states, not to the intrinsic needs or problems facing the mass of Africans. Because it refers to the historical development of the reciprocal relationship between society and state in Western capitalist societies, the theoretical baggage which the idea of 'civil society' carries with it means that its analytical and theoretical usefulness for approaching change in African politics and society is at best limited and may prove to be as economically, politically and culturally unviable as the African states that were handed down by the retreating colonial powers. Despite this central paradox the reification of 'civil society' in the politics of the African continent is illustrative of the new currency the concept has attained among political interests as a vehicle for persuing socio-economic and political change. This new currency and vogue is the key driving force behind the concepts usage in left-wing political discourses in South Africa. On the basis of its appropriation in Eastern European and African contexts, a 'civil society' discourse became central to the political struggles which emerged during South Africa's transition from apartheid, and, as I now explore, key to understanding the processes and dynamics of the politics of transition in South Africa.

¹⁰² K.K. Prah, *Beyond the Colour Line*, 1997, p.69.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.70

Chapter Four: South African Theories of ‘Civil Society’ and the Struggle Over the Creation of a New Social and Political Order.

... one can construct, on a specific practice, a theory which, by coinciding and identifying itself with decisive elements of the practice itself, can accelerate the historical process that is going on ... or alternatively, given a certain theoretical position one can organise the practical element which is essential for the theory to be realised. The identification of theory and practice is a critical act, through which practice is demonstrated rational and necessary, and theory realistic and rational. This is why the problem of the identity of theory and practice is raised especially in the so-called transitional moments of history ... For it is then that the practical forces unleashed really demand justification in order to become more efficient and expansive; and that theoretical programmes multiply in number, and demand in their turn to be realistically justified to the extent that they prove themselves assimilable into practical movements, thereby making the latter yet more practical and real.

(A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 1971)

Introduction.

The ‘politics of civil society’ is set out in this thesis to illustrate the processes and dynamics involved in the contemporary dialectic between political theory and practice. It is essentially an attempt to critically examine how a concept, reclaimed from the history of Western ideas for the purpose of opposing the Soviet-type state in Eastern Europe, has been reified in struggles for democratisation and development around the world to play a strategic role in the political struggles of South Africa’s transition from apartheid. As a way of understanding the broader processes and trends underlying its arrival and use in South African political debates, the preceding two chapters have sought to describe some of the main themes and issues ‘civil society’s’ re-emergence is representative of, and to illustrate why and with what consequences these struggles have been framed in the language of ‘civil society’.

In Eastern European and African political discourses ‘civil society’ has been shown to take on a number of distinct but related forms – as a slogan, analytical and normative concept – and, as a result, to have acquired a range of meanings and emphases. To briefly review, in Eastern Europe the processes of the concept’s re-emergence have been contextualised within the ‘East-West’, ‘socialist-capitalist’ frameworks of the Cold War period, whereby dissident intellectuals in the East and their sympathisers in the West, in reviving the concept, engineered a level of support for their cause in ways which would irrevocably challenge these mind-sets and lead to the collapse of the Soviet-type system. In voicing their struggle in terms of a Solidarity movement of ‘civil society against the state’, Polish dissidents constructed a new path to political change. If structural reform through mass united opposition to the Soviet-type state was their cause, then ‘civil society’ was their organisational slogan – a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. It was only until after the momentum of the Solidarity movement had gained a practical effectiveness in the early 1980s that it became to be analysed and

identified as 'civil society' against the state.

During this process of 'civil society's' re-emergence from slogan to analytical concept, a number of trends, engendering support from across the political spectrum in the West, were identified. Firstly, the way in which 'society' had been invoked by dissident intellectuals into a mass movement seemed to imply that Eastern European populations were a unified collective, a homogenised agent of opposition against, what was seen in the West as, a totalitarian state. The fact that this movement organised itself around the principles of autonomy and solidarity and emphasised 'Western' moral and political values and traditions such as human and civil rights, democracy, nationalism, and other 'pre-communist' values, suggested to many commentators that under Communist rule the development of societies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had been placed in some kind of cryonic suspension for the past seventy years. While this was clearly not the case,¹ the use of such metaphors tended to reproduce a perspective that these societies shared a consciousness and, therefore, a cultural, geographical and historical affinity to Western Europe and the processes of its socio-economic and political development.

Thus, secondly, the so-called 'Third Path' to change adopted by the region's dissident intellectuals was perceived to illustrate a theoretical compromise between the two ideologically opposed theories of change in Western philosophy – liberal reform and socialist revolution. Because the theory of 'structural reform from below' was characterised in non-political terms, thereby being ideologically 'non-threatening' to either East or West, it seemed to imply a 'self-managing' and independent society organised on the basis of a plural association of supposedly atomised individuals – a potential market – unified around basic socio-economic and moral values thought expedient to the development of a liberal democratic process.

Thirdly, these trends were characterised as implying a source of theoretical and political realignment between East and West. As we have seen in chapter two's discussion, these trends were thought to signal the end of a socialist society and the rise of a pluralist 'civil society'. The framing of these dynamics in terms of a 'civil society' against the Soviet-type state, may have been politically expedient for gaining Western support, but because the concept was so central to the process of the West's historical and theoretical development it was assumed that the re-emergence of 'civil society' in theory and as an empirical reality was a universal panacea for crisis-ridden nation states around the world. On the basis that the re-emergence of the concept 'civil society' spoke to both left and right about possible theoretical practical approaches to the present-day problems of the bureaucratic and autocratic dominance of the modern state in the West and other parts of the world, the concept has become a normative ideal. Thus fourthly, for liberals, on the one hand, 'civil society' is seen as a positive policy agenda; an ideal vision of a desirable social order thought conducive to promoting the

¹ See the anthropological studies by Michaø Buchowski, David Anderson and Susanne Spülbeck in Hann and Dunn, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, 1996, which identify the errors underlying such Western diagnoses of the social conditions of late socialist societies.

expansion of liberal democracy and capitalist economic development, particularly in the so-called undeveloped 'pseudodemocracies' of the 'Third World'. On the other hand, the idea of 'civil society' has now become the central instrument of left-wing agendas for engaging in the political process and structures of power, as well as constructing the theoretical and practical basis for democratic socialist change.

As chapter three has aimed to illustrate, these processes and trends in the re-emergence of 'civil society' in Eastern Europe have been brought to bear upon the politics of the African continent in different ways by both Western liberals and the left-wing Africanist academia. As a result the conceptual meaning and content of 'civil society' has developed in new directions, influencing the contours of its debate in the South African political context. For our purposes of understanding the processes of the concept's usage during the politics of transition in South Africa, a number of analytical and normative developments embedded in its reification in Africa become important. Firstly, the political and ideological retreat of the Western left into the theory of 'civil society' has been matched by an academic appropriation of the concept in African studies in the West. Not only was 'civil society' adopted as an academic slogan aimed at revitalising the empirical and analytical applicability of Africanist approaches to understanding unfolding developments in the region, but, more importantly, in this process Africanist analysis has illustrated that the premise of transferring 'civil society' onto the African reality and expecting as such that it will perform the same function as it did in the Eastern European context is essentially flawed.

In essence, although it was argued that 'civil society' needed to be reconceptualised to fit the African experience, the theory of 'civil society' served only to prescribe ethnocentric normative ideals of political practice onto African practices in ways which signalled the attempt to reconfigure African society and politics. According to the eurocentrism in the Africanist perspective 'civil society' in Africa is weak, conflictual and unequal due to the predominance of its 'traditional' structures and cultures (the comparison, obviously, being Western or Eastern European examples from which the models are derived) and, therefore, unable to perform the democratising function its theory presupposes. Subsequently such an analysis has led to the premise that democratisation in Africa can only be secured by the rebirth of political society. Apart from functioning to promote a bourgeois political culture from which a political elite can be drawn, prescriptions suggested that 'civil society' in Africa should adopt or regain a 'civic' or developmental role.

Thus, secondly, as it is demonstrated by the normative agenda in liberal discourses it is argued that African society needs to be reconfigured in terms of its class structure before an alternative political culture (conducive to liberal democracy) can emerge. Thus the reification of 'civil society' in Africa gives it a new political meaning: developed from its original use in mass Eastern European struggles, the concept comes to represent the 'non-partisan' sphere of autonomous and independent associations, non-government organisations, human rights and pro-democracy groups, entrepreneurial and bourgeois interest associations serving a minimalist welfare and development

function.

In the process of 'civil society's' re-emergence in Eastern Europe and its propagation in the African context, then, its meaning and use has shifted from one which spoke in terms of nurturing public power as an alternative basis of the common good to one which increasingly tends to place limits on public power by gravitating it into private hands. It is the central premise of this thesis that it is this conceptual shift and the political trend it represents which provides the framework in which 'civil society' is used in South African struggles over the nature of the transition to democracy. As this chapter intends to illustrate, the South African debate on 'civil society', at root, is a concern with protecting, and more importantly, promoting the political efficacy of public power in shaping the post-apartheid order. However, because the conceptual content afforded to 'civil society' by both its history in Western political philosophy and its re-emergence in the contemporary, it is readily manipulated for the promotion and protection of organised and private interests seeking in-roads into political (state) power. The result, as we shall see, is an impoverishment of political practice in South Africa; a practical politics which speaks more to the strategic interests of the ideological left, of party politics and corporate compromise than the needs of the South African mass of society; a practical politics in which South African society is constrained to a function of implementing (not devising or prescribing) the political elite's social policy in the field of development.

Many academics, whether contributing to or commenting on the 'civil society' debate, tend to emphasise the concept's grounding in discussions of the role of the civic movement after the unbanning of political organisations in February 1990; the struggles for political identity and alliance once the language of 'liberation movement' became largely redundant and replaced by the language and politics of negotiated transition. 'Civil society', it is widely argued, emerged in intellectual and activist struggles to protect the legacy and independence of a mobilised grassroots participation in the liberation struggle and its future role in the ambiguous transition to a democratic polity. While the civic movement was clearly in danger of losing its collective autonomy and plurality of interests to the ANC-led power struggle at the negotiating table, this chapter seeks to illustrate how the broader events, theoretical developments and strategic thinking which unfolded prior to and during the transition process shaped the contours of this debate and gave rise to the politics of 'civil society' in South Africa.

This chapter critically examines the published debates on 'civil society' beginning in 1990, to illustrate how the process of 'civil society's' conceptual development - from a slogan of the civics and the left to its analytical and normative propagation by the SACP - is driven by political events and their impact on the theoretical developments and strategic manoeuvrings of the left. I illustrate how 'civil society's' conceptual development speaks to the strategic problems faced by the left, whether aligned to political organisations, civics, the academia or other interests allied to the former liberation movement, in seeking to establish their independent agendas and positions in a political environment which demanded a continued commitment to unity and consensus over the goals of national struggle -

even though the goals of struggle had dramatically altered for each of these groups.

I begin by tracing the roots of the concept's emergence within the political and theoretical debates of the South African left as they pertain to reflections upon the interrelation between the long-term visions for constructing a democratic socialist alternative in South Africa and the short-term or immediate struggles arising from the politics of the transition process. It is this reflection process on the status and future role of socialism, from which a resultant antagonism between these short and long-term socialist agendas arises, and which sows the seeds for 'civil society's' controversial flourishing in the soil of South African political debate. The polemics of the debate on 'civil society' among the sectors of the left-wing – whether ANC, SACP, or civic-aligned – stem from the fact that whilst the primacy of the negotiated transition process was seen by all as crucial for laying the foundations for a future progressive order, the short-term need to strengthen the liberation movement's negotiating position against the National Party government tended to undermine the independence and autonomy of interests outside of the ANC. The disbanding of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1991 and the so-called 'brain-drain' of civic leaders lured by the promise of high office, as well as the theoretical shifts of the left to social democracy are intrinsic to the pragmatism which dominated this initial stage of transition. Furthermore, this short-term jockeying for position in the struggle for political (state) power, which was conditioned by a top-down corporatist style negotiation process, was matched by a shift to the centre-right. This had the effect of undermining both the dominant bottom-up sentiment of mass politics and, importantly, the clarity and commitment to the long-term goal of building a democratic socialism in South Africa.

The first section of this chapter traces the processes underlying the conceptual shift from the politics of 'liberation movement' to the politics of 'civil society'. By exploring the theoretical shifts and strategic debates among sectors of the left-wing as they reflect critically upon how their relationship and identification with the cause of the liberation movement, particularly its commitment to the theory of national democratic revolution, affects the goal of the transition to socialism, this section aims to illustrate the debilitating level of disunity within the left as a whole. It is this debate over the nature of the transition to socialism which, in the context of the imminent collapse of the Soviet state and the ANC's subsequent shift to the centre-right, which drives wedges between those on the left strategically committed to the organisational principles of the ANC-led liberation movement, and those demanding an independent force for socialist transition. However, with the collapse of communism and the unbanning of political parties in February 1990 the SACP, forced to choose between these strategies, instead decided on a strategic compromise – one which attempted to balance its continued support for the ANC-led power struggle at the negotiating table with the need to define its own independence as a party of the working class, but one which inevitably meant a retreat to democratic socialism.

The events of 1990/91 propelled many struggles into the political arena, largely in anticipation of the new battle lines which would be drawn over the fundamental issue of dismantling

apartheid and reconstructing the new social and political order. The transition process initiated the opening of a political society, a process of political reordering and realignment which radically altered the playing field and the course and goals of struggle. At this moment the logic of collective struggle began to lose its meaning and pragmatic efficacy as the broad image of political resistance fell away. The unbannings and release of political prisoners was followed by what Mike Morris called “strange events”²: old alliances shifted, new issues arose, and a plurality of interests emerged to redirect and redefine the nature of future struggle. In sum, the politics of transition was underscored by a key tension: what future democratic order was the transition a process to – national, socialist or liberal democracy? As important, given the ambiguity and fluidity of the political environment in which parties, trade unions, civic associations, capital, intellectuals and activists emerged to promote their interests and agendas, how was consensus on this vision to be attained; who would participate and how in its construction; and with what consequences to their own independence? The key area in which these issues came to the fore was when the role of the civic movement was considered. Revealingly, it was an anonymous writer in the ANC mouthpiece, *Mayibuye*, in December 1990 who raised the issue of the nature of the relationship between civics and the ANC, sparking a debate which would define the parameters of the conceptual and theoretical framework for the emergence of ‘civil society’ in discourses on the left.

Although the *Mayibuye* article does not mention the term, the idea of ‘civil society’, as it has been developed in Eastern European and African political contexts, is implicit in the language of its argument. Civics, it argues, were an integral part of the liberation struggle, retaining an important role in the post-apartheid dispensation, now concerned with “enhancing the quality of democracy at the local level and thereby at other levels in society”.³ In order to achieve this ‘democratic watchdog’ function, the article stipulated that civics should not be political organisations, nor aligned to political parties, such as the ANC; they were unavailable as structures of local government as they function in the arena of mass society requiring them to be “independent formations” to ensure the “widest community representation as possible”,⁴ suggesting a latent scepticism towards the ANC’s claim that it represented the interests of mass society. The concern with protecting the role of the civics, its independence and legacy as a powerful voice of change for the grassroots was a catalyst for debating ‘civil society’. The problems facing the civics were perceived not only to epitomise many of the classic issues associated in the theoretical history of the concept, but that the issues raised by the question of the civics independence and autonomy were representative of those faced by the organised interests in both the former liberation movement and of broader society.

Thus ‘civil society’ emerges in South Africa as a slogan of left-wing civic interests and although it is initiated by a social democratic strain in the ANC, its intended audience is clearly the

² M. Morris, ‘Dangerous Liasons? *New Era*, Autumn 1991, p.16.

³ Anon, ‘The Role of the Civics’, *Mayibuye*, December 1990, p.32.

