Civil society in non-Western contexts: Reflections on the 'usefulness' of a concept

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Abstract

The paper considers the usefulness of the concept of civil society—both as an analytical construct and a policy tool—in non-Western contexts drawing on a selected review of literature on Africa from anthropology and development studies. Rejecting arguments that the concept has little meaning outside its Western origins, and critical of the sometimes crude export of the concept by Western donors to build 'good governance', the paper examines local meanings being created around the concept. Nevertheless, it acknowledges that such adaptations are part of an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and markets. Current efforts to bring peace in Somalia are, in part, drawing on the language of civil society. Despite the apparent novelty of the rediscovered concept of civil society, it can also be invested with historical depth in the study of citizenship, exclusion and colonialism. The concept arguably therefore has both analytical value as well as inspirational power.

Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War there has been a global ubiquity to the concept of civil society among researchers and activists, and a widespread assumption among many policy makers in different parts of the world of its global relevance to strengthening development and democracy. The aim of this discussion paper is to provide some reflections upon whether or not the concept of civil society could be seen as useful—both in terms of understanding social and political processes, and in terms of policy intervention aimed at poverty reduction and development—in the context of non-Western societies, and if so, how.

The paper begins with some brief general comments about the recent rise to prominence of the concept of civil society, as both an analytical construct and as a policy tool, before moving on to discuss several different views about civil society in non-Western contexts—and particularly Africa—drawn from a selected review of literature from anthropology and development studies. It is not the purpose of the paper to engage in detail with the complex definitional debates about the meanings of civil society, which have been summarised effectively elsewhere (Keane, 1998; van Rooy, 1998). Nor is it the intention to generalise about Africa, which is vast, complex and diverse, but instead the paper aims to explore selectively some of different positions in relation to the relevance of civil society found in areas of the literature.

Nevertheless, it is useful to begin with some general discussion about the different versions of the concept of 'civil society' which are commonly found. Civil society is usually understood as 'the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the State and marketplace' (van Rooy, 1998, p. 30). Civil society is usually seen as being situated beyond the household, and writers such as Putnam (1993 and 2000) argue that civil society is composed of groups which cross-cut ties of kinship and patronage.

The idea of civil society has many different roots. The Scottish enlightenment thinker Adam Ferguson saw civil society as a socially desirable alternative both to the state of nature and the heightened individualism of emergent capitalism. The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel argued that self-organised civil society needed to be balanced and ordered by the state, otherwise it would become self-interested and would not contribute to the common good. Both approaches shaped the concept's early evolution. Moving from the social and political sphere to a narrower organisational

focus, the work of Alexis de Tocqueville has been influential and has been used to support arguments 'in favour of' civil society. De Tocqueville's positive account of nineteenth century associationalism in the United States stressed volunteerism, community spirit and independent associational life as protections against the domination of society by the state, and indeed as a counterbalance which helped keep the state accountable and effective. This account—and elements of those which preceded it—tended to stress the role of civil society as one in which some kind of equilibrium was created in relation to the state and the market.

Two other issues are also frequently flagged in discussions of civil society. One is that civil society is essentially fragile, borne out by Putnam's account of anxieties surrounding the 'collapse' of community in the United States (2000). The other is concern about the historical specificity or otherwise of civil society (Blaney and Pasha, 1993). Brown's (2000) account portrays civil society as fragile, historically-specific construct which first emerged from a distinct 'historical moment' in parts of Western Europe in the late eighteenth century. The new middle classes, along with a commercialising landed aristocracy, required conditions for sanctioned private accumulation while the state maintained legal order and stability, but was unable to impose religious conformity, which led an atmosphere of relative tolerance in which a new civil society flourished. This was a time when the state became strong enough to maintain law and order, but not too strong so as to become oppressive—a balance which Brown (2000) argues is crucial:

> There is very little margin for error here—if the state is too extensive it will strangle civil society at birth, too weak and private institutions will compete for its role as provider of order; if people are too much involved in each other's lives then they will lose the sense of distance needed to preserve civility, too little involved and they become part of an atomised 'mass society' (p. 8).

Such ideas have been highly influential in relation to efforts by development policy makers to promote democratic institutions and market reforms in developing countries—the so-called 'good governance' agenda made popular in the early 1990s which suggested that a 'virtuous circle' could be built between state, economy and civil society which balanced growth, equity and stability (Archer, 1994).

