22 The civil society: parties and associations

1. The Impact of Civil Society

The main theme in Montesquieu's theory of government was that in order to prevent the abuse of political power it must be met by counter-power. This should be accomplished through institutional pluralism, by checks and balances. A similar argument, but not primarily applied to the formal institutions of the state, was pursued by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59). In his studies of the early American democracy, he points out social pluralism, in the form of a multitude of strong popular organisations, as a crucial factor. He maintained that it was through these independent associations the citizens had been able to create an active civil society, which would obstruct a mounting state domination and a development towards dictatorial modes of government.

Civil society can be likened to a filter between the people and the state. Organisations of civil society represent their members in contact with the state. Also, the state contacts organisations of civil society in its efforts to communicate with representatives of the people. Examples of organisations of civil society are political parties and popular movements. These organisations are the basis of political democracy. They provide forums for the people to come together to debate common problems; they help people express their political desires and needs in an organised and orderly fashion. Their presence is evidence that the people have basic democratic rights and that the state cannot decide for them. This chapter is devoted to the exploration of these parties and organisations – in the "old" democracies of Scandinavia as well as in the "new" ones in the East-Baltic – together with a third link between the state and the people of crucial importance in a modern society: the mass media.

2. Parties and Party Systems in Scandinavia

There are many different kinds of party systems. There is the Soviet type of one-party system and the Anglo-Saxon kind of two-party system. With four or five major parties and a number of minor parties, the Scandinavian party systems are definitely of the multi-party variety. Countries practicing proportional representation tend to have multi-party systems. But all multi-party systems are not alike. There are large differences between the multi-party system such as it is in Sweden and that of the new democracies in Eastern Europe; and there are important differences even among the basically homogeneous Scandinavian countries.

The Scandinavian party systems have a simple conflict structure in the sense that they are dominated by a class-related left/right divide. There are, of course, other divides

at work, including religion, centre/periphery and even ethnicity (particularly in Finland), but left/right nevertheless accounts for the lion's share of the variance to be explained. The four or five major parties are easily identified in terms of the traditional left/right divide. There are communist and social democratic parties representing the working-class; there are conservative and liberal parties representing the upper and centre strata, and there are centre parties representing the rural and agricultural strata. The voters agree almost unanimously that the communist party is located on the extreme left and that the conservative party is a party of the right. Most voters would be inclined to locate the social democrats to the right of the communists or left-socialists, but there is no general consensus about where to locate the parties of the centre. In countries with strong social democratic parties, like Sweden and Norway, there is in fact a certain competition among the parties of the centre for the politically lucrative position as next-door neighbour to the social democrats.

There are a few other differences worth mentioning in this context. In Denmark and Sweden there is little evidence of divides other than left/right, while in Finland and Norway there is strong evidence of stable secondary divides. In Norway the parties of the centre – the Centre Party, the Christian People's Party and the now defunct Liberal Party – have traditionally been riding on what may be referred to as a set of strongly inter-correlated counter-cultural dimensions, rural vs. urban, periphery vs. centre, Free Churches vs. the Evangelical-Lutheran State Church, temperance vs. urban drinking habits and, last but not least, New vs. Standard Norwegian (the two main language-groups in Norway).

Finland also has a number of secondary divides. There is a conspicuous centre/periphery or urban/rural dimension of conflict which defines the Centre and Rural parties and cuts right through the strong communist or left-socialist party. There is an equally clear communist/anti-communist divide which dates back to the civil war in Finland in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917; and there is considerably more than a residue of the ethnic strife between Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers that marked Finnish politics in the 1920s and 1930s. On the face of it, this does not seem to be much compared to the complexity of Norwegian politics. But Finland does in fact have a more complex divide structure by virtue of the low inter-correlations among the secondary divides.

The Scandinavian party systems have their historical and ideological roots in the early part of this century. However, the political parties are no strangers to fundamental ideological change. The social democratic parties have gradually dissociated themselves from the Marxist rhetoric of the 1920s and 1930s. Yesterday's hibernating Stalinists and neo-Stalinists have transformed themselves into today's reformed communists or left-socialists. The conservatives, who were once mobilised into political action in support of the old pre-democratic order, are now counted among the most fervent supporters of political democracy. Of course, further examples of ideological party change could be given.