⁴ *Ibid.*

ANC itself. While the South African debate is shaped by and incorporates the theoretical and analytical developments of its propagation in the Eastern European and African contexts – such as the lessons of totalitarianism and the one-party state, East European dissident strategizing, the retreat of the Western left, the social democratic and liberal-dominated politics of democratic transition, and the questions concerning the respective roles of both state and society in the development and reconstruction process - the concept is made available as a slogan of the South African left precisely because these theoretical, analytical and normative properties spoke directly to the rethinking process on the left, a reflective process which began in the 1980s and was captured by Joe Slovo's 'Has Socialism Failed?' in 1990. Carrying with it the analytical and normative baggage accumulated in the Eastern European and African debates, the idea of 'civil society' is, however, very much grounded in and driven by the context of local struggles. The initial choice of framing these struggles in the language of 'promoting an independent civil society' does illustrate the link between local struggles and global developments and processes, but, as we shall see, 'civil society' takes on a particular pertinence in South Africa when applied to the context of the events and the political and theoretical struggles which unfolded following the unbannings.

The South African left were under no illusion of what the term meant or referred to in the South African social and political context – the sphere of public life previously denoted by the liberation movement and broader organised society, but now deemed autonomous of political organisations, but not ideas – or how significant the concept was for characterising the nature of the struggle for democracy in the transition period. The problem, however, was how 'civil society' could be manipulated to serve the individual interests and political agendas of left-wing intellectuals and activists in the transition process and beyond. This fact was noted as early as August 1991 in Monty Narsoo's article 'Civil Society – A Contested Terrain', in which he argued, "the disturbing factor is that the definition of the term 'civil society' is becoming the 'all things to all people'. Depending on what they are trying to punt, they will fashion the term in their own image".⁵ From such a normative starting point, the debate on 'civil society' moves quickly, and rather uncritically, from an analytical usage to become a prescriptive ideal, precisely because the direction and pace of events taking place at the level of negotiation threatened to diminish the influence of the left to puppets of the ANC or worse, as Narsoo pithily suggests, "mere pygmies battling away at the periphery".⁶ The ensuing analytical debate on 'civil society' is thus framed by an attempt to justify the use of the concept as a political vehicle for protecting and promoting the left's agenda, almost in spite of the fact that it simply did not have one but many.

Thus, as the second section of this chapter discusses, 'civil society' is used as an analytical concept, revealing, according to Narsoo, "more heat than light".⁷ This has as much to do with the

⁵ M. Narsoo, 'Civil Society – A Contested Terrain', p.24.

⁶ Ibid., p.27.

⁷ Ibid., p.24.

ambiguity of the transition and the political environment of the negotiation process as utilising the concept to advance a range of interests not being addressed or avoided by the negotiations (such as the transition to socialism for example). Importantly, what emerges from the civic issue is that instead of adopting 'civil society' as a slogan and then having to go through the process of defining its meaning (as happened in East European dissident struggles) the language of 'civil society' implicit in the *Mayibuye* article is premised on the analytical and normative meanings already developed in the Eastern European and African discourses. The arrival at the concept 'civil society' to capture the essence of an argument which spoke of a non-partisan independent arena necessary for enhancing democratic development, it can be argued, was an exercise in strengthening and marketing of the *content of the argument*, much like putting a name to a product, rather than creating a product to 'fit' a name (as happens in the Africanist debate). The point is that it is not the concept or idea of 'civil society' which comes under scrutiny in debate – largely because of the currency of its usage internationally – but the practical validity and efficacy of the theories the emergence of the concept is supposed to represent. In the context of the politics of transition, the problem which is debated becomes whether or not the civics and therefore 'civil society' is *capable* of, or even *appropriate* for performing the tasks the *Mayibuye* article suggests; whether or not the organisations of 'civil society' themselves are truly representative of the community's interests; and therefore if they are 'strong enough' for instrumenting an effective democracy in South Africa.

Such questions and issues were vehemently debated within the left by social democrats and socialists aligned either to the ANC, SACP or civics, all using the language of 'civil society' to defend their seemingly competing agendas and to discredit or marginalise those who opposed their strategic agendas. With the onset of the CODESA negotiations at the end of 1991 and beginning of 1992, 'civil society' takes on a heightened importance in the analytical debates which appeared in the pages of academic and political journals at the time, giving rise to a range of analyses. In particular, the significance which becomes manifested in 'civil society' illustrates the importance the concept assumed to the theoretical and practical direction of democracy in South Africa. Indeed, what the analytical debate of 1992 demonstrates, and which leads to 'civil society's' usage as a prescriptive concept, is that the differing views on how strong 'civil society' is in South Africa are directly related to normative disagreements over its purpose. The 'civil society' debate involved the deeply normative question of the type of democracy which is to be built, and how 'civil society' should function to construct this vision. Given the ANC's shift to neo-liberalism and bourgeois democracy, distancing itself from the SACP and clearly abandoning its commitment to a future transition to socialism, the idea of 'civil society' was used now more than before as the instrument for building the left's vision of a transition to socialism.

What Joe Slovo had initiated in 1990 had not only led to a heightened disagreement and incoherence within the politics of the left regarding its critical theoretical search for socialism's democratic future in South Africa, but among the divergent forces of the left 'civil society' became a

new historical site of normative and prescriptive debate concerning the processes and conditions which make the socialist project in South Africa possible but highly problematic. The second section examines the main positions in the published debates on 'civil society' – the more liberal and social democratic-aligned academic debates which appeared in the May 1992 edition of *Theoria* and the heated exchange within the competing left perspectives of civic and SACP activists - to show how the concept develops into its normative dimension. The politics of 'civil society' are analysed here through a critical analysis of these various theories of 'civil society' with particular emphasis on the fact that the seemingly intractable and highly ideological debate between the civic activist Mzwanele Mayekiso, and Marxist-Leninist ANC activists Blade Nzimande and Mpume Sikhosana affords the academic and social democratic discourses predominance in defining the normative content of 'civil society'. Thus while the left argue, in abstraction, over the Marxist pedigree of 'civil society' and therefore the concept's applicability to the socialist cause, the social democratic discourses debate in more practical terms the relative strengths and weakness of the civil sphere.

This discursive and analytical process is central. Whilst the positions on the left lock horns over the practical use of the theory of 'civil society', providing little other than theoretical incoherence and division, the social democratic debate concludes that because of the weakness, conflictual, and unequal nature of what constitutes this sphere 'civil society' is limited in its capacity to perform a democratising function. As a result it is argued, concentrating specifically on the issue of the civics and following normative trends in Eastern Europe and Africa, 'civil society' should be limited to "doing what comes naturally"⁸ – a developmental role – allowing the normalisation of party politics to resume its role in providing for the democratic agenda and processes. Clearly, as the April 1994 election date rapidly began to approach this had as much to do with liberal fears of an ANC majority riding roughshod over a weak civic 'watchdog' and translating into a populist democracy or, at worst, one-party state, as it had to do with the influence of analytical and normative developments of the idea of 'civil society' in Eastern Europe and Africa.

As the third section of this chapter critically examines, these theoretical and analytical developments ultimately reflect upon the relevancy and utility of 'civil society' as a progressive theory for the South African left. Despite the broad consensus on the need to strengthen the sphere of independent associational life for the building of democracy in South Africa, there is a dearth of thinking as to how this function is to be accomplished in practice 'on the ground'. Simply put, the left has little conception of how the theory of 'civil society' can be put in practice. However, throughout 1992 and 1993 the left, due to the predominance of the social democratic analytical discourses and via its support for the civic movement, attempt to bring the concept 'civil society' to bear upon the issue of development, particularly given the prominent policy-making role civics were afforded by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Increasingly marginalised in the transition

⁸ M. Narsoo, 'Doing What Comes Naturally – A Development Role for the Civics', 1993.

process and lacking a coherent and definitive socialist strategy or political programme, the SACP and the left in general take up Mayekiso's call for a practical application of the theory of 'civil society' as it is developed in left-wing civic analysis, and adopt it and the development issue as a vehicle for building their socialist programme.

So what, if anything, has the idea of 'civil society' actually achieved in South African politics? Does it provide a progressive theory for promoting the South African left's vision of socialism? Does its usage symbolise a deepening commitment to the concrete needs and interests of impoverished black and working class South Africans, or is it merely a way of dressing up class compromise in the ideological garb of socialist and social democratic rhetoric? This chapter aims to provide an analysis by which these questions can be addressed and intends to argue that the politics of 'civil society' represents the political and philosophical retreat of the South African left. The uncritical adoption of a 'civil society' discourse reborn in the liberal and democratic struggles of Eastern Europe, and dominated by Western liberal and social democratic paradigms, has ensured that ideological class struggle has been transferred out of the political realm, depoliticised and effectively controlled by the power of capitalist interests in South African society and the state. As Robert Fine has suggested, "I do not wish to suggest that civil society theory is no more than a mask for etatisation and for fitting into current orthodoxies of neo-corporatism; but rather that there is a difficult relation between the theory and its realisation".⁹ A 'civil society' discourse serves to ensure that poor and working class struggle in South Africa becomes not a direct assault on state power or even a critique of capitalism, but an accommodation to it; a counter-hegemonic struggle in the market place of ideas where the power to influence social policy will be determined by the ability to organise, gain access to financial and material resources, mediums of communication, and to compete with other powerful interests (such as internationally-funded NGOs and the institutions of capital) in this terrain.

From 'Liberation Movement' to 'Civil Society'

At the root of the emergence of 'civil society' in South African political discourses is what Moses Mabhida in 1985 called the 'battle of ideas'.¹⁰ 'Civil society' is essentially a product of how this battle between the competing political cultures and identities embedded in the liberation movement – black consciousness, African nationalism and the Congress tradition of the Freedom Charter, Marxism-Leninism, Western Marxism, grassroots mobilisation in response to the needs of people's daily lives – has unfolded; a product of how this battle has been shaped by global developments and processes, and surrendered itself or came to be overtaken by political events in South Africa since 1990. The emergence of 'civil society' among the competing strands of the former liberation movement illustrates to us how this battle has been carried forward into a new political environment.

⁹ R. Fine, 'Civil Society Theory and the Politics of Transition in South Africa', 1992, p.80.

Where strategy became a matter of “siding retrospectively with those from whom you have the most to gain”,¹¹ it was the language of this battle which has been de-radicalised and brought to heel by the limits of their sectarian ideas in relation to the ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism.

The notion of the ‘battle of ideas’ is an important one here for it points to the limits of unity inherent in a mass movement; one which justly claims to represent the will of the people, but one built on a composite of often dogmatic and usually competing political orthodoxies. Seeking the broadest possible unity in the struggle has been a fundamental organisational principle, and although it is embedded in the Freedom Charter and has served to characterise the politics of the ‘struggle’ over the decades, unity has largely been a strategic ideal sought, rather than a demonstrable reality. This fact has been at the heart of a strategy which was premised on the belief that unity and consensus were preconditions for strength in the battle against apartheid.

To establish a centrality for the liberation movement in the political process requires a unity of purpose and conformity in the target of that purpose. This unity becomes a powerful imperative for moulding political action. What is, however, crucial is that unity must occur around clear-cut points of mobilisation ... Such unity with the purpose of undercutting the legitimacy of the regime has to suppress and subsume more complex interests be they class, regional, religious or tribal¹²

These are the central problems which would face not just the South African left, but the liberation movement as a whole; questions of unity and conformity to the goals of the struggle at hand, at the expense of the independence and plurality of interests would provide the wellspring for controversy over the future goals and strategy of struggle. Importantly, unlike the Solidarity movement in Poland for example, the context in which the South African liberation struggle operated was far from conducive to coherence and unity. The history of colonialism and the logic of the system of apartheid and the socio-economic structure of relations this experience engineered meant that the conditions for unity and social solidarity among the masses – a shared social consciousness, class, political, racial, cultural identity¹³ – did not exist, and had to be created.

The organisational and strategic basis of the liberation movement was built upon the premise that South Africa constituted a ‘colonialism of a special type’, requiring a struggle against the dual forms of exploitation – national and class – which united the divided experiences of the South African whole. However, throughout the 1970s and 1980s events and developments, and changes in the political economy and social structure such as an expanding working class, the growth of migrant workers and a black petty bourgeoisie, increasing urban heterogeneity, struggles over the level of urban subsistence, the fiscal unviability and illegitimacy of local black government, state violence,

¹⁰ M. Mabhida, *African Communist*, No.100, 1985, p.5.

¹¹ A. Nash, ‘The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa’, 1997.

¹² A. Erwin, ‘The Question of Unity in the Struggle’, 1985, pp.54-5.

¹³ See the chapter 2 on East European dissident strategy in which it is noted that the social and cultural conditions under the Soviet-type system had resulted in what was perceived as ‘an unconsolidated mass society’, devoid of social, economic and political class cleavages and factions, fortuitous to a level of social solidarity unmatched in

problems of Bantustan education etc., led to the emergence of new interests, agendas and, therefore, new subcultures among the popular and working-class opposition. The rise of civic, community, and student mobilisation in response to the Soweto Uprising in 1976, and carried forward by the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983, as well as the growth of the independent trade unions, was indicative of these new plural dynamics and trends. These new class and community forces, according to Mark Swilling required the forging of “new traditions, new leaders, new symbols and, more significantly, new tactics”.¹⁴ It is during this period that we see not only a growth in the diversity of national and regional organisation – trade unions, student and church organisations, civics, - and shifts in the relationship between national and local, class and community-based forces, but also the concomitant growth in the diversity of, sometimes imported, ideological and intellectual traditions – black consciousness, populism, liberationism, nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, Western Marxism - shaping these forces and, importantly, contesting the nature and content of the national democratic struggle.

What was crucial about these political and theoretical developments was that they raised the issue of the need for a renewed theoretical and strategic commitment to unity through the acceptance of plurality and difference within the movement, rather than a unity premised on ‘populist’ appeals to national and class exploitation, and what some, inspired by the Western left, called the ‘dogmatism’ of the two stage theory. The diversity and organisational incoherence within the liberation struggle in the 1980s, of which it is widely acknowledged as constituting the height of mass mobilisation in South Africa,¹⁵ however, provided the ammunition for a heated theoretical debate over the strategy and goals of the liberation movement. Importantly, the central issue which was raised by these structural and organisational changes and developments, particularly for the left, was in who’s interests the liberation struggle would ultimately serve. According to emerging Western Marxist forces within the trade union movement, the liberation movement’s commitment to national democratic revolution as a two-stage theory of the transition to socialism would, in the long-term, jeopardise the working class struggle to the power of bourgeois sentiments. In its attack upon the pro-Moscow line of the SACP and its suspicion of the ‘petty bourgeois’ national leadership of the ANC, Western Marxism questioned and shook the very roots and goals of the alliance. The argument that by pursuing the national democratic revolution the liberation movement was ‘wasting its time’ because it was “likely to lead to defeat or betrayal”¹⁶, spoke of realities that could not be easily dismissed; as Peter Hudson asserted:

... the transfer of state power demanded in the Freedom Charter cannot be seen as inaugurating a non-capitalist putatively protosocialist path of development. Nothing in the Freedom Charter entails the elimination of capitalism and the establishment of a transitional

the history of social movements.

¹⁴ See M. Swilling, ‘Stayaways, Urban Protest and the State’, 1986, p.22.

¹⁵ See M. Swilling, ‘Living in the Interegnum: Crisis, Reform and the Socialist Alternative in South Africa’, 1987.