However, there is a different strand of civil society thinking which has also been influential in some parts of the world in recent decades. This has been influenced by Antonio Gramsci, writing much later, who argued that civil society is the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contained a wide range of organisations which both challenged and upheld the existing order. Gramsci's ideas about civil society have been influential in the context of processes of resistance to totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s.

Two differing civil society traditions can therefore usefully be distinguished, though it has been the organisational view of civil society exemplified by de Tocqueville which has been most enthusiastically taken up by agencies within development policy discourse during the past decade (Davis and McGregor, 2000). Since the early 1990s the 'good government' agenda has deployed the concept of civil society within the wider initiatives of supporting the emergence of more competitive market economies, building better-managed states with the capacity to provide more responsive services and just laws, and improving democratic institutions and deepening political participation. Support for the emergence and strengthening of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has formed a central part of this agenda (Archer, 1994).

However, others have argued that while the concept of civil society may be useful for analysis, it may have less value as a prescriptive tool in the hands of policy makers. There are three main reasons for this. The first is that different understandings of the term exist and this makes it difficult to agree precise policy purposes. Second, the concept of civil society is a primarily theoretical one and may not lend itself in any straightforward way to practical application. Third, the concept is arguably historically specific to particular time(s) and place(s) and may be sensitive to differences of history, culture and economy. Van Rooy (1998) has characterised the usefulness of the concept of civil society to development policy makers in terms of an 'analytical hat-stand' on which to hang a range of ideas about politics, organisation, citizenship, activism and self-help.

These questions of relevance and practical policy value are generating wide debates even within Western societies. If the concept of civil society is a historically specific and ultimately extremely fragile, then it becomes relevant to ask whether it has meaning outside the context in which it originally evolved. If we move on to consider non-Western contexts, differences of culture, history and politics may complicate such questions further.

2 The re-emergence of an idea

As we have seen, civil society is an old idea which has in the past two decades undergone a massive global revival. After emerging in Enlightenment Europe and later influencing important nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers such as Hegel, de Tocqueville and Gramsci it largely fell into disuse. It was rediscovered, and given new contemporary relevance, by dissident intellectuals in communist Eastern Europe in the 1980s engaged in anti-totalitarian struggle. Finally the cycle has been completed by the return of the concept back to the West where it has been 're-remembered' along with a realisation that 'we [in the West] have been living it without noticing' as 'part of the unremarked fabric of society itself' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 5).

However, the concept of civil society did not lie as entirely dormant as some accounts would suggest. In Latin America from the 1970s onwards, the concept of civil society was embraced by activists

fighting against the authoritarian military regimes. Keane (1998) shows how Yoshihiko Uchida and the 'civil society school of Japanese Marxism' emerged in the 1960s. Drawing on Gramsci's ideas, it argued that Japanese civil society was weak, showing how the patriarchal family and a culture of individual deference towards power allowed Japanese capitalism to grow quickly with very little social resistance.

The recent re-entry into political discussion has, as the Comaroffs (1999) point out, brought with it an irony: while some policy makers have become interested in how to build civil society in countries where it appears weak or non-existent, such in Africa, a level of anxiety has been generated in some parts of 'the West' that it has somehow been lost, as witnessed by Robert Putnam's (2000) argument that associationalism has declined in the United States such that many people now go 'bowling alone' instead of in groups. According to the Comaroffs, there is another irony to be found in the relatively sudden re-emergence of the concept of civil society. They argue that it has reappeared 'as if it is new and free of baggage'. Firstly, as an old term, it may represent an outdated 'modernist' concept with limited relevance for explaining contemporary patterns of change. Secondly if the apparent dormancy of the concept is investigated further, it is possible to show that the 're-remembering' of civil society in the West may have been selective. For example, a Hegelian concept of 'civil society' may be useful in understanding how access to and exclusion from public space and citizenship rights was organised in colonial African contexts, while Gramscian ideas about civil society have long been relevant to understandings of organised resistance to colonialism. In addition to the breadth of different understandings of 'civil society', there are therefore also both 'old' and 'new' understandings of the term.

Reflections on the relevance of the idea of civil society to Africa

In Western development policy circles the act of 're-remembering' has as we have seen been a selectively political one, since the version of civil society which has dominated development policy agendas has been one which plays down or ignores the more conflictual implications of the Gramscian version. It is this view that has dominated much—though not all—of the discussion about civil society in Africa found in the literature which this section now briefly analyses.

