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*FROM 'ANTIPOLITICS' TO 'ANTI-POLITICS': WHAT  
BECAME OF EAST EUROPEAN 'CIVIL SOCIETY'?*

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## **Section 1 – Introduction : The Conceptual Travels of ‘Civil Society’**

*“Few social and political concepts have travelled so far in their life and changed their meaning so much,” (Pelczynski, 1988; p363).*

### ***The Revival of an Historical Concept***

Perhaps the most important legacy of the developments preceding the dramatic events of 1989 in Eastern Europe has been the universal revival of the concept of civil society. Loosely conceived of as a public sphere located between familial relationships and the state, civil society comprises a multitude of autonomous voluntary associations which facilitate debate and encourage the active participation of citizens in public life. With its inclusive ethos, the existence of civil society is deemed to augment the institutional and procedural elements of democracy. Described in this way, as the ‘human factor’ in democracy and development, civil society has a definite intuitive appeal, capturing the imagination of groups and individuals across the political and ideological spectrum (Chandhoke, 2001). However, its popularity enables it to be used as a vehicle by all sides, ultimately detracting from its value: *“The ubiquity of a concept...may prove ultimately to be its undoing,”* (ibid; p6). The ambiguity with which this term is beset only serves to intensify the need to examine the meanings and debates attached to it, and to locate it within its historical context.

Hann (1996) traces the genesis of the idea to the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, who defined civil society as a state based on the rule of law, and

conceived of it as a means to reconcile the pursuit of individual interests with collective needs. This definition, closely related to Locke's conception of the 'social contract', and the antithesis of Hobbes' 'state of nature', describes the principles upon which the state was created. While recognising a necessary and mutual relationship, Hegel was the first to draw a conceptual distinction between the state and the sphere of civil society, a sphere in which ideas and activities independent from the state were expressed. In Hegel's view, civil society was the domain of the pursuit of self-interest, yet also encompassed a social and moral dimension (Pelczynski, 1988).

For Marx, civil society was an inherently modern phenomenon, specifically related to the capitalist mode of production; in other words, 'bourgeois society': the realm in which the hegemony of the ruling class is both disguised and maintained (Hann, 1996). On the other hand, Gramsci - from a neo-Marxist perspective - considered civil society to be the cultural arena in which ideas are contested and thus a potential source of challenge to the ruling class; the so-called 'war of position' (Pelczynski, 1988; p365). Marx and Gramsci exemplified a nineteenth century tendency to perceive civil society in economic terms, and as intrinsically political in nature. However, when the term came into popular usage in the 1970s and 1980s, it was via the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville, arguably the founder of contemporary notions of civil society. He effectively de-politicised the concept by separating 'political society' from 'civil society' and designating as civil society 'associationalism' of a cultural, as opposed to a political, nature (Kumar, 2001).

### ***‘Civil Society’: Contested or Hegemonic Concept?***

While notions of civility, tolerance, plurality, and the rule of law provide some basis of consensus, it is evident that there are considerable, and indeed irreconcilable, discrepancies between the various interpretations of civil society. The brief historical synopsis above serves to highlight three interlinking debates pertaining to civil society, each of which is relevant to, and will be subsequently examined in, the context of Eastern Europe.

#### **(1) Civil Society, the State, and Power Relations**

Despite its necessary autonomy from the state, civil society does not exist in a void, but has an intimate and interdependent relationship with the state and other power structures. It is predicated upon the rule of law, ensuring that its existence is legally rather than arbitrarily guaranteed. This, as Gill (2002) states, presupposes the existence of a “*permissive*” state (p86), by definition a strong, stable and legitimate state whose power is not threatened by the existence of autonomous social spaces. Moreover, this interdependence challenges what Chandhoke (2001) has identified as a tendency to elevate civil society above the state; to see civil society as a “*panacea for all problems*,” (Kaldor *et al*, 2001; p3). In establishing a dichotomy between state and society, an antagonistic relationship is often posited, which idealises society as an inherently positive and homogeneous entity and neglects the conflicts and inequalities residing therein. This failure to comprehend that the structures of power and domination constitutive of the state

are also reflected, and indeed advanced, in society constitute what Harriss (2001; p1) refers to as “*new weapons in the armoury of the ‘anti-politics machine’<sup>1</sup>*,” in which ‘anti-politics’ is construed as a negative process of depoliticisation.

## (2) The Hegemonic Discourse of Civil Society

Integral to this apparent depoliticising tendency in civil society discourse has been the ascendancy of the western neo-liberal paradigm, in which civil society is perceived to be a context-specific phenomenon, closely related to the rise of individualism, pluralism, and market capitalism (Rau, 1991). In civil society, according to this perspective, the protection of individual values and interests is paramount, pursued on a voluntary basis in an unregulated, competitive marketplace (ibid). According to Gill (2002), and reflecting a general consensus, its very existence is predicated upon the rise of a bourgeois middle class which is capable of pursuing its economic interests via these autonomous associations. At the same time, the co-operation and trust engendered by civil society is considered to be an asset in democratisation and economic development, overcoming problems of imperfect information and enforceability in market transactions and legal contracts (Putnam, 1993).

Rieff (1999), condemns the way in which civil society is presented in the neutral rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The anti-politics machine’ was a term coined by James Ferguson (1994) to describe the process he observed in development projects whereby the failure to recognise the pivotal role played by societal power structures in implementation actually served to reinforce those structures.

of participation and self-help, when in reality it serves to promote the tenets of liberal market capitalism, by reducing the size and scope of the state. This identification of civil society with non-political associations reflects, according to Kaldor *et al* (2001; p7), the fact that, “...the US does indeed think it has the ideal civil society, and, being the hegemonic power, allows no alternative vision.” Hann (1996) perceives this notion to be ethnocentric, excluding alternative definitions and presumptively delimiting the contexts in which it may thrive. Moreover, Alexander (1998) contends that the western market-based model, emphasising rational self-interest as a motivating factor, does not concur with early conceptions which contained a definite moral and social element: “[s]horn of its co-operative, democratic, associative, and public ties...civil society...came to be pejoratively associated with market capitalism alone,” (Alexander, 1998; p4). According to Chandhoke (2001), what was once a contested concept is now dominated by this hegemonic western discourse.

### (3) Descriptive Versus Prescriptive Concept

Rieff (1999) distinguishes between descriptive or empirical aspects of civil society which objectively describe what actually exists (autonomous associations, a high level of public participation, and so on), and those of a prescriptive or normative nature which depict what ought to exist. The latter depict civil society as an inherently positive entity to which all should aspire, espousing what are thought to be an integral set of – almost invariably virtuous - norms and values, such as tolerance of diversity (Hall, 1995), and civility (Gill,



2002). However, as Rieff (1999) recognises, there is a strong element of subjectivity in this categorisation, such that the terms of inclusion are contentious: “[c]onventionally, we use civil society to apply to groups, societies and social trends of which we approve...” (p11). This controversy reiterates the fact that, ultimately, the definition of civil society is relative to specific contexts and is thereby vulnerable to appropriation.