¹⁶ A. Callinicos, ‘South Africa: The Road to Revolution’, 1985, p.35.

social formation in South Africa. In fact the fundamental question from the point of view of the transition to socialism of specifically working class power within the state is not addressed in the Freedom Charter. Clearly, the transfer of state power as envisaged there would very significantly modify the mode of constitution and composition of the capitalist class as well as the form of capitalism itself in South Africa. Whilst this might be a necessary condition for the transformation of the mode of production in South Africa, it is not, and should not be, seen, as a sufficient condition of such a transformation.¹⁷

What Andrew Nash calls the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa¹⁸ would prove to be an influential factor in shaping the politics of the liberation movement in the late 1980s and 1990s. While the influence of the Western left in South Africa has been most marked in the rise of the independent trade union movement, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), in the wake of the 1973 Durban strikes, its legacy has been most pronounced in its contribution to the 'battle of ideas'. This movement was built on the theoretical influence of a Western trade unionist and anti-Communist critique and headed by a group of radical white students who, above all, sought a political and moral identity and role in the realities of the social and political framework of the time¹⁹, and who subsequently aligned themselves with the re-emergent black working class trade union movement in the early 1970s. Vocal in their criticism of the liberation movement's, and particularly the SACP's, theory of 'colonialism of a special type', these 'activists' argued that South Africa's racial exploitation and oppression was rooted in the capitalist class system and insisted that only a socialist revolution led by the black the working class could 'uproot the system of racial domination' in South Africa. Strategically arguing that revolutionary strategy depended on the development of a working class identity among black South Africans, steered away from what Foster called "the powerful tradition of popular politics"²⁰, the Western Marxist argument was justifiably seen by its SACP critics as a threat to the need for unity in the struggle, as undermining the "the basic theoretical formulations of the entire liberation movement".²¹

At a time when South African political organisations were banned and its leaders were imprisoned or in exile, and the liberation movement were struggling with massive structural change and a flourishing of organisational diversity, Western Marxism was able to find an in-route into South African politics. Essentially, in its attack on the basis of the SACP's alliance with the ANC as purely strategic and theoretically flawed, the discourse of Western Marxism in South Africa sparked a controversial debate about socialist identity and strategy which stimulated the beginnings of a critical reflection process among the South African left – a reflection process which, as the realities of the Eastern European and Soviet 'revolutions' began to unfold in the late 1980s, would culminate in the SACP's shift to democratic socialism and the theory of 'civil society'.

¹⁷ P. Hudson, 'The Freedom Charter and the Theory of National Democratic Revolution', 1986, pp.32-3.

¹⁸ A. Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa', 1997.

¹⁹ For an example of the philosophical exploration underlying this movement see Richard Turner, *The Eye of the Needle*, 1972.

²⁰ J. Foster, 'The Worker's Struggle', 1982, p.82

²¹ T. Zuma, 'How the Ultra-Left Play into the Hands of the Ultra-Right', 1987, p.86.

To a banned political organisation working underground and heavily reliant upon the Soviet Communist Party's funding and support, the South African Western Marxists were indeed a threat to the SACP, not just strategically in terms of their critique of the organisation's alliance with the ANC, but ideologically. FOSATU heeded and spoke directly in the language of the lessons the Western left had learned from the East European experience; in particular Poland, where an 'independent' trade union organisation had provided a vehicle for the expression of an 'autonomous' working class identity among the masses, and had successfully served as the catalyst for revolutionary upheaval. Thus, Western Marxism in South Africa can be seen as a pragmatic and strategic criticism more than a theoretical or even Marxist endeavour, one which attempted to apply a model of 'revolutionary organisation' – one which at this stage had not even been completed, let alone being non-capitalist in intent - to a context of democratic struggle in which racial and national identity could and should be, it was argued, deferred to class. This, I would argue, rested on the pragmatic dual assumption that there existed a growing and 'uncaptured' working class among the black population, and that within a black trade union, organisation on the basis of working class identity would provide workers with a more politicised identity. However, although this revolutionary perspective was clearly grounded in a realistic assessment of practical developments occurring in Poland and a realistic reflection, albeit from a Western perspective, upon how these trends could be brought to bear on the transition to socialism in South Africa, a wave of panic appeared to rush over its SACP critics:

The real ... aim of these new 'Marxists' is to reject the two-stage theory of our revolution. To do this successfully, they have to question the validity of the thesis of 'colonialism of a special type' and then proceed to demolish the national democratic stage thesis and question the role and genuineness of the non-proletarian forces in the struggle. They want to change the orientation and language of our movement and all that we stand for.²²

Not only did the assimilation of Western Marxism within the trade union movement threaten to challenge the goals of struggle from within, but, as Gus Hall perceived, also from without:

It is one thing to criticise weaknesses and mistakes with a partisan desire to help correct them. It is quite another to join the frenzied, howling hyenas of reaction and imperialism in condemning, denouncing and vilifying socialism and Marxism-Leninism while prettifying and running interference for imperialism²³

Importantly, what the moment of Western Marxism forced upon the SACP and the broader liberation movement to recognise was that the struggle in South Africa was taking place in a rapidly changing international environment. Thus the liberation movement, and particularly the left, would strategically have to come to terms with this environment, and the broader international forces and trends which constitute it. As Alec Erwin identified, it was the politics of international environment which would become "the other determinant of the struggle in the contemporary context"²⁴, and reflections upon it

²² Nyawuza cited in Zuma, p.111.

²³ G. Hall, *African Communist*, 1982, cited in Ibid

²⁴ A. Erwin, 'The Question of Unity in the Struggle', p.57.

which would serve to substantiate the liberation movement's pragmatic commitment to national democracy, and after 1990, neo-liberalism. While this process would serve to marginalise the left and its socialist agenda during the transition process, the influence of the international environment would also open South African politics and the politics of the left to reflections upon how international developments could contribute to understanding local struggles.

Essentially, based on an analysis of the international environment that itself has been shaped by, it is the Western Marxist critique which inadvertently provokes responses and strategic reflections which, combined with international and local events, sounds the demise of the liberation movement's commitment to the two-stage theory. As Alec Erwin, once revolutionary strategist of socialism in the trade union movement and now proponent of neo-liberalism as Trade and Industry Secretary, suggested, the power to defeat apartheid and thus the nature of the future democratic order would depend not simply on demonstrating the movement's unity to its cause – the eradication of the system of apartheid - but from its ability to engender international support. This required the successful marketing of the theory of national democratic revolution; a national policy which, in the context of the international environment in the mid-late 1980s, spoke in the neutral language of social democracy, was non-ideological, ambiguous, open-ended, independent, and autonomous of any powerful or 'controversial' interest. As illustrated by the East European dissident's strategy, it was perceived of as a fail safe means of attracting the widest possible support for the struggle and thereby ensuring the collapse of its enemy.

A liberation movement that is attacking the legitimacy of a regime cannot ignore this international arena – in fact it could almost be said to be crucial. The support or possibly more correctly the lessening of resistance that a liberation movement can achieve depends upon how it is perceived in international forums ... It cannot easily identify itself with one or the other of the big power camps as this will alienate the social democratic, non-aligned and Third World countries who are important in shaping decisions of international organisations ... In fighting the battle for the mantle of legitimacy in the international arena a fine balancing act is called for ... For the liberation movement such a fine balancing act militates against a clear-cut and detailed political and economic programme.²⁵

So, how did the SACP respond to this new ambiguity surrounding the nature of the transition of socialism? Their first line of attack was to marginalise and exclude those who opposed or threatened their position within the liberation alliance. Thus, it was the 'anti-communist', 'anti-soviet', and 'ultra-left sectarianism' of Western Marxism which came under fire; their link to, what are clandestinely identified as, 'other sectarian' organisations in South Africa²⁶, and their "aim to have some influence on the activists in the democratic movement in South Africa, thus attempting to weaken the strength and cohesiveness of the leadership of that revolution".²⁷ The South African left, thus, attempted to re-affirm their commitment to the theory of national democratic revolution, and

²⁵ Ibid., pp57-8.

²⁶ According to Zuma these South African sectarian groupings and personalities included the "Unity Movement, Cape Action League, AZAPO ... Neville Alexander, No Sizwe, Martin Legassick ... among others". See p.86.

therefore their commitment to the ANC-led alliance. Thus, in the light of Erwin's call for the need for movement unity and legitimacy, the SACP spoke in terms of its historical commitment to 'democratic' revolution and organisational independence, asserting that it is not Soviet-influenced, but open and non-orthodox: "the SACP is a South African Party, produced and moulded by the complexities of South African conditions ... has its own structures and finances, holds its own meetings and congresses and has its own programme".²⁸

While this is clearly an understatement²⁹, the aim is to distance themselves and that of the liberation movement as a whole, not only from the Soviet Union, but from the 'ultra-leftism' of Western Marxism whom, it is argued, play "into the hands of the ultra-right" with their "pseudo-revolutionary phrase-mongering" and their "failure to analyse adequately the dynamic relationship between national oppression, class exploitation and the revolutionary process"³⁰. Indeed, so eager to assert its autonomy the SACP goes as far as to define its 'independent tradition' in the historical development of the theory and practice of the South African revolutionary process. As Slovo argues

... perhaps one of our most significant achievements in the 65 years of our existence has been a truly indigenous elaboration of the theory of the South African revolution. This theory has increasingly informed revolutionary understanding in the ranks of the broader working class and national movement.³¹

In light of the liberation movement's strategic move away from the language of socialism at this stage in the revolutionary process, the SACP appear willing to resign themselves and the transition to socialism to the democratic process. Yet, the underlying and strategic notion here, is that in its alliance with the ANC it is assumed that "the predominance of advanced socialist forces in the socio-economic and political democratic decision-making process" will be assured, enabling "the new social relations of production [to] gradually tilt in favour of socialism".³² However, increasingly compromised by unfolding international events and their effect upon liberation movement strategy and agenda, the left's goal of the transition to socialism became not a revolutionary, but an ambiguous 'gradual' democratic process of 'structural reform'.³³ Or, in the words of Zuma, in a democratic and open society where "political activity will for the first time be free, the SACP will be free to educate, debate and do whatever is deemed necessary in the new conditions to advance the process towards

²⁷ T. Zuma, p.86.

²⁸ Ibid., p.111.

²⁹ See M. Morris, 'Dangerous Liasons?' 1991.

³⁰ Zuma., pp.86-7.

³¹ Joe Slovo, *The African Communist*, 1986, p18, cited in Zuma, p.110.

³² Zuma, p. 88.

³³ In defence of Western Marxists, Saul criticises the strategy being pursued by the ANC and SACP as part of 'an emerging project of structural transformation' based on 'popular initiatives in such a way as to leave a residue of further *empowerment* – in terms of growing enlightenment/class consciousness, in terms of organisational capacity – for the vast mass of the population, who thus strengthen themselves for further struggles and further victories', see J. Saul, 'South Africa: Between 'Barbarism' and Structural Reform', *New Left Review*, 1991, pp.5-6.

socialism".³⁴ However, in the context of South Africa's political transition from apartheid, this approach comes to represent nothing other than an accommodation to the logic of the free market and a reliance upon the theory of 'civil society'.

Largely because of its strategic and philosophical alliance in the liberation movement, and largely due to Joe Slovo's 'hurried intervention', 'Has Socialism Failed?' which was first dispersed in pamphlet form in December 1989³⁵, the SACP had emerged from the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the emerging crisis in the Soviet Union relatively unscathed in the South African context. In its wake, however, and in the bigger crisis it faced after it was unbanned, the SACP was forced to live out its earlier strategic claim of 'independence' and non-orthodoxy. This it duly did by pragmatically re-orientating itself, but not without an ideological battle within its ranks, to democratic socialism. Initiated by Slovo's discussion paper which declared the SACP's commitment to self-examination, democracy, political pluralism and autonomy, it is this within this Party battle between democratic socialism and Marxism-Leninism and driven by the political environment of the transition process that the idea of 'civil society' is formulated within the left. All its conceptual emergence required was the stimulus provided by the debate on the role of the civics, and once it had emerged in left-wing discourses the concept and idea became the new site in which left-wing ideological and strategic battles would take place.

The unbanning of the ANC, SACP, and other political organisations of the liberation movement in February 1990 had broad implications which ran deeper than questions of conflict resolution and political transition. This was a political environment in which strategy derived from pragmatism, and being on the winning side resulted from engaging in broad and ambiguous alliances. Lamenting the demise in the 'revolutionary alliance's' objective of socialism, Alex Callinicos writes that "the imminent prospect after February 1990 of a transfer of political power to the black majority should have made the question of what would happen once national liberation was achieved more pressing".³⁶ On the contrary, before that question could even be addressed other more immediate and pragmatic issues had to be solved at the national level; establishing party identity was contained within attempts to reassure capital and big business, developing constitutional and economic policy and programmes, establishing a discourse with the apartheid regime for furthering talks. How these were approached would ultimately serve to force the question of the transition to socialism off the national agenda.

For the SACP, its alliance with the ANC and the overlapping leadership tended to blur its role as well as opening it to attacks that the Party operated as a secret cabal in the ANC, controlling and directing it from within.³⁷ The SACP's presence in the ANC and the Congress of the South African

³⁴ Zuma, p.87.

³⁵ Joe Slovo, 'Has Socialism Failed?' A SACP pamphlet, published by Inkululeko Publications, London, reprinted in *South African Labour Bulletin*, 6, February 1990.

³⁶ A. Callinicos, 'South Africa After Apartheid', 1996, p.10.

³⁷ *The Star*, 20 June 1990.

Trade Unions (COSATU) was quite evident – 8 of the 22 internal leaders served on the ANC's national executive committee, and of those 22 leaders included Coastu vice-presidents Chris Dlamini and John Gomomo, Cosatu's assistant general secretary Sydney Mafumadi and National Union of Metalworkers general secretary Moses Mayekiso.³⁸ The SACP had also gained the membership of a large group of its former Western Marxist critics, now turned democratic socialist. All of which should have translated into a position of strength, but instead represented disunity and ideological division. Slovo's discussion paper generated an intense debate in the Party, but one which initially focused on political malpractices and a critique of stalinist tendencies in the party (bureaucratic, authoritarianism, and anti-democratic) and their remedy (political pluralism and 'more democracy'). According to Colin Bundy the central theoretical premise which had guided debate and conflict in the 1980s was largely ignored: "CST and National Democratic Revolution have scarcely been opened to reassessment ... in fact, the only visible change is that national democracy is now construed in less far radical terms than before".³⁹

The theoretical immobility of the party frustrated its members, particularly the radicalised youth and workers, with its inability to forge a coherent identity for itself as a working class party with a programme, practice and policy that asserts such an identity. While communities continued to suffer from the economic unviability of their local infrastructures, Joe Slovo was presented as the 'human face of South African socialism', wooing capital and big business with the tepid argument that "true democracy" no longer requires the "complete destruction of the white state ... socialism and the market are not, as is commonly supposed, opposed to each other in principle ... the market is the mechanism for the realisation of value, there is nothing inherently capitalistic about it".⁴⁰ Or rather, as Daryl Glaser would have it, the SACP now had to accept the logic of the free market if socialism would be a competitive force. In fact, its political future was seen now to be dependent upon it: "socialism will either win out in a free clash of ideas – or not win at all".⁴¹

On the one hand, Slovo's reference to political pluralism is indicative of this shift, but on the other hand, it is heightened by the calls among the former Western Marxists within the trade unions for a 'social contract' between state, labour and capital, indicating a move towards a social democratic language in which negotiation could be facilitated. While Slovo's stance reflected more a general theoretical shift in the left, the reorientation within the unions and COSATU reflected the more practical and immediate concern of achieving genuine progress toward socio-economic change for the black population. However, no policy programmes in which their voice could be heard emerged. Furthermore, in the context of the unbannings of political parties which filtered radically conscious youth and workers from communities to either the SACP or ANC, and the ensuing predominance of

³⁸ *The Star*, 7 August 1990.

³⁹ C. Bundy, 'Theory of a Special Type', *Work in Progress*, 1993, p.18.

⁴⁰ *Business Day* 12 Dec. 1990, see also 'Nudging the Balance from "Free" to "Plan"', *Weekly Mail*, 30 March 1990.

⁴¹ D. Glaser, 'Putting Democracy Back into Democratic Socialism', *Work in Progress*, 1990.

the national debates, all appeared to by-pass the masses they were supposed to represent.

At the national level debates were dominated by the top-down language of corporatism adopted by parties, unions, the state and capital, and this was matched by a shift from a radicalism still evident in the townships to a social democratic, at worst a neo-liberal, compromise. Thus the national dictates meant that questions of party and trade union identity and role in struggle were beginning to unfold with events, but what was evident was that this discourse tended to bypass the issue of the local, the issue of mass mobilisation, public power and the identity and role of civics. As we see, in order to make the local voice heard civics were forced to engage the political elites in their own language – the language of ‘civil society’.