Four different possible answers can be identified to the question 'is the concept of civil society relevant to Africa?' The *first* is a clear 'yes' based on the idea of a positive, universalist view of the desirability of civil society as part of the political project of building and strengthening democracy around the world. For example, the global civil society network CIVICUS aims to '… help advance regional, national and international initiatives to strengthen the capacity of civil society'. The *second* is a clear 'no' based on the argument that a concept which emerged at a distinctive moment in European history has little meaning within such different cultural and political settings. The *third* is

an adaptive view which suggests that while the concept is potentially relevant to non-Western contexts it will take on local, different meanings and should not therefore be applied too rigidly. *Fourth*, there are those who imply that the 'relevance question' is probably the wrong question to ask, arguing that the idea of civil society—whether explicitly recognised as such or not—has long been implicated in Africa's colonial histories of both domination and resistance. Each of these points of view will now be briefly considered.

(a) Prescriptive universalism

The idea of civil society in Africa as a 'good thing' has been has been eagerly taken up in some quarters. This has perhaps been in response to early (and of course continuing) ideas by outsiders that Africa was hostile to the development of civil life. Adam Ferguson wrote in 1757 that Africa had a 'weakness in the genius of its people' and did not inspire the virtues 'which are connected with freedom, and required in the conduct of civil affairs' (quoted in Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). Harbeson (1994, pp. 1–2) has argued that civil society is crucial to Africa's future political development:

> … civil society is a hitherto *missing key* to sustained political reform, legitimate states and governments, improved governance, viable state-society and state-economy relationships, and prevention of the kind of political decay that undermined new African governments a generation ago. *[my italics]*

In this view civil society fills a gap in social science theory around economic and social development on the ground in Africa, where both donors and African governments have largely failed so far to develop sound policies. The framework of civil society allows for setting out and agreeing working rules about improvements to the workings of the state and economy.

According to Harbeson et al, this has the effect of shifting discussion away from the *balance of power* between state and society to debates about the *terms of the interdependence* between state and society. The state is seen as the binding, organising principle of the political order (the arena within which processes for the authoritative allocation of social values takes place) while individuals, groups and organisations are seen as part of the political order when they participate in these processes

> ... but are part of civil society when they seek to define, seek support for or promote changes in the basic rules of the game by which social values are authoritatively allocated.

In this view, civil society is not just about associational life, but is also about individuals and associations taking part in rule-setting activities.

Following from this positive view of civil society has come the phenomenon of prescription at the level of policy. Within development policy discourse, the framework of good governance has brought

support for civil society as part of a policy package transferred to Africa by official donors and NGOs. For example, it has taken the form of support for the monitoring of elections and voter education by civil society organisations, and to 'capacity building' work in the relation to local NGOs through the provision of organisational support and training.

This perspective on civil society in Africa remains an optimistic one, although there have been concerns raised within it. One is the danger of what Blair (1997) calls 'civil society gridlock' in which so many different interests are active that they paralyse social and political life through a multiplicity of claims made on services and resources. This is particularly likely to happen when the state is weak, because additional 'claims' made from within civil society on the state may weaken it further. Another is the problem of prescriptive failure when the planned or desired results fail to emerge. Despite being technically part of 'civil society', certain groups generated by a policy intervention may not in the end 'fit in well' with the prevailing moral vision. For example, Garland (1999) analyses the work of an international NGO in Africa and finds an assumption that Western ideals, which appear lacking, need to be transferred and built locally. The NGO works with local hunter-gatherers who readily seize the opportunities on offer for building civil society with outside support, but are then criticised by the NGO for having created the 'wrong' kinds of civil society institutions based on clan, kin and market systems.

(b) Western exceptionalism

Following from the critique of this prescriptive universalism argument, some researchers therefore suggest instead that the concept of civil society really has little meaning outside the contexts of Western Europe of North America. For example, in rejecting many of the arguments for the simple policy transfer of civil society to Africa, Maina (1998, p. 137) argues that 'civil society is a concept made to order for the political reality of Western society' which has 'limited explanatory power' for the complexities of African associational life because it fails to understand the domination of African societies by a predatory state, the informal character of many forms of organisation, and the fundamental roles played by class and ethnicity.