Parties change policies and re-interpret their ideological heritage for a variety of reasons, including self-interest. Parties are there to mobilise the vote; and if they cannot do this any more, they either reconcile themselves to fading away or modifying their electoral platforms so as to make them more palatable to the voters. When interpreted in this light, the arrival of new competitors may be seen as an indication that the old and established political parties have failed to adapt to the demands of the political market. There have been several such indications in Scandinavian politics over the past two decades. The process in Finland started with the landslide victory (from 1% to 10.5%) of the Finnish Rural Party – an agrarian splinter movement with a distinct populist appeal – in the parliamentary elections of 1970, and it culminated in 1973 with the roaring success (15.9%) of the Progressive Party – a neo-liberal

party with a pronounced populist appeal. In the Norwegian elections of 1973, a similar protest party – then known as Anders Lange's Party and now known as the Progressive Party – polled an impressive 5% of the votes cast.

Sweden long stood out as a haven for the five old and established political parties by virtue of the 4 percent clause introduced in 1970 as an explicit safeguard against parliamentary fragmentation. But not so any more. Parties like the Greens (established in 1981) and the Christian-Democrats have made their way into the parliamentary arena during the 1990s. Local parties have become more frequent and successful in many Swedish communities and regions during the previous decade, altogether leading to a more fragmented party picture.

3. Popular Movements in Scandinavia

It is common to analyse the numerous popular movements in Scandinavia in terms of organisational waves of development. The first wave included religious organisations (Free Churches) and the temperance, women's, labour and peace movements. These popular movements began to appear in the mid-1800s. They fought for basic civil rights and against privileges acquired by certain groups in society. An important issue in this period was universal suffrage.

The second organisational wave is dated from the 1880s to the 1920s. Labour unions, farmer, consumer, and housing cooperatives are examples here. These groups fought for economic rights. Women organised themselves in unions to fight for better working conditions. Employer associations were created in this wave as well. Many of the first and second wave organisations threatened the political establishment of that time. Free Church members and teetotallers were harassed by politicians, clergymen, and the police. Labour unions, for instance, found it difficult to rent meeting halls, which explains the high number of outdoor meetings held during this period. By the 1930s, however, most first and second wave organisations were accepted as legitimate representatives of the people.

In the third wave of organisational development, popular movements for citizen empowerment gained ground. These "adult education societies" dedicated themselves to educating the people. They offered programs including courses on the rights and duties of Swedish citizens, courses on political democracy, and classes in debating techniques and rules of procedure for conducting meetings for supporters of popular movements. One important reason for the weak hold of fascism in Scandinavia in the 1930s and 1940s was the presence of popular movements which supported political democracy.

The fourth wave of organisational development began in the late 1950s. It concerned the struggle for personal integrity and respect. Organisations for peace, the environment, human rights, and women struggled against destruction, whether it was in terms of environmental pollution, wars, or discrimination against specific individuals and groups. There are interesting similarities between the first and fourth waves of organisational development.

An important characteristic of Scandinavian political culture is corporatism. Corporatism is the integration of the organisations of civil society with the state. Roots of corporatism go back far in Swedish history. The Swedish model was a model of corporatism based on close collaboration between the state and the largest labour market organisations as well as collaboration between the state and other large and important organisations, for instance those for consumers and farmers. Corporatism meant that civil society became less separated from the state, no longer in opposition but in co-operation, and the state began to regard many popular movements as legitimate and important participants in the political process. Many of these

movements had previously fought against the political order, but in this period they began to cooperate with it. Negotiations between organisational elites and state officials replaced street demonstrations. Corporatism proved to be a successful method for political decision-making for developing the welfare state. Organisations of civil society took public responsibility for their actions. Scandinavia became internationally known for progressive politics and Sweden in particular for labour peace.

Later, changes in the economic, social, and political landscape made it difficult to reach corporatist agreements and maintain corporatist relationships. Popular movements – and particularly labour market organisations – started to function more as special interest groups. Government reports questioned the integration of civil society and the state. Politicians and experts recommended decorporatisation. Scandinavian popular movements in the 1980s and 1990s have begun to assume a new and different kind of public responsibility. They are filling in gaps in the welfare state and even taking over tasks which were once the responsibility of government. Meanwhile, the established popular movements today struggle with problems of decreasing membership and a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The younger generation, however, has turned away from traditional popular movements towards collective forms of organisation, requiring less long-term commitment and more 'action' and visible results. Examples of these new forms of popular participation are associations for animal rights (both militant and non-militant ones), Greenpeace for the protection of the global environment, and the recently formed 'global' network against world-trade and capitalism, ATTACK.