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Section 2 of this paper will examine the development of the concept of ‘civil society’ in the unique context of communist Eastern Europe, emphasising the novel interpretation bestowed upon it: specifically, the notion of ‘antipolitics’. Section 3 will then analyse the proclaimed ‘victory’ of civil society and its apparent demise in the postcommunist context, considering some of the explanations proposed for this phenomenon. Section 4 will endeavour to construct an alternative explanation for the apparent demobilisation of the population, based on the assertion that elements of the dissidents’ notion of ‘antipolitics’ have, perhaps unwittingly, served to further Harriss’ understanding of ‘antipolitics’ outlined above, perhaps accounting for the dwindling popular resonance of this term. Finally, the conclusion will draw together the developments – both conceptual and actual - which East European civil society has undergone and use these to illustrate some of the problems associated with the concept and consider how – and indeed whether - this concept can regain its meaning, both in this context and more generally. While general

trends will be examined, specific references will be made to Poland and Czechoslovakia<sup>2</sup>, highlighting both similarities and differences between each case.

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<sup>2</sup> Tendencies observed refer specifically to the area of Czechoslovakia which subsequently became the Czech Republic.

## Section 2 - 'Civil Society' in the 'Post-Totalitarian' Context

*"...the banner of civil society has been raised in very different social worlds,"* (Hall,1995; p1).

### *The 'Post-Totalitarian' Context*

Havel's<sup>3</sup> seminal account of the nature of the regimes in Eastern Europe, 'The Power of the Powerless' (1985), distinguished them from classical dictatorships by assigning them the label "*post-totalitarian*" (p27). The primary distinction, in his view, was their reliance upon ideology to maintain a monopoly of power, to the extent that every individual, merely by conforming to the - often symbolic - requirements of the system, was instrumental in the persistence of that system:-

*"...by accepting the prescribed ritual, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game... he has himself become a player in the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place,"* (ibid; p31).

While obscuring the level of individual opposition to the regime, this ritualistic compliance obliged people to "*live within the lie*" (ibid; p35), creating an alienated and apathetic population, and a system of anonymous and monopolistic power.

Buchowski (1994) attributes this phenomenon to the inherent problems involved in maintaining an externally-imposed regime whose legitimacy was extremely tenuous and whose power was essentially weak. Communist rule rested upon the complete domination

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<sup>3</sup> Havel, a prominent Czech playwright and dissident, was one of the most forthright critics of the regime and was elected as President following the collapse of the communist regime.

of all spheres of life, such that any behaviour which did not conform to the needs of the system automatically constituted opposition to that system (Kolakowski, 1971). Matraszek (1989) illustrates how, in this way, the independent associations constitutive of civil society presented a threat to the state's monopoly, compelling the authorities to suppress such activity. State intrusion also served to politicise all aspects of life (Konrad, 1984), so that even groups which were ostensibly non-political became political by virtue of their defiance of the regime's hegemony, forcing them out of the public sphere and into the private. The autonomous voluntary organisations of civil society were replaced by "*compulsory pseudo-associations*" (Kolakowski, 1971; p41), devised by the Party-State as a means to overcome the impulse for independent social forms.

Evidently, the regime operating in Eastern Europe during the communist period could not, in the classical sense, be considered conducive to the development of civil society. Fundamental preconditions were absent, notably the rule of law, tolerance of diversity, and an individualist ethos. Indeed, the very notion of a social sphere separate from the state contradicted the concept of the all-encompassing state: "*communism... abrogates the distinction between state and society,*" (Kumar, 2001; p19). Nevertheless, private resistance existed from the outset and was increasingly expressed in the post-Stalinist period, typically in the expanding sphere of independent public activity. Gill (2002), believes this to be a testament to the durability of society and pre-communist values in the face of repression, but this is to idealise the pre-communist period and fails to recognise

that the system's dominance was never absolute. Furthermore, the regime was not static and the degree of tolerance of independent activity varied over time and between countries (Pickvance, 1999).

### ***New Ideas: 'Antipolitics' and Morality***

The identification of the concept of 'civil society' with opposition groups can be attributed to the rhetoric of the dissidents; those intellectuals who refused to conform to the system's demands. Inevitably, given the unique context within which this term was applied, there was a degree of novelty about its usage. Notably, 'civil society' was something inherently positive to which the dissidents aspired, endowing it with a normative, rather than simply an empirical, meaning. Opposition initially manifested itself in 'revisionism': the socialist conviction that the system could be "*humani[s]ed and democrati[s]ed... 'from within'*" (Michnik, 1985; p135). However, the brutal suppression of uprisings in Hungary and Poland in 1956, and the Warsaw Pact invasion of reforming Czechoslovakia in 1968, undermined this conviction and led many to concede that the system was unreformable. The strategy of the opposition therefore became that of "*...exploiting inherent contradictions in the system,*" (Kolakowski, 1971; p42) in order to expand the scope of autonomous activity.

Civil society discourse expressed the aims of the opposition, not only in strategic terms but also in terms of the principles on which that strategy was based. While many of these

were undoubtedly reactions to the restricted context imposed by the system, they were nevertheless derived from a philosophy which had an appeal and relevance external to that context. According to Tucker (2000), in his analysis of the writings of Czech dissident and martyr Jan Patočka, the dissidents' philosophy was derived from the tradition of phenomenology; emphasising individual consciousness, conviction, and intuition. Havel's notion of dissidence as "*living the truth*" (1985; p40) - in contrast to "*living within the lie*" - expressed the principles of dignity, integrity, and morality so central to East European conceptions of civil society. Ost (1990; p68) describes this as "*anticipatory democracy*," the idea of living "*as if*" democratic guarantees had been instituted. By living according to these principles and - by extension - refusing to comply with the demands of the system, one not only reclaimed one's 'authenticity', but also undermined the stability of the 'post-totalitarian' system (Havel, 1985).

Most of the components of the 'philosophy of dissidence' can be encompassed within the idea of 'antipolitics', a phrase coined by Konrad (1984) to refer to the outright rejection of the pursuit of power by the opposition. This provided an antidote to the politicisation of life under communism which had resulted in a widespread popular distrust of politics, and reflected the realisation that civil society must operate within the boundaries set by the existing system rather than attempting to usurp that system. However, this principle of the "*self-limiting revolution*" (Staniszkas, 1984; p8) also contained a moral and ethical dimension; a practical adherence to the conviction that power is a corrupting force which

contravenes the *raison d'être* of the intellectual; the development of thought (Konrad, 1984). The fact that civil society, founded upon the principle of 'antipolitics', did not constitute an explicit challenge to the state is indicative of the belief that the change which would ultimately undermine the regime was to take place, not in the realm of politics, but in that of consciousness (Michnik, 1985); an "*existential revolution*" (Havel, 1985; p92).