James Ferguson (1998) points out that civil society 'has become one of those things (like development, education or the environment) that no reasonable person can be against' but that

> … the current (often ahistorical and uncritical) use of the concept of 'civil society' in the study of African politics obscures more than it reveals, and, indeed, that it often serves to help legitimate a profoundly anti-democratic transnational politics (pp. 3–4).

Ferguson (1998) shows how the 'nation building' paradigm of African politics, which envisaged the construction of national identities and structures of hierarchy in place of backward, traditional, primordial affiliations, has gradually given way to a 'state/civil society' paradigm which sees the importance of a dynamic local civil society in balancing, taming and reducing the role of the state.

The irony is that both models, though different, mirror each other and therefore share a basic false assumption of the existence of a vertical state/society opposition. In fact, power in Africa has long been exercised by entities other than the state—such as the British South Africa Company, a private corporation, which established structures for colonial rule in Zambia, and more recently the international financial institutions such as the World Bank which have determined state policies through 'structural adjustment' programmes.

At the same time, the tendency among outside policy makers is for African civil society to be conceived of in terms of a set of 'grassroots NGOs', most of which are funded by the international community, or by transnational NGOs such as World Vision International, a giant transnational organisation which is effectively taking over some of the state's functions in health or education. The range of organisations which may lay claim to be being part of civil society is of course much wider, and such NGOs in any case have complex horizontal links beyond Africa. The reason the civil society concept is unhelpful in such cases, Ferguson argues, is because these NGOs do not actually challenge the state 'from below' but are instead 'horizontal contemporaries' of wider institutions of transnational governmentality. New forms of transnational connection, Ferguson argues, show up the idea of a national 'state/civil society dichotomy' as simplistic and inaccurate. This is illustrated by an ethnographic example he provides of community organising in a South African township. One particular organiser sets out the challenge as building class-based civil society alliances with international solidarity groups and certain official donors rather than building local networks with what he regards as certain repressive elements within local civil society.

In a recent overview of Mozambique, Sogge (1997, p. 42) finds three sets of reasons to doubt the relevance of the concept of 'civil society'. The first is historical. The colonial state has constrained associational space so tightly that 'Mozambiquan ways of associating together hardly ever resemble institutions of civil society known to Westerners'. Under Portuguese rule the interests of business, labour and farmers were organised through state-controlled associational forms, while post-colonial political leaders emerged from the colonial state, not from the trade unions or the legal profession as in some other African countries. The second is political in the sense that for the past fifteen years (in the era of structural adjustment, weak public services and low wages) state legitimacy and citizen expectations are low with the result that there are few incentives for citizen organisation since power is widely perceived to be exercised from outside the country. The third reason is related to the ambiguous nature of public and private action, where informal social and political action is widely preferred over formal types, and the form of organisational activities is constantly changing in order to operate within a highly predatory environment.

(c) *Adaptive prescription*

The problem with the first view is that it tends to view phenomena through a Western lens and ignores (i) the historical legacy of colonial civil society building and (ii) organisations which either do not fit with its prescriptions (because they are based on kin or ethnicity or local 'tradition') or which it misses altogether (because the form taken is unfamiliar). The prescriptive discussion of civil society turns on imagined past stages of Western civilisation around eighteenth and nineteenth capitalist society and manners (Hardt, 1995). Such discussions have therefore come to see Western-oriented intellectuals, lawyers, entrepreneurs, teachers and church people as 'vanguards' of civil society's development in Africa in the form of efforts to develop an active public sphere, the role of voluntary organisations and the emergence of media institutions. The 'adaptive' view tries to argue that there is a middle way between crudely imposing the concept from outside or simply abandoning it altogether as being inappropriate.

Despite his earlier objections to the concept of civil society in relation to Africa, Maina (1998) later reluctantly concedes that such a concept can have value if it is adapted in various ways. In particular, he suggests that it is amended to include *activities* and not just organisations, and if it moves away from a 'Western' preoccupation with rights and advocacy to include self-help groups that are organised for personal, economic ends. The emphasis on informal, self-help activity signals the existence of an active civil society founded on a strong mistrust of the state and overcoming civic apathy, and Maina suggests that it may be from this sector that independent political leadership emerges.

