Civil Society as a metaphor of the “Good Society.” The limits of a normative concept and the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

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Civil society as a word has gained momentum in the last two decades. It has become a mantra for journalists, policymakers and academics, and a panacea for all ills. In contrast, as a concept, the idea of civil society is surprisingly undefined and under-theorized for its broad use. Paradoxically, the only agreement among scholars is based on the ambiguity and confusion of the idea. A broad definition locates civil society in the space between state, market and family. However, the relationship between civil society and the other spheres of society as well as the value of “civil” are subjects of endless debates. Civil society has been described as a “setting of settings,” where leftist, capitalist and nationalist arguments in favor of a preferred supportive environment for good life are included and partially accepted (Walzer 1995). This setting has been characterized, in turn, by associational life, an ideal of good society and a public space, theoretical approaches that, recently, have been integrated in a mutually supportive framework (Edwards 2004).

Nonetheless, questions abound. What are the boundaries of civil society? In other words, on the one hand, does the arrow of civil society point from family to the state? Or, the other way round, is the state a conditio sine qua non for a healthy civil society? On the other hand, what kind of organizations should be included and excluded? What criteria should regulate inclusion and exclusion? Civic and ethical values, pluralism and non-violence seem to be the most common keywords used in describing the idea(ks) leading civil society. This opens to a new set of questions, which relate the first and the second series. Is it civil society that, embedded in civism and pluralism, frames the nature of the state? Or, rather, is it the state that ensures and protects, through regulations, the civic and pluralistic nature of civil society?

The key point of these discussions, and their common ground, lies in the characterization of civil society as a metaphor of the “Good Society.” Needless to say, “good society” is – at least – an ungraspable normative concept. Is the relationship between a strong civil society (in its associational life) and society defined by what the majority of citizens identify as an ideal society? But this already seems a democracy-led bias. Furthermore, the relationship between individual and common ideals is unclear. Is the common ideal of good society simply the sum of individual utopias? And, finally, too often the diversity of civil society, not only in its organizational form, but also in its ideals seems to be forgotten.

The (intellectual and philosophical) history of civil society is in its largest part Western, if not European (Seligman 1992). Hence, not surprisingly, civil society has been linked, even though in different forms and degrees, to a shared Western utopia, namely Periclean Athens democracy. The liberal (Scottish Enlightenment) as well as the Hegelian-Marxist tradition of civil society thought, although different in approach and emphasis, pinpoint this relationship.

This paper aims to address partially these questions. It will focus on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in order to shed light on the elusive nature of civil society as a metaphor of the good society. The analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood and the takfir groups suggest a re-elaboration of the meaning of “civil” and “good society” in the conceptualization of civil society. I suggest that by freeing the ideal good society from liberal democracy and by shifting the attention to the “civil” (defining both a space where and the means by which to achieve the good society), the concept of civil society can be used as a useful heuristic and analytical tool even outside its Western domain. In particular, by stressing the role of the civil space in relation to the surrounding environment, I argue that Shukri Mustafa’s group – even though peaceful and forced to the confrontation with the state – consciously placed itself outside the civil society space. By contrast, the Brotherhood’s decision to stay inside the space of civil society was the logical outcome of their philosophical and ideological elaboration (and rejection of Qutb’s concept of jihiliyya). Both the ideological position and the interaction with the state have juxtaposed the Society to the more radical groups and influenced its process of moderation and political maturation.
References

