

Global South Studies on Civil Society

An Arab Contribution⁽¹⁾

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Abstract: This paper seeks to contextualise Azmi Bishara's *Civil Society: A Critical Study*. It argues that the book's added value lies in that it critiques reductionist approaches to civil society and reveals their failure to highlight the explanatory power and critical validity of the concept of civil society, as well as its democratic function. The book demonstrates how the concept has transformed from coinciding with the state whilst running parallel to natural society; passing through a stage of being an intermediary space between the individual, the state, and the market; then finally arriving at the distorted expression of that which is not the state which it has become, coinciding, hence, with the apolitical. The study begins with a review of the debates over the concept of civil society in the Global South Studies literature. It then proceeds to highlight the essential conceptual, theoretical, and historical problems of civil society with which Bishara engages in his book. Finally, the paper attempts to demonstrate how the book's arguments remain very relevant to the challenges facing civil society in Arab countries—regardless of the variance in their footing along the path to democratic transition.

Civil Society

the State

Azmi Bishara

Global South

the Arab Spring

Democracy

Introduction

By 2021, an entire quarter-century has passed since the first edition of Azmi Bishara's book *Civil Society: A Critical Study* was published.⁽³⁾ By now, nine editions of the book have been printed, most recently in 2017 by the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). Since the 1996 publication of its first edition in Ramallah, the book has become a seminal reference on civil society among researchers and students, not to mention an essential basis for

Arab thought on civil society and its relationship to the state and democracy, particularly in view of the two waves of Arab popular uprisings in 2011 and 2019. It is supported in this by Bishara's other contributions, most notably *on the Arab Question* (2018 [2007]),⁽⁴⁾ *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context* in three parts (2013,⁽⁵⁾ 2015,⁽⁶⁾ 2015⁽⁷⁾), *Democratic Transition and its Problems* (2018),⁽⁸⁾ and *Sect, Sectarianism, and Imagined*

1 This study was originally published in Issue 51 (July 2021) of *Tabayyun*, a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal, and translated by Nick Lobo.

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3 Azmi Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani: Dirāsa Naqdiyya*, 9th ed. (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017). The first edition was published in 1996 by the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy (Muwatin) in Ramallah.

4 Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Mas'ala al-'Arabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī 'Arabī*, 4th ed. (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018). The first ACRPS edition was published in Beirut in 2007.

5 Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-'Ilmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, vol. 1: *al-Dīn wa-l-Tadayyun* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013).

6 Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-'Ilmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, vol. 2: *al-Sayūra al-Fikriyya* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015).

7 Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-'Ilmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, vol. 3: *al-'Ilmāniyya wa-Nazariyyāt al-'Almana* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015).

8 Azmi Bishara, *al-Tā'ifa, al-Tā'ifiyya, wa-l-Tawā'if al-Mutakhayyala* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018).

Sects (2020).⁹) The question of civil society remains pressing and relevant, and its importance has only grown since the Arab Spring placed some Arab countries on the road to difficult transitions toward democracy. Some of these were aborted, though the conditions that led to them have remained, and even worsened.

This paper seeks to contextualise the book within what has come to be known as Global South Studies. The Global South as it is known today denotes a historical perception first and foremost, which is not related solely to fixed geographical borders through which one may differentiate between two entirely contradictory worlds (i.e., North and South), whether by the relation of that perception to their historical formation or in terms of the socioeconomic circumstances for the development of this formation. Whatever the origin of the notion of the Global South — or: the Third World, the developing countries, the underdeveloped countries, or even the East as opposed to the West — the Arab World is at its core. We are most concerned with the acknowledgement that this contrast is indeed present, between two worlds on one hand and within each of the worlds individually on the other, because such an acknowledgement is what would permit the disclosure of the hidden contexts and conditions behind the emergence, at one time, of concepts such as that of civil society, their decadence at a second time, their revitalisation at a third, and so on.

There is a wide segment of the non-Arabic literature that has set out to examine civil society in the Global South based on comparative studies across the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It shows that there exist three chief difficulties facing the study of civil society in the Global South.

- First, there is the difficulty of self-identification, and although this challenge is not limited to civil society and includes almost all concepts discussed in the social sciences, civil society, as shall become evident in due course, has its particularities.

- Second is the difficulty of departure from the Western context for the countries of the Global South. There is a wealth of vocabulary used to express this departure, including consumption (in the form of a producer of the concept and a consumer), import and export (there are those who export the concept far beyond their cultural boundaries and those who import it from outside their cultural boundaries), invocation or appeal [*al-istihdār aw al-istid'ā*] (particularly linked with the dimension of time), and finally transplantation [*al-istizrā*], which is a widely misunderstood term despite that its meaning in Arabic is clearer and more precise, exceeding the meaning of the English term "transplanting": the act of [*istizrā*] is not said of a plant, in the sense of moving it from one place and planting it in another, but of the land itself, in the sense denoting its preparation for cultivation.¹⁰
- Third is the difficulty of examining the challenges facing the formation process of civil society in these countries: a reflection, naturally, of the divergence in the historical, cultural, and social contexts which abound in the Global South in general. This becomes clearly visible just by browsing the table of contents of books published on civil society in the Global South.

To overcome these challenges, it appears that what Global South Studies is doing does not go beyond treating civil society as a *given* and *taken-for-granted* in one way or another. Thus, the discipline transforms it into a technical issue alongside other functional issues, whether related to strengthening democracy, empowering the transition thereto, or, maximally, containing the negative consequences of the economic liberalisation process. Ultimately, it transforms civil society into an *apolitical*, *ahistorical* issue, reducing it to a definition/categorisation of what is and what is not civil society (as if to reduce its historical and sociological dimension to civil society associations and non-governmental organisations). Hence, all that remains is to craft a list of what civil society ought to take on, based on a complete historical experience

9 Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāfī wa-Ishkālīyyātuh: Dirāsa Nazariyya wa Taṭbīqīyya Muqārana* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020). It goes without saying that all these works constitute an intellectual project which is simultaneously cumulative, integral, theoretical, and empirical, and which contributes at once to the critique of prevalent political philosophy and social theory and to the formation of a constructive Arab consciousness, which Bishara dubs "the Arab Question" [*al-mas'ala al-'arabiyya*].

10 "Ta'rif wa-ma'nā Istazra'a," *Almaany Dictionary*, accessed on 22/9/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/33s5ZF9>

whose success, on the surface, cannot be denied: namely, the western experience.

Therefore, rarely has a set of thorny questions⁽¹¹⁾ been posed to interrogate the danger of treating civil society as a given, along the lines of whether there is something in the Global South which can be compared to a given western concept of civil society or whether there are indications that, during the colonial period or shortly thereafter, subsets of the local population were influenced by modern ideas to create a space located outside the control of the state. If this is the case, how may the rest of the population be characterised, who remained outside the space of modern civil society in the form in which it was imported, or even transplanted, from the colonial West?

The added value of *Civil Society: A Critical Study* lies in the critique of this disposition and the unveiling of its failure to highlight the explanatory power, critical validity, as well as the democratic function of the concept of civil society. Through a meditative, historiographical endeavour, the book demonstrates how the concept has transformed from coinciding with the state while running parallel to natural society, passing through being an intermediary space between individual, state, and market, and finally arriving at the distorted expression of that which is not the state which it has become, coinciding, hence, with the apolitical. In this way, the book cautions that

this distorted concept, stripped of its historical and political dimensions,

may, in the Arab states and other states of the South, transform into a premodern factor that drives intellectuals out of politics, through modes of apolitical community-based action [...] or through betting on indigenous structures in their capacity as not-the-state, despite the fact that their function is uncivil as well and not only non-state.⁽¹²⁾

I begin this study with an examination of the discussions that the concept of civil society has seen in some of the literature that is classified (or classifies itself) within Global South Studies. I do not claim that it is by any means an exhaustive examination; rather, the goal is to highlight the way in which that literature has discussed the three difficulties, mentioned above, which impede the study of civil society in the Global South. I then transition to shedding light on the essential problems of civil society — conceptual, theoretical, and historical — with which Bishara engages in his book, in addition to highlighting his primary arguments vis à vis those quandaries. Thereafter, I attempt to demonstrate how these arguments remain very relevant to the challenges facing civil society in Arab countries, regardless of the variance in their footing along the path to democratic transition.

