
MEMORANDUM

TO: LILY TSAI
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Most of the literature on civil society focuses on a very particular, narrow definition of what civil society is and should do. Maybe due to both normative and measurability issues, most researchers have limited their operationalization of civil society to formal organizations and associations (particularly NGOs) and, in some cases, have even limited it to organizations that are aimed at pursuing goals that the authors deem as “good” (Diamond, Anheier, etc.). Focusing only on formal organizations, however, greatly limits the discussion and understanding of the process of formation and development of civil society. Organizations, especially those related to civil society and civic representation, very rarely emerge with an established, formal structure and more commonly develop out of small, informal, poorly organized groups. To only look at established, formal NGOs –or even worse, at a specific subset of NGOs according to their goals—to explain the role and workings of civil society is, to a certain extent, a type of sampling on the dependent variable that leads to tautological, naïve, and hollow explanations (I look at good outcomes caused by civil society and focus only on a particular subset of organizations that were involved in those outcomes and that fit my criteria of good organizations and therefore I conclude that civil society is good) that, more importantly, fall short of explaining the political process that led to the formation and development of civil society.

Civil society can certainly accomplish great things. To stop (or in some cases at least to limit) military repression in Latin America (Brysk, Khagram et al.), to provide basic services and resources to excluded groups (Onstrom, Miguel, Narayan), to achieve political representation and acknowledgement of the “untouchables” in India in the 1930s (Gandhi) or of women in the US in the beginning of the 1900s (Clemens, Sockpol) are not small feats and can certainly be viewed as good outcomes. Civil society can also, however, lead to radicalization

and increased conflict (Varshney), marginalization and reduced mobility (Portes), and to a reversal of democracy –as is the case in Venezuela today. As most of the accounts we read this week show, the characteristics of civic groups, the roles and functions they play, and the importance and power they achieve can only be explained by looking at the political, social and organizational processes through which they developed and the institutional context that created the need and opportunity for their existence. Clemens’ and Sockpol’s accounts of the development and rise of women clubs and associations in the US show how an institutional “hole” resulted in the disenfranchisement of women in society, which created a great need for their representation but also created a great opportunity. It is in the detailed account of the process through which small informal clubs and groups slowly garnered political power and, through organizational innovation and constant boundary testing, gained increasing momentum that eventually led to a thorough institutional transformation in the US that we see the role of different political actors –including the state—in shaping civil society and the types of outcomes it generates. The institutional vacuum, together with the ingenious framing of issues to gain and retain legitimacy while not directly challenging the status quo created an opportunity that was slowly and gradually captured by political groups. A similar pattern can be seen in Weller’s account of small groups in Taiwan and China and Schreffer’s description of the rise of the Sierra Club in the US. In both cases, an institutional vacuum led to the creation of a series of representation groups that were leveraged by the state to achieve certain goals and in that process gave these groups legitimacy, leverage and increased power. The process is inherently political and it entails constant boundary testing and pushing together with careful and creative framing of issues to gain legitimacy and political power.

Given that there is nothing inherent in the process that guarantees that the groups that amass political power through these mechanisms will use it for good purposes, it is important to both recognize that this is true and to understand how the process works in order to better predict (and prevent) possible negative outcomes resulting from the civil society phenomenon. The informal economy in Mexico, for one, is a perfect example of how an institutional vacuum has generated the need for civic organization but has also generated large opportunities for political entrepreneurs. The State has, up to now, leveraged

the small, relatively informal groups that organized in the different informal sectors to retain governability and social peace but also has, in the process, granted legitimacy and increased political power to these groups. Today, they are in the process of becoming increasingly institutionalized and are constantly testing and pushing the state boundaries, while creatively framing the issues in the same manner that initially granted them legitimacy, to continue garnering power and increase their span of action. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the informal economy is no longer just a social and political buffer for unemployment and economic adjustments and is increasingly becoming a challenge to the formal productive sector and the legitimacy of the state. If this process is not detected and handled it could potentially challenge state institutions, further weakening them and eventually transforming them. As we have seen, there is no guarantee that this transformation is for the good.

PREPARED BY RODRIGO CANALES.