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**“CIVIL SOCIETY”: THE “CONCRETE UTOPIA OF ALL
OF US – HOW WE ALL COULD COME CLOSER TO
WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR”**

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“CIVIL SOCIETY”: THE “CONCRETE UTOPIA OF ALL OF US – HOW WE ALL COULD COME CLOSER TO WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR”¹

Andreas Gross

I. Over the past 12 years I often had the impression that the more we talk about “civil society” and “civil societies” the less they exist. At least I am sure that civil society in the older and younger democracies are weaker than the discourses about them. I do not want to go so far as to say the more they speak about it, the less they really want one, but sometimes it is hard not to have such thoughts.

II. A strong civil society is one of the conditions of a strong democracy and good governance. And without strong democracy and good governance, there is no civilian control of the security sector, especially not of the armed forces.

III. My pessimistic views about the contradictions between the *civil society speak* and the quality of really existing civil societies grow from many experiences and observations in western, central and eastern European countries in many undertakings and missions as a peace movement activist in the 1980s, and as an expert and a MP both within and outside the framework of the Council of Europe since 1992.

Mentioning only one such experience, I recall a meeting in Skopje nearly one year ago, when a person who was presented to me as a representative of the Macedonian civil society told me after a discussion of several hours: “You know, as NGOs we as individuals or organisations or groups do not criticise the government or opposition parties; we are always politically neutral!” And he did not refine or alter his argument after I mentioned the idea that politics should not be confused with party-politics, and that democracy is the right to be, think, and act differently, to criticise whatever and

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whoever you think is not doing well, and that critics can be useful for every person in order to enable him or her to learn and to improve.

Even more difficult are my ongoing talks with representatives of civil society in Azerbaijan, when I try to argue for my conviction that they should work more within the society and act less to mobilise only the international community in order to press the authorities to act more respectfully of human rights and democratic principles. It is hard for them to believe that real change will only come out of their own society and cannot be imported from abroad, even with the best intentions, like the money they have to live on.

Sometimes I have the impression that staff members of NGOs which are funded by people, organisations and even states, who by their funding activities seek to contribute to the building and strengthening of civil societies, speak, act and behave like liberal politicians who think they know best what is good for the people. Such NGO staff members don't seem to need to include the people in the activity of identifying and making the people's cause. If this impression is true, this would mean that these people do not strengthen but weaken civil society when they are supposedly enabled to contribute to its building.

IV. I often ask myself whether all the money that reaches so-called "NGOs" is really invested in the best way that will build and strengthen civil societies in the making. Could it be that too much money is used in order to satisfy the donors in the short term, and is not being used more effectively to build and strengthen civil societies in the long term? Is too much money going too frequently into offices, computers, air tickets, a lot of paper, seminars for always the same privileged group of people living in the capital cities, and projects with nice titles and that are nice to show around but which do not contribute very much to the education and functioning of the community, nor promote discussion with ordinary citizens?

V. To avoid misunderstandings, and to enable us to embark on a realistic evaluation and fruitful deliberation, I would like to define some crucial elements of the concept of civil society, which I take from my historical and scientific studies and discussions:

Civil society means an ensemble of all *citoyens* and *citoyennes* who care about the community, transcend private interests, and are engaged on a volunteer basis inside and outside public institutions in self-managed groups, associations and other organisations.

VI. NGOs who want to serve the constitution and the building or strengthening of the civil society have to avoid thinking of themselves as a lobby and thereby reducing politics to lobbying.

Civil society-oriented NGOs have to empower the citizens and people themselves to be able to act on their behalf and in their interest. They also need a republican polity: this is a polity which understands that under democracy there are more than passive rights and freedom to choose as consumers, and which does not reduce democracy to parliamentary democracy and the choice of the people between parties at election time. Republican polities are made by institutions, proceedings and deliberations which enable citizens to act themselves – not only delegate their own sovereignty to others – and to realise politically together what no one can attain alone.

VII. Today we paradoxically face in the new and old democracies structural elements in our societies which endanger civil society strengthening and discourage its building. This is a paradox because never in our history have so many citizens had so many civil potentials (education, information, civic skills, power to judge and to communicate).

In the old democracies there are especially the hegemonic economic rationalities, the hegemony of the market forces over democracy, and the democratic culture and professional pressures which undermine the strengthening of civil society; at the same time, we face here a banalisation of the rich concepts of democracy, freedom and liberty.

In the newer democracies, we still have to overcome a heavy heritage that still marks the majority of the people and symbolises nearly all conditions which do not serve the building of civil society: The lack of trust in the other and the lack of self-confidence; the tradition of being an object rather than a subject of politics, and the general discrediting of collective action, organisation and politics.

And what makes the common task to overcome this anti-democratic heritage even more difficult? The new democracies have to build civil society by overcoming the old anti-democratic heritage under the new anti-democratic conditions of a society we know from the west without any of the achievements of the old social democracy, the liberal emancipative movements or the new social movements of the last 30 years.

VIII. Freedom, democracy, and justice and probably also the whole concept of civil society are notions with the dimension of concrete utopias. Utopia is neither an illusion nor wishful thinking, but may be understood as an “asymptote”: They show us where to go, they give us a perspective and an orientation, and give us ideas how to approach these futures. Let us be aware that we may have to come closer but have to be aware that we will never reach these goals totally.



Established in 2000 on the initiative of the Swiss government, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), encourages and supports States and non-State governed institutions in their efforts to strengthen democratic and civilian control of armed and security forces, and promotes international cooperation within this field, initially targeting the Euro-Atlantic regions.

The Centre collects information, undertakes research and engages in networking activities in order to identify problems, to establish lessons learned and to propose the best practices in the field of democratic control of armed forces and civil-military relations. The Centre provides its expertise and support to all interested parties, in particular governments, parliaments, military authorities, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, academic circles.

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