

# Civil Society:

The Political Theory of Democratic Change



Dr. Leo Casey

Executive Director

Albert Shanker Institute

- **Attribution** - This work requires author attribution. List “E-Collaborative for Civic Education – Tavaana” as the source for any information used in this document as well as any original attribution provided in this document.
- **Noncommercial** - This work can only be used non-commercially. The information is not to be used for profit.
- **Share Alike** - You may not make derivative works from this work. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar or a compatible license. And share your alterations, etc. with Tavaana to continue to build the body of knowledge.

# Democratic Transformations of Late 1980s and Early 1990s

Solidarnosc (Polish union Solidarity) legalized, and overwhelmingly wins free elections

'Velvet Revolution' in Czechoslovakia leads to overthrow of Communist government, free elections

'Iron Curtain' dismantled in Hungary, Czechoslovakia

Berlin Wall falls, and Germany reunified under democratic government

Dissolution of the Soviet Union



**SOLIDARNOSC**



End of South African apartheid and the establishment of democratic majority rule

Right wing dictatorships fall in Philippines, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay

But also...

Violent suppression of Chinese democracy movement and independent unions in Tiananmen Square





**What explains this wave of democratic change?**

[www.tavaana.org](http://www.tavaana.org)

According to a theory credited by many political theorists and analysts, the wellspring for the overthrow of authoritarian governments was CIVIL SOCIETY – the networks of voluntary civic associations such as unions, neighborhood and block organizations, community groups, faith communities, ethnic groups.



# Civil Society:

## A Brief History of an Idea

- In pre-modern period, there is no distinction between the state and civil society: civil society **is** the res publica, the political community.
- In modern period, distinctions develop between the state and civil society.
- John Locke, an English political philosopher, wrote “Two Treatises on Government.” He argued that civil society is created voluntarily by humanity, through a social contract with each other, to pursue our common ends.
- Adam Ferguson, a philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment, wrote “An Essay in the History of Civil Society.” He focused on the need for civil society to maintain pre-modern ideals of civic community and a republican vision of citizenship as commercialism and individualism grew.

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher of the French Enlightenment, wrote “A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality.” He opposed what he saw as the equality of our natural condition to the inequality of existing civil society, calling for a state which would reestablish that equality.
- Immanuel Kant, a philosopher of the German Enlightenment, wrote “The Metaphysics of Morals.” He saw civil society as the ground on which human beings develop ethics and morality, in which we learn to treat each other as ends, not means, and in which we act of behalf of the universal good.
- G. W. F. Hegel, a German philosopher of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, sought to develop a comprehensive philosophical system. He saw civil society as a mediating force between the individual and state that taught human beings to think ethically and brought them into relationships beyond themselves through the market, preparing them for their participation in the political world of the state.



- Karl Marx's conception of civil society developed out of his criticisms of Hegel. He argued that Hegel's state was a creature of the market and those – the bourgeoisie – who acquired private property and political power through the market. For there to be a true democracy, that concentration of private property and power needed to be replaced with a fully public, democratic power.
- Alexis De Tocqueville was a French student of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America, who observed that American democracy struggled with conflicting values of individualism and equality. The American people reconciled these values by forming organizations and voluntary associations that would consider the interests and needs of others while pursuing self-interest.

While the classic texts of Western political thought are certainly not of a single mind on the idea of civil society and its relation to the state, three themes run across the different thinkers:

- Civil society is a place distinct from both the individual and the state, where human beings establish lasting relationships with each other.
- Civil society is the medium through which human beings learn how to relate to each other and develop ethical conceptions of how to conduct those relationships.
- Civil society is the ground on which human community is formed.



Why is CIVIL SOCIETY such a powerful force, undermining authoritarian and totalitarian states?

To maintain their power and control, authoritarian and totalitarian states constantly work to isolate and atomize their subjects. A single individual can confront a powerful state, but he will not be successful unless he can join together with other individuals.

CIVIL SOCIETY provides the means for individuals to communicate and combine, and thus, the means to confront and overcome authoritarian and totalitarian states.

This is why authoritarian and totalitarian states are invariably known by their efforts to destroy or control the institutions of civil society. Of particular importance, for reasons we will examine in more detail in the next lecture, are trade unions. Authoritarian and totalitarian states always target unions for destruction or subordination first.

## Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

In late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the institutions of civil society began to take shape in modern bourgeois societies such as England and the United States. Habermas calls these institutions the public sphere, which he sees as the discursive space where individuals come together and discuss issues of common concern and interest, developing a common understanding of them.

Institutions of the public sphere are:

- ❖ Open to all people
- ❖ Sites of unrestricted and unfettered communication
- ❖ Places where “public opinion,” and “the public” itself, is formed





**For Habermas, the English coffee house was one of the original forms of the public sphere. It was a place where individuals came together, free of state control, to debate the issues of the day. Coffee houses became centers not only of political discourse, but also of artistic and cultural criticism.**

While coffee houses and salons were “face to face” institutions of the public sphere, the earliest newspapers were an indirect form of the public sphere, and a vital location of the formation of “public opinion.”

Together the institutions of civil society that make up the public sphere depend and thrive upon the freedoms that are essential for democratic society: freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion.

When authoritarian and totalitarian government suppress these freedoms, dissidents find ways to recreate underground “public spheres,” such as the samizdat publications under Communism and the use of social media.

## Antonio Gramsci Prison Notebooks

### Strategy for Overthrowing Authoritarian and Totalitarian States

- Direct confrontations of popular movements with authoritarian and totalitarian states can be premature, the equivalent of directly charging a fortified army
- It is important to build strength through the institutions of civil society, thus undermining the foundation of the authoritarian and totalitarian state
- This is the strategy generally followed by the popular movements of 1989.

- **Attribution** - This work requires author attribution. List “E-Collaborative for Civic Education – Tavaana” as the source for any information used in this document as well as any original attribution provided in this document.
- **Noncommercial** - This work can only be used non-commercially. The information is not to be used for profit.
- **Share Alike** - You may not make derivative works from this work. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar or a compatible license. And share your alterations, etc. with Tavaana to continue to build the body of knowledge.