The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed a growth in South African civic organisation.⁴² The trade union movement, professional associations, educational organisations such as the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), churches, youth groups, women’s organisations, co-operatives, township-based clubs, stokvels and associations, many of which were affiliated to the ANC and United Democratic Front (UDF) organised their members around the interrelationship between local and national projects. In effect, the logic of the apartheid state had politicised and oppressively controlled the private life and interests of South Africans, in ways that meant that the private, material, public, local, and national interests and needs of the black population were inextricably linked. This provided the national liberation movement with powerful symbolic interests upon which to mobilise large sections of black (and white) society. The liberation movement and the ANC, therefore, had emerged as the moral representative and collective expression of these civic formations and interests, but one which was driven by an organisational tension. The movement served to suppress the autonomy and plurality of interests for the sake of achieving the one overriding and dominant goal of transforming the apartheid state. It was perceived that the creation of a non-racial and inclusive democratic state, was where the solution of people’s material and local interests would best be served. However, the unfolding logic of political transition meant that black access to and participation in state power did not translate as equal access and ownership of power, but rather the promotion of an upwardly mobile and educated black middle class elite. Across the liberation movement, civics, trade unions, student and community organisations, as well as parties, had to decide whether or not to follow the ANC’s directive. For the civics this question of identity and their continuing role in the struggle became acute as they faced daily problems which required local and immediate solutions.

Importantly, developments were occurring in the individual communities throughout the country of which the liberation alliance working at the national struggle were not sufficiently engaged in – the collapsing of the Local Authorities and township infrastructures; the need for an upgrading of services, and a single tax base; the provision of land for housing, and the abandonment of the hostel

⁴² See M. Swilling, ‘Civic Associations in South Africa’, 1993; M. Mayekiso, ‘The legacy of Ungovernability’, 1993; J. Seekings, ‘Civic Organisations in South African Townships’, 1992; T. Botha, ‘Civic Associations as Autonomous Organs of Grassroots’ Participation’, *Theoria*, 1992.

system; and the need for a non-racial local government. However, when asked where solutions lay, the ANC's local government section responded to the complexity of the situation by vaguely asserting that "these questions can only be settled at the level of national negotiations ... we therefore need one national position".⁴³ However, civics argued, the political environment of national negotiation militated against the independent legacy and role of mobilised grass-roots participation in the struggle: "the government tried unsuccessfully to get the ANC to drop its commitment to mass action at the August 6 meeting in Pretoria. Now De Klerk is even bold enough to claim that he can bring the ANC to account over these actions ... [it] claims that mass action works against the talks".⁴⁴ The civic leaders assertion of 'no compromise on mass action' – the recognised need for communities to act through mass protest, whether consumer boycotts, stayaways or demonstrations – pointed to a key issue, one which was being solved among the parties of the liberation movement, but not yet addressed by the civic movement: while pressure from below was essential for strengthening the ANC's negotiating position and formulating local demands, the ANC-civic relationship (paralleling the ways in which the logistics of 'socialist' question jeopardised the strength of the alliance parties in challenging the legitimacy of the apartheid regime) was seen to jeopardise not only the national struggle, but the strength and autonomy of communities to participate in their own struggles.

Civic autonomy and independence was thus perceived as a strategic necessity. Not only was the legacy of a mobilised grass-roots participation in the struggle in danger of losing its collective voice and plurality of interests to the elite-driven power struggle at the negotiating table, but if local issues were to be addressed, then and in the future, civics argued that they should not automatically be viewed as a vehicle of ANC policy. Reflecting upon the lessons of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for democratic socialism in South Africa, Daryl Glaser, comments on the likelihood that the ANC would become the majority government of the future and argues that although the ANC may have a mandate to determine a society's overall collective project, majority rule should be kept 'within bounds' to ensure its compatibility with multiple centres of political power and with voluntary activity and individual initiative. This, he insisted, "entails answering the demand insistently made by the Eastern European opposition for an autonomous civil society":

By this East European opposition groups mean, broadly speaking, a social realm in which individuals and groups can engage in voluntary forms of association, self-organisation and exchange, constrained by law but beyond the control of the state.⁴⁵

Seen from this perspective, in the South African context, it was argued, communities required independent organisations and structures through which to generate and represent their needs and interests to local government, whoever was in government.

⁴³ T. Botha, cited in *Mayibuye*, December 1990, p.29.

⁴⁴ cited in 'No Compromise on Mass Action', *Mayibuye*, 1990, p.30.

⁴⁵ D. Glaser, 'Putting Democracy back into Democratic Socialism', p.29.

In the article 'The Role of the Civics'⁴⁶, *Mayibuye* asserted a similar argument to that already voiced by the members of the trade unions: transforming South Africa would require empowering the people – that is giving them an independent organisation and voice in the running of their daily lives. Civics, as grass-roots organisations of the communities, were perceived as essential instruments for achieving that goal. However, with their roots in the liberation movement, and its leaders often linked directly to ANC party structures, civics were wrestling with being surrogates of the liberation movement, and therefore the ANC, while at the same time claiming to represent their broader community's interests. In other words, it was argued, the identity and representativeness, and therefore the strength, of the civics derived from the communities they claimed to serve, not essentially from their strategic partisan support base due to their affiliation with the ANC. Legitimacy in the eyes of those whom they perceived themselves to represent was the central issue – a civic which is regarded as partisan was thought to alienate people with different political persuasions, thus undermining the fundamental role of civic organisation. As the *Mayibuye* article argued, the language of non-partisanship, independence and autonomy was aimed at attracting as broad as support as possible and thereby building the civics strength and legitimacy: "This does not mean depoliticising the civics. It means ensuring the widest community representation possible".⁴⁷

Thus, in the eyes of civic leaders, the term 'liberation movement' no longer served a practical purpose for the civics; it had become largely redundant losing much of its analytic and conceptual meaning. The unbannings and ensuing party and elite negotiations, therefore, was seen by the civics to have collapsed the logic of liberation movement politics, although the ANC and SACP continued to use the term making it particularly difficult for civics to assert their claims to independent status. On the one hand, February 1990 signalled a period of political confusion and crisis about the role of civics and their relation to the ANC: many in the civic movement were unclear as to whether they were to move away from resistance toward developmental politics and become neutral defenders of their original interests or independently organised 'watchdogs' of the ANC; or alternatively, to focus upon building strong ANC branches which would take up grassroots issues such as housing, electricity, transport, rents, health and standards of living, so as to ensure that the ANC retained its mass support base.⁴⁸ On the other hand, it signalled a period in which analytical and conceptual frameworks required renewal, and much to the dislike of some ANC regional branch activists⁴⁹ and working-class civic leaders⁵⁰ the *Mayibuye* article evoked the language of democratic socialism

⁴⁶ Anon, 'The Role of the Civics', 1990.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.32.

⁴⁸ See G. Daniels, 'Beyond protest politics', *Work in Progress*, 1991, pp. 13-15

⁴⁹ Blade Nzimande and Mpume Sikhosana, 'Civics are Part of the National Democratic Revolution', *Mayibuye* June 1991. They claim that at this initial stage in the transition civics should not be seen as a movement independent of the 'liberation movement', but should be subservient to ANC mass structures and local branches.

⁵⁰ Such as Mzwanele Mayekiso who calls the predominant democratic socialist discourse embedded in the *Mayibuye* article as a 'label used to disguise social democracy' undermining the civics own radical left-wing language.

dominant within the SACP and the trade unions. It spoke of a separation between the social and the political spheres, a compartmentalisation of the civic and the political, the depoliticisation of private and public life; all of which aimed at promoting democratic participation in an ambiguous space for non-political and so-called 'autonomous' and 'independent' developmental social activity.⁵¹ The civic ability to assert that claim to independence and autonomy from the 'liberation movement' was, however, provided by the concept 'civil society'. As a concept developed in the Eastern European societal struggles against the etatic state, 'civil society' seemed to speak directly to the problems faced by the civics, and more importantly, to their claims for autonomy from the ANC and the search for support in attending to the local needs and material interests of their communities *vis a vis* their struggle against the local apartheid government structures.

While an active and creative citizenry, participating in the strengthening and deepening of democracy was an attractive ideal for many political activists, intellectuals and civic leaders in South Africa's emerging political order, the type of social activity which would constitute this 'independent' space became open to debate and, therefore, open to manipulation by powerful interests. The legacy and power of a mobilised mass public, depending on whether one was a liberal or a socialist, was a potential force which either had to be harnessed and controlled or harnessed and cultivated. From the SACP perspective, civics would become harnessed as a vehicle for the transition to socialism. While there was a recognised need for the civics to engage in the dominant discourse if they were to have their interests heard, what drove the ensuing debate on 'civil society' was that if civics were to play an independent function in South Africa's transition to democracy, the legacy and power of the civics own radicalised language had to be harnessed. Just what the 'language of the civics' was - national democracy, socialism, or working class - was up for controversial debate.

'Civil society' was initially adopted because it was perceived to speak in a neutral language enabling civics to assert some measure of non-partisanship and independence from the ANC. However, it soon became clear in discourse that not only did the concept and idea of 'civil society' carry the baggage of a history of Western ideological conflict, but the sphere of public life it was supposed to represent in South Africa was constituted by a diversity of conflicting interests and identities, of which the civics were merely a part. To speak in terms of a 'collective civil society' against the state (as articulated in the Eastern European and African contexts) simply had no meaning in the reality of South African politics and society. 'Civil society' was a slogan available to anyone wanting to assert their independent interests, but primarily, because the civic's own political language spoke in terms of a radicalised relationship between the working class and communities⁵², it was quickly appropriated as a slogan of the left and an instrument for their divergent left-wing identities -

⁵¹ For example see T. Botha's description of ANC policy after 1990 in 'Civic associations as autonomous organs of grassroots participation', *Theoria*, 1992.

⁵² Perhaps the most comprehensive and insightful discussion of civic consciousness, activity and interests is captured in the literature by civic activist and leader, Mzwanele Mayekiso. See references at the end of this thesis for a list of his published work.

Marxist-Leninists, social democrats, working-class, whether activists, academics, civic leaders, intellectuals, ANC or SACP party members - to stake their claims in the unfolding dispensation.

Analysing the Strength and Role of the Civics: Debating and Promoting 'Civil Society'

The previous section has attempted to illustrate that 'civil society' emerges from a shift in left-wing discourses, a product of the 'battle of ideas' between the philosophical traditions embedded in the liberation movement and influenced by those imported from the West. This section aims to critically explore the ways which 'civil society' is used in analytical debate and to what political effect. I argue that after the unbanning of political parties and the onset of political negotiations, this notion of the 'battle of ideas' can be seen to move into a new environment; with the ANC's shift to neo-liberalism and the capitulation of the socialist agenda in the national political environment, the left-wing cause is transferred into the civic realm (and analytically into 'civil society') where the highly politicised and radical voice of mobilised civic and community organisations becomes the fulcrum for promoting the competing left-wing political agendas. However, the left-wing goal of the transition to socialism is militated against, not only by the predominance of liberal and social democratic debates over the perceived strength of organisations in this public realm, but, in the light of left-wing division over the national goals of socio-economic and political development and reconstruction, coherence over the role 'civil society' has in constructing this goal is fraught by ideological differences. I begin with the academic debates which emerged from a May 1991 workshop in the Centre for Policy Studies, University of Natal, later published in *Theoria* in May 1992, to illustrate the broader and more abstract political and theoretical dimensions of the 'civil society' debate initiated by the issue of the civics. I then go on to explore how this analytical debate has been criticised by the positions of left-wing intellectuals and activists as they seek to stake their philosophical and strategic claims on the conceptual content of 'civil society'.

The aim of the May 1990 workshop, in the words of the convener Doreen Atkinson, was to "grasp the significance of a new concept even in the process of its emergence" and to "clear the conceptual undergrowth"⁵³ of the 'civil society' debate since its emergence in late 1990. From glancing at the contributions to the workshop it is possible to say that academics on the left have welcomed the concept 'civil society', but not uncritically, in South Africa. Through academically tracing its historical and theoretical roots in Western political philosophy and delineating what these different meanings hold for contemporary South African political actors and thinkers, these contributors have aimed explicitly at developing the analytical content of the concept beyond that of a slogan of the civics. Essentially, it is an attempt to shift the level of debate; to bring the concept to bear on the broader questions of constitutionalism, the character and limits of a post-apartheid state,

⁵³ See the editorial preface by Doreen Atkinson in *Theoria*, May 1992, p.ix.

the questions of the nature of governmental and political practice as they impinge on society. In the process the debate serves to promote the language of social democracy under the guise of “enhancing the popularity of the concept” and exposing “the broader public to contemporary trends in South African political thought”⁵⁴. The workshop, therefore, must be seen to have had its own agenda in promoting ‘civil society’ as an analytical concept, and this, seemingly, was aimed at re-engaging political theory in the politics of South Africa’s transition. What the perspectives of the workshop do illustrate is how easily a concept derived in Western historical development and political philosophy can be manipulated to serve as a universal basis for both analysing the realities of the South African transition process and redefining political practice.

According to Doreen Atkinson’s reflections upon the history of the concept ‘civil society’, and, in particular, upon its re-emergence in Eastern Europe in the contemporary, the South African debate on ‘civil society’ is thought to underline “an impressive degree of concern” in South Africa that constitutionalism and multi-party democracy will not be a sure enough guarantee for the protection of liberty, rights and equalities in society. Premised on the political and analytical perspective currently in fashion which speaks of the historical and contemporary lessons of the ‘hegemonic nature’ of both the state and Party, Atkinson implores us that the role of new South African political analysis must be to “learn from the lessons of the West and East” and, thereby, conceptualise South African ‘civil society’ and its relationship with the state, if indeed, as it is argued by the civics, “it is time to leave a significant measure of initiative to the associations and organisations of civil society”⁵⁵ Atkinson’s opening paper, and those which follow it, can be seen as an exercise in the marketing of a ‘civil society’ discourse; a call to build on and expand the implications of the civic debate into the realm of South African political theory; to develop the theoretical and conceptual content of ‘civil society’ beyond mere slogan use; and to make the concept available for addressing the practical and political problems faced with reconstructing a democratic post-apartheid state.

Despite the self-acknowledged claim to have incorporated a ‘diversity’ of theoretical and analytical perspectives among participants in the workshop debate, “representing a political spectrum that included libertarians, free market advocates, social democrats and socialists”, the contributions are very much influenced by the analytical debates which have emerged from Western theoretical reflections upon the concept’s use in Western and Eastern Europe,⁵⁶ as well as in the African

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Atkinson, ‘State and Society in Flux’, in *op.cit.*, pp.26-7.

⁵⁶ The ‘classic’ writings on ‘civil society’ in Western political philosophy remain these contributors theoretical touchstones, alongside the work of Arendt, Habermas, Althusser and others. Thus, it can be said that the theoretical and analytical perspectives have been largely guided by the contemporary work of John Keane, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato on ‘civil society’. In terms of discourse this point is important for it illustrates that the sources and, therefore, the parameters of their debate are influenced by theoretical developments outside of South Africa’s borders. Although Atkinson claims to strive to develop “our own (South African) debate on civil society” (p.27), from such a theoretical basis it is difficult to see how this is made possible except beyond an ‘assimilation’ of Western debates to the South African context. This as we shall see is very much contrasted with

context,⁵⁷ and as a result, are dominated by the language of neo-liberalism and social democracy.⁵⁸ Essentially, the displacement of a liberation movement discourse, which spoke in terms of a national and class struggle, in favour of a liberal or social democratic discourse of 'civil society' which speaks abstractly of pluralism and independence, can be seen as an attempt to construct more collaborative, more controlled, and less economically disruptive ways of allowing national and class struggle to take place. The point is that the process of 'civil society's' emergence from a left-wing slogan of the civics to an analytical concept, in which its normative content is theoretically established and based, is, after 1991, dominated by an academic and a social democratic discourse. Importantly, as I shall show, this means that the alternative analytical, and therefore emergent normative, debates which take place within the activist left become marginalised in public political discourses.