Michnik's 'new evolutionism' (1985) articulated the need for gradual, evolutionary change, reflecting a distrust of utopianism, and the ethical rejection of violence. The opposition was conceived of in moral rather than political terms (Konrad, 1984), and there was an imperative to occupy the moral high ground vis-à-vis the state. In condemning traditional forms of politics, the dissidents' ideas essentially paved the way for a new type of politics, based upon the mobilisation of popular participation in an autonomous public sphere. As Ost (1990; p16) expressed: "*Antipolitics...is not a negation of politics, but a relocation of the political public from state to society.*" In practical terms, Benda (1978) envisaged a "*parallel polis*" (Tucker, 2000; p127) whose independent economic, political, and social institutions would represent an alternative sphere to that of the state. The dissidents revived the notion of active citizenship and facilitated the gradual development of what came to be known as 'civil society': autonomous associations which negated the suffocating conformism of the system and preached tolerance, individuality, and pluralism.

Despite the appeal to values integral to civil society, the novel context ensured that East European ideas diverged from the dominant western liberal paradigm. This has led many to question whether the developments apparent in Eastern Europe can justifiably be categorised as civil society, or whether the term should be widened so as to include these divergent forms. According to Tymowski (1993), what distinguished activities in Eastern Europe from those thought to constitute civil society in Western Europe and North America, was their location in networks of family and friendship groups, reflected in values which were “*communitarian and mutualist, not individualist and pluralist*” (p199). Wesolowski (1995) describes this interpretation of civil society as a “*socialisation of the classical view*” (p113) and identifies it as a legacy of the distinctive characteristics of the region, particularly its history of external domination. From the classical perspective, these features may be deemed to negate the individualist and market-orientated aspects central to civil society, yet Ost (1990) considers this to reflect a return to earlier conceptions of civil society.

### ***The Global Dimension***

In some respects, East European divergence from Western models of civil society was not simply incidental but was a purposeful critique of the perceived superiority of liberal capitalist democracy. Havel, in particular, considered many of the negative aspects of the communist system to be integral to modernity in general, citing a “*...failure to understand the totalitarian systems for what they ultimately are: a convex mirror of all modern*



*civilisation,*” (1998; p389). Several dissidents identified a crisis of democracy in the West which had undermined the essence of the concept via the prevalence of the impersonal rule of elites and institutions, and compounded by apathetic populations. Civil society was an expression of their aim to return to the ‘true’ meaning of democracy as genuine citizen participation; in other words, to substantive rather than procedural democracy: *“Democracy was to be, at last, not just abstract power upon the people and for the people, but also by the people,”* (Grabowska, 1995; p196).

As such, the dissidents were not simply seeking to emulate the West, as widely presumed but, on the contrary, felt that their approach had something unique to offer. Ogrodinski (1995) expresses the feeling that civil society was construed as an alternative to the capitalism-socialism dichotomy, the elusive ‘third way’ between state and market. At the very least, the events in Eastern Europe prompted people to question the extent to which the ideals taken for granted and promoted throughout the world, such as democracy and freedom, had really been fulfilled. The revival and re-examination of these ideals is an important explanatory factor in the universal enthusiasm for the concept following the events of 1989: *“...while antipolitical politics can remind us of the value of what we have, it can also remind us of the **limits** of what we have,”* (Isaac, 1999; p153).

A further global facet of East European civil society has been outlined by Kaldor (1999), who emphasises the dissidents’ utilisation of global linkages, giving rise to the concept of

a “*global civil society*”. The signing of the Helsinki Accord in 1975 committed the Soviet bloc to the protection of human rights in return for certain territorial assurances. This provided a legal basis on which the dissidents could pursue their objectives, and allied with the accompanying period of détente in Cold War hostilities, precipitated a degree of relaxation from the Soviet authorities which widened the scope for autonomous activity. In addition, the effects of Helsinki combined with developments in communications technology to create links between East European dissidents and western peace movements which Kaldor considers to have been instrumental in ‘creating spaces’ for civil society (Corrin, 1993). Such linkages demonstrate the interdependent relationship between civil society, the state, and the international system.

### ***State - Civil Society Relationship***

The ‘anti-political’ ethos adopted by East European civil society meant that, ostensibly, its relationship with the state was one of avoidance; an attempt to ignore the state while ensuring that the state’s coercive tendencies were not aggravated by its activities. Given the repressive context and the threat posed by civil society activity, however, such a strategy was inconceivable and, in reality, the two spheres interacted in significant ways. Civil society, as an ‘illegal’ entity and pursuing principles so alien to the communist system, necessarily defined itself as united in opposition to the state: “*Civil society was ‘us’; the authorities were ‘them’*,” (Smolar, 1996; p24). Rather than through explicit and direct political opposition, this was expressed in terms of a covert cultural opposition

which operated within the restricted space provided by the state framework. In this context, civil society could be characterised as “*defensive*” (Weigle & Butterfield, 1992; p1), whereby its purpose was perceived to be the protection of individuals from the encroachment of the state. Weigle & Butterfield (1992) liken this relationship to Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ in which civil society becomes the sphere of contestation of the ruling group’s hegemony.

However, envisaging civil society in this way amounted to what Ost (1990) describes as an “*ingenious error*” (p57): the failure to appreciate the extent to which this sphere is both dependent upon the state and is affected by its actions. The relationship between the state and civil society is a dynamic one in which the latter responds to the “*political opportunity structures*” (Glenn, 2001; p13) provided by developments at the state level. The relaxation in state control of social activities elucidated above, a defensive measure in response to external events and dwindling legitimacy, facilitated the development of what Weigle & Butterfield (1992) categorise as an “*emergent*” civil society (p1). Moreover, the fact that both entities were derived from the same social and political structures meant that “[t]he communists and the dissidents (and/or societies) were part of the same discourse,” (Buchowski, 1994; p146-7) and that the characteristics of the state were often reflected in those of civil society.

### ***Emerging Civil Societies: Developments in Poland and Czechoslovakia***

In the eyes of the international community, Polish - and indeed East European – civil society was epitomized by the activities of Solidarity, a movement which grew out of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR). The latter, as the name intimates, was established in 1976 as an independent Trade Union for the protection and advancement of workers' interests, whose activities were primarily in the form of strikes protesting against declining standards of living. Michnik (1999; p3) considers the creation of Solidarity in 1980 to have encompassed three great Polish political traditions: “...at a certain meeting point of what I would call the **intelligentsia's opposition**, ...and of what was then the **workers' opposition**...and of the **Catholic church**,” (my emphasis). Civil society therefore represented the fusing of the workers' pragmatic responses with the moral opposition of the intellectuals, building upon a history of nationalist resistance to external domination (Buchowski, 1994). The dissemination and expression of nonconformist attitudes was facilitated by the protective shield of the Roman Catholic Church (Buchowski, 1996), which had succeeded in negotiating a position independent from the state and therefore represented a bastion of civil society ideals and activities.

