Civil Society: The Imperative for Reconceptualisation

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ABSTRACT

The civil society concept is popularly multidisciplinary in utility and reference, yet, modernity has witnessed its worst misapplications and abuse, so much that it is controversially contended to be both something and nothing. This historical exploration of its origin and founding values had discovered the point of departure and distortions to its pristine virtue and its eventual abuse. It is argued that the pristine civil society maintained a Pareto elite/mass balance until the tragic rise of feudalism and the Church in socio-political calculations of the middle ages. The ensuing scenarios ensured the tragic crippling of the civil society; the triumph of the elite and the inconsequentiality of the masses. The elite have since consolidated on the post Westphalian and Industrial Revolution gains to redefine and manipulate the concept, firstly, towards the continual political ignominy of the masses, and, secondly, for perpetual elite dominance of the state, and the academia have been duped into complicity with the elite. The case is thus made on the imperative of a proper conceptualisation that would fine-tune the modern state in line with the progressive minds of the classical statesmen that fashioned the original civil society.

Key words: civil society, re-conceptualisation, ruling elite, civil elite, civil mass, pristine, feudalism, revolution.

INTRODUCTION

What else could be seemingly enigmatic than a highly subjectivised concept whose hyperinvocations and multipronged popularity have subjected it to critical intellectual rigmarolling, inquisitions and misapplications. Historically, the now omnibus concept of civil society has been one of the most contested in social discourses. From the ivory tower to the market place, the policy makers to the opinion molders, from the mass media to the village square and the aristocracy to the common man; besides being murky as a concept, it is so variegated that the same phenomenon traversed the spectrum from the very indubitable to the most dubious. Ebenezer Obadare aptly reflected and concluded on the concept as a dense and richly conflicted narrative (Obadare, 2005). Similarly, Adam Seligman, the globally renowned sociologist had worriedly pointed to the problem of defining civil society and concluded that “the resulting picture is one of great ambiguity and not a little confusion” (Seligman, 1992). The literature review of the concept reveals a paraphernalia of conflicting labels that had obnoxiously trailed the trajectory of its genealogical studies, and as well, the deepening crises of conception that ensued in its interpretational analytics. Examples of the diverse labeling described the civil society, at different intellectual analysis, as a “means to an end”, a “good”, an “idea”, an “ideal”, a “device”, a “plastic concept”, an “elastic concept”, a “new scientific concept”, a “collective noun”, a “neologism”, an “European concept”, an “experiment”, a “condition”, a “relativism”, an “amorphous term”, an “ambitious project”, an “elusive term”, a “flawed ideal”, an “arena of battles”, a “solution/panacea”, a “mediator”, a “counterbalance”, a “trick”, a “set up”, an “aspiration”, a “connotation”, a “phrase”, a “phase”, a “space”, a “profane society”, a “departure”, a “genderist agenda”, a “slogan”, a “buzzword”, and a “combat word” among numerous others. Hotly contested and yet warmly consented at different forums, the civil society is indeed a super omnibus concept that is applicable to almost everything and anything. The intellectual agony is the concern that this Pandora’s Box of descriptions and tags had perpetually problematized and seemingly condemned the term ‘civil society’ into a conceptual conundrum, foreclosing seemingly as well, the procurement of a universal definition in the postmodernist socio-political and philosophical theorization.

A dialectical scenario, among many other types, had obviously emerged from the above. For instance, the civil society is differently presented on the one hand as a promotive, and on the other, a suppressive concept. Michael Edwards, in his book, had referred to civil society as becoming a buzzword for reckoning a good society (Edwards, 2004). Perhaps, that informed Jai Sen’s opinion that “the term ‘civil society’ has been vigorously introduced into common usage, in governmental policy, in the academia, and in the media … (as) a given and a good – a virtually unquestionable good (Sen, 2010). The Economist had earlier commented, “It (i.e. civil society) is
universally talked about in tones that suggest it is a Great Good, so, so good that the Economist wondered in perplexity “what on earth is it?” (The Economist is cited in Encarnación, 2006). What readily comes to mind here is the hot philosophical contestation on the problematic and relative idea of the good. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had much earlier traced the origin of current structural inequality to the door steps of modern civil society, describing it as a trick perpetrated by the powerful on the weak in order to dominate their power of wealth, (Rousseau is cited in Mulder, 2005). And while Karl Marx in another critique interpreted civil society as consisting of isolated and aggressive individuals united by economic interests (Marx is cited in Beyers, 2011), a provoked Prof. Dieter Gosewinkel (2005) contends that the concept of civil society came up as a combat word to checkmate fanaticism and radicalism at the end of medieval ages, and at the beginning of modernity. He claims further, that at the age of religious conflicts beginning with the Reformation, the concept has been set up to define limits to other ways of structuring a state and of politics. With the premise that the civil society is often described as harmonious, non-violent and tolerant, one in which power does not seem to be of any importance, he strongly admitted in the contrary, “There is no real society like that”. Gosewinkel had thus nihilistically concluded - “there is no society in the world that is a civil society” (Gosewinkel, 2005).

Civil Society – an Attempt at Explication

Titling this subsection itself reveals the scariness of the effort to acceptably grasp or define the concept. From the non-consensual, but conflictual, conceptions above on the nature, meaning, intents and purposes of the Civil Society, it would ordinarily seem futile, unattractive and time-wasting to further undertake any intellectual endeavour towards comprehending, defining or establishing any convention on the idea of the civil society. This explains why many writers on the concept had tactically dodged or explicitly declined to offer critical definitions on the issue. That however is bizarre since a tenable or meaningful exposition may not be achievable over an undefined subject matter. Bent Flyvbjerg (1998), and typical of many others, for instance while affirming that the empowering of the civil society is a central concern for the project of democracy, went on to counter-affirm the vanity in the attempt to search for clear definitions of civil society as a concept. It is simply illogical and laughable to saddle an indefinable subject with such enormous responsibility. In the same vein, had many erroneously blamed the same improperly defined subject for failing to purportedly meet certain expectations. Of course today, civil society as a concept has become a very important phenomenon, nationally and globally, in socio-economic and political parlance, democratic calculations, and as well, in academic discourses. The rise into prominence of the concept, in the postmodern era, though transcended the social upheavals of Eastern Europe in the 1980s that saw civil mass actions uprooting communist/authoritarian regimes, and enthroning in its place, popular and people-oriented state systems. It however has led to a resurgence of the civil society as a phenomenal concept in social discourses over the past two decades. The other major fact is that, never in the political history and development of our world have we witnessed the level of mass-politicking ongoing today in modern nation-states. By mass-politicking is meant the involvement of whole national populations in the enthronement of their political rulers, of course, usually through democratic process or suffrage elections. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the global stronghold of communism, saw an emergent world and social order that celebrated and sought to partner with the vaguely defined ‘civil societies’, towards charting certain political and economic order and governance, and a distinct pattern of international relations generally galvanized for the neoliberalist globalization agenda.

Cox (1999), and Gallin (2000), and many others, had commented on the changing or shifting meanings of civil society. This paper does not have on its agenda a crux re-discussion of these changing meanings as that had already been copiously done by many scholars of note, and the ensuing harvest of conceptual summersaults have I also briefly highlighted at the introductory. The aim of this work however is to possibly and historiographically retrace the origin of the concept; first in the effort to diagnose and re-constitute it for proper contextualization; and then to identify and isolate the point(s) of departure that had triggered the changing meanings and demeaning of civil society as a concept. These, I humbly believe, would help the academy, the media and policy-elite circles to perhaps rescue the concept from the murky waters of idealization and to place it on a proper and broader pedestal.

Contrary to recent assertions of some scholars that the concept of civil society originated, rather than modernly revived, with the political philosophies of the likes of Hegel, Gramsci and Marx (Makumbe, 1998), it is instructive to acknowledge in the history of political thought that the concept of civil society predated modernism. It is essentially and originally a classical concept. Tracked to its Latinist root, the notion of societas civilis is indeed semantically original to Cicero (Wikipedia, 2008) — the classical Roman philosopher, orator and statesman, in his invaluable contributions to roman social and political thought. Basically then, and in the idea of Michael Edwards, civil society refers to a political association governing social conflict through the imposition of rules that restrain citizens from harming one another (Edwards, 2004). The most ideally example of such classical civil political association are
the Greek city-states or polis that were governed commonly through direct form of democracy involving only the citizens. Although citizenship here was narrowly defined since it precluded women and children below the age of eighteen, slaves and aliens, such political society was however esteemed since it allowed for a fair spread of political responsibilities across much members of the society. Civil society is thus an evolutionary good, depicting a society that had graduated from savagery, barbarity and practical self-centeredness, into civility, decorousness and popular politicking, dedicated to the pursuit of the common good. Consequently, before the Middle Ages and the rise of feudalism in Europe, civil society and good society became interchangeable synonyms (Gallin, 2000), and it is one in which people had organised among themselves to be commonly ruled.

Of course, socio-political thinkers, from time immemorial, have always been preoccupied with how to evolve, organize and institute a good, mutually beneficial, equitable and tranquilly social order in human society. Similarly, these political philosophers had written expressly concerning, in particular, the origins and necessity of political order, the government and the State. For instance, in the classical period, Plato’s ideal state is also a just society in which people dedicate themselves to the common good, practice civic virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation and justice, and perform the occupational role to which they were best suited. To Aristotle, the polis was an ‘association of associations’ that enables citizens to share in the virtuous task of ruling and being ruled. Both political theorists had spoken, firstly, to the mutual involvement of all members of the society in their civic administration, and secondly, to the inevitability of social governance. In fact, while Plato had opinionated the saddling of the philosopher-King with the burden of government, Aristotle had asserted that the best state is a polity ruled by the middle class, and that is due to their penchant for modernity and striving for equality. It is therefore categorical that quite contrarily to the utopianist convictions of the political anarchists, experience has shown that such lofty but difficult goals may not be realised without the procurement of the machinery of an effective government. This much is owed to the natural attributes of man, particularly in regard to his/her longings or senses for equality and freedom. Attention is not to be devoted here, per se, to the uncomplimentary roles between these human attributes that may lead to ‘all against all’ scenarios in the ensuing competition for scarce resources; and on the one hand, the institution of social order in human society, as these had been exhaustively debated by great, ancient and modern, socio-political theorists.

