Key Concepts in Political Theory: Civil Society

Department of Political Science
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• Social life is divided into many domains and civil society describes only one domain of social life and not the entirety of it.

• Society is a much larger concept in scope which includes many domains such as family, economy, politics, etc.

• Louis Dumont defines society as an organisation into which we are born, to which all involuntarily belong to and from where we get all our ideas and education. It is an all purpose organisation.

• Different scholars define civil society differently.
Features of Civil Society

• Civil society is a collectivity of people from that society which exists for a specific and limited purposes.

• First and one of the fundamental features is that the domain of civil society is separate and independent from that of state.

• It includes institutions that are ‘private’, meaning they are independent from government and organised by individuals in pursuit of their own ends.

• Second, it is made up of voluntary associations. Involuntary associations like family and caste are not part of it.
John Locke’s Concept of Civil Society

• Locke contrasts his concept of civil society with state of nature.
• According to Locke, state of nature is a hypothetical condition which is prior to political or civil society.
• From that hypothetical condition where no common judge is present, individuals may act erratic or impartial. So people enter a social contract and establish a civil society.
• To Locke, civil society is not a sphere different political sphere of state.
• It provides stable set of positive standing laws, impartial judges, and coercive apparatus for enforcing those laws.
Enlightenment Concept of Civil Society

• Enlightenment concept of civil society is linked with emergence of the sphere of economy and commerce by the end of 18th century (due to industrial revolution).

• Capitalist political economy’s important feature is to establish an independent economic sphere with its own laws.

• Economy which was earlier confined to private domain of household, due to capitalist economy now comes outside the domain of household. So, it is an intermediate sphere between household and state.
• According to new concept of political economy, commerce is the source for civility, as it links anonymous individuals in the market.

• Scottish enlightenment thought defines civil society as a name given to modern commerce based society, which is a product of capitalist political economy.

• Historically, development of independent economic sphere led to developments in political sphere, especially the institutions of representative democracy.

• Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized the role of various public associations as a wall against tyranny of the state and in defence of freedom of individuals.
Hegel’s Concept of Civil Society

To Hegel, civil society is an economic system where formally free and equal individuals could engage in work and trade.

He defines civil society as a sphere of ‘universal egoism’ in which individuals place their own interests before those of others.

He criticizes civil society for being based on unrestrained individual ego, as individual tries to pursue their self interest in a public sphere.

He does criticizes liberal definition of state’s functions are minimal and limited to protection of individual liberty and property.

He separates family as a private sphere where individual ought to pursue self interest and they become citizens, not individuals, concerned with interests of whole community.
• **Marxist Concept of Civil Society**
  
  • Marx also claimed that basic political contradiction in modern society is between ‘man as citizen’ and ‘man as private individual’
  
  • According to Marx, state does not stand above civil society to protect universal interests against private interest of the society.
  
  • He also states that state is neither independent nor neutral towards particular interest of civil society.
  
  • To him, understanding nature of state and political economy is necessary to understand nature of civil society.
  
  • Even though there is formal equality in civil society, it is divided on class basis and state is an instrument of domination of capitalist class over working class.
• Because of private property and prevalence selfish interests, to Marx, life in modern civil society is essentially unsocial and modern state has its foundations in this unsocial life.
• Gramsci, though believes in class war of Marx, he believes that ideological war is more important.
• To Gramsci, civil society is the place where the war for the control of ideas takes place.
• As humans define themselves in terms of ideals and values, ruling class tries to control those institutions at which those ideals and values are formed.
• Civil society institutions such as temples, parties, trade unions, universities, publishing house, the press and voluntary associations of all kinds are such institutions through which ruling class spreads their ideology and ensure its cultural and moral supremacy over subordinate class.
Contemporary Revival

• The revival of the concept started at the end of cold war, in eastern European countries, through people’s movements against authoritative communist states.

• Robert Putnum emphasized that the role of civil society associations in creation of solidarity among citizens. He says that the political life and performance of political institutions is better in societies where there is a long standing tradition of civic engagement, through voting, political participation, newspaper readership, participation in voluntary associations.