KOR and Solidarity were built upon the principles of what Michnik (1985; p49) describes as “*openness not conspiracy*,” and of civil society as the realm of genuine popular participation. Both can be partly attributed to the relatively tolerant policy operated by the Polish authorities towards independent activity, a position which was further relaxed in

reaction to expressions of popular discontent in 1956 (Tucker, 2000), and which explains the grassroots appeal of the movement (Stokes, 1993). Conceived of as an independent Trade Union, the pinnacle of Solidarity's success, via a combination of opposition pressure and regime accommodation, was the signing of the Gdańsk Agreement in 1980, establishing Solidarity as a legal, independent Trade Union. However, the legalisation of Solidarity challenged many of the ethical principles of the movement, forcing it to construct a positive relationship with the state (Ost, 1990). Its failure to understand the implications of this, combined with the ambivalence of the state, resulted in the imposition of martial law and the withdrawal of legal status in 1981, forcing Solidarity underground (Michnik, 1985).<sup>4</sup>

The discourse of civil society in Czechoslovakia occurred against a markedly different historical and contemporary background. As a result, Charter 77 – the main protagonist of civil society – was, both in principle and in practice, far removed from the united and coherent movement represented by Solidarity:-

*“Charter 77 is not an organisation; it has no rules, no permanent bodies or formal membership. It embraces everyone who agrees with its ideas and participates in its work. It does not form the basis of any political activity...it seeks to promote the general public interest,”*  
(Charter 77 Declaration, Havel (Ed.), 1985; p221).

Its remit was the promotion of government adherence to the tenets of the Helsinki Agreement, set out in a charter demanding the protection of human rights and civil

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the long-term implications of these developments will be discussed more fully in Section 4

liberties. As such, the opposition was of a far less tangible nature than that provided by Solidarity, largely expressing itself with symbolic references while confining itself to the cultural sphere (Tucker, 2000). Partly as a reaction to its abstract form, dissent was primarily the domain of intellectuals and the rhetoric of ‘civil society’ never really captured the imagination or the support of the mass of the population (Stokes, 1993).

Gill (2002) suggests that the prerequisites of the ‘classical view’ of civil society were evident in Czechoslovakia prior to the communist incursion: industrial development, an established middle-class, and a nominally democratic regime. However, the extent of society’s suppression by communist forces in 1948, allied with that following the ‘Prague Spring’ uprising of 1968, all but destroyed any vestiges of civil society (ibid). It was further undermined during the period of ‘normalisation’ following 1968, in which the ‘social contract’ ensured compliance via the satisfaction of material needs (Stokes, 1993), and resistance was quelled by force. The risks associated with dissent, alongside the benefits of compliance, discouraged dissent and “...*effectively isolated the dissidents from the rest of the population,*” (Tucker, 2000; p129). As in Poland, the Catholic Church enjoyed popular support but, in contrast to the Polish situation, the dissidents had no such alliance, either with the Church or the population (Stokes, 1993).

### Section 3 – The Rise and Fall of ‘Civil Society’

*“Just when intellectuals...were celebrating the return of civil society as an ideal, they have encountered it as a social fact. It’s like a cold shower the morning after,”*  
(Alexander, 1998; p1).

#### ***1989: Civil Society Victorious?***

Eternally etched in the minds of observers the world over, the unforeseen and dramatic events surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall – the defining symbol of the end of the communist regimes in East and Central Europe – have been interpreted in numerous ways. Most significantly, at least for the purposes of this paper, has been the proclamation of 1989 as indicative of the “...*victory of civil society*,” (Smolar, 1996; p28). This presumed triumph of ‘good people’ over a ‘bad system’ restored faith in humanity, encouraging considerable optimism, not only with regard to the future of the post-communist countries, but on an international scale. As Palouš (2000; p103) describes:- “*It was as if the world had become young again, full of hope, good will, and great expectations.*” Such enthusiasm, based upon the anticipation of a new type of politics grounded in the principles of democracy, citizenship, and morality, was compounded by the accession to political power of prominent dissidents. This new politics would, it was assumed, be characterised by the associations of civil society which were expected to emerge in response to the end of the repressive regimes (Kolarska-Bobińska, 1994).

Optimism of this type was derived from a misinterpretation of the reality, both of the

nature of the transition, and of the role of civil society in that transition. While the rhetoric of civil society and mass participation was rife during the so-called ‘velvet revolution’ and while social forces had a role to play in the unfolding drama, it is clear that the demise of the communist regimes cannot be attributed to ‘people power’ (Hall, 1995). Instead, their collapse should be considered an amalgamation of international factors (such as the Gorbachev reforms, and developments in media and communications technology), and domestic ones (economic problems, popular discontent, and so on), all of which exposed the inherent contradictions of the system. It was primarily the increasing frailty of communist control which provided, what Glenn (2001) terms, the “*political opportunity structures*” (p13) that precipitated mass mobilisation. Contrary to the popular romantic portrayal of populations valiantly overthrowing oppressive governments, the transition occurred primarily via the roundtable negotiations between communists and dissidents (Tucker, 2000), and was therefore “...*not an existential revolution but a political one,*” (ibid; p170).

Nevertheless, despite the obvious incongruity between their ‘antipolitical’ principles and their acquirement of political power, the ex-dissident leaders in both Poland and Czechoslovakia maintained their commitment to many of the ideals of their civil society discourse. In an address to the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, the newly-appointed President Havel acknowledged the dilemmas with which he was faced, yet emphasised his conviction that “[i]t is possible to pursue what we perhaps imprecisely called ‘non-



*political politics' – i.e. a policy which is based on the dictates of conscience,"* (Havel, 1991; p219). He also reaffirmed his belief in a politics based on civil society and active citizenship, actively encouraging the creation of autonomous organisations and public participation as a counter to state power (Isaac, 1999). Likewise, Michnik (2000) asserts that the Mazowiecki government in Poland, a Solidarity-based coalition formed as a result of the roundtable negotiations, was one of *"hope, consensus and unity"* (p85). Its mandate was to uphold the principle of civil society and to facilitate its realisation by constructing a government based on democratic consent (ibid).