Plato, in The Republic, often considered to be the pioneering work in political science (because it applies systematic reasoning and critical enquiry to political ideas and institutions, having departed from a comprehensive view of the human nature, to a prescription of how men everywhere ought to order their political relations) had conceived government as the noblest, the highest moral and practical task to which men of knowledge and virtue ought to devote themselves. It is indeed the noblest because of the arduous task that necessarily besets this estimable venture. Plato had taken government to mean the greatest, selfless sacrifice, service and responsibility that a man or a group of men can be saddled with. Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown is an old maxim that best described the enormity of responsibilities that are incumbent on government toward procuring, maintaining and adding value to social order.

The foregoing denoted the classical political theorists to have made no distinguishing between the civil society and the state, affirming as well that the state represented the civil form of society. It is categorically averred that in the classical age, philosophers did not make any distinction between the state and society. Rather they held that the state represented the civil form of society and ‘civility’ represented the requirement of good citizenship thereupon which it is claimed that the classical political thinkers endorsed the genesis of civil society in its original sense (Wikipedia, 2008). From the above, and climbing on the shoulders of the classical theorists, it could be said that the tag ‘civil society’ denotes a human society that had gone past the ordinary conditions of the natural society. The society in its natural conditions is rawish, uncouth and wildish, as might was right and men freely act within the dictates of personal, unrestrained volution and ego. It seemingly is, but not necessarily peculiar to the state of nature as depicted by the social contract theorists. The society is rawish and uncouth however, to the extent that the elements of civility were absent. And what are the elements of civility? Political and governmental organisation that enable members to order, secure and enrich their lives, adjudicative provision to amicably resolve the inevitable disputations that cohabitation must engender, egalitarianism aimed at deterring opportunism that could portend danger to society, and freedom to pursue happiness in all its ramifications though to tolerable limits, and as well, institutional provisions that would add value to human worth. These few elements among many others were naturally lacking and not original to a society in the state of nature, hence this uncivil society is inherently replete with chaos that tarnished the human worth. However, the rawish and uncouth attributes stand not against the classical assumptions that human beings are inherently rational and can collectively alter the trend in the state of nature, to deliberately shape the nature or course of their society, and also that they have the capacity to voluntarily gather for the common cause and to maintain peace in the society.

The society got transformed when humans were able to harness this inherent rationality in them to collectively alter and organize their society for the common good and peace through the instrumentation of political government. At its pristine classical conception therefore, the civil society represents the totality of the politically organised society. The prefix ‘civil’ distinguishes it from just any other, or a (natural) society. The term civil denotes
the progressive advancement or mobilization of the *hitherto raw and uncouth* natural society into the arena of organised political governance. Rather than referring to any segment of the political community as usually is the practice today, the term portrays or denotes the political transformation that had happened to a natural society. Thus the term *civil society* is indeed a description, but, of an enlightened human community that had transcended above parochialism, a situation where conflictual natural instincts and ego ruled, to one in which such conflicts have been brilliantly and provisionally resolved through the instrumentality or the deliberate imposition of certain effective rules and regulations, otherwise called laws and commonly recognised, to moderate or modulate the interrelationships of members. By translation thus, a society that is civil is a polite society having been refined or processed from its natural crude form through the mills of civility. The British conservative political philosopher, Edmund Burke, beautifully regarded such society that is constituted on civil order as a polished society (Microsoft Encarta, 2008).

To the extent also that the civil society refers to a political association governing social conflict in the idea of Michael Edwards above, the same is also by logic a political society. In this vein, obviously, the classical view of the civil society is inclusive of every segment of the politically organized human community; its peoples, their various groupings, and very importantly too, their government. Put differently, a civil society is composed of both the governor and the governed. An entire civil society could be said to have been shelled, sheltered or cocooned in the state, but that state was inconsequential and non-sacrosanct in that it merely subsists, and only at the prerogative of the very civil society, and only to distinguish it from many similar civil societies, sharing or otherwise the same environment. Members of a civil society are referred to as citizens, with civic virtues, duties and rights to their government and state, vice versa, making governance and the smooth-running of the state thereby to be the mutual responsibility of every segment of the civil society. The civil society was also politely imbued with civil rights and liberties that guaranteed freedom, justice and equality to citizens under a common legal system, and with privileges to fully enjoy civil protection, to freely partake in state-related activities without undue restrictions. John Locke aptly tagged it a commonwealth that is maintained by the recognition of rights and responsibilities, and the strict observance of a generally applicable common law. The same commonwealth serves as the custodian of the civil rights, responsibilities and the common law. Of prime importance to the classical age theorists, up to certain Enlightenment Thinkers is that they considered civil society as a community that maintained civil life, the realm where civic virtues and fundamental human rights flourished. The civil society in its pristine formation was not thought of as a separate realm from the state. Indeed, at its conceptual origin, the civil society is indistinguishable from the state since the organised state is by nature itself a civil society. However, this classical and original genealogical conception of the civil society soon got lost or perhaps twisted or bastardized, as the world transitioned down the ages amidst numerous socio-political, economic and religious upheavals, developments and transformations, all of which had culminated in the *tragedy of the civil society*.

**A Dissection of the Classical Civil Society**

Having established the pristine conception of the civil society, it is pertinent to pry into this political society towards understanding and distinguishing the defining components that had made this classical innovation operational. Basically, the state is a civil society, and the civil society is essentially a political society that is comprised of the governed (in their totality, groupings and representative organisations), and the governor (with its institutions and agencies). Put differently, the civil political society is composed of the governing elite or government individual(s), and the governed civil mass, otherwise referred by Ernest Gellner as "the social residue that is left behind when the state (government) is subtracted" (Gellner is cited in Encarnación, 2006). The government here may be composed of one individual – the monarchy or the philosopher King as preferred by Plato or of few in the Aristotelian aristocracy, or of many representatives of the peoples as in a democracy – which increasingly is the most popular form of government since modernism. The political civil society is thus divisible into two main entities – the civil elite and the civil mass. However, the government in a civil society is actually run by a fraction or super subset of the former, appropriately here referred as the political or government elite. In other words, not all members of the civil elite, who by all means are the privileged minority, make it to the government elite. But more often than not, the government elite, usually the custodian of the force or will of state, are drawn from the civil elite. It is however pertinent to express that this work does not intend to academically explore on what defines or qualifies a person as elite or otherwise. The conventional belief suffices and is here taken for granted that the elite usually refer to a privileged minority group within the larger group of people who have more power, special office, social standing, property or wealth, and even natural endowment such as mental faculty or talent than the rest of the group, and who by virtue of these have been distinguished from the generality. The remainder majority who at that material time are not equally endowed are categorized as the mass. The civil society membership is thus summable as the totality of the civil elite and civil mass elements.

As earlier suggested, the civil mass referred to Gellner’s social residue that is left behind when the civil elite that governs the state is subtracted. The civil masses are simply the commoners and are always also the super
majority of every civil society. For instance in France during the French Revolution, the French civil mass is located in the Third Estate which at the time, constituted a whopping 98% of the French society, and the term Third Estate, was used by Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès to refer to people who neither belonged to the Clergy nor the Nobility, which respectively were the First and second Estates (Sieyès in McNeese, 2005). That segment is composed of the peasants, working people, and the bourgeoisie. With the exception of sophisticated and revolutionarily polished societies of the West, the greater percentage of the civil mass groups in societies, besides being often simple and naive could best be described as having the subject culture attitude to political governance as categorized in the political-culture study of Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba. By the subject culture is meant that they are aware of their political system and its outputs but do not participate in the processes that result in policy decisions. With a weakly developed sense of the institutions through which societal demands are channeled, most members have a limited sense of personal political efficacy and a disbelief in ability to influence the decision making process. However, the civil mass groups are only powerful just in terms of their overwhelming mobbish numbers which particularly are potentially put to use in times of political revolutions to overwhelm the ruling elite. Be that as it may, the ultimate control, leadership, destiny and direction of the civil mass usually rest, firmly secure in the hands of the minority civil elite. This is a universal fact and is alluded to by the British conservative political philosopher, Edmund Burke. Of course, to him, and verily too, “government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants”, (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). However, he considered the people (i.e. the civil masses) ignorant and impetuous since the capacity for reason in most people is severely limited, (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). Thus, in his disdain for the civil masses while analyzing the cause of social discontents, he declares “I am not one of those who think that the people are never in the wrong. They have been so, frequently and outrageously” (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). He argued consequently that they are best governed by their “social and intellectual superiors” (i.e. the civil elite). To that end he gracefully bragged, “Nobility is a graceful ornament to the civil order. It is the Corinthian capital of polished society” (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). Of course also, by nobility he meant elitism, and Burke’s elite circle during the Scottish Enlightenment was then composed basically of the Church, the Royalty, and the Aristocracy where he belonged.

