

DIVERSITY OF CIVIL SOCIETIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Shmuel Eisenstadt

The World Forum in Yaroslavl to be held in September 2010 will consist of four discussion sections. One of the sections will be devoted to the consideration of the problem of **the diversity of the democratic experience**, which differs in various states due to their specific geographic and social conditions.

Israeli sociologist **Shmuel Eisenstadt**, whose academic career began in Hebrew University in Jerusalem, became one of the scientists who made significant efforts to 'cut the Gordian knot' of problems associated with the transition of different types of societies to democracy.

Contrary to the classical theory of modernization, which inherently supposes all societies' movement towards unvaried modernity, Eisenstadt defended and still defends a thesis on modernity as a special type of civilization, which originated in Europe and spread throughout the world. While Western patterns of modernization are incorporated into various societies, according to Eisenstadt, they collide with constellations of symbolic and institutional premises firmly fixed within these societies. Consequently, unique civilizational complexes emerge when values of modernity are refracted through local traditions. Due to this, there appear in the world 'multiple modernities,' as defined by Eisenstadt.

'Multiple modernities' take the shape of 'multiple democracies.' The questions that have to be answered here are whether civil society in each separate democratic state possesses its own features. And which features are universally inherent to each civil society? Or could it be that the civil society of democratic state, due to its 'otherness' to any internationally approved parameter, will be declared as non-democratic?

Diversity of democratic experience meant multiplicity of forms, generated by this very experience. Probably, this question will be raised during the sessions of the World Forum on the **'Modern State: Development of Democracy And Criteria of Effectiveness.'**



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Eisenstadt is one of the founders of comparative analysis of civilizations. His concept of 'axial Age civilizations' has become widely known. 'Axial Age' is specified by revolutionary breakthrough, which occurred, substantially, in all important cultures during the first millennium BC. He is also famous for his research of modernity. Eisenstadt defends a thesis about modernity as a special type of civilization, which originated in Europe and further spread throughout the world.

In the recent discussion that emphasized the importance both of the state as well as global financial frameworks and forces, there has been a relative neglect of the problematique of civil society – which yet is of crucial importance for the understanding of the dynamics of contemporary societies.

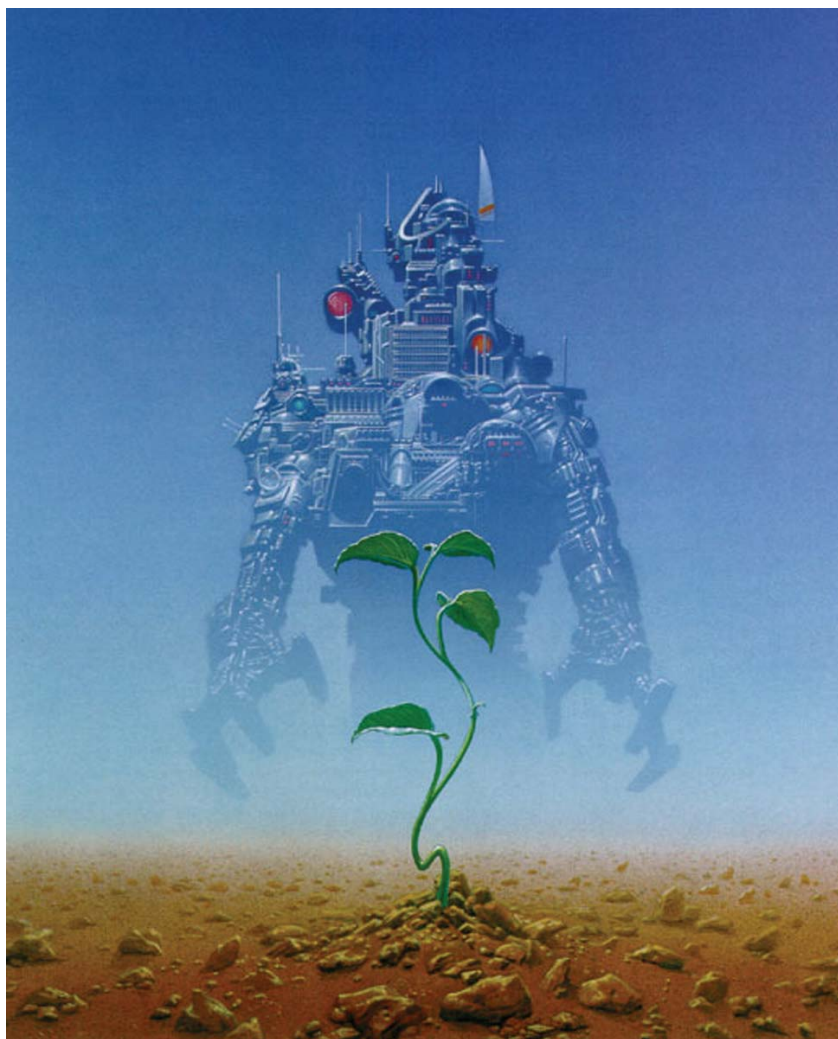
These dynamics are greatly influenced by the crystallization of new patterns of relations between ideological orientations, regime types, public spheres and civil society. These new developments have been closely related to new, and to some extent contradictory, ideological orientations and conceptions of civil society and of its relations to the state. According to one such neo-liberal

