

Cultural identity, civil society and mass communication*

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INTRODUCTION

I have the feeling that the XVI Conference of IAMCR, held in Barcelona in July 1988, devoted to the subject Cultural Identity and Mass Communication by no means exhausted this important theme. So, it seemed fitted to organize at this Conference a working-group consecrated to it, as a way to go on the research on this dynamic issue.

In this text, my main aim is to try to make some reflections on the relationship between civil society and mass communication, as another form of approaching it. In this occasion I shall not try to define the concept of cultural identity, because of its different approaches — sociological, psychological, anthropological, political science, etc — and on account of the fact that I prefer to pay a special attention to the ambiguous concept of civil society.

As a matter of fact, it is undoubted that it exists a narrow link between the cultural identity of a political community and its corresponding civil society. It is even more evident in those societies that are nations without state, as, for instance, the case of my country Catalonia. It does not exclude, however, that in certain cases, as, for instance, in France, there is an evident feeling of the relationship between both concepts.

So, my intention in this case is very modest: to offer a certain number of elements to analyze the connections existing between a definite civil society and its corresponding media system, principally the private one. My prior intention was to make a special reference to Catalonia, but I have thought that it was better to place my analysis on general terms, but without neglecting that what it is happening in Catalonia in this area is an unavoidable reference for me.

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I should like to point out, however, that a certain number of authors in the field of mass communication have already made more or less ambiguous mentions to the role of the civil society in the development of the mass communication and the impact that mass media have, conversely, on it. I have not been able, nevertheless, to find a proper approach, among sociologists and political scientists, on the influence that mass media of private ownership have in the development and consolidation of their civil society.

So, modestly, I should like to contribute with some remarks to this important issue. In fact, my thesis is that the concept and content of the civil society requires, in any case, to take into account the influence that in this process is exerted by private mass media, as fundamental elements of power, ideology, defence of interests, etc, which the dominant and usually minority groups of a civil society use to impose their views on the majority of its population.

According to this criterium, I am going to offer some definitions of civil society as to try to demonstrate that, for different reasons, this relationship between civil society and private mass media system, has not, up to now, as far as I know, been taken into account.

SOME DEFINITIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

A good deal of authors have approached this concept, but I shall limit to the most well known ones. So, even being interesting I shall not quote here British authors as Hobbes, Locke, Ferguson, etc.

So, Hegel says that it is a set of institutions which are conceived to satisfy the needs of the economic life and that regulate the play of the private interests. According to I. L. Horowitz, for Hegel the civil society represents the superficial area of the monetary relations, the field where individuals fight for the private accumulation of wealth and prosperity¹. This conception, of course, coincide, practically, with many conservative authors that reduce the civil society concept to the private economic sphere.

Marx considers the civil society as a synonym of the bourgeois society, and following Hegel defines it as the total amount of the social relations of economic nature and encompasses the set of material relations of individuals for the development determined by the productive forces.

According to him, inner it exists a relation of mutual dependence originated by class links, the needs and the life material requirements. The members of the civil society are in a strong connection because of these needs and their corresponding interests. Marx believes, indeed, that civil society is the real basis of the capitalist State.

Both conceptions reflect, in my opinion, a restrictive view as to identify this concept exclusively on its economic nature. I am convinced that it is effectively outstanding, but it is not exclusively so.

I think that Gramsci offers an interesting insight when he says that civil society is the set of organisms commonly called "internal and private" which corresponds to the hegemonic function that it is exerted in any society by the dominant group². He defines the political society or State as the direct domination or commandment through the State and the legal power.