The civil elite, from the immediate above, are also distinguishable into its diverse specialized components, and it is from its fold that many aspire to the most esteemed elitist status, i.e. the political or government elite. Within the broad civil elite fold are the intelligentsia, the industrial/economic elite, the military elite, the technocrats, the royalty, the nobility, the aristocrats, the wealthy, the charismatic, the professional politicians, elites of the priesthood, bureaucracy elite, the justiciary elite and many other categories of the civil elite circle. Whichever category or component of the civil elite that form the civil government also becomes the political elite but this vary, depending on times and situations. For instance, in theocratic states, the religion elite composed the government. For instance again in the medieval Europe, the Royal elite and the nobility had ruled England before the English Revolution of 1640 when the monarchy and the British Parliament (then composed mainly of the British nobles) again competed for political authority. The aristocratic nobility had themselves much earlier successfully wrestled political power with the Monarchy when King John in 1215 was pressured into signing and sealing the Magna Carta which decreed that the royalty, the nobility, the aristocrats, the wealthy, the charismatic, the professional politicians, elites of the priesthood, bureaucracy elite, the justiciary elite and many other categories of the civil elite circle. Whichever category or component of the civil elite that form the civil government also becomes the political elite but this vary, depending on times and situations. For instance, in theocratic states, the religion elite composed the government. For instance again in the medieval Europe, the Royal elite and the nobility had ruled England before the English Revolution of 1640 when the monarchy and the British Parliament (then composed mainly of the British nobles) again competed for political authority. The aristocratic nobility had themselves much earlier successfully wrestled political power with the Monarchy when King John in 1215 was pressured into signing and sealing the Magna Carta which decreed that the

The intelligentsia had once received the support of Plato to form government. In his book, The Republic, Plato’s recipe for good government is the rule of those who know over those who do not, i.e. the rule of the cognoscenti over the ignorant. Of course, in a move that has been criticized as undemocratic, Plato is of the opinion that education is the key to good life for all, and that the road to better government and public service is through appropriately conceived systems of prolonged, intensive and functional education reserved for future rulers only. Also, largely in the past, and to a little extent today outside of the Western World, the military elites, being the custodian and implementer of the raw force of state, have seized this opportunity to hijack political power and occupy government via coup d’état. But then, experience has shown that the military turned political elites do recognize and cooperate with other members of the elite circle towards procuring a smooth running civil government. Frustrated professional politicians in Nigeria, during the defunct, but prolonged military rule in the country, once clamoured for diachronic form of government that would enable them to co-rule the nation with the military elite.

That every civil society is ruled by its elite is not strange but the norm. It also does not matter the circumstance of the civil society for even when it is upturned in a revolution popularly undertaken by the civil mass, the ultimate political control will still be taken over by a new set of civil elite that emerge in the aftermath, and that only, if the revolution had not originally been instigated by certain aggrieved section of the previous elite circle. Edmund Burke had perhaps wrongly believed that the revolutionaries in France and the British radicals of his day,
who were calling for universal voting rights and an end to the monarchy, had a misguided faith in reason and abstract ideas. He disapproved of any destructive revolutionary change for his above stated reason that the civil society is best led by its elite. What he probably refused to acknowledge, however, is that a new set of civil elite would always emerge, after every political upheaval, to manipulate, manoeuvre and dominate the civil mass. But perhaps also, as a foremost British conservative parliamentarian of his time with multi elitist statuses, he was not only being selfish, but parochially protective and supportive of the status quo elitism. This perhaps made Charles James Fox, a foremost radical British politician at the time (who rather hailed the revolutions), and an opponent of Burke in the same parliament to disparagingly describe him as ‘a damned wrong-headed fellow, (who) through his whole life (was) jealous and obstinate’ (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). The foregoing is to establish the fact that the civil elite and civil mass are the regular features of every civil society. But what is worth notice also is that, invariably, the civil mass is the most permanent feature of the civil society. People rise into the elite circle from the civil mass base mostly by privilege, fortune and opportunity, and less by right. But when and if unfortunately they lose their elitist status, which definitely is a natural possibility, they revert back into the broad civil mass fold as new elites emerge to take their place. History is replete with Kings that have lost their royal elitist status to die as pauper, while peasants and slaves were known to have had upward mobility from the civil mass base into becoming political or government elites. It is somewhat cyclical. Ultimately and invariably however, and by logic also, everyone in the civil society belongs to the civil mass, and that remains the basis of every civil society.

A prominent individual that lost his elitist status to die a downtrodden commoner is perhaps Niccolò Machiavelli, the Italian historian, statesman, and political philosopher, whose unethical but influential writings on statecraft have turned his name into a recurring decimal in socio-political and philosophical thought. After his lowly birth on 3rd of May 1469, he became employed as a clerk in the Florentine civil service. As a government official, Machiavelli rose to prominence after the Florentine Republic was proclaimed in 1498. At barely 29, he became a top diplomat and managed critical military operations of the republic. His duties included missions to the French king, the Holy See, and the German emperor. In the course of his diplomatic missions within Italy he became acquainted with many of the Italian rulers. Machiavelli reorganized the military defense of the republic of Florence. By all means and standard, he rose to a privileged position as a member of the government/political elite in his state. In 1512, circumstances forced him out of the elite loop when the Medici family, regained power in Florence ( ushering in thereby a new set of ruling elites) and dissolved the republic. He was deprived of office and briefly imprisoned for alleged conspiracy against Medici rule. At his release, he retired to his estate near Florence, where he wrote his most important works, in particular The Prince, published in 1513. Machiavelli actually dedicated the Prince to Medici rulers in the hope that he would be restored to his elitist position and public life. Despite his attempts to gain favor with the Medici rulers, he was never restored to his prominent government position. When the republic was temporarily reinstated in 1527, he became shunned by many republicans on the suspicion of pro-Medici leanings. He died, probably broken hearted and ignominiously in Florence later that year at 58, a nonentity of the civil mass.

Civil Society in the Post Classical Age

Developments in the post-classical era almost marred discourses in political philosophy. Indeed, further consolidations, progressive developments or refinements in the pristine form of the civil society were either tragically aborted or ultimately stalled. The Middle Ages became characterised by unprecedented political transformations, which partly was a result of the rise in political awareness of very many members of that society and which largely manifested in elite opportunism and the eventual violent civil mass reactions, coupled with increased competition for (though not yet scarce) resources which basically is the arable land, but more importantly due to the occurrence of intellectual revival to the extent previously unknown and which was triggered by the Renaissance in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries, culminating in the Age of Enlightenment during the 18th Century. One of the contending issues of the period that gave new meanings / dimension and direction or disorientation to the preexisting political setting was the rise of Feudalism on the one hand. Feudalism (together with the church) had compromised or even subverted the pristine form of the civil society, not exclusively in the senses of patron/client and master/servant systems or in the theocratic ideals of the church, but inclusively, and significantly too, in the destruction of the mutuality of cooperation cum responsibility between the civil mass and the civil elite toward the smooth running of civil communities. The original civil society was an all-inclusive communion that recognised no distinction among all groupings, but which in plurality functioned as a single, organised, and mutual social system, but that was before the tragedy of the civil society.

Feudalism essentially represents the complete takeover of the middle age society by the nobility and royalty, and the seeming relegation of the social residue (i.e. the rest of the civil mass) into peasantry and political inconsequentiality. Feudalism was a contractual political and military institution of the nobility. The practice essentially binds a noble servant to his noble master, (otherwise called a vassal to his lord), though within the frameworks of certain recognized subjective rights and obligations. The pristine form of the civil society had thereby

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suffered the loss of such defining relationships as the egalitarian rights and obligations of the citizens to the government and vice versa. Better still, human communities lost the pre-existing civility that had predefined the civil society in which people had mutually dedicated themselves towards the objective pursuit of the common good, the practice of civic virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, equity and justice. These sterling libertarian virtues were replaced, somewhat, by a system of subjugated service, involving oaths of fealty and homage, and whose subinfeudation is hierarchized from the sovereign Princes to the Barons, Barons to the Knights, and down the line unto the peasants, through and alongside a parallel system of Seigniorialism, which is a system of political, economic, and social dominion between seigneurs or lords, and their dependant farm labourers - the peasants. It is instructive though to note that some powerful feudal lords, being then the possessor and implementer of the raw force of state, could shirk in their obligation, aimed toward the deliberate handicapping of sovereign princes in the effective political control of their state.

On the other hand, the Church, politically fronted as the Holy Roman Empire, also negatively impacted on the flourishing of the civil society particularly in its staunch support for feudalism and Seigniorialism in local societies. Of course, the Church and the Monasteries immensely benefited from the system through their ownership of huge arable lands farmed by peasantry efforts, and this may never have being the case in an unsubverted egalitarian civil society system. At the interstate level, Popes had clung to the traditional concept of a temporal realm coterminal with a spiritual realm of the church, ultimately making The Holy Roman Empire to lay claims to universality, floating thereby as well, a centralized and fairly effective political administration for Europe. A third major issue, and of course which the first two fed into, was the numerous European wars of the Princes which culminated over the centuries in the Thirty Years’ War - a series of destructive European conflicts that lasted from 1618 to 1648, involving most of the states of Western Europe. The long stalemated war ended in negotiated settlement that was ratified by a treaty historically tagged the Peace of Westphalia. By its terms, religious autonomy was granted to the princes and their states. More importantly however, the sovereignty and independence of each European state of the Holy Roman Empire (about 300 of them) was formally recognized, making a nonentity of the emperor. Indeed also, the monarchs had not only triumphed over feudalists, they also had transgressed the church to assume direct responsibility (to or as God) over the affairs of their state.

The treaty seemed to have rescued the civil society from the stranglehold of feudalism. Very importantly too, it had permanently readjusted the political landscape of Europe by the principle of territorial sovereignty of political units that it introduced. Many of the rules that henceforth governed international relations were derived and codified in the Peace of Westphalia. Indeed, the westphalian legacy thrived into post-modernism as the foundation of the nation-state system currently operational. Otherwise referred as interstate system, the governing rules had rudimentarily set forth the principle of self-determination for peoples by systematically and conceptually entrenching the sovereign rights of nations such that no one nation should infringe upon another nation’s rightful territory or interfere in another nation’s internal and governmental affairs. However, this golden rule of interstate system is delicate and important because the emergent system had provided for no central authority that could set and enforce rules of interstate relations worldwide. The corollary is that the absence of a central authority behaves on nations to be on the watch and to carefully and appropriately scheme their interrelations. In the realist theory, they cannot rely on any higher power to enforce the rules or ensure fair play among nations. They must therefore enforce the rules by themselves or in alliance with other nations. With the abrogation of feudal military service, the post-Westphalia states needed to device other means of self-preservation and must constantly prepare for any eventuality in the event of interstate aggression or system breakdown. Consequent upon the need for self-preservation by states in a precarious post-1648 interstate system, and being opportune, as well, by the terms and of the Treaty, many sovereign princes tightened their grip on state powers. Monarchs were able to dispense with feudalism and its attractions or otherwise, to organize alternative means of raising standing national armies via conscriptions or professional engagements, while state funds swell through state-centered fiscal and other economic policies, all which gave birth not only to strong fiscal-military states but had enabled the monarchs to further circumvent and evenemasculate the feudal lords. Remunerated professional bureaucracy was also employed to effectively administer the state and to implement policies. These, and many other measures, enabled sovereign monarchs to maintain direct effective control and supreme authority over their citizens and their state.