The basic premise underlying the academic agenda is that while 'civil society' is useful for analysing the character of South African social and state-society relations, the concept's value lies in its normative or prescriptive use, providing historical and theoretical models of a desired social order which can be brought to bear on the political and theoretical questions of the day. Thus the central issue their analysis has had to attend to is what the sphere of 'civil society' in South Africa is constituted by, and whether these organisations and associations are strong or weak, or if they help or hinder the development of broader independent associational life in this sphere, and therefore, if they can help promote democracy in South Africa. According to Alf Stadler, however, the fate of South Africa's 'civil society' in accomplishing these tasks is dependent solely upon the nature of the state and its contribution to economic and civil security. Following Africanist analyses of state-society relations in Africa, he contends that 'strong states make for strong civil societies' because, he argues, there is no functional distinction between the two spheres: "There is no exclusive feature of action or behaviour which can convincingly point to consistent distinctions between the state and civil society. There are no arguments which convincingly point to normative or ethical distinctions: both occupy the public realm and actors of both claim legitimacy on the grounds of the general interests they serve".⁵⁹ Stadler, therefore, is concerned that 'civil society', and not the state from which, he argues

the analytical debates arising from political activists such as Nzimande, Sikhosana and Mayekiso.

⁵⁷ Alf Stadler is the only contributor who refers to the analytical debates of 'civil society' in its relation to the state in Africa, and his point of reference is Robert Fatton's work. I have dealt with his work in the previous chapter, but it is perhaps interesting to note that Stadler bases his conception of the post-apartheid state on the models exhibited in Africa in which he points to particularly African problems of patron-clientelism, corruption, and authoritarian rule, and thus the 'traditionalism' of an African society which describes 'civil society' as weak, reactionary and undemocratic.

⁵⁸ For example the academic Mark Swilling is noted in the editorial as 'socialist', while he clearly calls himself a democratic socialist, something rather different from the 'socialism' of Mayekiso, Nzimande and Sikhosana for example. Without going into a debate on political identity and categorising in the modern age, as South African's are, I have noticed, prone to, it seems to me that Swilling is far from 'socialist' or even Marxist in his perspective. But this raises an important point of which this thesis attempts to deal with, that political identity, like the political parties themselves, in the post-apartheid era is extremely fluid and ambiguous. Ideological certainties are, for better or worse, being replaced by a 'mainstream' discourse in which we end up speaking loosely in terms of 'radicalism' for example.

⁵⁹ A. Stadler, 'Strong States Make for a Strong Civil Society', 1992, p31.

it's politics and interests derive, should claim to provide the conditions of democratic freedom and equality.

In the context of the South African transition process in which he is writing, Stadler's argument implies that organisations in this South African 'civil society' should defer to the task of constructing the new state, and therefore, to partisan support of the party best suited to forming the new state, else they be "consigned to a state of civic inconsequence"⁶⁰ in the current conjecture. This has grave implications for another issue raised by the civic debate, namely the relationship of 'civil society' to 'hegemonic' political parties, such as the ANC is widely seen to represent. While Stadler was deliberately ambiguous about which party South African 'civil society' should support (although he does stipulate the liberal and social democratic criteria the Party should have, particularly aiming to 'generate the conditions for [capitalist] accumulation'⁶¹), Mark Swilling, Steven Friedman, Khehla Shubane and Thozamile Botha explicitly point to the ANC, and argue the need for non-partisanship as 'civil society's' organising principle.

Reflecting upon the Solidarity movement in Poland, where, it is argued, it gained control of all state-owned enterprises and cultural institutions not, as widely supposed in the name of 'civil society', but as a Party with 'hegemonic' 'statist' tendencies, Swilling argues for building independence and 'voice' at the grassroots level; Botha argues for non-partisan civic associations in black townships; Friedman, warns of the tendency in the Charterist tradition to reject the virtues pluralism in its demand for uniformity and commitment to its world view; and like Friedman, Shubane, once civic activist and now advisor to Urban Foundation suggests that South African 'civil society' is underdeveloped because of its relationship to the liberation movement, and that it faces the danger of being sucked into the ANC's hegemonic political bloc. On the surface these four contributors share a similar concern, the need to distinguish 'civil society' as an independent composite of autonomous organisations from the ANC-led liberation movement, but this is where their similarities end. The content of the argument in each of their contributions is moulded by their particular political interests and agendas.

Clearly on the left of the political spectrum, and in contrast to Stadler's neo-liberal argument, Swilling endorses an 'associational socialism' in which he argues a more genuine equality than the formal equal rights guaranteed under capitalism, or the type of material equality enforced under statist socialism can be promoted. Termed a 'radical civil society writer',⁶² Swilling emphasises the pluralistic diversity of South African associational life, but laments the ANC's 'subtle' attempts to subordinate both its autonomy and pluralism⁶³ and argues for a democratic socialist alternative in

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.32.

⁶¹ Although Stadler's pro-capitalist, pro-market position is only hinted at in this paper, his perspective is better illustrated by his article 'A Strong State Civilises Society: A Response to Louw', 1992.

⁶² D. Glaser, 'The Limits of Civil Society in South Africa', 1992, p.10.

⁶³ As an example Swilling argues that the ANC's policy of nationalisation could be misconstrued by a statist tendency in the party: "it makes it possible for the ANC to argue that the policy of nationalisation – i.e. state

South Africa, premised on the practical lessons of liberal democracy and socialism.

In short, democratic theory accepted the uncertainty of pluralism but truncated the scope of democratic accountability. Socialist theory extended the scope of democracy but condoned the despotic consequences of utopianism by rejecting the uncertainty of diversity. This, in essence, is why democracy and socialism have come to contradict one another. If there is going to emerge a new democratic socialist alternative, it is going to have to be premised on the socialist conception of extended democratisation and the democratic acceptance of diversity, uncertainty and pluralism.⁶⁴

The strength of 'civil society' and therefore its function in a democratic order, is, in Swilling's view, based in its diversity and pluralism at the local level, and its freely and voluntarily structured – i.e. not controlled by party, state, or any powerful organisations of capital and business – associational life. While he welcomes the ANC's recognition of the democratic value of an autonomous civil realm, Swilling rejects the logic of the ANC's national ideology that the state will construct a democratic framework and will act as the 'guardian of civil society's strength and autonomy': "This utopian liberal democratic conception of the state", according to Swilling, "would like formations within civil society to surrender their right to be their own guardians. If this happens, the single most important force for democratisation – 'civil society' will be left too vulnerable to wage the struggles over democratic values and procedures that are to come."⁶⁵

Thus, in Swilling's view, a strong 'civil society' in South Africa should be one that behaves more or less like a market place of association and negotiation where interest-based links are established, such as co-operatives and supply and distribution networks, and socio-economic development comes from the 'harnessing' (not the subordination) of society's independent and creative energies. The implicit and undeveloped point Swilling's argument raises is that the pluralistic and associational potential of 'civil society' should be seen as the prime repository for socio-economic development in South Africa. Swilling's argument is clearly informed by a moral framework which places responsibility for societal interests and the common good in the hands of society itself; an empowered 'civil society' is seen as a counter-balance to the economic power of the elites who dominate control of the state. Despite his acknowledgement that South African society is far from homogenous, unified and nonconflictual, Swilling assumes that the development of an associational civic sphere constituted by horizontal coalitions is conducive to negotiation, compromise and consensus. This issue is taken up in Friedman's liberal critique in which he displays a distrust for civics and, what he suggests is, an ANC-controlled 'civil society' rhetoric:

To take slogans seriously is to understand – and misunderstand – politics. The arrival of a slogan often heralds an important shift in political thinking and strategy. But to take slogans at face value is often to misunderstand the meaning of the shift, for they may not say what

ownership – is derived from the clause in the Freedom Charter that says the wealth 'shall be transferred to the ownership of the people'. This jump from 'the people' to the state is only possible if 'the people' are synonymous with the state. The road from this to statism, history has proven, is a short one", p.75.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.77.

⁶⁵ M. Swilling, 'Quixote at the windmills', 1992, p. 98

they mean.

So it is with 'the independence of civil society', a phrase which has gripped the imagination of left-wing intellectuals and has become common currency in the broad African National Congress (ANC) camp.⁶⁶

Friedman uses an analysis of the concept 'civil society' as a slogan of the 'liberation movement' to argue it as part of an ANC/SACP 'bonapartist plot' to seek to represent the whole of public life in society, or a Gramscian struggle for hegemony. His point, it seems, is not only to suggest that the conditions for a strong 'civil society' – "a strong democratic state", "proven representativeness of groups like civic organisations", and a "diversity of interest group representation"⁶⁷ – do not exist, and that they will not under a non-liberal-aligned state governed by the ANC/SACP alliance. His aim in analysing 'civil society', it would appear, is to formulate a critique of the ANC/SACP alliance as a 'Bonapartist' government in waiting⁶⁸. Friedman's use of the 'Bonapartism' metaphor enables him to imply that the nationalist discourse of the liberation movement is far from 'liberational' or democratic, but is informed by the logic of 'colonisation': "advocates of 'civil society' in the resistance camp may be preparing the way for its subjugation in a new guise. They may prepare the way for a civil society starved of resources and power, colonised by an elite with close affinities to the state".⁶⁹ Thus, he maintains, any theory of 'civil society' must be informed by the liberal notions of democracy, rights, freedoms, liberty, pluralism, and hence the logic of the free-market where, it is argued, individuals are free to define their own interests. However, whilst Swilling uses the concept to promote the idea that 'civil society' and the interests and activities which are formed there should be harnessed and cultivated toward promoting the vision of a socialist future, Friedman's argument, in contrast, implies that liberals would prefer to harness 'civil society's' power and control its outcome toward democratic participation and economic activity.

According to Shubane, however, neither of these goals apply in the South African context because, he argues, civics are inherently weak due to their historical and continued relationship to the liberation movement. As advisor to capital's Urban Foundation and the parastatal Independent Development Trust, Shubane intends to discredit the idea that 'civil society' is a panacea for democratic development in South Africa, and to replace this notion with the idea of corporatist negotiation between state, capital and 'civil society' through the mediation of political pluralism and a multi-party democracy. Like Stadler, Shubane takes his analytical and theoretical cue from the perspectives developed around analyses of African 'civil society', thus arguing that the civics are "structurally limited" because of South Africa's colonial past⁷⁰. Not only does he suggest that the debate over "the existence or otherwise of a civil society among the disenfranchised communities in

⁶⁶ S. Friedman, 'Bonaparte at the Barricades: The Colonisation of Civil Society', 1992, p.83.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.88-89

⁶⁸ For a critique of Friedman see Swilling, 'Quixote at the Windmills: Another Conspiracy Thesis from Steven Friedman', 1992, pp.97-104

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁷⁰ K. Shubane, 'Civil Society in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa', 1992, p.38.

South African society is a moot point” because they are essentially, in his view, organisations of the liberation movement, but that the debate on ‘civil society’ has “come rather early” in South Africa⁷¹ – the role of a strong ‘civil society’, he argues, must be to ‘consolidate’ the transition to democracy. Shubane contends that what is required at this early stage of transition is to create a strong state through dismantling the liberation movement into political parties and by constructing a competitive and representative party process, thus freeing civics to become non-partisan. His analysis of the South African concept of ‘civil society’ is based on a rather suspect and circular perspective which seems to suggest that the flourishing of civics during apartheid cannot be seen as organisations of ‘civil society’ because ‘civil society’ is a sphere where individuals have access to political citizenship. Thus he argues, references to a South African ‘civil society’, like those in the African context, hold little theoretical or practical relevance; in order to have a ‘civil society’, Shubane argues, it must be created firstly through obtaining the franchise and gaining citizenship:

With the resolution of the colonial dynamic, however, civil society has not flourished in many former colonies. This has resulted from the approach of liberation movements which led their societies to freedom. On assuming the reins of power many set themselves up as the only legitimate party in government. Thus the idea of multiplicity in political representation was done away with. Civil society suffocated in an atmosphere in which plurality was not tolerated.

It is still possible, however, to build a robust civil society in countries undergoing a transition from a colonial past. This can be done in South Africa by dissolving the liberation movement whose historical role will have been fulfilled with the advent of a new political order. This should then allow for the formation of political parties ... it is under these circumstances of pluralism, which can contribute immensely to the emergence of civil society, is likely to be nurtured in a post apartheid future.⁷²

The political and theoretical implications of Shubane’s argument are enormous and potentially dangerous in my view⁷³, but while there is not the time or space to develop a critique it will suffice to say that we are left with an impression that Shubane’s analysis desires to promote the view (to capital and business) that the question of the role of the civics is inconsequential to the transition to a neo-liberal post-apartheid state. The more pressing problem facing democratic development in South Africa is the need to establish a multi-party system on which a democratic state can be built. ‘Civil society’, by implication of its continued relationship to the liberation movement, cannot perform this democratising function.

In contrast, Botha stands out for his realistic assessment of the South African civic movement. As a long time civic activist, Botha is very much aware of the implications the unbannings, ensuing talks about talks, and the resultant shift from the politics of protest to the politics of development, had

⁷¹ Ibid., p.35, 33.

⁷² Ibid., pp.40-1.

⁷³ For example, see ‘The Normative Agenda in Liberal Discourses: Between Strengthening and Commissioning Civil Society’ in chapter three on ‘civil society’ in African politics for a discussion of the normative implications of such views, particularly how Africanist analysis has unwittingly led to international attempts to reconfigure the class composition of African society through the direct intervention of NGOs and development agencies in this

for grassroots organisations, and in many ways helps to develop the theoretical and analytical content of 'civil society' in the civic argument presented in *Mayibuye* in 1990:

By virtue of being able to organise across the political spectrum, civic associations are in a good position to mediate the competing interests of organisations of civil society. In short, a civic association embodies competing interests of civil society while remaining free of state control and independent of political organisations. But it should be noted that civic associations are themselves a terrain of contest for political and ideological hegemony. It is for this reason this paper will argue that civic associations can only enjoy relative autonomy from political organisations.⁷⁴

Botha's perspective is refreshingly not state or political institution-centred as are some of the other contributions; he realistically weighs up the impact political change has had on the civics as a component of 'civil society' as a diverse, often conflicting, whole and argues that South Africa's transition led to a particular environment in which a formal civic and political dichotomy arose. This differentiation, however, did not lead to a weakening of the civics and 'civil society' under the dictates of hegemonic parties as Shubane, for example, argues, but to a heightened political sensitivity or consciousness of political identity in 'civil society':

For the civic associations, the events after February 1990 have opened up new frontiers of struggle. Not only are they required to fill the vacuum left by the collapsing local authorities, they are also expected to deal with transformational issues which will impact on constitutional changes nationally. Essentially this new role played by civic associations implies a redefinition of their identity in the transition period and, probably, in post-apartheid South Africa.

But the real challenge facing the civics and the rest of the democratic political movement ... in this whole process is to ensure that the benefits of the many years of struggle will, in significant ways, accrue to the majority of the oppressed and exploited masses.⁷⁵

This last point, that civics and the parties of the former liberation alliance must work to ensure the protection and empowerment of the masses in whose name they struggled for, is analytically and theoretically central to the development of the concept 'civil society' in South African political discourses, but one which has, in practice, been undermined in the East European and African contexts. Such a point illustrates the significance analytical usage of the concept comes to play in defining the normative goals of struggle during the transition period.

Importantly, Botha raises an important insight of which this thesis is an attempt to show: the emergence and development of 'civil society', both as a concept and as a perceived empirical reality, is not only driven by a range of interacting, often competing, local and international processes and dynamics, political events and theoretical developments, but that its reification as an autonomous and independent sphere has become a justification for its use by private interests seeking to promote their political agendas. As Botha argues, "the institutional interests of organisations of civil society become

sphere.

⁷⁴ T. Botha, 'Civic Associations as Autonomous Organs of Grassroots' Participation', 1992, pp.58-9.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.58.

transformed in the context of political discourse”.⁷⁶ This idea is central for it illustrates the processes involved in the emergence of the slogan ‘civil society’ within the civic movement, and how it is adopted and developed differently by different political discourses as an analytical concept in political debate. This cannot be better illustrated than by the analytical debate on ‘civil society’, which subsequently emerges as a critique of the above discourses among ‘hard-line’ left-wing activists.