However, if Gramsci states that the fundamental elements of the State are the State itself and the civil society, as Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi underlines, he

has asserted also that in reality both concepts may be confused with. Gramsci thinks that civil society must be conceived as the hegemony of a social group upon the whole of a society, exerted through so-called private organizations as the Church, trade unions, schools, etc.³

Another interesting view is offered by Nicolas Bobbio⁴ when he states that it is the sphere of the relations between individuals, between groups and between social classes, which develops outside the relations of power that characterize the state institutions. He distinguishes three levels:

a) The field where take place the ideological, social and religious conflicts that the State is supposed to be obliged to settle up them; b) the basis of departure of the demands to which the political system has to give an answer; c) the area of expression of the different forms of mobilization, association and organization of the social forces pretending to conquer the political power.

According to Bobbio there is a permanent connection between the state and its civil society. Besides, political parties articulate and convey the demands of the latter, which are the aim of the political decisions.

I am going to conclude this summary overview on the different conceptions regarding the civil society, quoting the Catalan sociologist Salvador Giner, who has been for many years professor in English universities. According to this author it is the sphere, historically formed by individual rights, liberties and voluntary associations, whose autonomy and mutual competition to perform their interests and private intentions are assured by a public institution called state. The state prevents itself to assume a political intervention in the internal development of this area of private activities⁵.

Giner emphasizes as the main characteristics of this institution the following ones: a) Individualism in the behavior of individuals and of groups. In this concern he stresses the role of the voluntary associations; b) Privacy as opposed to the idea of public; c) The market as a fundamental element; d) Pluralism as a culture which originates different attitudes, beliefs and conceptions, related to the corresponding ideological and interest approaches; e) An acute sense of class relations inside it⁶.

If I should have time enough it would be very suggestive to formulate a certain number of criticisms to the above-mentioned conceptions, because all of them do not encompass this issue, in my opinion, in a proper way. They all take a partial approach, that in my view is insufficient to cope with the complexity of this concept. Principally, on account of the fact that any serious research on the present concept of civil society by no means can exclude to take into account the influence that exerts in its development by the private mass media.

In any case, notwithstanding, I think that to the purpose of this contribution it was necessary to offer this set of different definitions. So, it allows me to try to expose forthwith some elements that, in my opinion, has to be taken into consideration when we try to set up any relationship between the civil society and its corresponding private mass media system.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS PRIVATE MASS MEDIA SYSTEM

First of all, I should like to say that I am referring all along this text to private ownership media because I consider that this type of mass media is, as I shall endeavour to expose, one of the crucial elements nowadays of the development of any civil society according to the ideology and interests of its dominant groups. It

is evident, that we cannot neglect the influence of the public mass media, but actually they are in practice more related to the State or to the political society, than to the civil society. Even if we assert often that public mass media must not be linked with the state but with the society — without specifying which type of it —, in too many political systems their connection with the state is too much strong.

In this sense, I should like to point out that, in my opinion, a political regime is much more democratic as more restricted is the link between the state as such and the public mass media operating in it.

I am going thus to propose some points of reflection about this issue. I have the certainty that it requires a deep research, but the aims of this text only pretend to raise some questions and to further new analysis:

1) Any civil society having a definite sense of its own cultural identity — that often may include the idea of national identity, as well — is the result of a long historical process that runs into its own specificity of community being different from all others.

2) Even if it might seem, according to the definitions that I have previously mentioned, that in practice the distinction between state and civil society is rather easy to be established. I am not at all sure of it, but conversely. This is particular true in capitalist societies where the paramount role of private initiative signifies in the reality the fundamental role played by private interests. And not only economic ones that are, indeed, the basic ones. It creates a certain difficulty to distinguish between both.

This fact originates a close relationship between the public and the private sphere. On the other hand it raises the fundamental issue of the role of power. When I refer to power I do not only allude to political power, but economic power, as well. It might seem that political power is to the state what economic power is to the civil society, but I am convinced that such a formulation is untrue and, again, confusing, on account of the fact that in practice both institutions are very much mixed up.

3) In fact it is obvious that the private economic power lies in the civil society, but the development and exercise of this power may have far-reaching political consequences. As we have seen, some authors quote as one of the main elements of civil society its relation with the marketplace, but it is not only this.