Civil Society's Return to Global South Studies

This study uses Global South as a critical concept. Part of what being "critical" means is plurality in terms of definitions. Yet a comparative investigation reveals the common ground therebetween, expanding and contracting according to context; this is not the place to elaborate on this issue. Anne Mahler indicates that there are three essential definitions.⁽¹³⁾ It has been conventionally used by international organisations that specialise in development, those which essentially

emerged during the era of the Non-Aligned Movement, in reference to the economically-disadvantaged states, just as it has been used in the post-Cold War period as a substitute for the label "Third World". In recent years, in a varied set of fields, the Global South has been employed in a post-nationalist sense to denote the spaces and nations that were negatively affected by contemporary capitalist globalisation. The second definition indicates a geographically undefined space

11 See, for example: Nira Wickramasinghe, "The Idea of Civil Society in the South: Imaginings, Transplants, Designs," *Science & Society*, vol. 69, no. 3 (July 2005).

12 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 8.

13 Anne Garland Mahler, "Global South?" *Oxford Bibliographies*, 25/10/2017, accessed on 22/9/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/30D05PR>

within the borders of wealthy countries, influenced by the external factors of capitalism; hence, we have economic "souths" within the geographic North, and "norths" within the geographic South (i.e., embodiments of the South in the North and others of the North in the South, or of the periphery within the core and the core within the periphery).

Whereas this usage relies upon a long heritage of analysing the embodiments of the South within the geographic North, the modifier "Great" [*al-kabīr*] which corresponds literally to the English "Global" [*al-ālamī*], is used merely to divest the South of its geographical dimension, which continues to obstruct our view of the divergence in the contexts of its political, economic, and social formulation, at once distant from and close to the North. By way of this non-geographical perception, a third meaning is attributed to the Global South whereby it indicates the imaginary of resistance on part of a transnational political entity that took shape through the common experience of oppression and subjugation under contemporary global capitalism. According to Mahler, the critical literature classified under the heading of Global South Studies has been preoccupied with analysing the subjectivity of the Global South in such a way as to surpass the nation-state as a unit of comparative analysis and with understanding the contemporary relations between the actors of the South itself or relations among affiliated groups across traditional national, linguistic, and ethnic lines of division — to say nothing of tracing the history of those relations in previous historical forms witnessed by exchange within the South itself.

Yet this critical concept, even if it is critical, ought to be used with reservation. When reflecting on civil society in the Global South, one must also be attentive to history. Whereas the Global South is based on a non-geographical perception, civil society by contrast

(ought to be) based on a historical perception; indeed, the more it is employed as an ahistorical notion shorn of its historical dimension, whether theoretically for understanding or practically for affecting change, the more it loses its value. Thus, the principal argument of this study is that the sociological concepts which depart geographically toward the Global South, among them the concept of civil society, are neither ahistorical, apolitical, nor non-technical, and the further they stray across space and time, unaware of their history, the more they lose their "explanatory value" as concepts, ideas, and theories and their "force for change" (or emancipatory power, to use a little bit of the conceptual equipment upon which was founded the critical philosophy of Global South Studies) as praxis.⁽¹⁴⁾ Thus, these concepts must be examined *ici et maintenant* (i.e., here and now) in their defined historical location and moment, lest their transplantation end in failure. I assert that to express what is going on with the concept of civil society as (either) an import from the West or an export to the Global South is imprecise — it is an unsuccessful transplantation attempt, the logic of whose failure lies in that it has been addressed from the perspective of trial and error, then further trial and error more perilous than the last, then a distortion and, finally, a trivialisation and debasement of the experiment. In this way, I propose that we understand Bishara's notion that civil society in the Arab imaginary has come to be everything which is not the state and is not politics.

After a long absence, civil society was brought back to the forefront in Eastern Europe and Latin America during the 1980s, mainly finding its way into the political discourse widely adopted by international development agencies in the 1990s.⁽¹⁵⁾ Then, it became an inseparable component of academic research in numerous disciplines, the discourse of activists across different fields of activism, of politicians, decision-

14 Bishara phrases that as "civil society's historical meanings, critical potential, and explanatory power in understanding social and political structures"; see: Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 9.

15 Nira Wickramasinghe fully explains how the idea of civil society was sown in the countries of the Global South in a social environment shared with other normative concepts such as governance and partnership, then how the focus given by civil society intellectuals and practitioners in the field of development to the context of the transition away from what is known as the Washington Consensus, which appeared in the early 1980s before making room for the post-Washington accord, concerned with dissociating from neoliberalism in favour of policies toward policies of reconciliation with the state and its interventions. Thus, the redesign of civil society and the market, in their capacity as two chief actors in the implementation of what has become known as good governance, was increasingly affirmed. Then, with the state's return to the development field, proponents of development held that good governance is only possible through a "partnership" between the state, the private sector, and civil society—all of which are linked through a network of ties. See: Wickramasinghe, pp. 473-478.

makers, and donors nearly everywhere in the world. Undoubtedly, however, civil society is understood and practised differently throughout the world, so studies of civil society in the Global South seek to investigate how those methods differ and in what ways they are impacted by cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts. The matter does not end here, however, going beyond to pose exhausting normative questions (under the influence of postcolonial, leftist, and critical approaches) such as whether civil society is part of a neo-imperialist project, itself considered part of a Western hegemony project of multiple instruments (political, economic, and intellectual, certainly), and whether the countries of the Global South would be receptive to the transplantation and practise of the notion of civil society as the scion of the historical experience of Europe, then North America (or "in the West", shall we say, to be concise).

In a group research project overseen by Marlies Glasius and others⁽¹⁶⁾ entitled *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, it was no surprise that the constituent essays were organised geographically; distinction was made between the contexts of Eastern Europe and Latin America "which can in a sense claim 'ownership' of the revival of the civil society idea in the 1980s"; of Europe and North America which saw a "rediscovery of the homegrown but long-forgotten concept of civil society"; of Asia and Africa "where there is an uneasy coexistence between local and imported or imposed versions of civil society"; and of the Middle East, where the "desired" role which civil society must perform remains especially controversial. Glasius and his colleagues concluded that politics lies at the heart of the debate on civil society, and the book includes chapters which directly explore the matter of political participation in addition to others which focus on the importance of political context in the analysis of civil society. Distinction was made between two principal trends in the literature:

- A trend focused on the effect of extant political institutions on the context of certain countries,

which plays an important part in framing the pre-existing space and integrating civil society therein (as if it were a transplanting operation, to use transplantation in the sense of bringing in a sprout from outside the field and planting it—not of preparing the land for cultivation, a meaning which is lost on this inclination); and

- Another trend focused on the importance of drawing attention to the fact that civil society itself is a political actor, and although it is formulated within a certain political discourse, civil society nevertheless affects modes of shaping and transforming that discourse in return.⁽¹⁷⁾

Leonardo Avritzer identifies three forms of civil society in Latin America: liberal civil society (in Argentina and Chile); participatory civil society (in Brazil); and "uncivil" civil society (in Peru and Colombia). The liberal form is related to rebuilding rights-related structures and forms of collective action seeking to guarantee accountability and the rule of law. This form operates by promoting social work when the political regime fails to carry out its due role within the liberal system. The participatory form is located within the mediation process between political society and the state, whereas the "uncivil" form of civil society relates to the case in which civil society formulates itself in the absence of guarantees sufficient to make the political space peaceful. It is in this very case that the many modes of collective action to be found in the region (i.e., Latin America) are subject to destructive dynamics resulting from state and/or market policy. Avritzer defines "uncivil" civil society as the phenomenon of citizens' self-reliance in the absence of state power to provide public goods such as individual and social security. Despite using the characterisation "uncivil", he does not condemn society's self-reliance in structuring itself, but rather the stipulations which have imposed this defensive form of collective action.⁽¹⁸⁾

Other models examined in the above volume indicate that this phenomenon is under no circumstances limited to Latin America; other chapters traced nearly