However and regrettably, these same measures that circumvented feudalism unfortunately had only led to pseudo restoration of the civil society. The eventual civil society was never in the pristine format. Monarchs had absolutely assumed state powers in the unprecedented dimensions that virtually held hostage the post Westphalian civil society, and they outrightly suspended all civil rights and liberties. Cohen and Arato had aptly commented that the coming of absolutism or the authoritarian state marked the division between the traditional (i.e. the classical) and modern meanings of civil society, (Cohen and Arato is cited in Beyers, 2011). To them, a duality came into being, with all political power now in the hands of the ruler and a depoliticized society. The wills of sovereign princes became unlimited in theory and in practice. Consequently, the civil society was like suspended or better still reconstituted, and the civil mass was held hostage while citizens were made to undergo various deprivations by their
rulers on the pretext of maintaining territorial sovereignty, keeping law and order, and of ensuring security and stability of state. In addition, the royal elites in government had not only robbed the civil masses of their political habitations, i.e. the state, wherein they are now being permanently tenanted, they chose not only in addition to abrogating other components of the civil elite circle, but also to rather treat the entire civil mass, not as citizens, but as the ruled and despised subjects, whose rights and fate are determinable only at the whims of the reigning dynastic and autocratic monarchs. The post-Westphalia political configuration had provided European princes with the desired wanton opportunity to fully imbibe the tyranny and despotism of Machiavellianism that was waiting up. Niccolò Machiavelli had in 1532 published the prince as a handbook of acute power politics that teaches ruling princes on the acquisition and maintenance of political power. He enjoined a serious-minded prince to be guided above all, not by morals but by the dictates of necessity. He must acquire and decisively utilize power in an uncharitable fashion over his subjects, and must know when or not to wield it as circumstances dictate. He, as well, must of essence be cunning, deceptive and unscrupulous if he wanted to maintain his government. Thus and thenceforth, sovereign princes (and later the succeeding ruling elites) began to devise odious means of acquiring limitless powers that would continually tame or subvert the civil society.

To that end, and rather than regard the state as a mere inconsequential cocoon housing the civil society, it became not only spirited and enlivened, rarefied and acutely superposed in the Hobbesian sense as a leviathan, over and above the civil society. But strangely worrisome also is that the state became personified, sacredly idolized and ‘omnipotented’. Sovereign princes equally and arrogantly assumed the omnipotence and other attributes of God in their claim to Divine Right of rule. Louis XIV of France epitomized this when he laid claims to king’s divinity, ‘we princes are the living image of Him, who is all holy and powerful’ (Bluntschli, 1875). Before Louis XIV on March 21, 1609 had King James I claimed that Kings are justly called Gods (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). The English monarch then in his quest for absolutism and the divine right of Kings had delivered a speech before the British Parliament that ‘The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God’s lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods’ (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). He went further in that speech to justify monarchical assumption of arbitrary powers to clean sweep the civil society. The monarchical absolutism that replaced civility or the civil order came to the extreme as sovereign princes outrightly assumed the direct status of the state. The famous phrase of Louis XIV: L’etat c’est moi (I am the state) virtually captured the acute political principle of monarchical absolutism. It meant that people actually derive their essence mainly in the King. This monarchical arrogance was aptly described by Johan Kasper Bluntschli in the following way:

The King no longer regarded himself as the head, the highest and most powerful member of the body politics, but he completely identified the state with his own person, so that no member of the state except himself was endowed with political rights. His personal welfare was the welfare of the state; his individual rights were the rights of the state. He was all in all; beyond him was nothing (Bluntschli, 1875).

The deprived and frustrated citizens of the post-Westphalia states began to agitate against the absolute nature of the state and for the revival of the pristine civil society. Critical questions and concerns were raised on monarchical absolutism in the Enlightenment period that culminated in the demands for constitutional and representative government. It took members of the elite circle in Britain a strenuous effort to curtail the monarch, restore constitutionalism, and to establish the preeminence of Parliament during the peaceful Glorious Revolution of 1688, while a bloody revolution that involved the entire civil mass (aristocrats, bourgeois, the urban poor and peasants) led to the abrogation of monarchical absolutism in France between 1789 and 1799. For the first time since the duo of Feudalism and the Church altered the classical political setting of European civil societies, these series of socio-political revolutions seemed to help in the reinstition of the civil society particularly through the reinstatement of the various inalienable rights of the emergent citizens, vis-à-vis the new but limited role of government in the different Bills, Acts and Declarations that followed. Many historians generally attribute the rise of modern democratic government to these civil revolutionary events.

Of invaluable impact here is the contribution of the British political philosopher, John Locke, to the resuscitation of the civil society particularly in the pristine form. Although the first contractarian philosopher, Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan (1651), had expressly divorced God and divinity from the reigns of monarchs, affirming rather that government emerged from a rational and prudent act of peoples collective will to be led, he nevertheless legitimated the excessive possession of power by sovereign princes as the only sustainable guarantee of the peace and security provided by government, away from the destructive state of nature. Hobbes had hereby not done much to restore the pristine civil society where strict observance of rights and responsibilities had legitimated government and secured the principles of egalitarianism for the people.

John Locke, in his two Treatises on Government (1690) may be regarded as the modern progenitor of the civil society with his political theory which is principally hinged on two principles – that of obligatory reciprocity and
the limitedness of government or the state. Locke, in the 89th and 90th verses of The Second Treatise, had outrightly condemned monarchical absolutism to be inconsistent with the essence of civil society and civil government. Locke affirmed that the “freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to everyone in that society...and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man”. He consequently regarded the despised peoples under the dominion of absolute monarchies to be still in the perfect state of nature, the chaotic and unrestrained state from which the civil society had escaped. Of critical essence to John Locke’s political theory, whose great influence had survived into postmodernism, is that only the strict observance of rights and responsibilities will protect citizens against the unjust captive rulers. Unlike Hobbes that placed peoples at the mercy of government, Locke had rather reposed the sovereign power and liberty to sack or appoint governments in the citizens. Similarly, the sustenance or rightful existence of a government is only a function of its ability to deliver dividends of good governance. Locke may have even done more to uphold government when compared to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s, who in Du contrat social (1762) had described government merely as an agent of the sovereign general will of the people in their decision to float and live in the state. By that he meant that governments have no right whatsoever but mere grace of existence. Although, Locke’s treatises on government, together with many other political theories and activities emanative of the Age of Enlightenment significantly contributed into the revival and reformation of the civil society; the civil government and civil constitutional development around the world, it never in the ultimate led into the full recovery of the pristine form of classical civil society.

A major development that hindered this recovery was the ability and necessity of governments, particularly in the post-Westphalia state system, to raise regular standing national armies through induced / compulsory conscriptions or remunerated professional employment of able-bodied men and women, and who by their calling, training and discipline have been orientated toward unquestionable loyalty to government. Of course, the formation of standing armies did not originate with the post-Westphalia state system as history records the use of standing armies even by ancient and classical civilizations of Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome and others. However, they were previously more occasional than regular, less trained and disciplined than modern professionals, and in often cases, they were citizen-soldiers, usually unremunerated and sparingly used only during offensive and defensive interstate wars. They were usually demobilized and unneeded in peace times. Such classical standing armies had even disappeared with the rise of feudalism in the middle ages. Feudalism was hinged on local defense as each land-owning baron on King’s tenancy organized his own personal protective forces recruited from among the men that worked for him. In return, each baron and his men were legally committed to making available annual or occasional military service to the monarch. However, sovereign princes may be incapacitated as the feudal lords could successfully renege or switch allegiance at will. Besides, feudal fighting forces were usually composed of poorly trained and ill-equipped soldiers whose preoccupation was farming. It is even also in the interest and desire of feudal lords, and as a security for the sustenance of feudalism, that kings were unable to raise standing armies.

Political expediency in the post-Westphalia however changed the nature of militarism practically and completely. It necessitated the formation of standing national armies, and this has become a recurrent feature of modern states ever since. The rules, utility and modus operandi of military operations changed dramatically as new programs and issues were introduced into military service. Sovereign princes began to invest state fund massively into developing and equipping the military. For instance, the French army, numbering over 200,000 soldiers by 1678 under King Louis XIV the most autocratic French monarch, organized a quartermaster department to perform supply functions, and as well, standardized the training and inspection of troops (Weiss, 2007). Soldiery in Europe became regularized, professionalized and standardized in terms of conscription or employment, training and organization, discipline and loyalty, specializations and functions, orientation and education. The modern army became permanently mounted and placed on alert even in peace times, ready to be deployed for the reason. The famous realist aphorism ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’ made a standing army an essence of the modern international system. James Madison, the fourth President of the US and one of its founding fathers, had famously affirmed that ‘a certain degree of preparation for war...affords also the best security for the continuance of peace’ (Microsoft Student, 2008). Consequently, the post-Westphalia states became acutely militarized, and military use was neither precluded to coercive diplomacy nor deterring or containing external aggression, but inclusively against all decorum, to settling domestic scores, usually in the guise of maintaining interior security. All in all, and having been regimented and brainwashed antithetically against the civil society, and as well, with their barracks deliberately situated in seclusion, often outside of civil population centers, organized standing national armies provided sovereign princes and future governments with sweeping raw powers to cow civil societies. The army simply became a special caste with its own set of interests, usually in no consonance with the ideals of civil society and neither subjected to civil jurisdiction, but packaged in the interest of ruling classes. The army has since been permanently transformed into a massive killer machine in aid of government, whose head has also fondly adopted the title Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces to publicly demonstrate the exclusive domiciling of the military in the executive portfolio.