4) In the present political development, the place of political parties is, indeed, very relevant. They articulate the ideology and the interests of segments of its corresponding civil society, but at the same time, as prospective power institutions, they pretend to play a significative role in the state political process. Are they, then, a corner-point of the relationship between civil society and the state? This is an interesting question to answer, specially in political communication, because of the place it occupies in the functioning of many mass media, principally those less concerned with entertainment. Again, on account of the narrow connection existing today between politics as a process and political communication. In another words, we have to consider the evidence that most of the political development is considered as such provided to it passes through the mass media.

However, in this field, I am convinced that if we accept that interests are one of the main components of the development of any civil society, we are compelled to allow a very relevant role to the large set of pressure groups that are functioning in it. Often, pressure groups have a parallel or a complementary role to political parties, in addition to attempt to get their own objectives. So, they are not

only fundamental in the political process, but also as essential factors of development of any civil society. In this aspect we have to emphasize that the confrontation of interests is one of the foundations of it. This function is assumed by pressure groups and it ends with the concept of corporatist society, very noticeable nowadays.

5) I should like to assert the strong connection that exists between pressure groups and mass media, either public or private, on one side the former as a privileged source of messages transmitted through the latter, and on the other side, their will to own or to control, directly or indirectly, them. This is a fundamental issue in this approach.

It is particularly important the actual development of the concept of deregulation and privatisation of broadcasting, the consolidation of the concept of the industry of communication as a productive form of making profit in the business field. The unavoidable result is the constitution of powerful and diversified multimedia and the ever increasing importance of advertising in the development of mass media, a fact that unfortunately has not always been taken enough into consideration by scholars.

6) Moreover, in any civil society may be noticed the existence of elite groups that try to dominate its evolution in the political, economic, cultural, etc. fields, what originates a pluralistic approach, that may be checked when they act through the mass media as pressure groups. Pluralism is, thus, an outstanding element to be taken into account.

7) It is interesting also to think about which are the mechanisms relating the idea of civil society with the fashionable concept of public sphere — in the Habermas's sense — in the formation and expression of public opinion. Is public opinion reflecting with its pluralism the civil society as to influence the political process of the state in the main issues? How must we relate the concept of power in it? Is public opinion in its diversity the best way of approaching how a civil society is evolving in a definite orientation?

These and many other questions can be put forward when we try to envisage the connections between civil society and its private media system. Indeed, I have not pretended to give any answer. My only wish is to formulate the following

CONCLUSION

I am quite convinced that it is necessary to stimulate scholars interested for this subject in its broad sense and with its implications in the field of political communication, as to consecrate their best efforts to research in this area with an interdisciplinary view.

It is very much fitted indeed to place these reflections on a particular case, for instance, as far as I am concerned, in Catalonia, because of obvious reasons. But in this opportunity I have thought it was better to deal with it on a general basis.

In any case, summing up, I should like to assert that any serious approach to the concept of civil society requires to consider the role that mass media in general, but particularly, private mass media, plays in its development from a political, sociological, economic, cultural point of view. Indeed, if the social interactions in any society are conveyed principally through mass media, we have thus to underline the fundamental role played by them. It should be considered a serious mistake not to take it into consideration.

NOTES

1. *Fundamentos de sociología política*, Fondo de Cultura Económica de México, México, 1972, pages 92-93.
2. *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*, Torino, 1948, quoted by Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, in *Pour Gramsci*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris, 1974, page 163.
3. *Id id.*, page 164, quoting *Lettere dal carcere*, Torino, 1972, page 481.
4. *Sociedad civil*, in *Diccionario de Política* of Norberto Bobbio and Nicola Matteucci, Siglo XXI de España eds., Madrid, 1982, second volume, page 1575 and following.
5. *Ensayos civiles*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 1987, page 56.
6. *Id id.*, pages 56-62.