conception, promulgated by many aid and development agencies as well as by NGOs (especially in Eastern European, Asian and African countries), **civil society constitutes an autonomous ontological entity confronting another such entity – the state**, and possibly also the market; and there exists a contradiction between vibrant civil society and a strong state, i.e. that a burgeoning and vibrant civil society can develop only in a weak state, which, presumably, will not threaten its autonomy.

In this conception of civil society, governmental activities had to be minimized, creating broad spaces for free voluntary activities – and for the market economy in its turn, which would also reinforce the development of such spaces.

In contrast to these neo-liberal, extremely individualistic conceptions of civil society, movements in Europe and the United States, as well as various communitarian ideologies in Europe, in America, and in Latin America, put forward a different **'collective' conception** of civil society. Within it, the public sphere was conceived as an arena in which collective conceptions of common good were promulgated and in which the state was seen as at least one major arena where such conceptions have to be implemented. Here civil society is basically conceived as a distinct mode of regulation of power, the core of which is the combination of the self-regulation of the major social sectors, associations, movements and political groups, with their autonomous access to the major institutional arenas (especially, but not exclusively the political and economic arenas), with their participation in the rule-setting and in regulation of conflicts in these areas.

But the concrete contours of such civil society greatly vary between different pluralistic societies. Thus, for instance, in India they are rooted in the conception of mutual group duties, while in Europe they are based in the conception of individual rights. Other parallel but distinct conceptions of civil society developed in some African countries in which relations between the public and political arenas developed on the basis of 'older' communal (tribal) concep-



tions of accountability and participation in the community.

In all of these cases, the successful crystallization of such civil society is greatly dependent on the extent to which they are rooted in their internal nationalist conceptions and are not imposed from the outside, as is the case with many of the NGOs. Such imposition may be very much detrimental to its development and contribution to economic development, undermining political stability and patterns of civility, and giving rise to strong new 'clientelistic' relations between these agencies and the various social groups sponsored and co-opted by them.

Significantly enough, such detrimental outcomes were minimized or counteracted in those cases thereof, as was the case for instance in some sectors of Indian society in which the implementation of the new economic policies became closely effected in confrontation with older and newly reconstituted communal frameworks and networks.

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Beyond these developments in the framework of pluralistic regimes there crystallized in the contemporary scene (above all, in the Middle East and to some extent, in Latin America) in different patterns of *non-liberal* (albeit not necessarily anti-liberal) patterns of *civil society*, patterns of relations between ideological orientations, regime types and public spheres and civil society – the common denominator of which has been the crystallization of deeply divided and fragmented civil society that withdraws itself from active political participation with dissociation, especially from the 'electoral' politics, but at the same time being very influential in the political arena. Among the important illustrations of such possibilities one can mention different Islamist movements.

All these developments stress the need for systematic analysis of different patterns of public spheres and civil society in the contemporary scene. ■

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