### ***Civil Society's Untimely Demise***

In the immediate aftermath of the revolutions there was some evidence of the anticipated eruption of autonomous social activity, with the emergence of a plethora of organisations, from political parties to NGOs (Whipple, 1991). However, this level of mass mobilisation could be sustained only as long as the euphoria remained, and with it the belief that 'the people' had a significant role to play in the new system. Rapidly this enthusiasm diminished as the dilemmas of transition and restoration became apparent, superseded by feelings of disillusionment and apathy. Tymowski (1993) refers to this as a *"post-revolutionary hangover"* (p192) which manifested itself in declining public participation in elections, political parties, and in the activities associated with civil society. Despite the promises of a political and social system based upon the ideals and practices of mass participation, Howard (2000) demonstrates that organisational membership is actually

lower in post-communist Eastern Europe than in either the established democracies or the new democracies of Latin America and Southern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Tucker (2000) bemoans the lack of interest groups which characterise civil society in the West, concluding that the accomplishment of civil society appears to be some way off in Eastern Europe.

According to Kolakowski (1990, cited in Buchowski, 1994; p141) “[n]o revolution ever succeeded without bringing bitter disappointment almost in the very moment of victory.”

In many ways, then, the apparent mass demobilisation following the ‘people’s revolutions’ can be considered within the realm of the inevitable, as a realisation that the hopes generated could never be fulfilled (Michnik, 1998). East European civil society, despite its purported rejection of utopianism, was propelled by idealised visions of the future and of notions such as democracy. These fallacies were soon exposed as it became apparent that “...there is no ‘real’ democracy, only ‘real-world’ democracies which rarely compare favo[u]rably with the ‘ideal’,” (Körösenyi, 1999; p228). However, both Michnik (1998) and Pickvance (1999) reject the assumption that the decline of autonomous social activity is necessarily a negative development, and indeed categorise it as indicative of a ‘return to normality’. They assert that it was the exceptional circumstances surrounding the liberalisation and collapse of the communist regimes which precipitated mass mobilisation but that this was both unsustainable and

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<sup>5</sup> Howard’s conclusions are derived from an analysis of the 1997 World Values Survey which indicate lower membership in all organisations with the notable exception of the previously state-run Trade Unions, which have retained some of their residual membership.

unnecessary in postcommunist conditions. Such general explanations can be supplemented by the more specific factors to which we now turn.

### ***Communist Legacies & The Absence of Prerequisites***

The universal optimism generated by the demise of the communist regimes was, in many ways, predicated upon a failure to fully appreciate the impact of those regimes upon the people who participated in them. As Michnik (1998) concedes, “[t]he death of the Communist system does not mean the end of totalitarian habits,” (p152). Primary among the traits of the system was its paternalistic inclination, such that “[l]ife under communism was a life without responsibility...” (ibid; p272). The provision of basic needs and guarantees of social welfare were intrinsic to the legitimacy of the state and the acquiescence of the population. However, the dependency and lack of a sense of individual responsibility they engendered persisted beyond the collapse of the system, constituting an impediment to independent activity (Tucker, 2000). Communist doctrine also encouraged collective over individual behaviour, so that society operated on the basis of family and friendship networks (Tymowski, 1993). These are assumed to give rise to an “*amoral familism*” (Tarkowska & Tarkowski, 1991)<sup>6</sup> in which relations of trust and co-operation are confined to family, a tendency inimical to the emergence of the voluntary, pluralistic, and individual networks of civil society.

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<sup>6</sup> This term was coined by Banfield (1979) in his analysis of ‘backward’ Italian societies.

A further psychological legacy of communism, evident in the civil society rhetoric, is a fundamental antipathy towards politics, a testament to its misuse by the authorities. As a general rule, people continue to express considerable mistrust towards politics (Jørgensen, 1992), mindful of the corruption, intimidation, and lies with which it was associated under communist rule. Party-state intrusion into, and control over, all aspects of life and their consequent politicisation compounded this negative view, manifesting itself in apolitical attitudes which have prevailed (Heller, 2000). Indeed, Kolarska-Bobińska (1994) notes that, ironically, people's reluctance to participate in the new political processes and in the organisations of civil society is a direct reaction against the compulsory participation in communist elections and organisations; they are now "*free **not** to participate*" (Howard, 2000, my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> In addition, communist dogma actively inhibited the development of many of the supposed pre-requisites of civil society: an individualist ethos; tolerance of diversity; and the emergence of a bourgeois middle class (Gill, 2002).

### ***Postcommunist Realities***

Howard (2000) proposes that participation in the sphere of civil society is related to economic affluence, as only those of sufficient means have the inclination, time, or ability to participate. Each of the former communist countries has succumbed to a process of severe economic decline as the introduction of market forces has exposed endemic structural weaknesses. On an individual level, many have suffered as the provision of

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<sup>7</sup> This forms part of the title of Howard's analysis of declining civil society participation in Eastern Europe.

social welfare on which they were reliant has been withdrawn (Buchowski, 1994), and the hopes of emulating the wealth of the West have dissolved. According to Ash (1999), the ideals which motivated civil society have been undermined by the market processes of privatisation, economic liberalisation, and the exclusions created by competition, as “... *‘politics of values’ speedily gave way to ‘politics of interests,’*” (Smolar, 1996; p35). In short, economic reform and recession have diverted attention to more immediately pressing problems, while simultaneously creating divergent interests which have fragmented the population.

The effects of economic uncertainty have been compounded by the concurrent processes of political change, in which the totalitarian regimes have been replaced by reforming ones. However, despite the dramatic symbolism of the revolutions, authoritarian regimes have not been transformed into democratic ones overnight, retaining many of the structural features, and even personnel, of communist rule (Bernhard, 1996). Grabowska (1995) cites deficiencies in legal guarantees and the continued predominance of authoritarian over democratic means of rule as explanatory factors in civil society’s decline. Even where democratic structures and processes have been successfully instituted, they have seldom served to encourage the independent, self-organisation of civil society. In fact, Gill (2002) states that such activity has actually been undermined as the state has become a legitimate entity and is thus considered a more appropriate realm of participation. Furthermore, the need to make decisions and overcome logistical

dilemmas has rendered the principles of East European civil society somewhat irrelevant, and has necessitated the sacrifice of principle to pragmatism (Wesolowski, 1995). According to Palouš (2000), several former dissidents have even explicitly condemned autonomous activity.

Alongside the immense economic and political upheavals of transition have been changes in social structures and in the individual psyche. Kolarska–Bobińska (1994) has noted the ideological void which has accompanied the end of communism as the value system which dictated action and thought disintegrated. She defines the effect on individuals as “*anomy*” (p48): the lack of a sense of purpose and control caused by fundamental changes in structures of meaning. The market and democratic processes which have replaced communist ones do not provide meaning to individual lives, instilling a sense of disorientation (Tymowski, 1993) and uncertainty. As Smolar (1996; p34) expresses: “[p]eople seem to feel ‘lost’ in the new reality of postcommunism,” as social bonds disappear along with the communist organisations which created them. People are no longer united in opposition to, and fear of, the repressive state but feel isolated and bewildered, feelings which are not conducive to the relationships of trust and association central to civil society. Where civil society was once the rallying cry of those who sought to end communist rule, it has provided neither meaning nor solution in the postcommunist context.

