Public Spheres and Civil Society in Selected Pre-Modern Societies: Some Comparative Observations

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The purpose of this paper is to present a comparative analysis of the constitution of public spheres and civil societies in three pre-modern civilizations – the Islamic, the Indian, and the European Christian ones.

This analysis is undertaken in the frameworks of the comparative study of civilizations and of multiple modernities.1 In many, especially more recent, studies of modernization and globalization, one can find a very strong assumption that the development of a vibrant civil society is a basic component of modernity, above all of democratic modernity, and the development of such civil society has often been seen as an important yardstick according to which different societies were measured.

This recent discourse has been squarely put in the framework of modern Western, especially European, experience. In this discourse public spheres and civil society were often conflated, and civil society was often conceived as a distinct ontological entity facing another such entity – the state, but when the term and discourse of civil society were transplanted also into non-European or non-Western societies, there arose the problem of to what extent civil society (as for instance Ernest Gellner has formulated in a most extreme and forceful way) is essentially connected with the classical Western individualist liberal conceptions; or whether, as anthropologists like Hahn or the Comaroffs2 have indicated,

the central core characteristics of civil society, of its relation with the state, can also develop on the basis of other premises.

The growing literature on these problems, the available historical and contemporary evidence, show the assumption which conflates civil society and public sphere and the concomitant assumption which has informed many of these discussions that civil society constitutes a very problematic and distinct ontological entity – confronting another such entity – the state (or also the market), and that the relations between civil society, public sphere, and the state, the political arena are much more variable than is implied in this literature.

The concept of a public sphere entails that there are at least two other spheres – the “official” sphere of rulership and the private sphere – from which the public sphere is more or less institutionally and culturally differentiated. It is, therefore, a sphere located between the official and the private spheres. It is a sphere where discussions about the common good are at stake. This holds also for the official sphere; but in the public sphere such business is carried out by groups that do not belong to the ruler’s domain. Rather, the public sphere draws its membership from the private sphere. It expands and shrinks according to shifting involvements of such membership, as Albert O. Hirschman has demonstrated with regard to modern development. The term “public sphere” therefore denotes the existence of arenas that are not only autonomous from the political order but are also public in the sense that they are accessible to different sectors of society. The discourse in public spheres admits to the possibility of different interpretations of the common good and of the demands made on the rulers in the name of such good, but not in terms of private, distinct interests.

Civil society entails direct participation in the political process of corporate bodies or a more or less restricted body of citizens in which private interests play a very important role. Such society entails a public sphere, but not every public sphere entails a civil society, as defined in the contemporary discourse. In every civilization, especially literary ones with some complexity and literacy, a public sphere – but not necessarily a civil society type – will emerge.3

But whatever the differences with respect to the relations between public sphere, civil society, and the political arena, in all societies these relations have entailed continual contestation about power and authority, their legitimation and accountability. The concrete ways in which such