Hann and Dunn (1996) argue that civil society has many different forms even in Western societies, but that locally-specific 'counterpart traditions' may interact with the Western 'export' of a universal idea of civil society. Edwards (1998) develops this line of thinking in a draft paper for the World Bank which sets out a set of oppositions between Western and non-Western ideas about civil society. Rather than current prescription based on Western models, Edwards argues for a more open-ended view support to civil society in terms of process, negotiation and as a contested domain. Within this domain, there are a series of tensions around the concept of civil society between (i) Western origins in industrial capitalism and the nation state, as opposed to different histories and contexts outside; (ii) the idea of civil society balancing social/market conflicts and leading to the 'fracturing of tradition' as opposed to the role of colonialism; (iii) the three sector model common in the West as opposed to the greater degree of blurring between sectoral boundaries which may exist elsewhere; and (iv) the view of civil society as a set of positive values, as opposed to the common mixture of traditional and modern institutions which are both civil and 'uncivil' in other societies.

This is supported by the arguments presented by the Comaroffs (1999, p. 22) who argue that there is a 'Euro centric tendency to limit civil society to a narrowly defined institutional arena', running

counter to Hegel's original insistence that the civil sphere of relatedness has its origins in the historical particularities of capitalist production and exchange. Outside this narrowly defined category for example we might find the existence of partisan, parochial, or fundamentalist organisations each with a claim on civil society roles and membership. The narrow view also brings with it the tendency to undervalue the role of kin-based and ethnic organisations in helping to form public opinions and political pressure groups.

Such organisations for example can be seen to have played a role in recent democratisation processes in Uganda. The role of 'tradition' in helping to structure different forms of African civil society is therefore an important question which requires closer understanding. In Tunisia, Keane (1998) describes how Al-Ghannouchi has shown how sections of the Islamic religious community are beginning to accommodate aspects of modern democratic principles within a 'post-secular' view of an Islamic society in which, between nature and God, there is a space in which human, context-bound judgements have to be made.

Widening the concept of civil society to include involuntary membership and kinship relations opens up the concept to locally specific institutions and processes. Karlstrom (1999) argues that we need to go beyond simply identifying civil society with 'voluntary associations', pointing out that in Uganda the restoration of the Ganda kingship is politically significant despite its nonconformity with Western ideals of liberal participatory government. This restoration arguably promises a political order founded on coexisting clan-based organisations and royal rule, a more stable, responsive and representative institution than a national party system, and a long history of clans mediating between citizens and monarchy, checking excesses of power. The possibility for kinship to take on both a private and a public face in Uganda contradicts Western assumptions of civil society in which kinship relations are considered to be outside civil society norms:

> … African sociocultural arrangements provide their own logic of sovereign accountability, their own public spheres, their own forms of nongovernmental organisation and association (p. 27).

While a distinction between state and society is maintained, the relationships between them are being reshaped. For example, there is a greater capacity for local government councils to delegate certain tasks and resources to elements of 'society' in the form of NGO staff, groups and associations at the local level rather than having these resources 'captured' as used to be the case. Within such a perspective, the obvious danger is of course to move from prescription into an equally unhelpful position of cultural relativism. There are also dangers in moving too far from a generally agreed understanding of what 'civil society' really means. If it is widened to include kin groups, for example, it is a long way from Gellner's (1995) argument that civil society should not only be seen in terms of balancing the state, but is also a counter-balance to the what he terms the 'tyranny of cousins'.

(d) The wrong question to ask?

Some writers argue that the concept of civil society must be relevant to the African context because it was used as an organising principle by colonial administrations and current debates cannot ignore this legacy. In this view, it is therefore irrelevant to argue about universal or local realities and it is instead more useful to analyse the historical processes which have shaped civil society in Africa and the forms these have taken. For example, Mamdani (1996) suggests that the current 'blinkered view' of civil society prevents us from looking critically at either European or African civil society, and particularly at their complex interrelationship dating from colonial times. Mamdani shows us that this meeting was in reality very 'uncivil' and aimed to institutionalise difference between groups of citizens and ethnicised subjects, and between civilised colonists governed by 'constitutionalism' and native tribes governed by 'customary law'.

It is this enduring set of tensions which have persisted in the post-colonial era and which have helped structure the competition for state power and have also fuelled community conflict. The growing obsession with civil society in Africa may date from the mid-1980s, but the contents of these debates have a far longer history. For example, some nineteenth century 'humanitarian imperialists' used a discourse of civility which implied universal human rights and norms of citizenship. Nationalist resistance has long been couched in terms of citizen rights denied and led to many social movements and voluntary associations, and civic activism against the state in Africa long pre-dates the Eastern European struggles normally associated with the re-emergence of civil society.