### ***Civil Society: A Victim of its Own Success?***

There is a sense in which its apparent ‘victory’ over the repressive state has actually fatally undermined civil society in Eastern Europe: “...*a civil society whose essence was radical opposition to the communist state could not survive the disappearance of that state,*” (Smolar, 1996; p28). With the removal of the focal point of its activities, what united civil society no longer existed, prompting cognitive changes in the definition of this sphere. The accession of its most prominent members to positions of political power initiated a process of “...*decapitation through success,*” (Bernhard, 1996; p313). This has confused allegiances and blurred the distinction between civil society and state (Buchowski, 1996), to the extent that, according to Kolarska-Bobińska (1994), people have refrained from participating in civil society in the belief that the new governments are acting in the interests of ‘the people’ and will simply be hindered by such activity.

For East European civil society, in a many ways, the “...*strengths of its period of opposition became the weaknesses of its period of rule, and of its relevance as a general model of civil society,*” (Kumar, 2001; p387). The antipolitical stance of the dissidents was impractical as a principle for exercising power, but it was also an inadequate framework for the activities of postcommunist civil society. Civil society’s antagonistic relationship with the state was no longer appropriate, while its unity actually prevented the diversification of interests characteristic of ‘genuine’ civil society (ibid). Its tactical alliance with the Catholic Church became problematic (ibid), as many of the Church’s

doctrines exhibited levels of hierarchy, dogmatism, intolerance, and exclusion which were antithetical to the ideals of civil society. Even civil society's relationship with its founding fathers – the intellectuals – was a cause for concern.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Implications***

Disillusionment, uncertainty and exclusion have manifested themselves in a number of tendencies which arguably further inhibit the development of the 'political culture' of civil society and work against democracy. The weakness of a democratic and inclusive civil society encourages a reliance upon kinship and personal ties, leaving ordinary people vulnerable to what Tismaneanu (2000b) terms "*uncivil society*" (p15): the pejorative and undemocratic ideologies of nationalist and religious populism. Such movements, characterised by charismatic leaders and a collectivist ethos, mobilise support via their promise of radical change but tend to be fundamentalist and exclusionary in nature (ibid). "*Nationalistic and religious feelings merge, blending effortlessly with the economic discontent of all those anxious to reach the promised land. This is how populism acquires its muscle,*" (Buchowski, 1994; p145). While traditionally excluded from classical definitions of civil society, in reality many associations which exhibit these features are still categorised within the realm of civil society.

Notwithstanding the general assertion of a deficit in East European civil society, there is

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<sup>8</sup> Many of these issues will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.



no discernible consensus as to the implications, or even the extent, of its apparent decline. Debate tends to polarise between the ‘optimists’ who envisage the gradual and inevitable emergence of a genuine civil society alongside the prescribed processes of economic and political reform, and the ‘pessimists’ who assert that East European history and ‘culture’ precludes the development of civil society. However, both positions are grounded upon western assumptions as to the definition of civil society, neither taking account of divergences between the western model and East European usage of the term. There appears to be little consideration of the fact that this phenomenon appears to affect more-or-less equally Poland, whose civil society movement was widely considered to be one of mass participation, and Czechoslovakia, where there has been a more general acceptance that the movement was dominated by intellectuals. This amounts to an insufficient recognition of the changes in the conceptualisation of civil society in Eastern Europe, and their implications for its popularity and levels of participation.

## Section 4 – From ‘Antipolitics’ to ‘Anti-politics’

*“The fate of the concept of civil society in East-Central Europe has thus become an ideological one. In theory it promises the creation of autonomous forms of social organisation independent of the state, but in practice it serves to legitimise the subjugation of the majority of society to the possessors of economic or cultural capital. It is an ideology of exclusion, not of emancipation,” (Lomax, 1997; p60).<sup>9</sup>*

### ***The Dilution of East European Civil Society***

Ash’s ‘We the People’ (1999) reflects the assumption that the revival of the concept of civil society in Eastern Europe simply represented an affirmation of the superiority of western ideals and the desire to emulate them: “[t]hey can offer no fundamentally new ideas ... The ideas whose time has come are old, familiar, well-tested ones,” (p163). However, as has been discussed, the concept emerged in a completely different context in Eastern Europe and became imbued with new meaning as a result. In particular, the notions of morality, community, and genuine public participation, became integral to the popular understanding of this term, explaining its general appeal and motivational capacity. In the postcommunist context, this new meaning appears to have been all but forgotten, subsumed into more general, classical conceptions:

*“...there has been a move away from the enriched, socialised idea of civil society towards the more limited classical notion emphasising the rule of law, political citizenship and the freedom of economic action – all of them seen in terms of individual rather than group or community rights,” (Wesolowski, 1995; p114).*

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<sup>9</sup> The processes described in Lomax’s article refer specifically to Hungary but can, on the whole, be generalised to incorporate Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Civil society has thus become equated with individualism, the market economy, and a restricted state; in other words, with ‘bourgeois society’ (Lomax, 1997). Those autonomous associations which do exist tend to be modelled on Western social movements, pursuing the – primarily economic – interests of their members (ibid). Civil society has become allied with democracy in the procedural or “*minimalist*” sense (Chandhoke, 2001; p4), in contrast with the radical, participatory democracy promised by the dissidents. Divested of its communitarian, moral, and participatory connotations, civil society has ceased to be the inspirational concept it once was in Eastern Europe and has been devalued in much the same way as democracy has, by its failure to live up to expectations. In some respects it is inevitable that a movement considered to be so revolutionary would produce ideas and create expectations which could never be realised. At the same time, social movements are inescapably products of their contexts, such that their original characteristics and objectives become partially irrelevant in the changing circumstances.

Where the apparent dilution of the East European concept of civil society has been acknowledged, it has typically been attributed to the self-interested manipulation of proponents of neo-liberal capitalism. It is assumed to have been an externally-imposed process, often on the part of western donors or advocates of market-based policy prescriptions who were seen to be “...*hi-jacking civil society as something to roll the state back with,*” (Wainwright, in Kaldor *et al*, 2001; p6). As a result, civil society came to be

equated with NGOs (Chandhoke, 2001) – a viable, cheap and preferable alternative to the state – and used predominantly as a justification for reduced aid (Rieff, 1999). According to Chandhoke (2001), the popularity of this concept in the West following 1989 was actually a direct product of its identification with the overthrow of communism. As was discussed in section 1, this tendency to use the emotional appeal of civil society to promote neo-liberal market policy prescriptions, has resulted in the depoliticisation of this concept; the dominance of Harriss’ conception of ‘anti-politics’ (2001). Conveniently ignored are the power relations underpinning civil society, the exclusions resulting from these, and civil society’s relationship with state structures.