With the exception of Swilling’s argument⁷⁷, the above debate was not published until May 1992, but their juxtaposition here is to illustrate the chronology of political discourses which emerged and were predominant in 1990/91. It is these discourses, driven by the content of the argument laid out in *Mayibuye*, to which activists on the socialist left responded. According to ANC Natal activists Nzimande and Sikhosana in their Marxist-Leninist response, ‘Civics are Part of the National Democratic Revolution’ published in *Mayibuye* in June 1991⁷⁸, civics should remain an integral part of the ANC-led national democratic revolution and should not be separated as an independent movement from the liberation movement and its struggle. This is argued on the dual premise that the reason for the civics popularity was due largely because “their political perspective was that of our movement”, and, therefore, if it is accepted that the ANC is contesting political power on the basis of addressing the material conditions of the masses “why then is there a need for civics that are separate from ANC mass structures?”.⁷⁹ While this argument contains more opinion than analysis, and is strategically intended to retain the ANC’s mass support base during the negotiation period, it provides the theoretical and practical context in which a heated analytical debate on ‘civil society’ emerges on the left.

In their argument, Nzimande and Sikhosana appear to collapse the civics into the ANC (almost as a vindication of the collapse of the UDF and its leaders’ assimilation into ANC party structures a few months before) on the weak claim that independent civics conflicted with the building of a democratic ANC, arguing the need for civics to give way to local ANC branches in order to build the ‘movement’. Explicit in this argument is the fear that civics would organise themselves as alternative power centres to the party, thus undermining the party’s claim to mass-support and representation and, therefore, undermining the legitimacy of the party’s negotiating power with the government. While an extreme argument, and one clearly driven by its authors’ striving for political gain, the political environment at the time may have at least contributed to this perspective. For example, throughout 1990 and the early part of 1991 unity in the struggle remained a central issue for the ANC/SACP alliance, particularly given the De Klerk administration’s attempt to smear the SACP

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.60.

⁷⁷ Swilling had also published ‘Political Transition, Development and the Role of Civil Society’ in 1990, and his ‘Socialism, Democracy and Civil Society: The Case for Associational Socialism’, appeared in the August/September issue of *Work in Progress* in 1991.

⁷⁸ Nzimande and Sikhosana, ‘Civics are Part of the National Democratic Revolution’, 1991. It is interesting to note that the editors of *Mayibuye* in which this article appeared, clearly distanced themselves from the opinion of the article’s authors suggesting that the ANC itself were not supportive of their perspective.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.38, 37.

and drive wedges into its alliance with the ANC⁸⁰, as well as the escalation of township violence at this time argued to have been driven by a ‘mysterious Third Force’.⁸¹ At the time of Nzimande and Sikhosana’s article the ANC had suspended talks about talks with the government and were also in the process of transforming the entire organisation from its local branches to the National Executive. As Nelson Mandela writes:

We faced not only logistical problems but philosophical ones. It is a relatively simple proposition to keep a movement together when you are fighting a common enemy. But creating a policy when that enemy is across the negotiating table is another matter altogether. In the new ANC, we had to integrate not only many different groups, but many different points of view. We needed to unite the organisation around the idea of negotiations.⁸²

In this pressurised context it is hardly surprising that ANC branch leaders would feel the need to assert and justify their representativeness and strength at the local level, and would take offence at the political and strategic implications of the civic claim to function as ‘watchdogs’ for democracy. Autonomous mass organisations, Nzimande and Sikhosana argued, may have been a crucial Eastern European lesson from which to model opposition movements upon, but in the South African context they were writing “the existence and rebuilding of mass organisations”, they argued, would become “an obstacle to the strengthening of the national liberation movement”.⁸³ What becomes clear from this argument is that civics were perceived as a threat to the very existence of ANC local branches on the premise that the ANC should be seen to constitute the legitimate and sole voice of the liberation movement and, therefore, of the masses. In fact, it was this symbolic myth of the “ANC as national liberation movement” which civic activists and leaders were attempting to unravel in asserting their own legacy in the movement, and, as I have seen above, which social democrats and liberals have found so politically disturbing.

As we have seen in the academic debate on ‘civil society’, the fact that the ANC/SACP continued to talk in terms of a ‘liberation movement’ was being hotly contested. The fact that the unbannings had procured the ANC and SACP’s positions as fully fledged political parties contesting political (and therefore state) power, meant that a line of demarcation, as Botha identified, had been drawn between political and mass society. This required an independent sphere in which the ANC and other political organisations would have to compete for support in society – rather than dictate the terms of their authority in the name of vanguardism. Civic activists and academic commentators were

⁸⁰ One facet of this attempt was government attempts to persuade the ANC to exclude known communists from its delegations in the ‘talks about talks’ at the Cape Town meeting of May 1990. Another facet was linked to the controversy over ‘Operation Vula’ in May 1990 which involved casting the SACP in the role of an anonymous, malign force manipulating the ANC for its own insurrectionary ends. Also in a statement in parliament in April 1991, Derrit Viljoen blamed the SACP for the ANC ultimatum of 5 April, in which the ANC threatened to suspend talks if the government did not take concrete steps to end the township violence by May 1991.

⁸¹ The issue of the Third Force came from a speech by Mandela in September 1990, in which he publicly expressed his suspicion of renegades in the security forces of attempting to disrupt negotiations through inciting township violence.

⁸² N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 1995, p.710.

⁸³ Nzimande and Sikhosana, op. cit., p.38.

in no doubt that this public sphere – where claims to authority and representation were legitimated – necessarily had to be free and open to public debate and scrutiny, as well as competing interests. The dominance of one particular interest, which tended to override all others in this sphere, in the eyes of the civics – itself a competing interest in this terrain – was simply opprobrious to the democracy for which they had fought alongside the ANC. However, Nzimande and Sikhosana were adamant that this social democratic shift endangered the strategic commitment not only to the democratic stage of revolution, but also towards socialism.

The last half of 1991 brought with it some significant political events which served to alter Nzimande and Sikhosana's theoretical and strategic perspective slightly, and therefore their analytical discussion of 'civil society'. The beginnings of frailty in the ANC/SACP alliance were beginning to show, and in July Mandela remarked in an interview that the ANC was beginning to distance itself from the SACP:

We will have to make a decision on these questions because organs of government can never be stable if there is instability economically. We have to be very careful about the economic programme. We have to indicate what we believe in. That would be dangerous at the moment because it would split us from top to bottom. [But] after apartheid is destroyed, the SACP ... will take their own line, which we will not follow. We won't follow socialism. We have got our own programme.⁸⁴

Furthermore, within the SACP Slovo's proposed ideological shift to political pluralism was vehemently criticised by members of the 'hard-left' in the party and who increasingly spoke of 'reformist capitulation'.⁸⁵ The coup attempt against Gorbachev and the suspension of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union in August 1991 brought internal ideological differences to a head in the SACP and questions about its future were being hotly debated - such as should it continue to exist as a separate entity in the ANC-led alliance or should it establish itself as an independent force. Thus, it was in this political context and less than three months after the beginning of CODESA and in the wake of the SACP's 8th Congress, in which congress delegates voted against Slovo's reformist, democratic socialist ideas in favour of orthodox Marxist-Leninism, Nzimande and Sikhosana return, seemingly revived, to their analysis of 'civil society'. This took the form of an open attack rather than a critical analysis of aspects of democratic socialism's conception of 'civil society'.

In an article published in *African Communist* at the beginning of 1992 Nzimande and Sikhosana argued that the democratic socialist strain within the left, and their "uncritical revival of civil society as the solution to establishing democratic regimes", was flawed⁸⁶. This critique of democratic socialists, though largely premised on a re-reading of Marx and Gramsci's writings on 'civil society', depended on the premise that the 'correct' approach to the question of building a socialist democracy in South Africa lay in a continued commitment to the two-stage thesis. Thus they

⁸⁴ Full text of the interview was published in *The Star*, 18 July 1991.

⁸⁵ See Devan Pillay, 'After 70 fighting years – can the SACP Change Track?', 1991, pp.1.8-9

⁸⁶ Nzimande and Sikhosana, 'Civil Society and Democracy', 1992, p.41

argued that it was 'absurd' to separate 'civil society' from the state and to seek to build socialism from below as 'watchdogs' of the state without capturing the state itself:

The net outcome of such an approach is in fact the opposite of what it claims to be fighting for – i.e. abandoning the terrain of the state to the whims of state bureaucrats and capitalist institutions. Thus an important issue is obscured: How can, what these 'democratic socialists' call 'organs of civil society', play a role both inside and outside the sphere of the state. In other words, for them, the state ceases to be an arena of contestation, but only requires pressure groups from outside it to act as a check against its inherently undemocratic and bureaucratic character. If the state is inherently unable to contribute to a process of democracy (whether it be national democratic or socialist one) we might as well forget about struggling for the capture or seizure of state power.⁸⁷

Although democratic socialism is well positioned in theoretical and political debates on the crisis of Eastern European and Soviet socialism, particularly because of its reformist liberal democratic agenda, its application to the analytical debate on 'civil society' is rejected by Nzimande and Sikhosana (and, one might add, within the majority of the party). The implication of their critique is that the context of South African political and social change, and the crisis of South African socialism, differs in fundamental ways to developments and problems in Western and Eastern Europe. The South African historical context throws up practical and theoretical problems and issues concerning a theory of 'civil society' which are perceived by these authors to be intrinsic and particular to South African socialist thinking and strategy. In rejecting democratic socialism they argue that socialism's theoretical and practical future lies in its Marxist-Leninist heritage, and the abandonment of socialist language and analytical concepts in favour of liberal notions of democracy is, according to their circular argument, the abandonment of socialism itself. Yet, in rejecting democratic socialist conceptions of 'civil society' as a narrow liberalism, Nzimande and Sikhosana conveniently replace the concept with 'organs of people's power', with an undeveloped argument that the term is rooted in the radical perspective of national democratic revolution and will thus serve to provide the socialist 'civil society' agenda with some revolutionary content.

The notion of 'organs of people's power' emerges from a critique of the ANC as liberation movement in which they reflect that "social movements do not necessarily aim at the fundamental transformation of society, but can be reformist ... organ's of people power on the other hand are organs that may or may not develop out of social movements. Organs of people's power are primarily about fundamental and revolutionary transformation of society. They are therefore about the transfer of power to the people and are directly concerned with the wielding of state power".⁸⁸ In redefining the concept 'civil society' in Gramscian terms, as 'organs of people's power', they aim to subject the building of democracy to the 'popular will', whom will counter any "bourgeois-democratic settlement that might be found within the ranks of the national liberation movement".⁸⁹ However, although this

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.48.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.51.

conception of 'organs of people's power' marks a shift from their earlier argument, it remains unclear how these organs can 'counter' any bourgeois settlement made by the ANC if, as Nzimande and Sikhosana contend, civics continue to be subsumed to the liberation movement.

On the one hand, Nzimande and Sikhosana would like civics to compliment the work of the liberation movement by building local ANC branches. On the other hand, they are not at all coherent about whom they perceive to be the vanguard of 'people's power'; they imply that certain elements of the ANC constitute a bourgeois class interest which no longer represents the interests of the 'people', and their 'hard-left' philosophical position within the SACP seems to present the party as the alternative vanguard of building socialism, but how do 'organs of people's power' come into the power equation if they are neither independent civic institutions nor fall into the theoretical category 'civil society'? One is led to question whether Nzimande and Sikhosana are simply constructing new analytical concepts to serve their revolutionary perspective. Their point that 'civil society' speaks in the language of liberalism and 'soft' democratic socialism is clearly made, but when radical concepts are not matched by a coherent theory they tend to reinforce the predominance of these liberal and social democratic discourses shaping the concept 'civil society'.

What emerges from Nzimande and Sikhosana's analysis of 'civil society' is that socialism and therefore the SACP should not betray its Marxist origins, but interpret the classics to find a guide. This guide is found in Gramsci's writing on 'civil society', enabling them to reject the democratic socialist discourse as 'bourgeois' and one which serves to deny the people's struggle for national democracy and socialism of its revolutionary content. In their pragmatic application of the relevant parts of Gramsci's thought to suit the political context of the time – i.e. the ANC's abandonment of socialism, and the ideological and strategic disputes between the 'soft' and 'hard-line' camps within the SACP – the replacement of 'civil society' with 'organs of people's power' is merely an analytical and theoretical play on words which enables Nzimande and Sikhosana to maintain, in theory only, the Marxist dialectical relation between the social and political spheres, the state and 'civil society'. In sum, therefore, their analysis of the concept 'civil society' raises three central points: firstly, it highlights the concept's historical and theoretical 'bourgeois' nature; secondly, that it is a divisive concept which, in its language of independence, autonomy and non-partisanship, works practically to sow divisions in the logic and organisation of the liberation movement; and thirdly, therefore, 'civil society' weakens, if not threatens, the drive to socialism. However, as Mayekiso asserts, the upshot of Nzimande and Sikhosana's analysis is no more than an attempt to debate the "radical pedigree of the notion of civil society".⁹⁰

The launch of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) in March 1992 provides the context in which a final analytical position in the debate on 'civil society' emerges on the left, and, by its very nature as a 'working class' civic critique of both 'soft' and 'hard-line' left

⁹⁰ M. Mayekiso, 'Institutions that Themselves Need to be Watched Over', 1993, p.28.

analyses, contributes to the range of normative perspectives already in place. According to Alexandra civic activist Mzwanele Mayekiso, in rebuttal to Nzimande and Sikhosana's conception of 'organs of people's power' as vanguard of socialism in South Africa, it is SANCO which is the "auspicious contribution to the struggle for a firm civil society that serves the working class".⁹¹ SANCO, as an independent, non-partisan national organisation of the civics is perceived by Mayekiso to be crystallisation and epitomy of 'civil society', at least, its working class component. By distinguishing between the "developed organs of civil society which serve the bourgeoisie" and "the organs of civil society ... civic associations, trade unions, the women's groups, youth groups, churches, burial societies, and other organisations, formal and informal, that represent the interests of poor and working people"⁹², Mayekiso argues that the non-partisan organisations of the former liberation movement, through SANCO *can* find an autonomous role in the South African transition through their civic and 'working class', rather than political, identity. However, that role remains unclear in his article because at this analytical stage in the debate Mayekiso, as are the other positions in the debate, is simply formulating the basis of a theoretical argument from an analysis of the concept 'civil society'.

Mayekiso's concept of 'working class civil society' is far less abstract and perhaps a little more tentative about constructing a theory of socialist revolution out of an analysis of 'civil society' than are his critics. In contrast to Nzimande and Sikhosana, Mayekiso's position is in favour of strengthening the 'organs of working class civil society', and, implicitly therefore, SANCO, to serve the original 'watchdog' function laid out in the 1990 *Mayibuye* article, but is given a 'socialist' twist. Under the tutelage of SANCO's commitment to local reconstruction and development⁹³ civics can provide for the empowerment of socialist thought and socialism in general: "organs of working class civil society", he argues, can "provide the raw material and energy from which to construct socialist building blocks"⁹⁴. Thus, he claims, an analysis of 'civil society' from a working class perspective is essential. As we have seen, so far the debate's analytical focus has either conceived of 'civil society' as some independent public sphere of free and voluntary association of competing interests, or, as a result of this discourse, 'civil society' has been criticised by the 'hard-left's' analysis as the site where bourgeois dominance and class hegemony is reproduced. Therefore, as Mayekiso points out, the working class *voice* itself has been absent not only from theoretical and analytical debate, but therefore the conceptual content and development of the term 'civil society' as it comes to play an important role in thinking and strategising about the politics of South Africa's reconstruction and development.

It is these civic formations, now headed by SANCO, which have arisen in the sphere of so-

⁹¹ M. Mayekiso, 'Hands Off the Civics and Civil Society', 1992, p.21.

⁹² M. Mayekiso, 'Working Class Civil Society', 1992, pp.33-4.

⁹³ see for example Moses Mayekiso 'Response to Blade Nzimande, 1992; and Sanco Policy Guidelines, July 1992.

called 'civil society' which are, as Mayekiso argues, a powerful resource for the working class and, therefore, socialism: "that is why many who advocate a strong working class civil society in South Africa, do so in the knowledge that this is a unique time and requires a unique approach to politics".⁹⁵ He thus injects 'civil society' with a class content on the premise that because the issue of black working class struggle has become marginalised by the political and strategic shifts among the parties of the former liberation movement, it therefore remains *the* dominant struggle in 'civil society' – the dominant struggle between society in its relation to the state: "precisely because civil society interrelates dialectically with class divisions at the level of economic production, and with the class state, it is itself a terrain of class contest and struggle".⁹⁶ This is illustrated, he notes, not only by the emergent bourgeois character of the ANC as it becomes the dominant negotiating voice of the liberation movement, but by the very nature of the analytical debate over the nature of 'civil society' in South African political discourses.