16 Marlies Glasius, David Lewis & Hakan Seckinelgin (eds.), *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

17 Ibid., pp. 3-4.

18 See, for instance: Leonardo Avritzer, "Civil Society in Latin America: Uncivil, Liberal, and Participatory Models", in: Glasius, Lewis & Seckinelgin (eds.), pp. 47-53.

the same mode in Bangladesh, where a "community initiative" organised by a Dhaka mosque succeeded in reducing organised crime. Similarly, vigilante groups (also called civil defence groups) have formed in South Africa in response to the inefficacy of the policy, but it becomes clear that the methods of these special "crime-fighting" initiatives, not to mention their membership and affiliation, become criminal in turn.⁽¹⁹⁾ On the other hand, Jenny Pearce differentiates between liberal and other radical forms of civil society in Latin America, following Avritzer (dubbing them the democracy's "builders" and "critics"). Yet she concludes that polarisation into two categories is not useful throughout Latin America because both are necessary to confront the advance of authoritarianism and populism — still powerful in all parts of the region.⁽²⁰⁾

In the Global South, it appears that the ways in which institutions of civil society operate deny it its *raison d'être*: citizenship in and of itself. Not only related to the deep-rootedness of traditional social structures, or primordialism in Bishara's idiom, this is also linked to the inclusion of civil society committees, institutions, and organisations in the predominant corporatist framework of Global South states on one hand⁽²¹⁾ and/or the global aid regime⁽²²⁾ on the other. This makes them unconcerned with "developing their own accountability to a social base"

and their various aims. According to Wickramasinghe, they now have no need for representation and legitimacy; "since their legitimacy comes from global acceptance, they do not need a social base to function".⁽²³⁾

Despite the broad praise and support civil society receives from researchers, donors, and NGOs in developed countries, it has also generated a counter-narrative in stark opposition to a "ritualistic, ubiquitous usage" of the term. In truth, there is "a mounting rage against this term and what it represents among social groups that feel threatened by it". There are those who believe that civil society, as an idea and as a project, must be rejected because it constitutes an inseparable part of the neoliberal programme to reconstruct the states of the South, even when met with those who are proposing alternative concepts for the term and strive to breathe new, nuanced life into this statement.⁽²⁴⁾

What is notable in the research of Glasius and his colleagues is those arguments some cite, to the effect that most "positive impact" tendencies have not travelled from the West to the East, or from the North to the South, but rather have departed via more complicated routes. For instance, Bernard Dreano argues that the heritage of political ideas carried by migrants had a prominent, albeit unspoken, effect

19 That does not mean that this approach has not faced criticism. In the same volume, for instance, Jenny Pearce objected to the contradiction to be found in the expression "uncivil civil society" inquiring whether one may speak of a civil society in the face of the flagrant deficiency in state performance. See: Jenny Pearce, "Collective Action or Public Participation? Civil Society and the Public Sphere in Post-Transition Latin America", in: Glasius, Lewis & Seckinelgin (eds.), pp. 54-61.

20 Ibid.

21 Corporatism is a structure for political and social organisation in which the state dominates and has a monopoly over public space by establishing interest groups and civil society organisations loyal to it, whereby the latter transform into instruments for reining in disruptive social forces and demanding the pluralism purported to accompany the modernisation process. Corporatism is considered attractive to ruling elites, whether military or civilian, in the Third World because it allows for the achievement of economic growth and social development without giving free rein to political forces that might transform into instability factors in those elites' view. For more information on the inclusion of civil society under the umbrella of the corporatist state, see (especially the third chapter of): H.J. Wiarda, *Civil Society: The American Model and Third World Development* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2003).

22 In discussing the "illusions" of civil society in sub-Saharan Africa, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz argue that the "dichotomy between state and civil society, which is substantially taken for granted in most current interpretations of African politics, does not reflect realities on the continent", such that there is "the constant interpenetration, or straddling, of the one by the other". Civil society in Africa is an ideology that follows from the call of Western donor states and institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to decrease the state's role in the context of structural adjustment programmes. As a result, there is a "new emphasis on the putative significance of civil society" and a transition of resources toward local NGOs which the West depicts as "the representative bodies" of that civil society. The important reality that Chabal and Daloz highlight is that the spread of NGOs reflects "a successful adaptation to the conditions laid down by foreign donors on the part of local political actors who seek in this way to gain access to new resources". Thus, the massive surge in the number of NGOs does not reflect the prosperity of civil society in the sense in which it is understood in the West. See: Patrick Chabal & Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (London: International African Institute, 1999); Wickramasinghe, p. 446.

23 Wickramasinghe, p. 466.

24 Ibid., pp. 467-468.

upon the democratisation of French civil society.⁽²⁵⁾ Even in the same European context, given that Eastern Europe, compared with Western Europe, has recently come to know civil society, Hilary Wainwright offers an analysis of how dissidents from Central and Eastern Europe have contributed to the development of the current praxis of civil society activists in Western Europe; how all of that was undermined by neoliberal interpretations of the fall of the Berlin Wall; and how the "language of civil society" has been used by "third-way" governments, as with the New Labour Party in the United Kingdom; and finally how certain political practices in Western Europe were essentially inspired by models of participatory policies in Brazil.⁽²⁶⁾

In any case, there are different arguments whose explanatory power extends beyond postcolonial movements, even if they too are not free of shortcomings. Wickramasinghe argues that, when postcolonial (or postmodern) scholarship "invaded" the debate on civil society, bringing along

its intellectual leaning towards unmasking the partly opaque relationship of power it calls "difference," it strayed away from the flow "when occurrences of hegemony are so present in the global aid regime."⁽²⁷⁾

This would include states and international donor institutions which undertook to promote civil society as a necessity and a historical moment for the countries of the Global South. Here, I overlook the debate on the possibility that the idea of civil society had a departure running contrary to its geographic departure, which has failed to respond to the idea's historicism in and of itself, and I am content to examine some relevant postcolonial arguments. Once again, Wickramasinghe argues that European languages travelled to the South imbued with the idea of civil society by the onset of modernity, formulating a civil space in colonised countries. Although this civil space, naturally, was not known as civil society,

it took the form of spaces with which the colonising states, or those constituting areas of opposition to colonisation, had not yet tampered.⁽²⁸⁾ Yet, with the arrival of European colonisation, the imposition of the state as an inescapable part of social culture led to the appearance of a concept giving collective definition to the spaces which were (or were supposed to be) outside of state control. It is therefore claimed that most postcolonial states are witnessing a coexistence of "traditional social norms with liberal democratic institutions", albeit under the banner of

an uncertain, ambiguous, and often paradoxical relationship. Out of this has emerged a specific kind of modernity that is still in the making, which some social scientists — who remain captive to the idea of a singular modernity — have termed alternative modernities.⁽²⁹⁾

In the same context, Wickramasinghe observes three theoretical choices by which she claims Global South Studies has "succeeded" in solving the problem of defining civil society in non-Western societies: limiting the usage of the concept solely to institutions arising from Western modernity; proposing a more comprehensive approach that engages broader forms of organisations based on different experiences and perhaps cultures; or regarding civil society as an instrument of oppression instead of an emancipatory space,⁽³⁰⁾ and an instrument of hegemony instead of a pluralistic space. Adherents to the first and second choices may be readily taken to task on charges of treating civil society as a technical concept not to exceed the issue of categorisation, even though the two differ as to what may and may not be considered civil society narrowly and broadly. Here,

the shallowness of this approach becomes clear; beginning with definition [i.e., of the term] and ending with categorisation [i.e., of the phenomenon], such that the definition transforms into a projection of the ready-

25 Bernard Dreano, "In Paris, the Global Place is No Longer Saint Germain des Prés: Civil Society and the French Debate", in: Glasius, Lewis & Seckinelgin (eds.), pp. 82-88.

26 Hilary Wainwright, "Western Europe: Democratic Civil Society versus Neoliberalism", in: Glasius, Lewis & Seckinelgin (eds.), pp. 89-98.