4. Parties and Organisations in the New Democracies

One could characterise the political situation in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism somewhat facetiously with the words: "the party is over". With the demise of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the East European communist parties into post-communist movements, much of the ground for large national political organisations has disappeared. In fact, the word party – which equalled Communist party – was met with severe scepticism by the people. Many political organisations preferred to be called fronts or movements in order to avoid the negative connotation of the term party.

However, Western experience shows that parties are normally the most suitable structures for aggregating and articulating the interests of the people. In his

Figure 97. Prime ministers of post-communist Poland (from the left): Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Hanna Suchocka, Jan Olszewski, Waldemar Pawlak. In the middle, the chairman of the session. Photo: Alfred F. Majewicz

well-known study of parties and party systems, Giovanni Sartori proposed a simple definition of political parties:

> A party is any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates in public office (Sartori 1976, p. 63).

Sartori's broad definition is especially suited for Eastern Europe. Here, not only organisations that label themselves parties are components of the political system, but also broader movements, uniting several parties and looser political groups as well as trade unions, participate in central politics.

It is possible to distinguish between four stages in the development of new party systems in Eastern Europe. First came the dissolution of the Communist parties. Then the popular fronts appeared which were broad coalitions against Communist rule, e.g., the popular fronts in the Baltic States, Solidarity in Poland and Democratic Russia. The third stage was characterised by the dissolution of these popular fronts. In the fourth stage – which is now approaching its end – political parties in the Western sense are being created. But most parties are still small in comparison to parties in Western Europe.

Figure 95. Political gathering of communists in St Petersburg, in 1999. Photo: Alfred F. Majewicz

As is the case with political parties, other social organisations are still underdeveloped in Eastern Europe. The trade unions are in the process of being reorganised and revitalised. A number of industrial associations have appeared. The Catholic Church has resumed quite an important role in Polish and Lithuanian politics, while the Orthodox Church has strengthened its position in Russia. But in general, there is only a rudimentary structure of civil society.

Although much progress has been made, the current development of political democracy in the East European states contains elements of a possible future breakdown. Most of the stable democracies of Western Europe, like Britain, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, have a long-standing tradition of what Sartori (1976) would call *moderate pluralism*. However, most of the unstable democracies during the 20th century – the German Weimar Republic (1919-33), the French third and fourth republics, Spain before and immediately after Franco, Italy before and after the second world war etc. – were plagued by what Sartori refers to as *extreme pluralism*. The current situation in the new democracies of the Baltic region could be characterised as *polarised pluralism*, i.e., somewhere in between the other two extremes. The question is if these countries will develop moderate pluralism as in the Nordic countries or extreme pluralism as in Weimar Germany or Italy of the 1920s and 1930s. In conclusion, the parties and party systems in the Baltic region – as well as civil society on the whole – are still too undeveloped to guarantee democracy. On the other hand, in Poland, as well as in the Baltic States, there are no apparent signs of non-democratic mobilisation taking place. Even

though the parties revolve around charismatic personalities rather than on firm ideological foundations, there is a commitment to the democratic rules of the game, which has survived three national elections well.

5. Democracy and the Mass Media

The concept of democracy is closely related to the free formation of public opinion. Democratic decision-making is founded on the existence of public dialogue and the right to criticism. All interests of society must be able to find channels for their expression. Consequently, a free press, radio and television should be seen as prerequisites of democracy and the process of democratisation itself. The mass media is an embodiment of the right to freedom of expression. From the people's perspective, the media is a fundamental channel of influence as well as information.

In a general sense, freedom of the press is best defined as the right of the media to be free from control, to collect information, and to comment freely on issues and events. In a wider definition, freedom of the press could also imply participation of the people in the media, as well as accessibility of the media to the general public. Regardless of what description is preferred, a difficult problem might arise in any democracy when it comes to the realisation of the freedom of expression. On the one hand, the safeguarding of this principle requires extensive legislation, but, on the other hand, unrestricted freedom of the press could run counter to the individual's right to privacy and protection from the public sphere.

Figure 96. The former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, assassinated in 1986, very skillfully used modern mass media to reach his audience. Photo: Bert Mattsson/Pressens Bild

The justification of democracy

Why Democracy? Having reached the end of our exploration of democratic government, we still have not touched upon the most fundamental of all problems of democracy: why have it? How can we justify democracy, as opposed to other alternative forms of government? This is of course a grand subject in literature, and here we restrict ourselves by presenting, in short summary, some of the main arguments in defence of democracy.