This class perspective also makes it possible for Mayekiso to formulate the basis of a theoretical position concerning the heated issue of the separation of the social and political, whether or not civics should resign themselves to civic issues and allow the ANC to take political leadership and responsibility. The issues and interests which effect the working class, he argues, are both social and political by the virtue of the poor and working class's material interests and needs. Thus the 'organs of working class civil society' are not only perceived as potentially non-partisan, but powerfully positioned as mass formations to be a progressive force for change during the transition. Furthermore, by implication, they are available as a non-partisan force for both 'watchdogging' and for actively engaging in reconstruction and development at the local level: "class struggle will continue into the post-apartheid era ... if the movement within the ANC towards meeting basic needs begins to fail, it is logical to expect that working class organs will continue to press for programmes that meet those needs".⁹⁷ This argument underlines the similar premise advocated by Nzimande and Sikhosana's argument for 'organs of people's power'; at root, the concept and idea of 'civil society' functions to provide an open arena in which alternative, critical or independent sources of opinion, ideology or perspective can compete for public authority, legitimacy and support. It is on the basis of this premise that Mayekiso is in agreement with Nzimande and Sikhosana's critique of democratic socialists, and why he, like them, chose to engage in the debate on 'civil society'. In his critique of democratic socialist Mark Swilling's analysis of 'civil society', Mayekiso's underlying premise is that the language and conceptual content of 'civil society' must, if the drive to socialist future in South Africa will ever occur, be rescued from 'soft' and 'reformist' discourses and predominated by the voice of the working class:

⁹⁴ 'Working Class Civil Society', p. 34.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38

... Where Swilling is at fault is in describing the movement to socialism in terms of reforming capitalism. This is a view of socialism as simply a set of activities that take place in a pluralistic society to make capital nicer. There is no analysis of the underlying tendencies of capitalism, and this flaw prevents Swilling from embracing socialism in all its richness.

As a result, Swilling's 'socialist principles' are little more than simple liberal reforms, fine in their own right, but by no means socialist in content. They do not aim to change the *relations of production*, but merely to accommodate a shift in power towards the progressive forces.⁹⁸

This strategising over the conceptual content of 'civil society' is essentially what the analytical debate on 'civil society' is all about. While the aim of the analytical process is to make the concept work for promoting one's particular agenda or interests, the aim and result of analytical debate is to engage critically in shaping the content and meaning of the concept *vis a vis* other competing interests and agendas, and, in the course of this 'battle of ideas,' to promote one's discourse as predominant. Thus at this stage of this thesis' argument, in view of the processes and dynamics which have brought the concept 'civil society' to bear analytically on the politics of South Africa's transition to democracy, we arrive at a central point: in debating the so-called strength of the sphere 'civil society' in South Africa for promoting democratic development and reconstruction it should be noted that it is the normative content of the concept itself, the practical relevance of the theory of 'civil society' to furthering a particular political agenda, which is at stake in this debate. Furthermore, because of what the concept is supposed to represent in reality – an imagination of the sphere of public life where opinion is formed, debated and reconfigured in relation to the dialectical interplay of socio-economic, political and other interests acting autonomously of the state – 'civil society's' conceptual content (whether formulated upon democratic socialist, Marxist-Leninist, 'working class' analyses, or a mixture of all) will inevitably shape the character of public life in South African society.

So what resulted from the analytical debate on 'civil society'? While three central analytical and theoretical positions on the left had clearly emerged to shape the concept in the South African context, what effects did they have on 'civil society's' continued use in South African political discourse, and consequently upon left-wing strategies for democracy and development? In Eastern Europe I have shown that the analytical debates on 'civil society' served as a theoretical and normative basis for legitimating the organisation of Polish society into a mass movement against the Soviet-type state, as well as providing the context for a theoretical shift within the Western left. In the African context, it was the analytical debates on 'civil society' which took place within Africanist academic circles which provided liberals and pro-democracy analysts and policy-makers, linked to Western governments and international aid agencies, with the theoretical and practical justification to prescribe and import Western models of socio-economic and political organisation into African societies. In both of these political contexts the concept 'civil society' has been brought to bear by different analytical discourses in different ways, with contrasting results. Whilst the East European

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.39.

usage of the concept was based on a demand to limit state power through a public sphere, in Africa this political ideal, although it formed the basic premise for reifying 'civil society' against the one-party state, has translated into the limiting of public power. Thus in the context of the political process in South Africa, how does 'civil society' develop from an analytical concept to become normatively significant, if not a blue-print, for the left's political strategy and political vision in the post-apartheid dispensation, and with what results?

In illustrating the dynamics and processes underlying 'civil society's' emergence as political slogan and analytical concept in South Africa it has been possible to show how these analytical discourses have promoted three distinct theoretical perspectives on the South African left – 'reformist' (social democracy and democratic socialism among academics and policy analysts), 'hard-left' (a Marxist-Leninist position among socialist party stalwarts Nzimande and Sikhosana), and 'working class' (the socialist-orientated civic position advocated by Mayekiso and SANCO). It is the content of these theoretical arguments on the strength and role of 'civil society' which have evolved in the course of debate, have translated themselves into normative conceptualisations of 'civil society' in the process, and served to provide prescriptions for South Africa's democratic development. In short, it is the social democratic and liberal analyses of 'civil society' which have tended to drive the development of democratic theory and practice in South Africa. These analyses of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the sphere of 'civil society' have promoted the view that whilst an autonomous and independent civil sphere is a good in itself, its existence, however, should not necessarily be seen as the sole instrument for democratic development in South Africa. The arena of the civics, and therefore 'civil society', is perceived to be limited in its capacity to perform the so-called democratic watchdog function argued by the *Mayibuye* article. Not only is the sphere thought to contain undemocratic features, but it is argued that the creation of an independent 'civil society' cannot occur until the 'liberation movement is disbanded, thus requiring the establishment of a political society and the normalisation of party politics. Thus in the context of the negotiation and transition process, despite their claims to non-partisanship and independence, it was suggested that civics, as a vehicle of public power, should be diverted to take up specifically non-political issues.

From the left perspective, in contrast, 'civil society' was debated, not necessarily with a view to addressing the issue of the role of civics during the transition period, but on the basis that the concept and the public sphere it represented could be developed as a theoretical and practical vehicle for the transition to socialism. However, while analytical debate of the concept opened up new theoretical approaches – Nzimande and Sikhosana's 'organs of people's power' and Mayekiso's 'working class civil society' - the central problem with these left theories of 'civil society', particularly with Nzimande and Sikhosana's, has been translating them into practical politics. In answer to Mayekiso's call for a shift from theoretical to practical debate, Nzimande and Sikhosana have been silent. It would seem that their analytical use of 'civil society' served the function merely to debate the ideological position of the left, providing no coherent theory of how 'civil society' could

be used to construct the left's vision of building socialism.

Thus, the 'hard-left' perspective and, in particular, their Marxist-Leninist discourse disappears not only from the 'civil society' debate but, therefore, from published left-wing and SACP strategic discourses. In May 1992, the same month that negotiations, after a four-month interruption, were reconvened, the academic liberal and social democratic debate was published in *Theoria*. The political context of CODESA 2 provided those 'civil society' discourses with renewed currency, in public discourse and particularly in academic and analytical debate on issues of democratic transition, citizenship, rights theory, social movements and political change, governance, etc.. However, it is Mayekiso's 'progressive' theoretical perspective on 'working class civil society' which is adopted by the SACP as the strategic vision of the left-wing. This is largely because it balances not only with the party's shift to democratic socialism in which the language of 'empowerment' and 'capacity building' becomes predominant in their critique of the ANC's neo-liberalism, but because of their need for a practical political agenda and platform. In stressing that socialism is promoted at the grass roots with empowerment, consciousness-raising, and meeting basic needs of the townships by a 'working class movement' instead of a vanguard Party, Mayekiso's theory of 'working class civil society' becomes the left's political vehicle through which it aimed to develop and promote a socialist programme.

According to Mayekiso, such a working class movement represents and provides services, skills and training in order to meet needs and unmet interests and initiating progress: "Community-based development institutions, and experiments in worker-management and ownership, are the building blocks of a new mode of production, similar in their function to the petty bourgeois enterprises of the eighteenth century which arose from the decay of feudalism, to challenge and transform social relations".⁹⁹ Mayekiso's point concerning the civic's provision of basic needs was seen as key to the socialist agenda. Although Mayekiso's theory does not provide answers to whether a relatively economically empowered community will provide the building blocks for a socialist revolution in the long term, in normative and prescriptive terms, as the SACP recognised, it provides an important and relevant strategic in-road for the left to engage in the politics of empowerment and economic justice in the short term. As with the other left-wing positions in debate, Mayekiso's theory reinforces the notion that a strong 'civil society' is a socialist priority in the post-apartheid order, not only to promote democracy, but a philosophical and strategic basis on which an agenda for South African socialism can be built.

The South African Left's Search for Hegemony: Prescribing 'Civil Society' as a Post-Apartheid Strategy

Almost a year after Mayekiso's theory of 'working class civil society' was published in the *African Communist*, he returned to South Africa after a period of community economic development training

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 40

in the United States to find that there had been little theoretical or practical development in the debate on the role of 'civil society'. In an articulate review of the recent literature on the civic and 'civil society' debate in *Urban Forum* (1993), Mayekiso wondered aloud why few academics and activists on the left were prepared to revisit the debate as socialists:

But of all the writers, none at all contested (or considered) the idea I mooted earlier in 1992: that civics grounded in an ideology of working-class civil society can help build a strong socialist movement through experimenting with new relations of production in the future, and by concretely challenging the modalities of capitalism in the present.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, he argued, though largely suspecting that his argument had been misinterpreted, the 'civil society' debate had yet again produced more heat than light, more of a semantic debate on the degree to which the Marxist classics theoretically supported developments in the South African context and the political position and theoretical perspective of the left in that environment. All of this theoretical debate, it appeared, had achieved little practical or strategic development.

There were those who were eager to comment upon this intractable situation of the relation between theory and practice. For example, according to British Marxist Robert Fine writing in *Review of African Political Economy* in 1992, the practical flimsiness of a theory of 'civil society' to the left was due to the fact that it had no purchase on the unfolding reality of the transition process: "just as neo-Marxism emerged [in South Africa] in the 1970s at the close of the period of its practical truth, civil society theory also emerged in the 1990s after the event"¹⁰¹. In his view, and a point agreed upon by academic Daryl Glaser¹⁰², the left's reliance on the theory of 'civil society' neglected the role of the political party in the transition process to democracy in South Africa. While much of the literature on South African 'civil society' does indeed tend to imply the need for a separation of the political and civic spheres, defined in practical terms of the disbanding of the liberation movement, Fine's argument seems to miss the whole point of the debate. As this thesis has aimed to illustrate such a perspective tends to misunderstand the nature of the processes, dynamics and discourses which shaped the contours of the concept's usage in the South African context.

In his mission to contribute to academic attempts to critique the obvious theoretical immobility of the South African left, Fine's argument contends that as an imported concept 'civil society' was brought uncritically to bear on the politics of South Africa's transition on the basis of its credibility of "its political role in the overthrow of the former communist regimes and its ideational role in defining a radical alternative to totalitarianism".¹⁰³ In fact, it is he who blindly (but rather selectively) transfers 'civil society' as it has been conceptualised in the Eastern European context onto the South African political reality without noting the specific ways in which the concept has been adopted and adapted by the discourses of political debate. Thus, he feels justified in suggesting that

¹⁰⁰ M. Mayekiso, 'Institutions That Themselves Need to be Watched Over', 1993, p.38.

¹⁰¹ R. Fine, 'Civil Society Theory and the Politics of Transition in South Africa', 1992, p.80.

¹⁰² D. Glaser, 'The Limits of Civil Society in South Africa', 1997.

the concept does not 'fit' the South African context. Indeed, he bases his whole analysis on a misunderstanding: "To understand what lies behind the self-preservation of civil society theory in South Africa", he suggests, "it will be useful to locate its origins in a wider political context. It should be read as an attempt to build a 'third road' distinct from the two paradigms which have dominated South African opposition politics in the post-war era".¹⁰⁴ Although the concept has been imported to the South African context, largely through Western left discourses as his own, nowhere in the literature on 'civil society' written by South African activists or academics is there mention of the idea of 'civil society' being conceived of, or even construed, as a philosophical 'third road' within the South African left. The "difficult relation between the theory and its realisation", as lamented by Mayekiso (and others) in 1993 was not necessarily due to the theory's negation of party politics, or, as Glaser would have it, from making it "do too much"¹⁰⁵, but as I have shown, because of political and ideological differences and struggles over constructing the discursive and conceptual content of the term. This important point was illustrated by Mayekiso. The left, he argued, in doggedly debating ideology were flogging a dead horse, there needed to be a shift in debate. The shift Mayekiso clearly had in mind was acceptance of the basic premise contained in the logic of his article 'Working Class Civil Society', which had implicitly laid out the basic principles for a socialist agenda.

In his theory of 'working class civil society', Mayekiso had stipulated that the socialist movement could gain an in-road into South African political processes through advancing the non-profit, collective development principles and community controlled organisations being developed by the civic movement. In this process, not only would the socialist left contribute to the building of the working class movement around basic needs, but that there was a practical need for a coherent critique of the capital and state-led development programmes being imposed on these South African communities. In essence, Mayekiso was maintaining that the sphere of 'civil society', at least the working class component of it he had identified in theory, was an ideal terrain in which the left could engage in South African politics and build the socialist movement.

In other words, it is time for a new direction in the debate to examine the unfolding democratic processes, with the actual involvement of the working class representatives, on the shop-floor and in the community. Not just in theory, but in practice. Are we ready to go in this direction, comrades?¹⁰⁶

However, quite possibly due to Nzimande and Sikhosana's cutting attacks upon Mayekiso's 'Marxist respectability' in the debate on 'civil society' and the concepts' 'revolutionary pedigree', the predominance of the 'hard-left' line within the party meant that the SACP were still tactically hesitant to adopt a coherent agenda around the theory of 'civil society', or for that matter, around any issue, and even by mid-late 1993, the SACP were still divided ideologically, politically and strategically.

¹⁰³ Fine, *op.cit.*, p.71.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.73.

¹⁰⁵ D. Glaser, *op.cit.*, 199, p.5.

In the wake of the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' it had at least conducted a thorough self-criticism, opening itself to external criticism, elected a popular leadership in Joe Slovo, Chris Hani, and Jeremy Cronin, had founded additional branches, and was successfully recruiting members, but, as Colin Bundy noted June 1993 the left's continued theoretical immobility left it in a position in which it resembled the 'rearguard'.¹⁰⁷ Largely due to the dynamics of the anti-apartheid environment in which mass protest and insurrectionary activism had given way to negotiation, compromise and visions of an interim government, as well as the international hegemony of neo-liberalism, the SACP continued to promote its commitment to the national democratic revolution in line with its Congress decision to play an independent role within the liberation alliance. In the words of Bundy, this represented a programme of capitulation rather than contestation: "South African socialists must guard against the tendency to postpone or shelve the battle for socialist ideas on the grounds that national liberation necessarily unlocks an automatic gateway to socialism. This poses a special challenge to SACP members. Party orthodoxy, at its most complacent, still tends to assume that the butterfly of socialism will emerge naturally from the cocoon of national democracy".¹⁰⁸ Instead of vague references to the 'need to reshape the orientation of the economy' and 'deepening the process of democratisation', many on the left, critical and frustrated by the SACP's capitulation, argued the need for the party to forge a working class identity, programme, practice and policy. As Bundy argued, the SACP needed to build on its recent theoretical discussion of 'civil society' and, adopting the language of Gramscian strategy now familiar to the discourses of the left, "engage in a war of position in the trenches of civil society".¹⁰⁹ Quite simply, this programme of action seemed the only option available to the party. As Mayekiso put it, "the main question we should be debating is how SACP leadership and activists will take up a clear, independent programme that coincides with the programmes and campaigns of the progressive organs of civil society".¹¹⁰

Three key discursive and strategic developments facilitated this shift. As Mayekiso argues, 1993 "was a year notable for the realism that began to seep into all sorts of real-life political discussions and arguments"¹¹¹. Firstly, the long running debate within the civic movement over its role in the transition process and beyond, as indicated in perspective of Mayekiso's 'working class civil society', was beginning to head in the practical direction of development. While the civics continued to play a central role in organising mass protest, stayaways, rent and consumer boycotts in the fight against apartheid structures (and during the collapse of CODESA in May 1992), a degree of convergence emerged on the issue that the politics of development were inextricably tied to the politics of protest. It has always been the case that some degree of expertise on development-related

¹⁰⁶ M. Mayekiso, 'Heat, Light and Civil Society', 1993, p.76.

