

COMMENTARY

Conceptual and Methodological Suggestions for Improving Cross- National Measures of Civil Society: Commentary on Heinrich

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Introduction

Volkhart Finn Heinrich has provided an important contribution to the comparative study of civil society, both by writing his conceptually lucid article and by developing the very promising Civil Society Index (CSI) for Civicus. In the article, he makes a strong methodological case for more transparent, cumulative, and multi-faceted measurements of comparative civil society than have been created to date. I strongly endorse this aim, and I share his hope—and conviction—that civil society is not a dying concept.

Nonetheless, with the goal of contributing to a fruitful exchange that may lead to better and broader measures of civil society, I would like to raise two main points for discussion: the first is conceptual, while the second is methodological.

Conceptualization: Can Civil Society be Applied Universally?

An important, though often implicit, question runs throughout Heinrich's article: Does (or can) civil society exist in non-democratic and/or non-Western countries? One can imagine a variety of answers to this question, spanning from a very narrow to a quite broad conceptualization of civil society. A narrow view will posit that civil society derives from the particular theoretical tradition and practical historical experience of the West. According to this position, civil society refers specifically to the kinds of voluntary organizations that emerged from the American and West European models, and in

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some sense, civil society can only exist in societies with that historical background. In other words, even if this gives the concept an ethnocentric bias, civil society is viewed as an inherently Western concept that arose out of a distinct historical experience.

In contrast, a broad view of civil society—of the type that is generally stressed by anthropologists—argues that the conceptualization and measurement of civil society should be expanded from its narrow focus on voluntary organizations in democracies, so that it treats all forms of social organization and practices as different manifestations of the same general phenomenon, civil society. According to this view, each country has its own civil society, and any cross-national variation is in the form that civil society takes, but not in its level or strength.

Heinrich clearly favors the broader view, agreeing with ‘the bulk of empirical studies’ that ‘regard the civil society concept as embodying a universal notion of collective voluntary action and therefore advocate using it as a heuristic device, devoid of any ideological or socio-historical baggage’. Later in the article, he adds that the CSI’s definition is ‘applicable in widely different contexts’, and indeed the Civicus Project is being applied in about 50 countries from all parts of the globe.

My own approach to civil society is closer to the middle. Unlike the broad view, I do not treat civil society as a universal concept that exists everywhere, just under different guises. I do not think that the original definition and empirical manifestations of civil society should be diluted and stretched in order to fit contexts that are vastly different. Moreover, I fear that doing so may result in the mischaracterization of some of the most interesting and unique forms of political and social action in some countries, by forcing them into the ‘civil society’ label.

At the same time, however, unlike the narrow view, I do not think that the applicable empirical terrain should be restricted to countries that are culturally or historically ‘Western’. For there is an actual substantive and practical basis for the study of civil society—even while still viewing it as a specifically Western concept—in non-Western countries, since many of them have attempted over the past few decades to Westernize and democratize. And it is therefore especially important to be able to measure their status and progress according to that common yardstick.

From this perspective, I argue instead that *regime type* is the crucial distinction, and I claim that what one might call ‘classical’ civil society can only really exist within countries that have democratic institutions (regardless of their ‘Western-ness’). This is not to say, however, that countries must be advanced liberal democracies in order for civil society to exist, but rather that they should meet the basic minimal criteria of procedural democracy.¹ In other words, civil society is a legitimate, appropriate, and important object of exploration and analysis within countries that can be considered electoral democracies. But to extend the concept beyond that to various types of authoritarian regimes is, in my view, an endeavor that risks lumping too many different phenomena and forms of organization into one already-beleaguered concept.

This leads to an obvious rebuttal: what about Eastern Europe? Is it not true that civil society helped lead to the collapse of Communism? In some sense, the answer has to be ‘yes’, especially since events in Eastern Europe (and Poland in particular) are what led to the rebirth and widespread popularization of the term ‘civil society’. But at the same time, the East European example shows precisely why it is so important to distinguish between civil society in democratic regimes and civil society in other types of non-democratic regimes. For in just a few years—as I show in my book—the countries

of post-Communist Europe went from being the midwife of the term civil society to having the least participatory civil societies in the world. In other words, the form of *oppositional* civil society in the late 1980s was clearly very different from the *democratic* civil society in today's context. As scholars, I believe that we should avoid the temptation of lumping these together, and at the very least, we should be developing sub-categories, such as 'oppositional' and 'democratic', in order to better capture the very distinctive dynamics that occur in different types of countries. The CSI does not seem to make any such distinctions, and this may lead to conceptual and methodological problems for the Project further down the road.

Methodology: The Need for a Cross-national Empirical Baseline

I will now turn from issues of conceptualization to the measurement and operationalization of civil society. I agree entirely with Heinrich on the need for more comparative research, and particularly cross-regional analysis, on civil society. This is not to denigrate in-depth case studies, which are often very rich and suggestive; but if we want to make claims about the relative *strength* or *weakness* of a country's civil society, or even about variation in types and forms, we need to have a common empirical standard that we can apply across different countries and cultural contexts.

The most common measures of civil society have focused on the organizations and associations themselves. Many studies present extensive data on the distribution of different types of organizations within a country's civil society, and others report data on the changes in the number of registered groups over time. But there are numerous methodological problems with these analyses, including: (1) inconsistent categories of types of organizations, which vary tremendously from study to study (thus ruling out meaningful comparisons across countries); (2) haphazard data collection, based on very unclear sampling methods (thus resulting in dubious claim of representativeness); and (3) overlooking the 'death rates' of organizations that quite often cease to exist (thus becoming fictitious artifacts in the lists of organizations).

