Civil Society, Patronage and Democracy

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship of contemporary analyses of civil society to research venues dealing with the transformational capacity of patronage, at work in democracies. It has two aims. The first is to offer an approach to civil society that is based on both the formal characteristics as well as the pragmatic dimensions of contemporary state-society relationships. The second is to show that within this theoretical approach, patronage appears as an integral part of many modern democratic regimes and must be treated as such in order to publicize the private domain and thus avoid the privatization of the public domain.

Introduction

The wave of democratization that encompassed Latin America, Southern Europe and Eastern Europe in the last decades was in more than one way the result of internal contradictions, struggles, and the unraveling of ruling coalitions, followed by the redrawing of international boundaries and agreements. As it was paralleled by the decentralization of power structures and the empowerment of civil society, this wave of political change in the late 1970s and 1980s generated expectations of a radical break with the past and anticipation that the more hierarchical aspects of the reconstituted societies would soon become remnants of the past. Expectations had it that social movements, voluntary associations and intermediate institutions of civil society would effect an overall reconstruction of the political centers and a reformulation of community through a strong emphasis on participation and the endorsement of an egalitarian vision of rights and entitlements. Indeed, the initial burgeoning of civil society and the participatory flavor of the new social movements effected far-reaching changes in political regimes, changing the formal relationships between leaders and constituencies, especially in formerly authoritarian settings. Both in the countries which had just completed the transition to democracy, and in the more established democracies, distrust increased toward traditional forms of party politics and politicians, reflecting a world-wide trend of dissolution of controls, fragmentation, and a search for more 'genuine' forms of democracy.1

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In light of the subsequent dislocation of established patterns of interaction, and in many societices the abrupt explosion of civil, ethnic and nationalist conflicts which border on an Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ a more cautious appraisal, especially concerning the variable forces and pragmatic realities of the new regimes, is in order. This article aims to provide some of the necessary tools for an appraisal of some of the dimensions involved in the trend towards democratization and decentralization which can also grapple with the disruptive after-effects. This will be done through an exploration of the relationship between the discussions on the development of civil society and research on the transformative capacity and impact of patronage and clientelism. In addition to analytical elaboration, we suggest approaching sociopolitical developments from the perspective of the pragmatic dimensions of public life and politics. This venue will incorporate research on patronage and civil society into the analysis of the prospects of social change beyond contemporary political revamping.

Civil Society and the Transformation of the Public Sphere

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, a process of struggle and change led, first in the West and then in non-Western contexts, to a widening of political participation and a crystallization of citizenship ideals, civil freedoms, and legal frameworks aimed at subjecting traditional authority to the scrutiny of representative forms of government (Habermas, 1989; Hirschman, 1982; Calhoun, 1992). This transformation was connected to long-term socio-economic change which was precipitated by the consolidation of self-conscious (e.g., bourgeois) sectors willing to promote such processes as marketization, monetarization, and rationalization and to generate a reconstruction of state-society relations. Sociocultural change was also involved in the development of urban cultures, modern science, educational systems, public spatial environments, and new forms of social communication. A new link between the public and private domains emerged in tandem with the consolidation of the modern state, which has been expressed with shifting connotations in the idea of civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Seligman, 1992).

The concept of civil society alludes to the existence of organized public life and free associations beyond the tutelage of the state, yet oriented toward the public sphere and toward influencing public policies. The range of arenas and social sectors involved varies contextually, involving in most cases voluntary associations, social movements, the market, and intermediary institutions such as councils and local frameworks. Whatever the concrete nature of the organizational and structural web, from an analytical perspective civil society refers to the interlinking arena where private interests meet public concerns and both are mutually structured and maybe institutionalized, e.g., in the form of rights and entitlements. Civil society can be nurtured through involvement in participatory activities and grassroots organizations, through the establishment of centers of sociability like coffeehouses, clubs, and voluntary associations;