¹⁰⁷ C. Bundy, 'Theory of a Special Type', see insert 'The Future of the Left: Realism or Defeatism?', 1992, p.17

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73.

¹¹¹ M. Mayekiso, 'Institutions That Themselves Need to be Watched Over', 1993, p.21.

issues was always within local community and civic organisations. It was, for example, the local civic's diagnosis of the fiscal non-viability of the Black Local Authorities which largely explained their protest against them; civics also acquired a working understanding of technical issues in housing as a result of their negotiating around rental and servicing fees; they also developed an understanding of the economics of transport through their engagement in bus boycotts¹¹². It has, therefore, been not so much a matter of local community organisations needing to change their interests and expertise. Rather, as it was argued, what has been required is a change in the way they needed to mix protest strategies with a knowledge of new aspects of the development and political processes. Under the leadership of SANCO this approach to 'empowerment' had gradually began to unfold through the development of organisational, service and skills training and education programmes for civic leaders and communities in order for local organisations to engage critically in the development process. "It is this type of knowledge", according to SANCO, "combined with protest expertise, that is part of the newly required mix for effective local community organisations".¹¹³

These practical developments on the ground raised the profile and literature on the relationship between development issues and the idea of 'civil society' (particularly African literature) considerably, and, alongside other analytical perspectives on development, social movements and democratic transition, was matched by a shift in academic social democratic and democratic socialist discourses. While the analytical and normative debate on the strength and role of 'civil society' for building democracy continued unabated in journals and workshops (largely because it was the conception of the 'type' of democracy which was at issue), there was a concerted effort among some academics of the left to revisit the issue of the role of 'civil society' from the angle of development and its key role in 'transforming' South Africa. As Iris Young contends:

... attention by leftists to the virtues of civil society has diverted us from seeing its limits, and thinking through in a new way for our times how movements can be developed that press for selective planning and public investment policies aimed at directly creating jobs, or providing goods and services directly, as well as wresting some economic power from the hands of private capital. I worry that a focus on democratisation may be diverting progressives today from an equally important commitment to economic equality and social justice.¹¹⁴

This was a key illustration of the theoretical shifts taking place within much of the academic left, not just in South Africa, but also in the West. Particularly in the context of the African continent, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the dual issues of democracy and development have become synonymous with the analytical and normative capacity of the concept 'civil society' across the political spectrum. However, in South Africa throughout 1993, while the issue of building democracy was largely being decided within an agreement for a government of national unity, the setting of an

¹¹² See M. Mayekiso, *Township Politics: Civic Struggles for a New South Africa*, 1996.

¹¹³ SANCO, *Democracy and Development Supplement*, 1994, pp.74-5. See also *Reconstruct, the Work in Progress/New Era Supplement*, issues 4-9, 1993.

¹¹⁴ I. Young, 'Civil Society and Social Change', 1994, p.94.

election date for 27 April 1994, and the drafting of an interim constitution which provided for multipartyism and proportional representation, there was a marked shift within the 'civil society' debates from issues of democracy to development. Economic stagnation, such as high unemployment, declining GDP growth rates, declining capital investment among other economic woes of the time, was seen as the crucial issue by many. In sum, this context reflected positively upon the role and function of organisations in 'civil society' in their relation to a state with limited resources. Almost in correspondence with the work being carried out by civics on the ground, it was generally recognised that non-state agencies would play a vital role in development projects given the limited resources of the state, and in light of the failures of state-led development projects in other countries such as in Africa and Latin America for example.

The fact that party-aligned projects had led to severe ruptures within communities,¹¹⁵ a role for independent organisations of 'civil society' was, therefore, seen as important by many commentators. For analysts such as Narsoo¹¹⁶, this issue begged a central question – what role can these organisations play if both the effectiveness of development and the growth of democracy was to be maximised? The fact that development was a hotly contested political issue meant that civics and organisations in this sphere would be set up against one another in competition for scarce resources; or would create an environment in which development resources would be seen as a political weapon to be controlled rather than shared.

... the idea that civil society is a terrain of contest between interests, some of whom are conservative implies that simply handing development over to 'civil society' will not necessarily empower social movements ... An adequate left view of civil society's role in development would, therefore, have to take into account the existence of these interests and suggest a response to them.¹¹⁷

In response to this possible scenario some liberal commentators have suggested the need 'tolerance', even requiring civics to learn "an entirely new mind-set"¹¹⁸ From Shubane's liberal perspective, the concept spoke in normative terms of 'civility', acceptance of pluralism, rights, democracy and citizenship, and thus civics needed, in the words of Alex Boraine to develop an 'educated and active base', a 'democratic political culture', and respect for civil and human rights, and citizenship.¹¹⁹ On

¹¹⁵ The attempt by the ANC and its allies to convince the government to upgrade hostels was stymied for a long while by Inkatha adherents who saw it as a political ploy to dismantle IFP strongholds, and this led to a great deal of conflict in various communities. Similarly, an attempt by IFP hostel-dwellers in Alexandra to stage a clean up operation was seen by residents as an incursion by Inkatha and led to clashes. See Mayekiso, *Township Politics*, 1996; M. Narsoo, 'Doing What Comes Naturally', 1993.

¹¹⁶ N. Narsoo, 'Doing What Comes Naturally', 1993.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹¹⁸ K. Shubane, 'Civics as a Building Ground for a Democratic Civil Society', 1993, p.36.

¹¹⁹ A. Boraine, 'Democracy and Civil Society', 1993, pp.38-9. It would seem that both Boraine and have in mind here the replacement, if not the changing, of the language of the civics toward the acceptance of liberal or social democratic discourses, empowering civics to contribute to the building of a democratic culture and to facilitate the building of democracy. The point is that both of these authors imply that the 'democratic culture' and 'model of democracy' to be upheld and fought for by 'civil society' is liberal or social democratic. While these two positions are rather extreme in their implications, the message from the centre-left is that the normative content of

the other hand, as Geoff Schreiner's analysis indicated there was an emerging convergence of views amongst those most closely associated with the development process and their growing support, at least during the transition process, for the development of a series of national (and regional), issue-based negotiating forums such as the National Economic Forum (NEF) for example. Yet, it was argued, because of the predominance of business and labour organisations, and the financial and technical weaknesses of the civics in comparison, it was unclear whether civics had the political and negotiating clout to meet the challenges of contributing to the development process in a substantial way. The point was that 'civil society' could not go it alone. In sum, these left-wing academic normative theories of 'civil society' illustrated that a 'window of opportunity' existed in which the left could actively engage itself to restructure the process of policy formation and execution in the development context.

Another key development which facilitated the shift to embracing, what was termed, a 'progressive' theory of 'civil society' and the support for the development programme of the civics as a strategy for the left was an emerging consensus between socialist-identified alliance members on the issues of economic 'development', 'transformation' and 'reconstruction'.¹²⁰ This consensus was based on the widespread endorsement of John Saul's 'structural reform', but renamed by Eddie Webster and Karl Von Holdt as 'radical reform'. Alongside COSATU's commitment to 'Growth through Redistribution', 'radical reform' spoke of a "labour-driven reconstruction of the South African economy", based on powerful worker organisation and on the role of unions in the corporatist structures of economic negotiation. In debating the issues of economic policy many on the left pushed for an even broader definition of working class involvement in development and reconstruction, to enable greater mass empowerment:

Any advance towards socialism will require that major sectors of the working class – because of their lived experience – are consciously hostile to capitalism and do not believe that their interests can be met within existing social relations. It requires also that there is an intelligentsia that supports working class aspirations. And it requires a political vehicle through which intellectuals can reach workers and through which workers can reach intellectuals¹²¹

In reviewing these three left-wing approaches to the issue of development which took shape throughout 1993– civic, academic and SACP – it is within the theoretical sphere of 'civil society', largely due to the normative content the concept had acquired in these debates, that the left found a not only a political programme – development and reconstruction - but also a political vehicle – 'civil

the concept 'civil society', within these discourses, has come to rest well within the neo-liberal camp. What emerges, however, from these discourses is, in similar ways to the normative use of 'civil society' in the African context, that a normative liberal or social democratic model of 'civil society' – as a desired vision of the social order - has already been constructed. What the normative debate requires is 'fitting' the South African social reality to that model. If, in the perspective of the author, the social reality is at odds with the theory of 'civil society' it is society or relations in society which have to change or adapt to fit neatly into this model.

¹²⁰ See for example P. Bond, 'Towards Grassroots Socialism: Politics in South Africa Today', 1992.

¹²¹ C. Bundy, 1992, p.19.

society' – through which the left aimed to advance a political strategy and identity for itself.

The fact that the GNUs adoption of a COSATU initiated Reconstruction and Development Programme in 1994 accorded a considerable role for 'civil society', alongside government, trade unions and business, in the formation of economic policy, was heralded as a breakthrough for left discourses and political strategy. According to Patrick Bond, the RDP and 'civil society' became the complimentary sites of socialist struggle: "the stress here is building a left project not only from the standpoint of organised labour, but from the base of the more advanced social and community movements". This strategy, he noted, corresponded with a range of other arguments advanced in the name of socialism – the 'progressive' civic movement and even Trotskyist ideologues¹²² – thus, apparently, justifying the SACPs endorsement of it. Thus it was through the discursive and political debates over the conceptual content of 'civil society' that afforded the left with the idea that it is within the theoretical sphere of 'civil society', rather than the state, that radical change, as well as socialist democracy, could potentially be initiated. Across the political spectrum of the left, it was argued that a vigorous 'civil society', empowered by its own participatory and radical legacy, is ideally positioned to make a central contribution in defining and determining the outcome of South Africa's new struggles. Many on the left have even concluded, following Gramsci, that if socialism is to achieve its project of extending democracy to the most oppressed in society a way needs to be found whereby its principles are given credence and support by a powerful segment of society. In South Africa the public sphere, thus slowly emerged as the new site of the ideological struggle between different conceptions of capitalist democracy and socialist democracy, in which the 'fate' of both are being posited upon its "perceived transformative potential".¹²³

Towards a Conclusion

An exploration of the South African 'civil society' debate illustrates more the practical significance the left has invested in the concept 'civil society' for retaining legitimacy and strategy as a relevant political alternative to the ANC's neo-liberalism. In South Africa, the left does not have one coherent vision of that alternative but many. This, at least, was due to the ambiguous character of South Africa's emerging political order and balance of power which emerges from an ANC government; and the notion that the left's reflective and self-critical turn which was set in motion in 1989 has, in a sense, found socialism adapting and reacting to historical and theoretical developments and

¹²² In Neville Alexander's 1994 book *Some are More Equal than Others*, he writes: "Even though we have no reason to be sanguine and simplistic about the contested terrain of 'civil society', the existence of which in no way can guarantee a successful process of democratisation, it seems to me that it is in this sphere that we need to concentrate our efforts. In the end, only the independence of these mass formations – their financial independence, their commitment to non-sectarian practices and to the principles of participatory democracy – will carry us over the period of potential erosion of the gains that were made in the seventies and the eighties". p.92.

¹²³ Quoted from Maxine Reitzes, 'Civil society, the Public Sphere and the State: Reflections on Classical and Contemporary Discourses', 1994, p. 105

progressive change rather than initiating it. This thesis suggests that an analysis of the theories of 'civil society' developed in South African political thought are interpretations of and reactions to the emerging political context in South Africa, but they are also framed by political and theoretical developments outside its geopolitical borders. Thus understanding the processes of 'civil society's' emergence in South African political debates requires a critical understanding of its conceptual and theoretical development and use in these contexts.

What the chapters on 'civil society' in Eastern Europe and Africa have attempted to illustrate is how the concept has been adopted and propagated by a range of different political interests in order to justify and legitimate their political agendas. Used as a slogan, analytical and normative concept, 'civil society' has come to incorporate a range of meanings and a style of politics which does not necessarily serve those in whose name its emergence is presumed to represent. At root, the concept 'civil society' has broadly come to represent, through its conceptual development in different political contexts and struggles, everything that is not the state or the individual, depending on one's political perspective. Such a conceptualisation has essentially led to its abuse by social groups, political parties, private interests, even international governments seeking to promote their normative agendas on these societies, on the premise that harnessing public power, rather than state power, can be a force for political change. The Solidarity movement in Poland has become a model of this process to be emulated in other countries of the world. Thus in Africa, alongside political and economic liberalisation, 'civil society' has become a key policy agenda for Western governments seeking to combat the crisis-ridden one-party state through direct intervention in and management of the structural and cultural configuration of these societies. In the process, what is perceived to be the sphere of an empirical 'civil society' in Africa has come to represent a transnational phenomenon headed by international aid and development agencies, NGOs, human rights and pro-democracy groups, funded by private and corporate financial institutions, and which largely serve to undermine the power of African populations to command the direction of change in their societies.

In South Africa these political trends and processes, as they pertain to the politics of South Africa's transition from apartheid, have been the source of intense debate, particularly on the left. In their attempt to promote the transition to socialism, the left have also attempted to harness the legacy and power of the public sphere for its own political purpose. However, the broad theoretical problem, particularly for the South African left, which arises from the debate is whether or not 'civil society' can promote radical change in a socially and economically unequal society, and in a political system geared increasingly towards liberal democracy which accepts and allows its diversity of interests, but seeks to control it through less overtly coercive means such as through the competitive market system, corporatism, and interest group politics. The South African debate on 'civil society' does represent a crisis in political thought, especially if there lacks both a coherent critique of ANC government and a vision of an alternative reality. Part of the problem lies in the left's conceptualisation of 'civil society' as the site of a new struggle for hegemony and social change, one which relies more upon

moral pressure for democracy, equality and justice than a relevant theoretical analysis of structural relations of power and the processes that reproduce them. As Iris Young suggests,

it is a mistake to equate radical politics with democracy, as many on the left are now doing in this age when socialism is discredited. Increasing democracy in civic associations or corporations is a good in itself, because it enhances participation and self-determination, but it does little to address problems of structural economic inequality and domination. Democratising state decision making and policy implementation processes might address these structural issues to a greater degree, but only insofar as such democratisation extends to control over resources and the regulation of private economic activity.¹²⁴

The central problem is that debates on 'civil society' in South African politics have not appeared within a vacuum, and while it is currently fashionable to invoke 'civil society' as a panacea for democracy and development, as well as for re-orientating a discredited left-wing political theory towards political practice, it should be understood that the re-emergence of the concept was, originally, a Cold War phenomenon. While the South African transition was, in part, also conditioned by Cold War sentiments, it should not be uncritically assumed that a concept strategically employed in liberal and social democratic discourses in the former Soviet bloc for the purpose of engendering Western political support does not carry with it into different geopolitical contexts an ideologically determined conceptual baggage. As the chapter on 'civil society's' reification in the African context illustrates, the concept may only serve to reproduce existing power relations, much to the detriment of the continent and its peoples. 'Civil society' has a historical usage that spans over 300 years, one which is synonymous with the historical development of Western capitalist democracies, and one which, in retrospect, will be shown to have extended, through dominant languages and political discourses, across continents and cultures, even political ideologies. Thus its revival and 'universal' currency of usage in the contemporary should alert us to the processes by which that history is unfolding and bring alternative contextually relative conceptual idioms to bear on the process of change.

¹²⁴ I. Young, 'Civil Society and Social Change', 1994, pp. 92-93

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