The combination of loyal standing national armies with the principle of state’s sovereignty summed up into the consolidation of political power, and both had consequently made modern (even the democratic) governments to
gravitate into autocracy, a major menace to the civility of civil societies. Practical experience and recent history have shown that governments across the globe have always been allured to avail themselves the utility of this killer machine to surmount threatening civil dissensions. Alfred de Vigny, a French poet in the twilight of the Enlightenment, aptly captured this dangerous militarization of modern states - “an army is a nation within a nation; it is one of the vices of our age” (Microsoft Student, 2008). Thus, notwithstanding the liberation of Europe from the clutches of monarchical absolutism by the Enlightenment thinkers and the political revolutions, successive governments in any form, have always succeeded in trampling upon people’s rights with frenzied flagrance. It is rather bizarre that the Jacobins who inherited the immediate civil government in the aftermath of French revolution is one of the vices of our age” (Weiss, 2007). In the aftermath of the Revolution the congress rather relied on the occasional use of state militias, and only approved of a small standing army mandated specifically to guard US frontiers, while the first peacetime conscription in the US was not until 1940.

Modern governments did not only inherit and treasured the deployment of standing national armies; they had also cherishingly adopted the sacred idolization and omnipotence of the state and office from the defunct absolute monarchies to enable their consolidation of political powers. The possibility of militarizing an idolized state had finally jeopardized the full recovery of the civil society, while its pristine qualities were lost, perhaps forever. Using this twosome, governments or the ruling political elites of modern states have always succeeded in cheating, denying and squeezing out the civil mass of their ownership of the state - their natural creation and habitat, and wherein sovereignty ought to belong. Ordinarily, power is a tempter, and like liquor the gentlest of men have been corrupted by its intoxication. The ruling elites have often utilized the armed forces, firstly, to shield themselves from being accountable to the civil mass; secondly, to bolster their position in office in situations of acute opposition; and thirdly, to prevent the civil mass from expressing their agitation or renegotiating the state. The massacre of pro-democracy campaigners at Tiananmen Square and the eventual nation-wide brutal crackdown to suppress the Chinese civil society in 1989 buttress this fact. Many states have since created superbly trained and sophisticatedly equipped special elite guards, over and above the army, to secure the ruling elites from civil mass actions particularly when the loyalty of the army is in doubt, or when wanton utility of the military by the elite is problematic, due perhaps to civil constitutional constraints. Other tactics include the use of secret state police; special squads, courts, agencies, decrees, denial of basic rights, deception, trained control/brainwashing or the declaration of Martial Law, all in order to tame, hoodwink, harass, frustrate or bully the civil mass at will. Antonia Gramsci, the pro Marxian thinker, scholar and Italian Communist Party leader in his famous Prison Notebooks, published in 1947, had recognised that the power of governments is based, though not only, on brute force of the military and police (Microsoft Student, 2008). Most civil societies have also been constitutionally circumscribed through the entrenchment of immunity clauses that sanctify and shield elite office holders from public scrutiny or prosecution. Yet in addition, particularly in Africa, South America and Asia, and often in connivance with judiciary elites, the political elites have either relaxed or loop-holed the laws enough to enable them wriggle out of culpable official acts after tenure of office. James Ononafe Ibori, a one-time convict in the UK, and the former governor of the richest oil producing state in Nigeria has been convicted and sentenced by a London court for criminal acts of corruption while in office. He had earlier been similarly tried and bewilderedly freed on all counts charge (numbering well over a hundred) by a Nigerian Court. After his London conviction, the Nigerian Judge, marcel awokulehin, had quickly reacted to absolve himself of any complicity. He rather blamed the uncritical Nigerian law system which enabled Ibori to escape any guilty verdict despite the damning charges preferred against him. Another Nigerian Court had much earlier while in office declared non ex-convict this same man whom the UK authorities had now confirmed and tagged ‘a common thief’ and who had not even completed the terms of his previous conviction in the UK (Guttschuss, 2012). Serving elites have often also endeavored to legalistically protect former office holders from civil judgments, a scheme that is designed in hope to similarly have them protected after office. A Chilean constitution drafted during the repressive administration of Augusto Pinochet guaranteed past presidents with lifetime seats in the Senate, and as senators, they are technically and legally immune from prosecution for crimes carried out during their regimes. Of course, Pinochet himself became a lifetime senator after he’d been pressured to quit presidency. By and large, ruling elites have succeeded in the attempt to consolidate political power in the endeavour to continually and exploitatively dominate the civil society. The liberal philosopher, John Emerich Edward Dalberg, known better as Lord Acton, famously observed that “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it” (Microsoft Student, 2008), just also as Locke was anxious that the consolidation of political power can be turned into autocracy, if it is not brought under reliable restrictions (Wikipedia, 2008).
A grave consequence of all that is that in the attempt to re-contest or uphold the state, violence has become a recurring decimal of civil societies. Indeed, continual and rapacious violence, conflicts and agitations have been the natural inevitable of modern civil societies. Violence from the problem of obedience, violence wreaked from civil mass actions to protest against the state, crushing counter-violence from the government seeking to repress the civil mass (including insurgency and counterinsurgency), and all other forms of violence that the modus operandi of modern states have unavoidably engendered. The above scenarios logically explained the provocation of Prof. Dieter Gosewinkel into denying the existence of a civil society. In his expectation and words, civil society is often described as harmonious, a society which is non-violent, tolerant and in which power does not seem to be of any importance. He concludes, “There is no real society like that.” The possibility of ruling elites (no matter how benevolent or democratically appointed) to employ force of state to suppress civil mass actions at will similarly made J.J. Rousseau to conclude that “modern civil society is a trick perpetrated by the powerful on the weak in order to maintain their power or wealth.” Rousseau had considered and condemned the current state of civil society to affirm that man was happier when closer to his previous natural state. He also had disapproved of representative government but rather opined that liberty was possible only where there was direct rule by the people as a whole in lawmaking, where popular sovereignty, i.e. civil mass sovereignty, was indivisible and inalienable. For him, citizens must, in at least some circumstances, be able to choose together the fundamental rules by which they would live, and be able to revise those rules on later occasions if they choose to do so. Thus for J.J. Rousseau, popular sovereignty decides what is good for society as a whole, and the individual (including the administrative head of state, who could be a monarch) must bow to it, or be forced to bow to it. However, there is hardly any modern civil society where this had come by easily since the successful consolidation of elite’s political power has led to the shortchanging of the civil mass of their sovereignty. Nonetheless, evidence abounds, particularly in Europe, linking strong civil society with democratic consolidation, sustainability and accountability.

However, the nature of modern civil societies may have condemned the Gosewinkel's or Rousseauian ideals to mere tall dreams as violence and representative government may never be extricated from modern civil societies. For instance, it is an assured given that the geometrical rise in human populations in the post industrial revolution had obviously and perhaps forever ruined the possibility of direct rule by the people as a whole. Again, as rightly observed by Michael Frolic “civil society inspires a wide range of interpretations and individual agendas” (Brook and Frolic, 1997), consequently, myriads of divisive issues of human nature and modernity have created innumerable individualizations that made difficult arrivals at unity of purpose or collectivized decisions in civil societies. Often than not also, the divisiveness of civil society activism had bogged down the efforts of even the best of governments. This conclusion is very noticeable with Huntington, Linz and Berman (Tusalem, 2007). Samuel Huntington in some classical criticisms had warned about the ill-consequences of civil society, affirming that among praetorian societies, excessive group mobilization exacerbates social tensions and can delegitimize a functional state. Juan Linz had also warned that a strong civil society promotes regime instability, primarily because outside groups such as trade unions or working-class societies can have too much influence in policymaking. Their direct connection with the state can usurp the state’s moral imperative to govern in times of crisis and promote inefficient governance.

As previously and probably rightly claimed by Edmund Burke in an elite pomp, that most members of the civil mass are ignorant and impetuous with limited capacity for reasoning, they indeed may have not grasped what their social and intellectual superiors have known and which had probably prompted the latter into certain purportedly unpopular decisions, perhaps in the short or long term. For instance, certain decisions made by the US authorities in the aftermath of 9/11 were contested by the American populace as draconian. A good reference here is the USA PATRIOT ACT put in place weeks after 9/11, to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, towards enhancing law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes. But given the magnitude and dimension of the terror attacks and of the future potentials of uncheckmated al-Qaedaism, certain strict policies and drastic civil-restraints may be compelling in the interest of national security. It may even be asserted that notwithstanding the academic desirability of civil society, nothing absolutely precludes it from violence as experience as shown that no human society is immune to violence particularly since every society has to contend with different renegades and other abusers of freedoms. Even, the political anarchists that envisioned a society of fraternal associations, with higher institutions of government abolished, still recognised the occurrence of renegades but who in their advocacy should be persuaded (and not forced) to leave the community. The practicality of such advocacy remains perpetually a dream anyway, hence, certain element of force of state is needed to prevent or restrain any member that may engage in acts that are inimical to orderly and harmonious co-living in civil societies. To this extent, Gosewinkel's denial of the civil society may be out of place, and his expectation that the civil society must be harmonious, non-violent and tolerant, one in which power seemed to be of no importance, may after all be untenable, unnecessarily idealistic and utopian.