Moreover, in addition to these methodological problems, there is a crucial theoretical and substantive reason why this approach in itself is inadequate: the focus on organizations misses the crucial role played by *people*, by *ordinary citizens*, who form the heart and soul of civil society. In other words, an NGO can set up a fax machine and a website, but without members, without a constituency, it has very little to do with civil society. In my view, therefore, the counting of organizations provides very little basis (both methodologically and substantively) for a systematic comparison of civil society across countries and regions.

While there is no perfect measure of civil society, of course, I think that representative surveys can provide a stronger starting point than Heinrich acknowledges. Cross-national surveys allow us—at a minimum—to measure the percentage of ordinary citizens who are members of voluntary associations in the countries where the exact same survey question was asked. This alone provides a better approximation of a country's civil society than a hollow list of the number and types of registered organizations. And it also allows for extensive comparisons, both between countries and among individuals and social strata within a country, which enable researchers to reach theoretical and empirical conclusions regarding the causes and consequences of participation in civil society. Cross-national surveys are not without their problems, of course, and certainly they should be enhanced by follow-up case

studies, which can put flesh onto otherwise rather skeletal findings. But they also have great potential for improvement in the future, particularly if comparative surveys can go into more depth, by measuring not just membership, but also the extent of participation, the different types of interaction, the diversity of ties and networks, relation between people's public and private activities, and their connections to democratic values.²

In describing the methodological priorities of the CSI, Heinrich writes that the:

... first and foremost goal is to achieve valid and relevant results in the specific country context; comparability of the scores across countries is only a secondary objective, which, if necessary, must be traded off against the demand of contextual validity.

As someone who values the rich context of individual country studies, I am, on the one hand, sympathetic to this view. But it should be pointed out that this approach will ultimately yield data points on all sorts of variables and criteria that will be very precise, but not comparable. And though it will certainly be tempting for many scholars to incorporate these findings into their cross-national analyses, the lack of a common 'empirical baseline' for comparison will make it very difficult to interpret how countries differ from one another.

The main danger, in this sense, is the project's reliance on 'local stakeholders to ensure local ownership and context validity'. For this opens the door to all kinds of inconsistencies and biases that will not only weaken the potential cross-national comparability of the CSI, but perhaps rule it out altogether. This was certainly the case with the precursor to the CSI, *The New Civic Atlas*, which was published by Civicus in 1997. This earlier project reflected a naïve and almost utopian sense of the power and growing influence of civil society in countries around the world, and it included 60 short and unsystematic case studies.³ The CSI will certainly be of much higher quality, but I am not sure if 'a stronger role of the international project co-ordinator' will be enough to 'ensure consistency across countries'. This is particularly the case given the CSI's very ambitious goal of coding for 35 different indicators, which will then be aggregated into four dimensions and 27 sub-dimensions. If the scoring relies first and foremost on the assessment of local stakeholders, I am doubtful that the results will be accurate and comparable.

A better alternative, in my view, would be to include some type of rudimentary empirical baseline that can be considered fully comparable, even if it does not present a complete picture of type and consequences of civil society in individual cases. For ultimately, if we want to make comparisons, we need such a baseline, which we can then refine, analyze, adapt, and even put into question, because otherwise the results can be an incomparable mish-mash. As I have suggested above, I believe that a common survey provides the best avenue for such a baseline, though I recognize that it should not be the last word.

On the whole, Heinrich and the CSI are to be applauded for their emphasis on using multiple methods and triangulation procedures, and especially for providing a completely open and transparent discussion of the 'challenges', 'design defects', and 'implementation problems' that the CSI has encountered already, as well as for acknowledging directly that the methodology is 'far from perfect'. But given that the most difficult methodological challenges still lie ahead (i.e., the full CSI has not yet been conducted in most of the countries where it is planned), I have to admit that I am somewhat skeptical of the Project's ability to produce the kind of firm empirical baseline that I think is so important for the field.

Conclusion

In the end, while I am impressed by Heinrich's identification of the shortcomings of existing studies (including my own), I am not yet convinced that the CSI will be able to rise to this challenge. The CSI has certainly come a long way since the *Civic Atlas*, but will the project be able to capture the important conceptual distinctions between civil society in democratic and authoritarian regimes, and will its country reports accurately compare empirical realities and cross-national differences according to a common standard? Perhaps the new CSI has found a way of avoiding these pitfalls—and Heinrich's attention to the issue does make me more confident in that regard—but the obstacles are still daunting.

Again, despite these critical comments, I remain an ally in the goal to create better cross-national measures of civil society. I therefore strongly support the continuation of the CSI as a larger project that will move the concepts, measures, and the debate ahead.

Notes

1. In the cross-national part of my book I only analyze the 31 countries (out of over 50 in total) from the World Values Survey that met a specific set of criteria that qualified them as either democracies or democratizing countries.
2. Along these lines, Georgetown University's Center for Democracy and the Third Sector has recently conducted a major survey of the United States, called "Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy" (CID), which includes some comparisons to the 22 European countries that were included in the European Social Survey. For more on the CID survey, see <http://www.georgetown.edu/centers/cdats/cid.htm>.
3. For example, in her "Foreword", Ebrima Sall, the Chair of the CIVICUS Task Force on Visibility and Understanding, wrote that each country report "represents a powerful affirmation of what we believe is a universal movement toward greater citizen participation and influence".

References

- Civicus (1997) *The New Civic Atlas: Profiles of Civil Society in 60 Countries* (Washington, DC: Civicus).
 Howard, M. M. (2003) *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