27 Wickramasinghe, p. 462.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., pp. 462-463.

30 Ibid., p. 465.

made term onto the phenomenon — never to transform into a concept.⁽³¹⁾

Yet adherents of the third choice may argue that they are discerning and capable of exposing how civil society is eagerly presented by international donors and their local agents in the Global South "not necessarily as an antidote to poverty, corruption or as a vehicle for democratisation, but to steer grassroots organisations away from the radical influence of political organisations calling for radical, comprehensive, revolutionary reforms".⁽³²⁾

However, this choice appears insufficient to push the concept of civil society to the furthest extents of the critical project of any theory/experiment travelling across time and space, just as civil society has travelled, in theory and experiment, from the 17th century until the late-20th or early-21st century and from the West to the Global South. The flow of critical blood into this project is contingent on "[sending] the concept of civil society [back] to where [...] it properly belongs — the provincialism of European social philosophy", according to Partha Chatterjee.⁽³³⁾ This in particular is what Bishara does, yet he goes a step farther; not only does he return the concept of civil society to where it belongs in 17th-century Europe but he does so with all the different, ever-variable meanings of the concept every time it is summoned forth from the depths of oblivion. He states that

the repeated return of the term from oblivion after various stages of absence, going back to 17th-century political philosophy in Europe, means something different every time because it appears in a structurally and historically variable succession that generates new needs

and questions for the concept to answer [...] the invitation, or revival, of the term from its historical absence both come into convergence along two axes: the axis of historical development and the axis of the history of the theory itself. This convergence shapes a constantly evolving context for explaining and interpreting the concept of civil society.⁽³⁴⁾

Bishara then draws closer to the furthest extent of a project I have considered critical of civil society's theory/experiment travelling across time and space, making the theory of civil society a constitutive theory, precisely as identified in opposition to an explanatory theory. Explanatory theories hold that the social world is analogous to the natural world and the theories we use to explain it merely describe reality using an objective, neutral characterisation. Constitutive theories, on the other hand, consider the language we use and the concepts and theories we formulate to be factors that help to continually construct and reconstruct reality.⁽³⁵⁾ When it comes to civil society, therefore, Bishara reminds us that

we must not forget that the concept itself is part of the historical context, with its two [aforementioned] axes, and takes part in the creation and explanation of this context; it is thus explanatory at one moment and explained at another.⁽³⁶⁾

31 Azmi Bishara, e-mail to the researcher, 21/5/2021.

32 Aziz Choudhry, "All This 'Civil Society' Talk Takes Us Nowhere," *Z Commentary*, 15/1/2002, accessed on 12/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3o7aL4s>

33 The Partha Chatterjee intended here is the political scientist and anthropologist, not the Indian politician. This expression, by way of Wickramasinghe, appeared in: Partha Chatterjee, "A Response to Taylor's 'Modes of Civil Society,'" *Public Culture*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1990), pp. 120-121.

34 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 43.

35 In the epistemology of international relations theory, for instance, the realist theory adopts an explanatory position by which it holds that the function of theory is merely to describe and explain the external world out there and to unveil regular patterns of state behaviour. Thus, it explains the social world exactly as it explains the natural world, whereas critical theory, as a constitutive theory, holds that the function of theory lies in exploring the methods and instruments by which a world order where cooperation among social units and forces reigns may be constructed, instead of a chaotic system dominated by conflict among states for power and survival. See: Mohammed Hemchi, "al-Niqāsh al-Thālith bayna Nazariyyāt al-'Ilqāt al-Duwalīyya: Hudūd al-Ittiṣāl al-Ma'rīfī," *Algerian Journal for Political Studies*, no. 3 (December 2014). On constitutive and explanatory theory, see: Steve Smith & Patricia Owens, "Alternative Approaches to International Theory", in: John Baylis & Steve Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 273.

36 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 43 (interpolations between square brackets added by researcher).

Primary Arguments of Civil Society: A Critical Study

The book *Civil Society: A Critical Study* is in five chapters. The first chapter discusses "the limits and historicism of the concept" while the second traces its development "from the 'Leviathan' to the invisible hand of the market". The third chapter examines the relationship between civil society and the state under the heading "civil society's separation from — only to return to — the state". The fourth chapter then deconstructs the concepts of "nation, nationalism, and civil society". Finally, the fifth chapter engages with civil society in the Arab context under the heading "the reality and thought of civil society: an Arab dialogue". Naturally, there is not sufficient room in this study to summarise all the arguments mentioned in these chapters, nor is doing so in line with its objective. Therefore, I am content to shed light on the arguments relevant to the three difficulties facing the study of civil society in the Global South from which the study set off and to uncover how Bishara engages with those difficulties in *Civil Society: A Critical Study*.

The First Argument: The Difficulty of Defining Civil Society and its Multitude of Concepts

The difficulty of defining civil society (in general and not exclusively in certain countries of the Global South) stems from several issues. The concept of civil society varies according to the ideological position of the person speaking: the liberal's concept is different from that of the social democrat, the democratic radical, and the Islamist. Further, its concept among Third World elites differs from that of elites in the West.⁽³⁷⁾ It also varies according to its functions. Its proponents believe that it offers a "ready-made answer" to the many questions beleaguering them according to their contexts,

as it is the answer to one-party rule in communist states by creating a social authority outside the state; the answer to bureaucracy and the centralisation of the decision-making process in liberal states; and the

answer to the domination of the market economy over social life, health, culture, and art — the answer to the Third World's dictatorships on one hand and the traditional and membership-based structures therein on the other.⁽³⁸⁾

There are certain historical conditions which must be present for a certain explanation of civil society to take shape on the ground.⁽³⁹⁾ One must be aware of these conditions lest civil society transform into a *catch-all* at the most and a *synthetic* term at the least. Bishara holds that it has transformed into something resembling "a beggars' stew [*hasā' al-mutasawwīlīn*] combining the leftovers of different theories [and ideologies], and various time periods".⁽⁴⁰⁾ He then indicates that the prevailing understanding of civil society, which seeks theoretically to bring ideological advantages together with various theories of governance belonging to different historical stages, is marred by the desire "to achieve the impossible". Since it is impossible to skip over these stages by combining them in a single crucible, one must be aware of the historical conditions and contexts that give reality to a certain fixed concept of civil society, not all its evolving concepts.

Debunking the catch-all usages of the term mentioned above, the conditions of civil society as realised in the West are the separation of state and civil society, or state and community institutions; the distinction between mechanisms of state and economy; the individual's self-identification as a citizen: a self-sufficient being with rights in the state, regardless of their self-identifications that take shape through their various pre-state affiliations; the dichotomy between mechanisms of social institutions and the economy; the distinction between community organisations that are composed of free citizens who have voluntarily come into association and the collective membership structures in which the individual lives; and the contrast between representative democracy in the liberal state and direct democracy and active

37 Ibid., p. 44.

38 Ibid., p. 45.

39 Ibid., p. 46.

40 Ibid.

participation in decision-making within voluntary associations and modern community institutions.⁽⁴¹⁾

Further, these conditions shape the stages that the emergence and evolution of civil society have passed through in the history of ideas to reach us in its modern concept. Bishara draws our attention to the fact that the concept "has taken on new meanings as part of a clear process which can be traced [...] and these distinctions imply differences and contradictions which, too, are the secret to the ambiguity and inconsistency of the term civil society".⁽⁴²⁾ However, despite their positioning at certain, distinct times historically — and in certain, distinct places geographically — these stages have seen the completion, minimally, of two conditions out of those mentioned above: citizenship and the capitalist economy and liberalism.⁽⁴³⁾