Similarly, the natures of modern civil societies have triggered certain pessimism as regarding its role in state’s pursuit of constitutionalism and good governance. Rollin F. Tusalem has paraded certain arguments to show...
that an unrestrained civil society may be inimical to the rule of law, peace and tranquility of many modern states. For instance in recent times, civil society’s political activisms have toppled constitutionally elected governments; abrogated the institutionalization of the rule of law and the primacy of constitutional governance; and as well, returned authoritarian leaders and destroyed democratic gains. This for instance had variously been the case in Venezuela, Ecuador, Guatemala and Bolivia. Sheri Berman has argued in the same vein that strong civil societies and civic nationalism can facilitate societal discord, which again led, for instance, to the rise of the Nazi party - a party that was utterly inimical to the tenets of liberal democracy. Berman critiqued the civil society further by arguing that civic groups can produce cleavage structures, creating organizations that are subversive, radical, seditious, insurgent, and revolutionary. In many cases, civil group activisms have not been absolved from fanning the embers of discord and destabilization in countries. A case in point is the genocide in Rwanda in which a divided civil mass under the demagogical manipulations of certain opposing elites were bent on the extinction of one another. Hence, Tusalem discouraged the advocacy of civil society as a catch-all panacea that can generate better governance, political stability, or promote democratic consolidation among democracies (Tusalem, 2007). The Tusalem advocacy in juxtaposition with the good-governance activists’ promotion of civil society is an obvious instance of the confirmation of Obadare - Seligman consensus on the very conflictual and ambiguous notion of the concept.

This work however takes exception to the description of certain actions as civil society actions. A differentiation and distinction must be made between a civil mass action and a general civil society action. A civil mass action is usually and actually a sectional or narrow activity within the broad civil society setting. For instance a civil mass unrest is often erroneously tagged civil society action whereas the civil society does not have any special action other than the day-to-day good governance activities and dutiful civic responsibilities of citizens. When these are deemed to have failed, usually due to leadership problems, certain aggrieved section of the civil society may embark on civil action to protest their grievances or press for policy reforms. Such actions may be taken by members or all of the civil mass just also as aggrieved members of the elite circle. But just as a civil mass action can foment trouble for the civil society similarly can the civil elite action drive the civil society into commotion. The Glorious Revolution in England was after all primarily instigated by members of the elite circle. The error above stemmed from the elitist redefinition that had divorced governmental responsibilities from the civil society concept, firstly, in order to tame the masses and to portray them as trouble makers; secondly, to extricate the ruling elites from civil jurisdiction, and thirdly, to cheapen civil society activities as representing mere private acts that must not treasonably transgress the position of the political elites and the sovereign state.

Stemming from the immediate above, a strong civil society is here contended as one in which both the civil mass and the non-political civil elites have been able to mutually and effectively contest the state with the ruling elites without necessarily destabilizing or stagnating the polity. The difference between the strong and weak civil societies is simply that in the former, the ruling elites, and in fact, any section of the society has not succeeded in hijacking the state like an exclusive club. Without necessarily sharing the sentiments of Samuel Huntington, Juan Linz, Sheri Berman or Rollin F. Tusalem that strong civil societies can facilitate societal discord or instability, the submission here is that those are rather symptomatic of weak civil societies and on such occasions, it is actually a section of the state that has succeeded in hijacking the entire civil society to its own end. For instance, there may be a mass agitation against a ruling class action that is considered despotic. In other instances, a contesting or demagogical elite may mobilise a weak civil society behind a personal agenda. The Nazi Germany for instance was a state overtaken by the contesting demagogical elites, and in politics where major members of the civil mass are aggrieved or unsophisticated or of simple minds, they become pawns in the hands of ruthless manipulators. This is ditto for Rwanda where most members of the civil mass were naively fooled into becoming simple killer-implements and conscientious murderers under the maneuvering influence of certain Hutu elite extremists particularly in the top hierarchies of the military and government, believing intriguingly that a Rwandan state with an ultimate ‘Hutu power’ was attainable through a genocidal ethnic cleansing with impunity in the twilight of the Twentieth Century and the presence of a relatively effective international political order.

By logic and contradiction however, the above genocidal examples are symptoms of weak civil societies and not otherwise. And this is where for instance; social equity, justice, fair play and good universal education makes a good difference, though not the kind that teaches Social Darwinism and racial hegemony that could incite one against the other in a civil society. A strong civil society is characteristically satisficing and welfarist that it engenders an overflow of middle class families because opportunities and earnings, rights and privileges are often evenly distributed to elicit a fairly general commitment of all and to guarantee state’s peace and stability. This is because a strong civil society leaves no section marginalized or worst-off to warrant the wanton agitation of any section to seek insurgency or the destructive destabilization of state. Indeed, a strong civil society is a theoretical recipe for a peaceful state. However, responsibilities of building a strong civil society loom so large that they require the moderateness and modesty, sacrifice and compromise of all. But often in societies where most members of the civil mass are parochial and naive, the tendency is usually that ruling elites are tempted to abuse and corner the state and its resources, in order to be better off and dominant. The best way to exercise this abuse is for the ruling elites to
redefine and pull the state off the civil society and that would have shrunk the looming nature of the latter. The consequence is a weak civil setting that inherently portends danger to the state. Worst scenario cases are the predominant rentier states of Africa.

The best examples of strong civil societies are the Nordic states of the Scandinavia, i.e. Norway, Sweden and Denmark. These are the best scenarios of acute egalitarianism and welfarism with no known extremes of poverty and riches, or apparent class divisions. Quite archetypal of the pristine civil society in conceptualisation, these astute qualities contributed to their being some of the most developed states in the world. Norway’s ruling elite is composed for instance of a small class of very committed and highly disciplined, selfless, civil servants, who not only confine self to the rule of law but earnestly are promotive of generous and equitably fair take-home pay irrespective of status, and this is apart the fabulous state-funded social services. For Norway, all these have translated into globally enviable living standards, superbly rich life expectancy, national tranquility and harmony, and general submission to the rule of law. Consequently with relatively few criminal records, Norway could afford to adopt humane criminal code and dispense with capital punishment for all crimes. The consequence is that Norwegians dwell among themselves in peace and tranquility in economic splendour, and they are exemplary of the most patriotic and loyal citizens to their state. Maintaining internal security is thus a minor and cheap concern for the government with its comparatively few police; permitting thereby the splendid budgetary provisions to further generously fund social services. Norway epitomizes a strong civil society where worries are very remote of any societal discord, dissidence or instability as feared by Huntington and others. The United States and some States in Western Europe would have approximated this but for the deep attachments to capitalist and free enterprise practices which had fragmented their societies along class structures with certain bitter struggles. They have thus had to spend substantially to maintain internal security and to put down societal discord that inequality and classism engender. Very few African states, e.g. the peaceful Botswana, perhaps Africa’s most stable democracy, has a relatively strong civil society. Thus a very strong and virile civil society is concomitant to peaceful, harmonious and prosperous coexistence.

**Postmodern Interpretation of Civil Society**

Ever since its classical origin and pristine formation, the civil society can be best described as one of the most conceptually unstable phenomena in socio-political philosophy. As earlier argued, the civil society has changed from its pristine classical conception, and has adopted drastically different modern meanings. The civil society in its classical origin was not thought of as a separate realm from the state. Indeed, at its conceptual origin, the civil society is indistinguishable from the state since the organised state is by nature itself a civil society. In an historical overview of the concept, Cohen and Arato identify the pristine mention of the concept of civil society in Aristotelian thought and in the subsequent Roman understanding, as referring to the structure of the city-state (*polis*) as a society which functions as an ethical-political community, with the characteristics of freedom and equality under the rule of law (Cohen and Arato is cited in Beyers, 2011). The community shared in a set of norms and values which determined political as well as everyday life. In Aristotle’s construct there was no distinction between state and society. The social system was all-inclusive, containing all groupings, thus also allowing no distinction between society and communion (*koinonia*), which came to represent all forms of association, thus acknowledging the existence of a plurality of forms of interaction, association, and group life, and this plurality of forms functioned as a single organised body, a community consisting of societies, summing-up as a system where the people governed the people. The ‘people governing people’ here signify the absence of class differentiation, but the presence of freedom, equity and equality of every member of the civil society under the rule of law.

However, the presence of freedom and equality of every member have since given way to componential differentiations and the triumph of the elite class over the mass society. Put differently, the classical and original genealogical conception of the civil society soon got lost, twisted and bastardized, as the world transitioned down the ages amidst numerous socio-political, economic and religious upheavals, developments and transformations. It is somewhat similar in scenario to the Marxian account on the development of the (capitalist) state. To early Marxists, the state has not always existed, but came into being as a result of the attempt of a group of people to dominate others. Every society in the Marxian perspective developed in two stages. At the earlier stage, there were no classes; the society is particularly in a primitive state with no Aristocracy (ruling elites). The second stage was the slave-owning state when some sold and bought over their fellow human beings, subjecting them to any kind of treatment they so desired. Thus the first important class division known to history was the slave-owning state where a class of people emerged not only to own means of production, but owning people as well. Therefore, the owners of capital, land, factories and industries constituted and still constitute an insignificant minority of the population. This minority had continued to have complete command of the labour of the whole people. The state, in the Marxian analysis, has
been unveiled from its disguise as a moderator of conflict, to be a machine for perpetrating the rule of one class over the other, since it is impossible to compel the greater part of the society to work for the other part without a permanent and effective apparatus of coercion made possible through the instrumentality of the state.

In the civil society perspective, at its origin, there was the freedom and equality of every member. But at some stage, some few members of the civil society began to recognise, firstly, their elitism against the simplicity of the rest majority, and secondly, very importantly too, the vulnerability of this majority to elitist manipulations. Consequently at the opportunity, the elites exercised their social and intellectual superiority, in form of control and domination over and above, and inclusively to exploit the rest mass. That very moment when the elites utilized the privilege of their elitism to exploit the simple majority signaled the tragedy of the civil society. Let it be noted critically however, that elites had originated with the civil society but that at the inception of the latter, there had been no distinction or exploitation of opportunity, but the communion of all and the equality of opportunity. Indeed, the classical theorists and proponents of the civil society like Plato and Aristotle had been apprehensive of this occurrence, hence they had been technically careful in their different political philosophies to avoid encouraging the elitist exploitative domination, a development that could tragically hurt the course of the classical civil society. In fact also, the series of socio-political, economic and religious upheavals, developments and transformations, twice earlier mentioned, have been triggered and maneuvered by the elites and which in the ultimate has led to the triumph of the elite, and by logical but saddening converse, the tragedy of the civil society.