While the dilution and depoliticisation of the concept of civil society have undoubtedly been in the interests of the protagonists of neo-liberal market democracy, this process has not been purely one of external corruption. In fact, this paper argues that several of the key features of the discourse of East European civil society have actually contributed, albeit perhaps inadvertently, to this development, and therefore to declining participation.

### ***Antipolitics and the Depoliticisation of Civil Society***

Krastev (in Kaldor *et al*, 2001) argues that the concept of civil society was not properly developed by the dissidents, an assertion verified by Ash (2000): “[w]e preached civil society, the great slogan of post-89, without really quite knowing what we were talking about,” (p400). Dissidents’ adherence to ‘nonpolitical politics’ – a central tenet of the

civil society discourse – has actually undermined the emergence of a civil society which is viable in the postcommunist context. This aversion to politics, while entirely understandable in the circumstances, prevented civil society from defining its relationship with the state, inhibiting the establishment of the legal and institutional forms necessary to implement its ideals (Tucker, 2000). This amounted to a failure to realise the interactive nature of the relationship between state and society, and the fact that genuine democratisation must occur in both spheres (Kumar, 2001).

Furthermore, the absence of a positive political agenda (Ost, 1990), combined with the resolve not to directly challenge the state, had implications for the nature of the transition in which the dissidents played an integral role. Ultimately, any revolutionary ideals previously espoused by the dissidents yielded to the atmosphere of conciliation and compromise characteristic of the roundtable negotiations, prompting Ash (1999) to refer to them as “*refolutions*” (p164); an amalgamation of ‘revolution’ and ‘reform’. Such revolutionary aims as genuine participatory democracy based upon communitarian ideals and moral principles were sacrificed in the transition, both by the nature of the transition and by the failure of the dissidents to translate them into viable policies. As such, Eastern Europe succumbed to the tendency whereby “*...civil society replaced revolution as the prime locus of passions and imaginations ...even though the need for revolutionary transformation remains the paramount need...*” (Chandhoke, 2001; p9-10).

Civil society's inherently oppositional nature in the communist context, combined with an emphasis on solidarity and community, resulted in the treatment of civil society as a single, unified entity. While this unity was perhaps necessary, it was essentially artificial and was, according to Staniskas (1984), based upon a propensity to over-simplify issues and polarise debates. Undoubtedly a positive characteristic in forming a resistance to the repressive regime, the portrayal of the opposition as a cohesive force actually impeded the creation of a genuinely pluralistic civil society, obscuring conflicts and differences which existed within the movement (Staniskas, 1984). Perhaps even more crucially, Myszal (1992) has alluded to the monopolisation of the public sphere by such organisations as Solidarity, an ironic reflection of the homogenising state and a hindrance to the development of alternatives:-

*“...the social movement (Solidarity), has been powerful and holistic in its penetration of social life... Subsequently, the state and social movement have delimited the field of the quotidian whereby the knowledge and consciousness of society have been caught between these two forces,”*  
(p56).

Each of these processes has conspired to legitimise the subordination of some interests to others, both concealing and reinforcing structures of power and domination.

### ***Intellectuals and the Elitism of Dissidence***

Contrary to the portrayal of the events in 1989 as ‘people’s revolutions’, Ash (1999) insists that they can be more accurately described as “*revolution[s] of the intellectuals*” (p111). While it is relatively widely acknowledged that ‘civil society’ activities were

primarily the preserve of cultural elites in the case of Czechoslovakia, this assertion would appear to contradict the mass participation commonly associated with Poland. Despite contestation as to the extent, it is difficult to deny that there was significant public mobilisation in Poland prior to 1989, as reflected in the mass membership of, and support for, Solidarity. Nevertheless, all movements were created and dominated by intellectuals (Lomax, 1997), whose role became the mobilisation of the people to their cause. This ‘cult of leadership’ in civil society precluded genuine self-organisation ‘from below’ and served to reinforce the pervasive dependency of the population. Moreover, the prominent position of the intellectuals within these movements ensured that the agendas pursued were those defined by them, rather than a genuine expression of the demands and concerns of ordinary people.

The ideas propagated by the intellectuals – including that of civil society – were sometimes contested by, and often had little resonance with, ordinary people: “*Dissent was an anomaly. Dissidents...led a life where satisfactions, successes, defeats and frustrations were very different than those felt by the population at large,*” (Tamas, 1999; p182). Staniskas (1984) has demonstrated how, with the attainment of Solidarity’s legal status in 1980, internal differences were exposed between pragmatists and idealists, corresponding to the interests of leaders and members respectively. According to Ost (1990), the subsequent move away from a communitarian and participatory approach, to a more hierarchical organisation pursuing market principles, was construed by the workers

as a betrayal. Indeed, the representational deficit felt by Solidarity members towards their leaders is evident in the absence of Solidarity sanctioning and support for the mass workers' strikes of February 1988 (Stokes, 1993).

This development appeared to be in direct contravention of the dissidents' rhetoric of civil society as the realm of genuine popular participation, yet whether this can be considered a deliberate betrayal or an accidental distortion is debateable. Havel considered himself an unwilling leader, driven by his belief that his position compelled him to help those dependent on the system to realise and resist their subjugation (Tucker, 2000). This was an expression of the sense of responsibility felt by some dissidents, that their duty was to act as the "*guardians of moral purity*" (Flam, 1999; p31) in a corrupted society. In this view, there was something of the inevitable in the dissidents' supremacy, the result of their superior intellect, their "*monopoly on truth*" (ibid; p30), and their ability to determine what was in the common interest (Körösényi, 1999). However, others take a more cynical perspective, arguing that the lead role of the intelligentsia was actively "*nurtured*" by them (Stokes, 1993; p256), reflecting an elitist sense of superiority over the rest of the population (Lomax, 1997).

This is, according to Lomax (1997), symptomatic of dissident attempts to "*expropriate ... the concept of 'civil society'... redefining it to refer to their own elite activities and associations, and thus monopolising its use to legitimi[s]e their own behaviour,*" (p42).



Similarly, Glenn (2001) describes how the idea of ‘civil society’ was a ploy to mobilise the masses behind the dissidents, using popular notions of public participation, community and morality. In addition, the dissidents realised that by altering their emphasis to incorporate the liberal language of human rights, they could attract the support of the West (Tamas, 1999). Lomax (1997) describes the domination of civil society by elite groups as a “*betrayal of the intellectuals*” (p42), in which the absence of genuine autonomous associations are the result of deliberate deception by intellectuals in their endorsement of civil society:

*“From this perspective, civil society is clearly separated from any notion of egalitarian democracy or even universal citizenship, and it is not seen as implying either popular participation in the political process or the self-organisation of society from below,”* (ibid; p60)

Instead, it has simply advanced the hegemony of the dominant intellectuals and ensured the continued subordination of ‘the people’.