Thus, whilst exploring the concept's historicism, Bishara emphasises that to restrict what is meant by civil society to non-state community institutions, associations, and unions in the absence of the concept's other elements, then to relocate it to Arab countries (and, of course, other Global South countries) is to retreat from civil society by limiting it to this meaning, or by skipping over stages and taking shortcuts. Only through democracy and citizenship have those community institutions arisen, and it is a gratuitous, artless error to argue that this limited, technical, ahistorical concept of civil society ought to lead us to democracy. If civil society is a condition for democracy, then the civil society which led to democracy in the West is completely different from mere community institutions; "it meant civil rights at a certain stage; to regard civil society as contractual at another; [to hold] and expand parliamentary elections and their comprehensiveness at a third; and [to ensure] the rights of citizens at a fourth".⁽⁴⁴⁾ In this way, Bishara argues that

civil society leads to democracy because it is the very process of democracy's evolution. Community institutions in their contemporary form are the last of its manifestations, and to

regard them as civil society, then retroactively plant them in history as if they did lead to democracy, will never produce results. Rather, doing so would deviate from civil society's true battle in countries without a democratic system of rule: the battle for democracy, which is a battle of authority and state and which does not fall outside the state's domain.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Put differently, if the history of civil society in its current stage in the West concerns the founding and strengthening of voluntary social initiatives, NGOs, and other non-parliamentary institutions, then to demand and struggle for representation, freedom of expression and association, expansion of suffrage, and political participation represents no more than another stage in the development of civil society. The history of civil society is not the history of civil, non-governmental organisations. To highlight the role of the latter is simply a characteristic of one of its historical stages⁽⁴⁶⁾ — no doubt a late one, contrary to the earlier stage of struggling to construct political and economic requirements which precede the appearance of community/non-governmental institutions, distinct from the state/government and necessary for the effective operation of the latter. This is what warrants emphasising that to transplant civil society in its current, prevailing concept in the West into the countries of the Global South must be understood as to prepare the necessary conditions for civil society to function as a community (or civil, non-profit, non-governmental, etc.) actor.

In the same context, Wickramasinghe observes that the anti-state bias in the West at the end of the 20th century was merely part of the neoliberal agenda, strengthened by the identification of civil society as a broad set of institutions working beyond the limits of market and state. She thereby equates civil society to what has become known as the "non-profit", "the voluntary", the "third", or even the "independent" sector. It includes a set of entities such as universities, social clubs, professional organisations, welfare centres, environmental groups, family counselling agencies, athletic clubs, vocational training centres,

41 Ibid., pp. 47-48.

42 Ibid., p. 48.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 49.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 59.

human rights organisations, and more which represent civil society. All these various entities have certain common characteristics: all are organisations with a presence and an institutional structure, are non-profit, enjoy autonomy, and, finally, are voluntary.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The Second Argument: The Relationship of Civil Society to the State

The question of relations between civil society and the state is significant and, indeed, decisive in defining civil society. Bishara therefore reserves a considerable portion of the discussion for it, having made it a historiographical and critical debate *par excellence*. Through it, he revealed the absurdity of the arguments of those who say that civil society operates more efficiently the more there is a separation of civil society and state. He argues once again that to be content to emphasise this condition above its counterparts mentioned previously which are "in a stage where work may begin to impose society upon the state" in a way that causes membership structures "to necessarily take higher priority" because they "are better qualified and more effective before the state on account of the protection with which it has provided the individual for centuries". Yet, by comparison, "when we add the question of citizenship or the question of participation as elements of civil society to the separation of society and state, it immediately becomes a modernist reform programme".⁽⁴⁸⁾

What is more critical in stressing the condition of separation of society and state alone is that the economy necessarily becomes subordinate to one of the two:

to be either the state's economy or civil society's economy, which means to subjugate civil society to market mechanisms. Moreover, to copy liberal economic thought over to poor states is to establish a client state and expand the chasm between the wealth of the elite who take part in authority and the poverty of most citizens whose political involvement is to be

marginalised; this portends the destruction of any possibility of establishing civil society.⁽⁴⁹⁾

In this sense, the argument that appeared in the first part of this study is further affirmed to the effect that the ways in which institutions of civil society in the Global South operate deny it its *raison d'être*: citizenship as-such. As has been argued, this relates not only to the entrenchment of those membership structures but also, in a sense, to the inclusion and integration of the institutions known as civil society into the corporatist structure overcoming the states of the Global South, where the state is predominant in its use of the state economy as a tool to strengthen its hegemony over (civil) society and the market itself.⁽⁵⁰⁾ In another sense, it relates to the inclusion of those institutions within the global aid regime.

Bishara concludes that the historical condition of the first distinction

that initiates the civil society process is the division of the political unit into society and state, then their coming-together within a unit where the two are differentiated, then divided into more elements, to return and construct a more distinct unit.

Therefore,

the first separation in the history of civil society is the detachment of society and state, and of state and economy. The partition and transformation of the individual into citizen-as-individual or individual-as-citizen is the scion of [a certain historical stage, namely] the bourgeois political revolution.

It is the partition elaborated by social contract theories in their various forms.⁽⁵¹⁾ In this regard, Bishara traces the history of the variable relationship between state and society/between public and private spheres, state, society, and economy (i.e., the market), and state, society, and individual (i.e., the citizen) beginning with Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) to reach Thomas

47 Wickramasinghe, p. 470.

48 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 49.

49 Ibid., pp. 49-50.

50 Naturally, the state's predominance grows when its economy is a rentier economy, as is the case in a fair number of Global South countries.

51 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, pp. 52-53 (interpolations between square brackets added by researcher).

Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), Montesquieu (1686–1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Adam Smith (1723–1790), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), Jürgen Habermas (1929–), and many others.⁽⁵²⁾

On the relationship between state and civil society, Bishara concludes that this relationship has always been variable, set apart by numerous articulations whether across the history of political ideas or of the state itself. It is impossible to understand the lengthy absence from Western political theory seen by the concept of civil society for several decades of the 20th century, followed by its exuberant return during demonstrations against the one-party state in Poland and Eastern Europe generally during the 1980s, without understanding those articulations.

Civil society-as-concept "appeared" in its first instalment during the 1980s without the understanding of those articulations. For Thomas Hobbes, it is not separate from the state, even if it had not been distinguished from civil society during that stage. This has its historical justifications: civil society at the time was a form of transition from asserting sovereignty based on divine right to asserting it based on the social contract. Later came the presupposition that people in their natural state (namely, in the absence of the state) are social individuals, upon which civil society would be constructed — for John Locke, as a self-sufficient civil society apart from the state:

it is the initial, basic presence of civil society outside the state, prior to its mediation by way of (civil) social institutions. That is in addition to the understanding of society brought forth by Montesquieu, then de Tocqueville, viewing civil society as the intermediary that equilibrates the state and limits its direct influence upon

individuals or, as Hegel has it, that represents the social-moral sphere located between family and state.⁽⁵³⁾

Then, liberal theory came to transform Locke's hypothesis of society outside the state into the market; "whereas society, dependent on mutual relations between individuals in the market, used to be what produces civil society outside the state, the market had become the model of society, and the term civil society was no longer needed".⁽⁵⁴⁾ In this way, Bishara concludes that civil society

[...] has shifted from one stage to another as it records new dichotomies in the archive of its memory. In each case, we face the human being as an individual, society as social interrelations among individuals, and state as something marked by both. It is under the banner of the social reality that coincides with, then explains, the concept of civil society that the latter falls (and not vice versa: a social reality falling under the banner of the concept as a general, imposed definition). Societies to which the concept applies are those which have experienced a fragmentation, partition, or transgression to the membership unity of individuals and collectives (i.e., collective structures) on one hand, and a distinction between state and society on the other. They are distinctions which do not lead to total separation, such that we face individuals in themselves or civil society in itself; rather, they reproduce unity through their mediation — namely, of their differentiated elements. There are relations that bring the individual, society, and the state together into a single unit by structuring ties as a legal relationship. It is, thus, a unit composed of distinguished elements, not a "natural" unit like the local community [al-jamā'a al-ahliyya]. These are simultaneously the theoretical and historical

52 See especially chapter 2 (pp. 97-144); chapter 3 (pp. 147-239); and chapter 4 (pp. 243-295) in: Ibid. The book's central defining characteristic, without a doubt, is its critical, philosophical character. It takes the reader by the hand through a journey of divergent routes and paths but of a clear aspiration: to write the history of the civil society concept and to critique its prevailing understanding. This is what makes it a book on political theory, indispensable to researchers or scholars in numerous disciplines ranging from political science to political sociology, political philosophy, and political economy.

53 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

54 Ibid.

conditions for the usage of the civil society concept.⁽⁵⁵⁾

In the end, these distinctions must be captured and returned to their historical place to avoid two essential traps Bishara has dedicated much discussion to reveal: the trap of considering civil society that which is not the state, and of considering it that which is apolitical. Thus, one must return once again to the question of "here and now" (*ici et maintenant*) and address the concept of civil society in its place and historical moment⁽⁵⁶⁾ lest it become an ahistorical catch-all concept which is planted but not transplanted, summoned forth from a particular temporal and spatial context to be imposed upon different temporal and spatial contexts.