A single blow early in modernity that may permanently have ruined the resuscitation of the pristine form of the civil society was the Industrial Revolution. The wealth and other opportunities generated thereof were too gargantuan and compellingly tempting for the elites to equitably distribute in the earlier fashion of the Aristotelian communion. Commenting on the moral reality of the wealth and liberty in the capitalist society that evolved in the aftermath, Adam Ferguson, an 18th Century Scottish professor of moral philosophy writes, "many of the establishments which (hitherto) serve to defend the weak from oppression, contribute (now), by securing the possession of property, to favor its unequal division and to increase the descendant of those from whom the abuses of power may be feared" (Ferguson is quoted in Ignatieff, 1995). But Jean Jacques Rousseau had warned that obsession with private interest would lead to neglect of public duty. Amid such neglect, despotism might thrive, and both public virtue and private liberty would be corrupted (Rousseau is quoted in Ignatieff, 1995). Michael Ignatieff reported Karl Marx to have borrowed from these two critiques to conclude in disdain on the ensuing state that "Civil society's supposed division of political, economic, and ideological power was a sham. The state was the executive committee of the ruling bourgeoisie, and law was its chosen instrument of oppression" (Ignatieff, 1995).

Consequently also, since the post-Classical era when the elites had triumphed in the state, the concept of civil society has been changing, determined and qualified or defined only in elitist terms. In other words, the civil society is what the reigning or the contesting elites say it is. While the contesting elites give it a derogatory meaning in the quest for a change, the reigning elites define the concept much in line towards maintaining the status quo as that is critical to his wishful sustenance of dominance. For instance, Jaco Beyers (2011), in his incisive work on Religion, Civil Society and Conflict, writes on Marx's interpretation of civil society as consisting of 'isolated and aggressive individuals' united by economic interests. In this vein, Marx understood civil society as the replacement of collective units by the autonomous individual, causing civil society to lose its political character. Individuals operate in society no longer motivated by a common good, but by selfish interest. According to Marx, civil society was therefore supporting materialism; man is abusing others and simultaneously allows himself to be abused in order to reach financial gain. Civil society alienated man from the community and from himself and others. Of course, Marx was perhaps wrong to have depicted the civil society in this light, and he could not have denied that the so-regarded 'isolated and aggressive individuals' united by economic interests were the reigning economic cum political elites in the post Industrial-Revolution European States. But Karl Marx too, an intellectual but a contesting elite in his own right, was also seeking to hijack and redirect the same civil society towards his parochial, though intellecive, perspective. It could thus be conjectured in a critical analysis that the above Marxian critique on civil society and the state is a proof that elites of the Marxian perspective sought to renegotiate the civil society in another direction, and consequently too for their own domination.

G.W. Hegel, in the later spirit of Karl Marx, had encouraged the state as the ultimate arbiter of morality to checkmate, tame, correct and give the civil society necessary moral directions. This partly explains the rise of communist totalitarian states in Eastern Europe in the first half of the Twenty-First Century. But then, the whole intellectual world is a witness to events in the aftermath of the Russian Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The Revolution had led into the replacement of the autocratic royal elite (the Tsarist royalty and nobility) with a new set of combined intellectual, industrial, professional politician and military elites, hiding under the ideology of Communism. The 'disguised' goal of those who carried out the revolution was the creation of social equality and economic democracy in Russia, and quite characteristically of every civil mass-manipulating-elite, the revolution was driven by a deceptive but popular slogan "all power to the soviets." However, the Communist regime that was established eventually turned into a bureaucratic and repressive dictatorship that Mikhail Gorbachev was western-pressured into scrupling, over
seven decades later, with the policy sponde of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The Russian workers and peasants (i.e. the Russian civil mass) that were tricked into executing the Revolution were later to regrettably realise that they had only played into the hands of another opportune elites who ruled with harder iron hands in the now defunct Soviet Union, describable as the prison-house of nations just exactly as it were the situation with the deposed Emperor Nicholas II. After all, Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, (Microsoft Student 2008), had claimed that the power of governments is based not only on brute force of the military and police, but also on hegemony by which he meant the ways in which ruling elites use a dominant ideology to conceal their control of the masses. Gramsci, an Italian Communist Party Chief had tacitly admitted thus that the ruling elites of the USSR had utilized the ideology of communism to conceal their desired control of the masses. Of course, the scions of the communist elite (Putin and Medvedev) still forcefully curtail the civil society in the post Gorbachev (supposedly democratic) state of Russia as we write.

The other observation is that both the reigning or contesting elites have always invoked the civil society as a conceptual means towards achieving their ends, although the latest threat to the concept is its narrow application to a section of the state since the 1980s. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 but which was un-backed by United Nations, Omar G. Encarnacion in a work in 2006 recollects that “no sooner had the first bombs begun to fall over Baghdad than calls for making civil society an important building block in establishing democracy in Iraq began to appear in the American media”. It is perhaps scientific that democracy is most appetizing to every civil society by nature, but the ultimate agenda of these media publications were truly not geared for the sincere establishment of real democracy in that nation (Iraq) where the predominance of tenets and divisiveness of Islam may even be antithetical to the values and dictates of western democracy. However, the conquering American elites had recognised the need to desperately tame and calm the unsettled post-Saddam Iraq if meaningful and profitable oil exploration and civil reconstruction were to be undertaken by the American capitalist sponsors, instigators and beneficiaries of the invasion, (which also represents the reenactment of the *devil theory of imperialism* in the new millennium). The best way to doing that would be to trick and placate the Iraqi civil mass with the euphoriant self-belief of critical importance in fashioning a new direction for their country just liberated from the repressive authoritarian rule of Saddam Hussein, whereas a new set of aspiring Iraqi elites had collaborated with the invading forces in the underneath, seeking and waiting to replace the deposed Baath Party elites. But quite interestingly, Irene Taviss Thomson, a mass society theorist had earlier published another work that exposed the mass media as a tool for the elitist manipulation of the masses in the United States (Thomson, 2005). Of course also, in most nations, the mass media is an elitist property, a veritable tool in the hands of both the controlling or competing elites. Hence, the trick that had worked for the elite in the US was to be played again in Iraq. But without paying attention to the success or otherwise of the attempt, we must note that the elitist invocation of the civil society sentiment in the trick to stabilize the Iraqi society, and indeed for any society at all, was strictly intended for elitists’ ends.

What is worrisome however is the narrow application of the concept in recent years. Since the take-over of the state by the ruling elite and the tenanting of the civil mass in the aftermath of the Westphalia, the tag civil society has been repeatedly used to refer to either all citizens outside of government or issues relating to them, that is when it is not used to qualify non-governmental activist groups. This development explains why Ernest Gellner admits that civil society denotes “the social residue that is left behind when the state is subtracted.” For Persell et al. (2001), and very well in the spirit of Gellner, the civil society consists of all the associations to which people belong, including families, religious organizations, social movements, parent-teacher associations, neighborhood associations, sports leagues, labor unions, volunteer groups, professional or occupational associations, clubs, support groups, and so forth. In this light did many literatures on the issue depict civil society as being synonymous with the voluntary sector or the so-called Third Sector, and particularly with NGOs, advocacy groups, social movement agents, human rights organizations and other actors explicitly involved in actions for social change. But this development is not strange in the context of the idea earlier opinionated in this work that the ruling elite, since the Westphalia, had suspended the idea of civil society because of its obvious conceptual and founding values that could constitute restraints on political elites, but to rather float and promote the sacred sovereignty of government and the state.

Consequently the idea went missing in political discourses for quite a while until its revival and complete misapplication or reassignment, by Antonio Gramsci, in the 1930s. While attempting to analyse power relations in societies through his notion of class hegemony, Gramsci described civil society in a much different sense from its classical concept: as an arena in which battles for class power and against capitalism are fought; occupied by a struggle for material, ideological and cultural control over all of society, including the State, which as in Marx’s contention, is the instrument of class domination (Gramsci is cited in Gallin, 2000). Dan Gallin writes that Gramsci’s ideas became very influential with all those concerned with developing a democratic and at the same time radical form of Marxism, not only to combat capitalism but also in the fight against Stalinism. An intellectual luminance of his period, Antonio Gramsci had relocated the civil society away from its broad focus to represent such narrow activities within, but which had impacted on the course, direction and fate of the society and the state, hence the popular and
current misapplication of the concept. The undeniable fact interestingly is that the term – civil society, and not its concept, is now used to refer all nonstate active groups, organisations and institutions which seek to affect the state on the behalf of the peoples and other non-human elements of the society. Good examples here are the Amnesty International and the Nature Conservancy. The ruling elites of nations have since the 1970s referred the civil society as the Voluntary Sector of social activities for non-profit non-governmental organisations, or the Third Sector, in reference to the public and private sectors respectively. It is noteworthy interestingly that in spite of everything, the so-called Third Sector have been able to affect national governments in moderate or drastic terms. Of course also, aspiring elites have been known to float non-governmental civil activist groups as platforms for seeking and gaining cheap popularity with the civil mass towards contesting the political leadership of their state.