### ***Antipolitics, Anti-politics, and the Betrayal of ‘The People’***

Whether the result of a deliberate betrayal by the intellectuals, or the corruption ‘inherent’ in translating principles into practice, it is clear that the concept of ‘civil society’ is no longer associated with the ideals it once was in Eastern Europe, a development which has contributed to apathy and demobilisation. Wesolowski (1995) asserts that civil society has ceased to resonate with the Polish public due to its apparent abandonment of notions which were meaningful and relevant to them:

*“Because of the nature of Polish history [communitarian ties] may give meaning to people’s involvement in democracy. They may activate people to civic actions. Moreover, they may contribute to the development of beliefs bestowing civil legitimacy on the state,” (p129).*

Tymowski (1993) explains this in terms of what constituted the public sphere and underpinned so-called ‘civil society’ activity in Poland; the horizontal ties of familial and friendship groups. Against this background, the ideas of community, morality, and participation had an intuitive appeal and mobilising quality, such that their rejection in favour of alien notions associated with neo-liberal market individualism, has denigrated the very concept of civil society.

The dissidents’ rhetoric promised a radical alternative – both to communism and capitalism – which drew upon the values and aspirations held by East Europeans, a promise which has remained unfulfilled. Civil society discourse has been appropriated by liberal capitalist ideology, in which participation is confined to “*responsible individuals*” (Lomax, 1997; p56), in pursuit of capitalist development. In part, this has been the result of an endemic elitism amongst the intellectuals, who neither envisaged nor facilitated genuine self-organisation and participation by the masses. Their failure to engage in dialogue with those whom they claimed to represent has manifested itself in a situation in which people feel powerless, in which their views are unrepresented, their values undermined, and to which they can attach little meaning. Kaldor *et al* (2001) conclude that such a failure has been instrumental in fuelling ethnic and religious sentiment, and

has contributed to the success of right-wing populist movements; the very antithesis of civil society. In many ways, the use of the historical term 'civil society' and the enthusiasm with which it was embraced in the West, preordained that it would be subsumed by dominant theory and lose the unique aspects which had given it new meaning.

Another aspect of the deficiency of the dissidents' rhetoric was their reluctance to engage with politics, a product of the context but also an indication of their failure to realise the importance of power structures to the character and operation of civil society. This resulted in the absence of a long-term strategy, such that the ideals they professed were never translated into concrete objectives and their actions were primarily dictated by state-level developments. Their propensity to regard civil society as an inherently positive sphere, bound up in the positive attributes of people, enabled them to ignore its potentially exclusionary and inequitable aspects. Ignoring the fact that civil society has a tendency to be dominated by those very same groups who exercise hegemony over political and economic structures, successfully reinforces their dominance and removes the potential for civil society to become the sphere of contestation suggested by Gramsci. Devoid of its revolutionary potential, of the hope of creating a political system based upon genuine participatory democracy, equality, community, and morality, civil society has been divested of both its meaning and its allure. This signifies a reversion to the depoliticised version of civil society; a potentially dangerous ideological tool.

## Section 5 – Conclusions : Contesting Civil

### Society's Hegemonic Discourse

*“[There is a need] to understand civil society to refer more loosely to the moral community, to the problems of accountability, trust and co-operation that all groups face. In this sense, all human communities are concerned with establishing their own version of a civil society...”* (Hann, 1996; p20).

Kumar (2001) questions whether the term ‘civil society’ has outlived its usefulness, given the ubiquity and diversity of its usage. In postcommunist Eastern Europe, this concept appears to have lost its resonance with ordinary people, no longer constituting an impetus to popular participation and autonomous social activity. While this is partly an anticipated and understandable reaction to change and uncertainty, it is also indicative of a dilution of the concept from its previous associations and its appropriation by advocates of neo-liberal market ideology. Harriss (2001), while acknowledging the intuitive appeal of civil society and the beneficial potential of such associative ties, is critical of its ideological usage. Civil society has become integral to teleological assumptions as to the process, nature, and goals of development and to the tendency to presuppose what *should be* from the development trajectory of the West. It has become part of the discourse which precludes alternative models of development (Gray, 1991). If civil society is to be of anything other than ideological use, therefore, Kaldor *et al* (2001) maintain that this Western hegemonic discourse must be contested.

In order to retain its value, such a narrow definition - virtually meaningless outside very specific historical circumstances - must be widened to incorporate existing arrangements in other contexts. Hann (1996) demands a more inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of the term, taking into account divergent value systems and concentrating on those ideas that induce co-operation and trust in a given society. This, in turn, necessitates the consideration of specific contexts and historical traditions in defining the meaning, scope and purpose of civil society. What endowed the concept of civil society with meaning in Eastern Europe was its appeal to notions which drew upon the specific history of the people, such as community and equality, as well as to those which were particularly relevant in the context of the communist state, such as autonomy, participation, and morality. This conception would appear to concur more closely with one of the alternative meanings which Howell & Pearce (2001) ascribe to civil society; a sphere of mutuality and solidarity to “...*restrain the individualism and egoistic greed made rampant by capitalist development,*” (p32).

Pearce (in Kaldor *et al*, 2001) conceives of civil society in terms of an arena of public discussion and debate in which norms and objectives are defined; a sphere of contested rather than prescribed values and activities. This suggests a necessary re-politicisation of the concept of civil society and an awareness that “...*civil society is not a given, it is what its practitioners make of it*” (Chandhoke, 2001; p17). Rather than operating on assumptions as to the positive attributes of civil society, this approach considers civil

society in empirical terms, recognising its exclusionary aspects and its tendency to reflect and reinforce existing economic and political power structures. This may refute proposals as to the revolutionary potential of civil society, in that appeals to this intuitively attractive concept may be a vehicle for the pursuit of certain interests and agendas, whether those of a particular state, an ideological position, or an elite group.

Contrary to assumptions that the restoration of civil society in Eastern Europe is dependent upon development conforming to Western trajectories, it is clear that the revival of this concept must take place on a conceptual level. This would involve a reconciliation of theory with the specific meanings attached to civil society in Eastern Europe, requiring a recognition of the basis of these meanings in the early history of the concept. If civil society is to become a meaningful concept once more, its appropriation must be challenged and its definition must be based upon the meanings that people attach to it; it must be returned to the people. The concept of civil society in Eastern Europe clearly expresses many of the hopes and desires of people emerging from communist systems, with its emphasis upon genuine participatory democracy, moral politics, and communitarian principles. While these may be commendable principles, they are incompatible with many aspects of western liberal capitalist democracy and with its model of civil society. Moreover, they cannot be realised – if at all – without change of a genuinely revolutionary nature; change which must occur at the deeper structural levels of politics and economics as well as in civil society.

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