Civil society as non-state, or as "an aversion to the state", is civil society in the contemporary West, having constituted part of the historical democratisation process as perhaps the last of its manifestations. "Here and now" in particular, it reveals itself as a social entity "which may be summarised as the public sphere, outside the state, economy, and membership structures". As for being the opposite of and hostile to the state, we have seen how the debate on civil society in Eastern Europe transformed into a discussion of the nationalism question, with the confirmation that an identification of civil society which can be summarised

as being itself parallel to the state means nothing other than the deterioration of society and its relapse back to the level of individuals' membership affiliations or the level of ethnonationalism contrasted with the multinational state. Bishara adds in this context

that civil society has conditions going beyond its restriction to the process of encounter with the state; yet, on the other hand, it does not arise outside the zone of mutual exclusivity with the state. Many things may arise outside this circle of mutual exclusivity, but a civil society is not one because the historical origins of civil society are found in political society, followed by mutual exclusivity with political society, then the economy.⁽⁵⁷⁾

For this reason, we may understand the gravity of calling forth the historical definition of civil society as a social entity and planting it outside the Western context. In countries of the Global South where the state is still a problematic question, democracy remains non-existent or incomplete, and citizenship has become the target of pressures from membership structures and primordial affiliations, civil society by this definition can only be distorted and ineffectual. Before long, the institutions and bodies by which it is known would reproduce the membership structures

55 Ibid., p. 25.

56 In the same context, David Blaney and Mustapha Kamal Pasha observe that "few discussions on civil society in the Third World seek to view civil society as a structure and process; rather, it is treated as a fixed concept travelling through history which is supposed to arise through the production of empirical generalisations of the relations between society and state across time and space. Thus, the historical and theoretical particularity of this structure is lost, with it the definition of the institutions and relationships that determine the minimum social space for civil society and the principle of movement that shapes its course. Thus, applications of the concept to the situation of the Third World have failed in comprehending the impacts of global capitalism on the stability of civil society and the difficulties facing democratic movements". See: David L. Blaney & Mustapha Kamal Pasha, "Civil Society and Democracy in the Third World: Ambiguities and Historical Possibilities," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1993), p. 5.

57 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, pp. 28-29. In this context, Bishara turns to the case of Palestinian civil society, arguing that Palestinian civil institutions arose within the framework of mutual exclusivity with the Occupation State. In other words, in the absence of the Palestinian state, community organisations known as civil society unaccountably evolve as a "civil society" within the space of mutual exclusion with the Occupation State, not the still-absent Palestinian state. See: Ibid., p. 28, note 6.

of society/the corporatist structures of the state which society is anticipated to undermine.⁽⁵⁸⁾

In this sense, Bishara reminds us that "civil society is the product of state power, and [exists] for the sake of equilibrating this power. The matter of monitoring the state remains because and only because the state has the power to monitor society".⁽⁵⁹⁾ Thereby, civil society is not "the product of the destruction, decline, or destabilisation of the state but rather of delineating the relationship of the state, [as] the domain of power and monopoly of force, to the society in which the source of its legitimacy ought to be".⁽⁶⁰⁾ Next, he mentions some of civil society's fields of conflict, such as the environment, health, culture, and education, to assert that the sworn enemy of civil society in developed Western countries in fields such as these has become forces of the market, not the state.⁽⁶¹⁾

Bishara mentions an issue of greater risk to the summoning of this distorted, ahistorical concept of civil society and planting it in countries of the Global South that are still fighting for democracy: "[an] aversion to the state is ultimately an aversion to politics, and an aversion to politics is the most implacable foe of democracy, especially the element of participation in public life — the most significant essential component of developing civil society".⁽⁶²⁾

The Third Argument: Falling Out of the Dictionary

It is under this striking title that Bishara introduces an etymological⁽⁶³⁾ investigation into the term civil society. At the outset, he observes that encyclopaedias of philosophy and sociology have not allotted the term "civil society" its own place despite that the word "civil" appears as a component of several other terms: civil disobedience, civil resistance, civil rights, civil freedoms, civil law, civil war, and civil organisations or institutions, to name a few. An array of meanings may be derived from the concept "civil":

- first, that it relates to the state.
- second, that it relates to the state's "normal" treatment of citizens, as opposed to military, criminal, and religious treatment.
- third, that it relates to the treatment of a state's citizens to distinguish them from foreigners as in the case of civil war, which in Arabic is called [*ḥarb ahliyya*], not [*madaniyya*]—"the commonality between the meanings of [*al-ḥarb al-'ahliyya*] and 'civil war' being that the war takes place between citizens, which is a reminder that 'civil' is not derived from 'civilisation' or [*madaniyya*], but from 'civis' or [*muwāṭin*, i.e., citizen]". This meaning is also confirmed by the term civil law, which governs relations between citizens wherein the state is not a party; when the state intervenes, the civil case becomes a criminal case.⁽⁶⁴⁾

58 Blaney and Kamal Pasha attach a nearby concept: prebendalism. They have argued that political practises and forms of governance are not coincidental but rather at the heart of social life. Authoritarianism in Africa, for instance, which "usually comes in the form of personal, inherited rule, is an expression of the need for a weak state possessing relatively limited resources to control a segmented social life divided by other links to achieve 'hegemony'". Prebendalism, "the case in which the state and its administrative apparatus become an axis of social mobility and private and collective inflation at the expense of effective governance", thrives in such a context. It is a context in which "the people" are a sequence of divided "peoples" (which is what Bishara means by organic structures). "Pluralism" is the competition between those divided, primordial peoples to obtain a slice of the national "cake" without a perception of national identity or collective responsibility. To plunder the state to support individual and sub-national affiliations, where one would find identity and social cohesion, becomes morally acceptable, the primary basis to establish popular sovereignty in a state predicated on ethnic plurality. Therefore, "pluralism" within collectivist life does not provide a strong basis to reformulate the state-society relationship, nor does it constitute an example of a space of concern to civil society. Blaney and Kamal Pasha explain this deficiency of social integration in part with the weakness of capitalist development in the countries of Africa where it is still difficult to speak of a national economy, taking up a characterisation of African economic life as "pre-bourgeois". see: Blaney & Pasha, pp. 11-12. Nevertheless, the arguments Bishara has debated in his discussion of the relationship between civil society, citizenship, and nation, especially in chapter 4 of *Civil Society* (pp. 243-295), offer an intriguing, definitive contribution on this matter.

59 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 75.

60 Ibid. (interpolations between square brackets added by researcher).

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 74.

63 What is meant by *al-tathil* is etymology: the study of the origin of words.

64 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, pp. 81-83 (interpolations between square brackets added by researcher).

He adds nineteen other meanings to these three — for which there is insufficient space to explore here⁽⁶⁵⁾ — then stresses the significance of the derivation of the English term "civil" from "citizen" (*civis* in Latin), arguing that the derivation of the Arabic term [*madānī*] from [*madīna*, i.e., city] or [*tamaddun*, i.e., urbanisation] does not carry the same historical meaning as does "civil society" as term and praxis; namely, it

does not carry the indications of citizenship [al-muwātana]. Perhaps it would be more accurate to translate civil society as 'society of citizens' [mujatama' al-muwātinīn] or 'citizens' society' [mujtama' muwātānī] in Arabic. Although this translation is more precise than civil society, it could increase confusion as a product of its Arabisation and remoteness from mind. Still, it is useful in evoking the connotations of the Latin borrowing, making them present in mind.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Civil society cannot be separated from citizenship on one hand and the nation on the other. Bishara sets aside an entire chapter to discuss the synergy of these three statements.⁽⁶⁷⁾ That the nation not be formulated as a nation of the citizens inevitably results in the perseverance of pre-nationalist affiliations; thus, "civil society does not arise in consciousness based on the relationship between citizens (with their various affiliations in their private spheres), the nation (where there is room for many affiliations), and the state (an expression of the nation's political entity)". He then warns that

the loss of the burgeoning nation's consciousness does not establish in its stead demi-nations but rather a pre-nationalist consciousness, which could not be further from the spirit of civil society or from the core of its definition; it is based on the direct relationship of exchange between citizen and citizen on one hand (hence its voluntary solidarity dimension based on collective initiative) and between the public sphere, having taken shape amid this citizens' exchange, and the state (i.e., and not between sect and sect, or tribe and tribe) on the other.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Therefore, Bishara asserts that civil society must not turn its back on the political process for three reasons:

- first, that civil society is carried out only in the space of mutual relations with the state; this is the difference between civil and natural society;
- second, that there is an inextricable link between the formation of the nation and the formation of civil society connoting a citizenship-based affiliation: affiliation with the nation, not with doctrine, ethnicity, sect, confession, blood relation, or otherwise. Simply put, when this connection between the formation of civil society and the nation is not realised in the consciousness of those characterised as civil society, the nation transforms into demi-nations based on pre-nationalist affiliations that portend the collapse and deterioration of civil society into the state of natural society, where the notion of the state in and of itself is negated; and
- third, that the battle for democracy is a political one: a battle for power first and foremost.⁽⁶⁹⁾

An Arab Reading of Civil Society: A Critical Study One Quarter Century After its Publication

The book adopts a genealogical approach to the concept of civil society permitting it to "beleaguer" those who treat the notion as ready-made, complete, taken-for-

granted, as a historical inevitability, a panacea for the problems of countries in the Global South, and other delusions which the book is successful in dispelling.

65 Ibid., pp. 85-87.

66 Ibid., pp. 87-88.

67 Ibid., chapter 4, pp. 243-295.

68 Ibid., p. 31.

69 Ibid., p. 32.

Bishara highlights the spirit of this approach without doing so explicitly, writing that

the objective of the book is to transform a fixed saying, which elicits the satisfaction and relaxation of some and the indignation and resentment of the rest, into a movable, historical saying the power hidden within which appears through researching the path of its historical evolution.⁽⁷⁰⁾

By genealogical approach I mean precisely what it connotes in the philosophical legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche: that approach which surpasses research into the origins of the emergence of things to interrogate those roots in and of themselves, and to examine the process of their formation. Nietzsche states (and we ought not to forget for a moment that genealogy arose opposite metaphysics, which holds that things were consummate and total at their beginnings):

[...] this has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realise that what things are called is incomparably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for — originally almost always wrong and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and altogether foreign to their nature and even to their skin — all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body. What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such. How foolish it would be to suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to destroy [the world that counts for] real, so-called 'reality.' We can destroy only as creators. — But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create

new names [and estimations and probabilities] in order to create in the long run new things" (emphasis in original).⁽⁷¹⁾

According to the logic of this approach, what has happened and continues to happen to the concept of civil society seems to resemble the impact of *sedimented practices* to a large extent, despite my awareness that I am taking this concept out of the context in which it developed. Nevertheless, it remains that sedimented practises merely

[...] circumscribe the domain of credibility and intelligibility of a society's socioeconomic setting the norms, rules, and institutions that are taken for granted by large parts of a society and which, over time, have obscured the evidence of their own contingent origins.⁽⁷²⁾

In the same way, it appears that, before long, the context in which civil society has developed as context and praxis faded into oblivion. It thereby lost its *raison d'être*, and those operating within it (activists) and/or against it (academics) began to take a certain ahistorical pattern in the relationship of civil society to the state for granted, the passage of time having obscured evidence of the former's contingent origins.

Here, Bishara laments the way in which the concept of civil society has become synonymous not only with all "that which is not the state, but also with everything that is not politics per se. It thereby becomes closer to pre-modern praxis, driving intellectuals out of politics through modes of *apolitical*, community-based action".⁽⁷³⁾ In this context, Bishara places the blame on some of whom he calls "the pioneers of Arab romantic thought" among those who dared to dispossess the concept of its critical and democratic function and put it in total conformity with indigenous society, in Bishara's words, simply because it is not the state.⁽⁷⁴⁾

70 Ibid., p. 19.

71 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 121-122.

72 Dirk Nabers & Frank A. Stengel, "Sedimented Practices and American Identity in Donald J. Trump's Election Campaign", in: Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald & Dirk Nabers (eds.), *Populism and World Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 103.

73 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, pp. 7-8 (emphasis added by researcher).

74 Bishara argues that the return of the conversation on civil society between Arab intellectuals since the 1990s came as compensation for a political regression that afflicted them especially after the collapse of the socialist camp and the crisis of the Arab regime that intensified with the war in Kuwait and the Oslo Accords. It also compensated for their resignation from political work after a weakness befell the nationalist case, left-wing at the time. Thus, an entire generation of Arab intellectuals withdrew from politics to serve the establishment or started gambling intellectually on an erroneous understanding of civil society as beyond the state. See: Ibid., pp. 8-9.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how Global South Studies is positioned regarding two stances on civil society whose proponents the book seeks to trouble: those for whom it arouses satisfaction and peace of mind, and those for whom it elicits indignation and resentment. Further, the study has shown that Global South Studies, to overcome the difficulties facing civil society research in the Global South, is inclined to turn civil society into a technical, ahistorical (i.e., taken out of historical context), and apolitical (i.e., shorn of political meaning) question, reducing it to a definition/categorisation of what is and what is not civil society. Thus, the definition of civil society becomes a mere label. Yet, paradoxically, it is a designation proven to have failed to recreate reality "here and now" the way it took shape "there and then" in the environment in which it was originally created; the designation amounts to sheer enumeration and categorisation solely because it was in want of the symbolic power of creation, particularly on account of this ahistorical, apolitical feature — not to mention the absence of the actors who set out to employ a form of symbolic politics that, according to historic struggles, is capable of putting them in control of this creation process.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Bishara has directed sharp critiques at what he sometimes considers "the production of a complete theory",⁽⁷⁶⁾ at others "a sought-after good [...] which is treated as ready-made from producer to consumer".⁽⁷⁷⁾ He has denied researchers — whomever they may be — their surrender to this inclination, since

they do not trouble themselves to launch the discussion of the concept's theory and history but are instead content to narrate some Western definitions as quickly as possible, to select those that suit them in the form of 'civil society is...' Next, they begin with an attempt to combine

this formulation with the social phenomena they chose. Here begins the process of categorisation into non-governmental and community-based organisations, then categorisation of the NGOs into types and the community-based groups into types. Yet, were civil society to have significance as a concept, it would have been the foundation of the very same categorisation process, overseeing it from within. The prescribed categorisation process, on the other hand, is one of nomenclature: to designate certain sectors as civil society. But what is the desired theoretical and practical advantage of applying the civil society designation to extant phenomena with which we are familiar? There is no impediment in principle to assigning designations, but neither is there a particular benefit to be expected from them when they are not rooted in historical analysis.⁽⁷⁸⁾

The added value of the book lies in the critique of this disposition and the unveiling of its failure to highlight the explanatory power, critical validity, as well as the democratic function of the concept of civil society — not as a mere tool for strengthening democracy, as is presently the case in the West, but as a space to construct democracy itself, as used to be the case in the West, albeit at a certain historical stage in the development of political ideas one sense, and in the evolution of social, economic, and political structures in another.⁽⁷⁹⁾ This is what makes the book increasingly aware of the history of the notion's formation and becoming, a necessary condition for awareness of the idea in and of itself. Through a meditative, historiographical endeavour, the book demonstrates how the concept has transformed from coinciding with the state whilst running parallel to natural society, passing through being an intermediary space between individual, state, and market, and finally

75 One may refer to the works of Pierre Bourdieu in which he discusses the symbolic efficacy of the "productive" designation, which may easily be extracted and applied to the failure of creative potentialities vis à vis popular civil society nomenclature. See, for instance: Pierre Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32 (1987), pp. 1-17.