Mamdani (1996) shows how much of the debate on civil society is concerned with competing, ideological ideas about how to match universal governance ideals against existing institutions. For liberal modernists the call is for civil rights, while African communitarians criticise the discourse on human rights as being ethnocentric and argue instead for the reinstatement of marginalised political cultures. Mamdani, like Ferguson, suggests that such dichotomies are ultimately unhelpful because they simply replay the old dichotomies of universal and particular, of Western democracies and colonial orders created in their name.

What is therefore needed is to bring these wider debates into the limited discussion of civil society which takes place, particularly at the level of policy, and to enrich these debates with a more detailed understanding of actually existing civil society activity in Africa. For example, Masquelier (1999) analyses an Islamic reform movement in Niger which produces an active engagement with wider forces of social and cultural change. For example, women are required to be covered in public spaces but are also required to pursue an education and register to vote, thereby challenging the stereotypical conservative ideologies of gender, family and society. Such movements may be central to civil society in Africa because they seek to contest legacies of Western colonialism.

3 Conclusion

From the four different positions briefly outlined above, it is perhaps the third and fourth which are most persuasive. The idea of civil society cannot easily be dismissed as having little meaning outside its Western origins (the exceptionalist argument), but nor can it simply be exported by Western donors and used crudely to build good governance in developing or transitional country contexts (prescriptive universalism). By examining the local meanings being created around the concept of civil society in certain African contexts, it is possible to see how it has become part of an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and market around the world (the adaptive argument). And yet it is not helpful to regard civil society as a new term nor as necessarily having uniquely contemporary relevance, since the control of public space, and the exercise of the power to include or exclude sections of the population as citizens has long been a feature of colonised African societies (the 'wrong question' argument).

The potential usefulness of the concept of civil society can be analysed across two dimensions—it can be 'useful to act with' and it may also be 'useful to think with'. Despite the tendency for development donors to see civil society as a normative concept, and to seek the 'building' of civil society mainly through financial and organisational support to NGOs, there is no doubt that the recent interest by the development industry in civil society has helped to focus attention usefully on human rights, citizen action and institutions. There is a second dimension to this relevance. Cut loose from misguided policy transfer from the West, the concept of civil society can also be seen to have a capacity to inspire in Africa and elsewhere. It is, according to some accounts, animating action in wider political arenas, such as the current negotiations towards constructing a new Somali government after a decade of statelessness. At the recent Djibouti peace conference for Somalia the language of civil society was deployed in documents drawn up locally in support of the peace process:

> ... the representatives of civil society, together with the warlords, must come together to agree on the road to peace in the interests of all citizens, national harmony and the democratic right to choose leaders in accordance with an accepted formula (Life and Peace Institute, p. 14).

In this case, the term civil society is used to describe organised sections of society opposed to the domination of society by Somali 'warlords'.

The reworking of the concept in the light of African histories, politics and cultures creates allows for the possibility of illuminating more than just the problems of development intervention. There is a need to focus less on 'high levels of rhetoric, abstraction and ahistorical generalisation' and produce more 'close-up observation' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). Blaney and Pasha (1993) argue that the claim of the universality of the idea of civil society is warranted, but that it must include the analysis of both 'structure' and 'process' to avoid being represented as a static, ahistorical concept. This

means linking the discussion of African civil society with the international capitalist division of labour, distinguishing civil society movements from 'anti-civil society movements', and avoiding the conflation of 'society' and civil society. An engagement with the concept is therefore helping to reveal more about both historical and contemporary dimensions of African political development. However, as Ferguson and Mamdani show, there are problems with the simple conceptualisation of state/civil society opposition given the increasing importance of horizontal, transnational identities and linkages.

The absence of a clear understanding of the distinct forms taken by civil society actors and actions in African contexts requires research which links local realities with emerging global changes. While civil society has potential explanatory value and practical utility in Africa, Mamdani (1996) argues that Western prescriptive agendas can limit both of these, emphasising

> The need for ... an analysis of actually existing civil society so as to understand its actual formation, rather than as a promised agenda for change (p. 19).

Civil society in Africa can have multiple meanings, and as an 'all-purpose placeholder' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, p. 3) it can capture emerging aspirations in the context of local level social struggles for well-being and global economic and technological changes. The concept of civil society contains within it the seeds of contradiction in being both unitary and divisive, and prescriptive and aspirational, but it nevertheless leads us to focus on changing structure and process.

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