In current discourses, there is the talk of a global civil society, which though is highly contested in the academia regarding its precise definition or composition. However, there is no desire here to engage in the debate over its ambiguity or otherwise. But there are now myriad issues that had generated concerns for global management, and these have obviously integrated the diverse peoples of the world in such proportions that it could legitimately be subsumed the evolution of a phenomenally concerned global society. But just as it were with the states in the post-classical era, there has been a rise of world-class elites that seek to manipulate the integrated society. The term global civil society is used to refer to all non-state actors operating within and across, and capable of affecting decisions in member states of the UN. The inevitability of this stemmed from the establishment of the defunct League of Nations, (and which has since been replaced by the United Nations Organisation), to address the systemic failure and chaos that characterised the post-Westphalia international order. The corollary of every civil society is the rise of an elite circle to which it responds, thus we could talk now of international elites in the diplomatic corps who by their legitimate right of status and occupation have been propped up in office by the sanctioning national governments. Of course, the UN, which is predominantly elitist in occupation and operation, cooperates with the so-called global civil society. Not though for the fun of it, but for the reality that, as Paul Wapner puts it, when analyzing the relationship between the civil society and the UN, it is useful to talk about the global civil society, which refers to voluntary associations occurring across state boundaries, and operating as a realm for transnational collective action (Wapner is here cited in Weiss and Daws, year?). Apart from the fact that some non-governmental groups within states had networked for international agenda and effectiveness, numerous others had evolved internationally with global initiatives, targeting world economy and many other critical issues of planetary magnitude; it is thus perhaps legitimate for such organisations to target the UN since it is the only body with a worldwide mandate to address global issues, providing avenues for state’s interaction towards formulating effective international policies in a world of ever-increasing issues of interconnectedness. Wapner had concluded that “global civil society thus represents a seemingly important realm within contemporary world affairs.” But then the parade of international elite is not exclusive to the UN diplomatic corps, it is also inclusive of the corresponding elites seeking to affect global decisions, using the platforms of the international non-governmental organisations.

The incidence of global elites and global civil society has significantly and formidably risen, particularly in the age of globalisation. Economic globalisation in particular has brought about fundamental issues and practices that critically and intricately interconnected nations of the world in the unprecedented dimensions, particularly in the areas of international markets, outsourcing of productions, movements and procurements of goods and services, foreign direct investments, international loans and banking services, e.t.c. These have been the offshoot of the outcomes of the defunct Brettonwoods conferences of the United Nations on global monetary and financial policy, but which has since been heightened particularly by scientific cum technological advancements in communications, transportation and manufacturing, that drastically had shrunk the hitherto vast planet into a global village. The eventual establishments of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO); and these coupled with myriads of other International Non-Governmental Organisations that deal not only on contemporary issues of global magnitude and concern but providing formal consultancy services in their areas of competence to the UN (as laid down in the Article 71 of its Charter), did not only boost the ranks of global civil society, but inclusively concretized the rise into prominence of the Davos generation, the ‘global governance’ elites who use these and many other platforms to dominate the making of critical global decisions in the international political economic arena, on about who gets what, when and how (to borrow from Harold Lasswell), and determining the fate and fortunes of peoples and nations of the world. The criticality of global civil society and the corresponding elites cannot be overemphasized in the face of Cardoso report that “the rise of civil society is indeed one of the landmark events of our times. Global governance is no longer the sole domain of Governments. The growing participation and influence of nonstate actors is enhancing… and reshaping multilateralism” (Weiss and Daws, year?). However, it could be conjectured that the idea of the global civil society is the hatched dream of national elites seeking to network for further global pursuits.
Civil society is a classical concept whose pristine values have been grossly affected and restructured by the multiplicity of events that had taken place down the ages. Current trend in conceptualizing civil society has also fallen short of approximating the classical virtues of the term; hence the modern definitions of the concept have often strayed and become grossly confusional. It is the belief that this work has done justice towards identifying the points of derailment from the concept at its classical root as human organisations progressed into modernity. It is equally the belief that a reconceptualization of the term is urgent and necessary to rescue it from the barrage of elitist abuses for centuries running, and which has recently culminated in scholastic wanderings, frustrations and embarrassments. Such are the scholastic disorders demonstrated in the opening paragraph of this work where the confusion is evident in the wild and unwieldy descriptions and definitions of the concept whereupon its reality and existence became doubted. The absence of academic consensus on the concept in the mainstream political discourse has not only consolidated on the term’s misapplication, but inclusively had indulged the ruling elites in the continual misgovernance and deceptive abuse of their society.

The civil masses have not been left off the quagmire as they equally are involved in their dereliction of civic responsibilities which had resulted from their reactions to cumulative elitist abuses, and which unfortunately had given the civil mass a notorious perception about the state as aptly noted in the argument of the Hungarian dissident György Konrád, that "the state is unchangeable and irredeemably hostile" (György Konrád is quoted in Encarnacion, 2006). György Konrád’s book Antipolitics is described as a manifesto for living with one's back against the state because he encouraged fellow citizens to devote attention to issues of personal and parochial interests other than political ones. Indoctrinations into such antistate inclinations have permanently hardened people’s heart, acculturating many into imbibing antistate mentality and adopting confrontational strategies. Many in this category had sometimes wantonly resisted the most genuine overtures from state officials even in democracies. Very many citizens across nations have permanently adopted a negative mindset against the state and the scenario is like ‘can any good come out of Nazareth?’ For instance, Ariel Armony reported that in Argentina, human rights organizations, having been accustomed to a strategy of confrontation, found it difficult to cooperate with the institutions and agencies of the democratic state even when state officials were ready to negotiate with the civil society opposition (Ariel Armony is cited in Encarnacion, 2006). Armony adds further that: "They perceived the state as an enemy and rejected any possibility of dialogue with government authorities. Some groups even promoted an anti-state message with violent overtones." Edmund Burke had conceded that People crushed by law have no hopes but from power. If laws are their enemies, they will be enemies to laws; and those, who have much to hope and nothing to lose, will always be dangerous, more or less' (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). The corollary is that the György Konrád scenario has engendered state instabilities and failures in many instances and political revolutions that historically had gulped millions of lives with monumental destructions / disruptions of societal gains. It has also nurtured opportunities for demagogical manipulations of the civil masses as witnessed in the Nazi Germany and the Rwandan genocide. The case is thus overripe for a reconceptualization of the civil society which has remained a drifter issue for too long now on the coasts of hot disputations and contestations.

A fair conceptualisation must needfully begin to revert the civil society back to its original arrangement that recognised the communal enlistment of every member in the civil governance of their society. It must not only reinstated the equality of rights and opportunities for all without exception or disparity, but should recognise the state as the joint property of all irrespective of status. Rights and privileges may destabilize a civil state if misplaced or misused, thus, a workable conceptualisation of the civil society must declare elitism not as a right but privilege, whose exercise must not flaunt or encroach on the simplicity of the civil mass despite the power relations that favour the former. A proper definition of the concept must rescue the state from the stronghold of the civil elite and make it available jurisdictonally to all and sundry, by which is meant that government is made accountable to and that the state itself is open to healthy contestations by all. Intrinsic to the original civil society is the pursuit of happiness for all particularly in the entrenchment of civil liberties, freedom of association, property right (which needed not be promoted by the development of capitalism, classism and class exploitation), equality of opportunity (though often borne out of merit) and egalitarianism, state-sponsored effective social services among such other virtues that potentially and patriotically endear all citizens to their state. All of these had combined to conceptually fashion the pristine civil society. Indeed, civility is an initiative for the optimal and decent management of human society, and this made the civil society to be a moral construct. But that was possible because the classical philosophies and intellect that berthed the concept belonged to great statesmen and selfless minds that were concerned primarily, genuinely and absolutely for the public good.

A genuine civil state by design and nature, and not the elite state, would attract even the most radical but rational philosophic anarchist away from his utopia, and to desist from the advocacy for the abolition of government from, and for the setting up of extreme individualism in societies. Not until the triumph of the elite did the civil society abandon its sterling qualities for elitist prejudices that estranged and agitated the masses. It is obvious after all, that
the elitist pathological ambition to dominate the state led astray the classic conception of the civil society. Therefore, the academic emphasis on civil society must of essence deconstruct the elite (dominated) state, delegitimize the elites’ spurious hegemony and must seek to address or reverse the elitist consolidation of political powers that chagrined the civil mass. That however is not to be seen as an advocacy for the rule of majority or the civil mass, for the wisdom of Lord Acton suffices here that “the danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. Every class is unfit to govern and that the one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority” (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). Thus, the scholastic challenge should be the criticism of any and every act that connotes tyranny of one against another. Of critical essence here is that a civil society, which is already reduced to a moral issue, must be fair and equitable in every sense to every member, irrespective of class or status. Indeed, the occurrence of classism is an ominous development and decadence for any civil society, and the lone reason why the Scandinavian countries remained harmonious, peaceful, prosperous, decent and most developed is that the ruling elites have so far resisted the temptation to corner the state. Towards this end did Samuel Pufendorf (1734) brilliantly define a civil society or state as a “compound moral person” whose will is constituted by a union of wills, and this will must be considered the will of all. Accordingly, it may employ the powers and capacities of all its subjects to secure peace and security. A civil society therefore, aptly simplified, may be defined, as a cohabitation of men, joined in a union of their wills and resources under one supreme ruler, for their mutual protection and security, where ‘protection and security’ is connotative of every provision that could generate happiness in any form for all. This unequivocally is the vintage civil society.

The proper conceptualisation of the civil society must therefore also resist the elitist trick to divert, dislocate or condemn the civil society onto the narrow pedestal of mere autonomous issues of group interests that are nonstate in aggregate, but must be broadly deemed to encompass or represent all acts that are imperative in the effective running of an organised state. Put differently and as admitted by Flyvbjerg (1998), that most writers on civil society agree that the subject has an institutional core constituted by voluntary associations outside the sphere of the state and the economy, the academia must not be lured away from, but ought to carefully reinstate the philosophical ethics, the deep political connotations and the statist nature of the civil society. Only this would posteriously absolve the academic from any collusion with the elite to shortchange or destroy the civil society. It is agreeable to this work that no concept is immune to improvable amendments particularly since there is nothing on earth that cannot be bettered upon. However, the enhancement of any phenomenon must not begin by or include the outright dismissal or distortion of its founding and factual initiatives and objectives. Times may certainly change but values need not. An overdue scholastic remedy of the civil society concept must neither be oblivious of the classical values upon which it originated nor overlook the transitional and elitist pitfalls that had for centuries been concealed in its definition.

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