76 Bishara, *al-Mujtama' al-Madani*, p. 27.

77 Ibid., p. 7.

78 Ibid., pp. 39-40.

79 In the book's introduction, Bishara refers to this analytical approach to the concept's historiography which is based on the reconciliation between the evolution of theory and praxis, stating that "[it is] a theoretical book that investigates the development of this concept (i.e., in its historical definition) through a review of the history of Western political thought and the accompanying social progressions". See: Ibid., p. 7.

arriving at the distorted expression of that which is not the state which it has become, coinciding, hence, with the apolitical.

This distortion essentially arises from overlooking the temporal and spatial dimension within the concept's perception and praxis. In the West, now and since the concept was called forth in the late-1980s, civil society is not the state (nor, it must be noted, is it ultimately hostile thereto), nor is it political because its *raison d'être* (or *raison de revenir* — why it has returned anew) is the shortcomings that afflict democracy, as well as addressing market imbalances, naturally, given that they too result from the state's withdrawal from intervention into the economic space.

Thus, the return of civil society in the West, concurrently with its invocation outside the West, has confronted social, political, and economic developments capitalist countries have witnessed since the 1960s, such as the cultural revolution and the rise of environmental conservation movements, feminist movements, peace movements, and local citizens' initiatives on issues of health, environment, and otherwise. All this crystallised into a certain form of action to confront the state's bureaucracy on one hand and take on the forces of the market economy on the other:⁽⁸⁰⁾ namely, it crystallised in the form of the social sector. Yet it does not turn its back on politics when confronting the public and private sectors as intended in non-Western contexts, including the Arab context where the boundaries between public and private sectors have yet to be drawn — to say nothing of the boundaries between those two and the social sector (I say "have yet to be drawn" out of optimism, so as not to say "have not been drawn").

In this way, the book warns that the distorted concept, shorn of its historical and political dimensions, may, in the Arab states and other states of the South, transform into a premodern factor that drives intellectuals out of politics through modes of apolitical community-based action or through betting on the indigenous structures in their various forms by which civil society is given a technical definition as that which is not the state.⁽⁸¹⁾

Now, if we return to the question of time and space (*ici et maintenant*) which appeared at the beginning of this study, what might the civil society construction stage mean, relying upon the book's arguments, in the Arab context (and the context of the Global South as a whole)? It means to achieve democracy, not merely to establish or found civil institutions to balance parliament/the market, because this definition is related to a particular place (i.e., the West) and a particular time (i.e., now — by which I mean the late-20th and early-21st century) as well as related to a shortcoming in democracy and liberalism. This deficiency has accumulated over history within the context of the Western experience, whilst neither democracy nor liberalism has been established in the Arab context to begin with. Here, Bishara cautions against "jumping past necessary stages such as the achievement of democracy and social justice, for the sake of a contemporary concept of civil society which is based on both having been achieved in the West".⁽⁸²⁾ In other words, if we have neither democracy nor liberalism in the way the West does, what good is it to define civil society as the civil institutions that resemble those found in the West and perform the same functions as do those in the West presently? We must, therefore, redefine it critically: we must carry out a kind of excavation, which is why I indicated earlier that the book is replete with the genealogy of the concept.

This critical definition of civil society is what allows us to explore its political and democratic impact before anything else — not to focus on civil institutions, bodies, organisations, and so on. Bishara states that

What civil society has to say may be useful in the Arab battle for democracy if it has been understood historically — namely, critically — by exposing its historical limitations, then revealing the potential energy therein. Yet its account may be harmful to the issue of democracy and the emancipation of the Arab person were it to turn into a tool to neutralise the issue politically: that is, a tool to avoid invoking the question of system of governance.⁽⁸³⁾

80 Ibid., p. 27.

81 Ibid., p. 8.

82 Ibid., p. 46.

83 Ibid., p. 19.

Thereby, the book extends an invitation to Arab intellectuals

to return to the political arena starting from the basic statement the book carries, which says that civil society without politics and outside the context of the battle for democracy is a process of nullifying the historical meanings and critical power of civil society, not to mention effacing its explanatory power to understand social and political structures.⁽⁸⁴⁾

Once again, the book presents itself amidst the transformations of the Arab Spring

which ended the impasse that [the Arab region] has faced for the past three decades. The political dimension, related to the system of governance question [...] dominates these transformations, through which the democratic question returns as a political issue.⁽⁸⁵⁾

Finally, I may summarise here the following statements as a means of arguing that the book's primary arguments remain in close contact with the truth of the transformations seen by Arab countries, regardless of the variance in their footing along the path to democratic transition.⁽⁸⁶⁾

First, social unrest across the Arab Spring revolutions saw the return of the political. This return was accompanied by groups of citizens, aware of their rights as citizens, who were the ones to take the initiative for action and participation in the public sphere; "and what is being built via this revolutionary process is at once *a civil society* and *a citizens' nation*" and it is the core of the invitation the book has put forth. The events of the Arab Spring have proven the book's argument such that "in societies seeking democratisation, parties — or the voluntary organisation and unification of people for a political goal related to the state regime — are an essential part of civil society".

Second, the events have shown, not limited to those of the first wave of the Arab Spring in 2011 but of the 2019 wave as well, that the protests were not anti-state; "rather, we saw a quasi-instinctive reaction that welcomes the

role of the state as guardian of the revolution when this state sets itself apart from the regime in the form of the national army". That was manifested clearly in the case of Algeria. As previously demonstrated in this study, the book has argued that "civil society without a state is not a civil society. Rather, it could collapse into collectives; the experience of Iraq directly after 2003 remains in mind". In other words, collapsing into a form of natural society where membership structures and primordial bonds prevail.

Third, the Arab Spring revolutions revealed the limitations of the role of so-called NGOs (not to minimise their significance) to which the prevailing, distorted understanding of civil society confines the definition of civil society. They also demonstrated that "civil society as a society of citizens does not take shape in isolation from the issue of the state, but rather by interacting therewith". It is true that some of those who participated in the protests were activists in many of those NGOs and community associations, but what about the groups that set out calling for change in the political regime? All this is considered a clear indication of the absurdity of reducing civil society to civil institutions by their many names.

Fourth, two primary challenges face the citizenship project, as the Libyan case demonstrates: the first internal and the other external. The internal challenge is represented by "attempts to revive tribalism and regionalism and by the competition of political forces", and this applies to all forms of traditional membership affiliations. The external challenge is manifested in "foreign intervention that violates sovereignty", where "civil society outwardly appears to be a sovereign nation". The book shows that to violate sovereignty is to violate citizenship and, thus, defines civil society as a citizens' society. On one hand, foreign intervention through alleged support for the democratic revolutions rapidly turns into political and economic prescriptions that undermine sovereignty and the determination of national political options (e.g., regarding Arab integration or commitment to the Palestinian cause). On the other, in countries with internal sectarian divisions

84 Ibid., pp. 9, 22.

85 Ibid. p. 10 (interpolations between square brackets added by researcher).

86 See in particular the introduction to the book's sixth edition and subsequent ACRPS editions, pp. 7-18, and chapter 5, titled "the reality and thought of civil society: an Arab dialogue", pp. 299-365. Here I would mention that the direct quotes in the remainder of the study are located between these pages; the stressing of some of them is possible in the original text.

(regardless of sect), political conflict turns into identity conflict. Thus, to call for foreign assistance becomes a sectarian act, since a given sect views the rival sect primarily as an enemy; thereby, foreign intervention turns into a factor that undermines citizenship, then shatters the nation's bond of union.

Fifth, the book takes the reader by the hand on a long, yet fascinating journey to explore "the functional-historical definition process for civil society, passing from the indigenous collective of society and the market economy to voluntary unions and so forth". Yet it affirms that "this is a process that, in one sense, not every society can be expected to pass through in its entirety nor, in another, one whose ready-made results are sufficient". Moreover, the book emphasises that democracy, after a long history of ideas and articulations, has become

an integrated political system which can be learned from without the expectation that the same historical process will recur. The projection of this expectation would be that it is impossible to implement democracy because it is impossible for history to repeat itself.

This is a sound statement with which to close, as it takes us once again to the conclusion that to read the book from an Arab perspective merely helps us to examine the falsehood of overriding inclination in Global South Studies to define civil society as an ahistorical, apolitical concept, then to elucidate, in Bishara's idiom, "its historical meanings, critical energy, and explanatory power to understand social and political structures".

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