The first argument maintains that democracy is the only mode of government capable of realising the principles of liberty and equality. Democratic decision-making is the only way of giving an equal say to all individuals, while – at the same time – protecting and promoting their freedom. A second argument values democracy because it develops the potential of the individuals to become fully rounded human beings. It maintains that, through participation in public life, the human being perfects his or her inherent capabilities of fraternity and compassion, and makes him/her publicly spirited. Furthermore, one could assert that the democratic process is the best way of managing conflict. Democracy functions as a safety valve against violent social strife by letting the sources of disagreement be expressed; democracy facilitates the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

In justifying democracy, it is important to take into consideration the plausible alternatives. Although there are many other forms of government, theoretically speaking, when referring to history one could, with some over-simplification, speak of one ferocious opponent of democracy: authoritarian rule. When referring to authoritarianism, we denote regimes where political power is restricted to the hands of a small elite, whether this elite is but one person (like despotic tyranny) or a group of persons, like in some military dictatorships – or, not to say the least, Communism as practised in the Soviet-type systems.

In the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe democracy is still contested in some circles, among those who hope for some kind of authoritarian rule instead, though such views seem to be decreasing among the establishment. Two kinds of arguments are usually put forward in favour of this stand. First, that the peoples of the region lack democratic traditions, and that the rapid introduction of democracy may result in anarchy. Second, that in the post-communist states, unlike in Southern Europe or Latin America for example, the political transition is accompanied, if not dominated, by the economic one: from a command to a market economy. In order to accomplish this transition, it is maintained, authoritarian principles of government must be applied.

The first argument is by no means new in the history of democratic thought. Throughout the 20th century the contention has been heard that the historical and cultural backgrounds of the countries in the Third World are very different from the West, and therefore unsuitable for democracy. As an underlining of the specific problems pertaining to the democratisation of countries lacking the "Western" traditions of individualism and liberty, this is certainly an important point to be made. But as a claim of the impossibility of democracy in such countries, it is simply untrue. Democracies do exist in the Third World, and countries lacking liberal traditions have been able to inaugurate democratic forms of government – the massive examples of India and Japan perhaps being the most notable. So, fact kicks back on those maintaining this kind of "cultural determinism" argument.

As to the second, economic argument, one might as well assert that instead of being a hindrance to economic reform, democratic institutions are a means of enhancing the tolerance in society for the harsh measures that need to be taken. Popular involvement in the process of change is not naturally an obstacle to resolute action. By increasing the legitimacy of the regime, it may indeed facilitate the accomplishment of reform programs.

A Long-Term Strategy. But perhaps the knockdown argument for democracy is the negative assertion once put forward by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". Thus, taking all the weaknesses of democracy into account, one still has to admit that there exists no better alternative. What is then asserted is that the crucial merit of democracy is its inherent capacity of self-control, its resistance to the tendency of complete social destruction which authoritarian forms of government have in so many instances demonstrated – by the enforcement of extensive genocides or through gigantic militarism or an uncontrolled economic decay.

With regard to its achievements, democracy can be said to represent a cautious political orientation. Through the institutionalised channels for popular control and by upholding a wide range of the citizens' rights, which serve to restrict the exertion of power, democracy is not the form of government that enables great leaps in the reconstruction of society. What it makes possible, on the whole, is only a fairly modest, reformist way of social change. But by the same token, it is the sort of regime that has the ability, better than any else, of obstructing a development towards political barbarism, and a subsequent societal disaster.

It is precisely this – the superiority of democracy as a long-term strategy – that has tended to take some time to recognise. For in these matters one cannot always rely on others' experiences.

Apparently the media plays a crucial role in every healthy democracy. It provides a forum where public debate can take place, and when the media is permitted to function autonomously it can act as a watchdog on political and economic power. There are, however, several problems facing the media in young democracies. When a one-party system is replaced with democratic institutions, the political leaders might still oppose the freedom of the press and try to use the media as their mouthpiece as soon as a critical situation occurs. Secondly, the journalists themselves can find it hard to fully grasp the role of the media in a democracy. They are used to working as the propaganda tools of the party in power, and they often lack practical knowledge of investigative journalism. Thirdly, both the print and broadcasting media are expensive ventures and private alternatives, as well as the existing media, will easily get into financial troubles – especially if most parts of the economy have been controlled by the government. Finally, in order for the mass media to attain full effect, the people must be literate and rather well educated. This is not always the case in a nascent democracy.

Of course, even in a mature democracy, the relation between the mass media and democratic principles can be controversial. One problem relates to the power over the media. Who controls the radio, the TV and the press: the journalists, the state or private owners? A second problem relates to the actual power of the media. The question is whether the media is merely an instrument in the hands of the people and the power-holders, or a source of political influence itself.

"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time".

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill