



The politics of adult education: state, economy and civil society

MARK MURPHY

University of Stirling, Scotland

There has been a recent general resurgence of interest in civil society, a resurgence that is also found in adult education. Radical adult educators, in particular, view civil society as the privileged sphere of radical learning and social change. It is seen as the site to engage in democratic struggle, social movements and political change. This new elevation of civil society is tied into a wider crisis on the political left – the crisis of socialism. This crisis is reflected in the wider debates on the politics of civil society, a debate centred on the differences between Marxist and post-Marxist definitions of civil society. The purpose of this paper is to clarify this debate, and outline its implications for adult education theory and practice. To this end, the paper examines the history of the civil society idea, a history demonstrating that analyses of civil society need to be placed alongside understandings of the state and the market. These understandings of political and economic society provide the bases for two very different political agendas – socialism and radical democracy. The paper discusses how these two agendas impact on adult education, in particular how different analyses of the state/economy/civil society relationship suggest divergent conceptions of social conflict.

Introduction

Recent times have witnessed a resurgence of interest in an old political science concept – civil society. The term has made a ‘sudden reappearance after near complete disappearance in the public discourse’ (Eberly 2000: 3). Civil society is on the ‘lips of foundation executives, business leaders and politicians; it seems as though every university has set up a study group on civil society and the phrase finds its way into half the dissertations in political sociology’ (Calhoun 1993: 267). The term was not always so popular. ‘Before the 1980s, references to contemporary ‘civil society’, whether in academic sociology and political science or in the public sphere, were few. Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, they are many’ (Bryant 1993: 397).

Civil society has also come to the fore in adult education theory and research.¹ It is championed, in particular, by more radically inclined adult educators, who view civil society as the site of radical learning and political struggle. In this regard, radical adult educators fall in line with the contemporary left. It is no coincidence that this debate developed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the cold war. The elevation of civil society by the European left is the result of a crisis of confidence, one rooted in the troubles afflicting radical politics in general, but particularly socialist/social democratic politics. The failure

Mark Murphy is a Lecturer in Education, Institute of Education, University of Stirling, Scotland.

perceived or otherwise, of both these interconnected political projects (socialism in the East, social democracy in the West) has elevated civil society to the privileged sphere of radical social change.

It is the crisis of socialism, as an experience and an ideology, that has prompted this search for alternative concepts. The terms of civil society, its attractive combination of democratic pluralism with a continuing role for state regulation and guidance, make it appear hopeful to societies seeking to recover from the excesses of state socialism; at the same time it seems to offer help in the refashioning of radical politics in those societies where socialism has lost whatever appeal it once possessed. (Kumar 1993: 375)

There is a plethora of terms at the heart of the current debate on the role of civil society, both within adult education and the wider political left.² The 'crisis of socialism,' 'democratic pluralism,' 'state' 'radical politics' – all are important focal points of heated exchange. The response of the left to the supposed triumph of capitalism has produced the privileging of civil society as a site of struggle. The differing interpretations on the left of this triumphalism, have produced heated exchanges surrounding the theoretical and political efficacy of civil society. The debate around civil society is one between the Marxist/neo-Marxist oriented left, or socialists, and what has been referred to as the post-Marxist left, which covers an array of thinkers, but who can be collectively described as radical democrats.

The revival of civil society as both a credible force and problematic concept, have been partially reproduced within the theory and practice of radical adult education. Although this debate has impinged on adult education on a surface level, what is missing is a deeper, historical, analysis of these issues. What connections are made between the state, economy and civil society? How do these connections impact on adult educators' understandings of social conflict? The purpose of this paper is to examine these connections and notions of conflict in order to understand the different political objectives undertaken in civil society.

Adult education and civil society

Why have some adult educators taken so strongly to the notion of civil society? The theory and practice of radical adult education has long been involved in identifying spaces, whether physical or cultural, where forms of counter-hegemonic learning can take place. Freire's (1998) emphasis on cultural education, Thompson's (1983) women's groups as site of critical awareness, Finger's (1989) valorization of new social movements – these are some prominent examples of adult educators seizing on something that offers a 'freedom to learn'. Other forms of organization are rendered less adequate in this regard. Institutions of higher education, chambers of commerce, trade unions, and in particular, formal political parties are all viewed with suspicion, tainted as they are by connections to the state and the economy. Power and money are the enemies of undistorted forms of learning.

Civil society is now regarded as the site par-excellence for providing this space in which to learn free from power and domination, free from the state and the economy.

The civil society is the development of the infrastructure within a nation which mediates between the state and its citizens. A strong civil society, which promotes the full participation of its citizens, ensures that we strive towards a participatory democratic goal. It counters the development of a civil society dominated by the powerful interests of the state and those citizens representing a dominant cultural majority. It prevents the marginalisation of less powerful 'sectors' be they based on race, ethnicity, gender or social class. (Cunningham 1992: 12)

Also present in this quote is the other reason behind the elevation of civil society – the belief that adult education can play a role in the struggle for a more participatory democracy, a belief in line with the proud tradition of progressive and radical adult education. This tradition is now centred on the notion of civil society as the 'battlefield' of social change. Civil society is seen as providing potential spaces both for learning free from domination and also engagement with social change. It also acts as somewhat of a catchall phrase for activities such as cultural education, women's groups and new social movements among others. It is no wonder, then, that civil society has so strongly caught the imagination of more radically minded adult educators.

There is another dimension to this recent focus on civil society as a site for learning and social change – the crisis of socialism and social democracy, political movements derived from the Marxist tradition. As the left in general has undergone a major re-thinking of its fundamental tenets, so too has radical adult education. This process of radical re-thinking has established civil society as the new buzzword of the field. Civil society is viewed as providing a space for democratic practices, practices that can now avoid grandiose notions of social change and offer up more 'self-limiting' approaches to adult education and social change.

The revolutionary fantasies of the 1960s must give way to a more chastened and modest utopianism: chastened because we have learned that political projects which totally remake 'society' have been disastrous, modestly utopian because one of the big lessons of the twentieth century appears to be that it is utterly catastrophic to human well-being for social learning processes to be constrained within civil society. (Welton 1997: 28)

This 'self-limiting' 'chastened and modest utopianism' is critical when attempting to understand the recent championing of civil society. It seems to act for some adult educators as a political 'hedging of the bets' in uncertain times. Calls for a revitalized civil society appear to signify a rejection of Marxism and notions of social change centred on class politics and revolution. But in that case, what do adult educators who valorize civil society stand for? In particular, how do they view the role of adult education in relation to the state and the market?

Examining the debates regarding civil society reveals that it has historically been situated in relation to the state (political society) and the market (economic society). A trawl through these historical debates can provide a platform from which to examine the current interest in civil society, perceptions of the state and the market, and the politics of adult education in these 'post-revolutionary' times.

Conceptions of civil society pre-Hegel

A distinction exists between a pre-modern phase and a modern phase of theories of civil society, the dividing line being the theory of Hegel.³ Civil society in the pre-modern phase was synonymous with political structures and organization – with the state, while civil society in the modern phase is considered as the opposite of the state (Castiglione 1994: 87). According to Kumar (1993: 376), this identification reflects the classical origins of the term, or more precisely its Greek origins, particularly with the notion of *societas civilis* in Cicero's writings and its earlier foundation in Aristotle's concept of *koinonia politike*.⁴ This identification of civil society with political society went through some transformations before the modern period. As Castiglione (1994: 87) outlines, there are three different periods characterized by three different dichotomies. The first is the classical Ciceronian/Aristotelean paradigm as mentioned above, in which civil society is regarded in opposition to 'domestic society' or the household, a place in which humans do not play the role of a 'political and social animal'. The second is the concept of civil society as opposed to the state of nature, as identified in Hobbes.

The third and final period before the modern is characterized by an opposition between civil society and primitive society. This opposition is the domain of the Scottish moralists and the Scottish enlightenment. 'The great Scottish philosophers – Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and David Hume – call this new social formation a 'civil society' to distinguish it from the 'savage and barbarious' tribal societies observable in the new world. A 'civil' society was civilized and ordered by the rule of law' (Ignatieff 1995: 129–130). Although civil society did not lose its political character, it now had a natural history of its own, with a sphere of society 'distinct from the state and with forms and principles of its own' (Kumar 1993: 377). Secondly, this sphere 'is the complex product of contradictory tendencies, mainly associated to the diffusion of commerce and market relationships' (Castiglione 1994: 88). The Scottish philosophers connect civil society to the economy – a connection missing in the other pre-modern understandings of civil society. It is no coincidence that this connection coincides with the development of capitalism in Europe – a development with significant implications for the theorists of the modern period, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci.⁵

Modern conceptions of civil society

In the pre-modern period, three principle actors were identified in the context of civil society: civil society itself, the state and the economy. Pre-modern theories equate civil society with a place for free participation, whether in politics or economics. At the same time, it is only in the theory of the Scottish moralists that all three identified components come into play. The Scottish moralist's understanding of civil society is often regarded as the source of Hegel's own understanding (Castiglione 1994: 87). Having said that, Hegel clearly distinguishes between the state and civil society. As Neocleous (1995: 396) puts it, Hegel's conception of civil society is an 'essentially modern one, developed as it is in response to the French revolution, the industrial revolution, and the emergence of a sphere of social conflict'. It was in his *Philosophy of Right* (1967) that Hegel elaborated on civil society. With the French revolution, Hegel viewed

a significant development in that it represented a problem close to his heart – the political realization of freedom. At the same time, with the industrial revolution, there was a development of extremes of poverty and wealth. And connected to this, there was the development of a sphere of private individuals separate from both domestic society (family) and political society (state), essentially a sphere of social conflict. When faced with all these developments and the conceptual problems connected to them, Hegel ‘makes the crucial theoretical shift by positing a third dimension “civil society”, standing between the family and the state’ (Neocleous 1995: 396). Hegel outlines the positioning of civil society and its connection to the state. ‘Civil society is the [stage of] difference which intervenes between the family and the state, even if its formation follows later in time than that of the state, because as [the stage of] difference, it presupposes the state; to subsist itself, it must have the state before its eyes as something self-subsistent’ (Hegel 1967: 266).⁶

Hegel’s notion of interdependence with civil society does not include the state, but presupposes its existence (Shils 1991: 9). However, while the state is outside civil society, the *economy* is housed within it. According to Shils (1991: 5–6), Hegel saw civil society as ‘the market, the commercial sector of society and the institutions which were necessary to the functioning of the market and the protection of its members’. Hegel used the phrase *bürgerliche gesellschaft*, which in German means both *civil* and *bourgeois* society. This means that, according to Hegel, there are two distinctive features of this new sphere of social relations. First of all, they are *socio-economic* as opposed to *political* relations, and secondly, this new sphere of civil society is essentially *bourgeois*, i.e. it is a sphere of atomized self-seeking individuals.⁸ What Hegel did was ‘recognize the essentially capitalist nature of civil society’ (Neocleous 1995: 396). Hegel considered poverty to be a general consequence of civil society and arising necessarily out of it, unless it is governed by a higher power, the state. ‘Civil society affords a spectacle of extravagance and want as well as of the physical and ethical degeneration common to them both’ (Hegel 1967: 123).

Hegel viewed capitalist modernization as the cause of this physical and ethical degradation, a development that, on the one hand, created vast quantities of wealth, while on the other, produced a class of people unable to benefit from the freedoms of civil society.⁹ Adam Ferguson, whose *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1995) was a major influence on Hegel’s own thoughts on the subject (Bobbio 1979: 27), concurs with Hegel’s characterization of the relationship between poverty and civil society. ‘Many of the establishments which serve to defend the weak from oppression, contribute, by securing the possession of property, to favour its unequal division and to increase the ascendant of those from whom the abuses of power may be feared’ (Ferguson, 1995: 63). This connection between civil society and inequality is at the heart of the modern debate concerning the role (and, just as importantly, the intended role) of civil society. Hegel, although he identified this problem of structural inequality in civil society, could provide no real concrete solution. Becker (1994: 124) clarifies the dilemma that faced Hegel:

Pauperization was a structural component of civil society and therefore controls must be placed on industry and the price of commodities. The state’s intervention, however, if excessive, would conflate the distance

between it and civil society – the latter would simply disappear. This posed an exasperating dilemma for Hegel: He appreciated the value of civil society and its manifold benefits of moral and economic freedom and thus was reluctant to call for the invoking of state power which in the end would certainly crush it. This remained an insoluble problem for the philosopher – perhaps the only major one the great systematizer had failed to accommodate.

This ‘insoluble problem’ – pauperization or state control – leads directly into the great heir and critic of Hegel, Karl Marx, and his conception of civil society.

Marx and civil society

Hegel’s equation of civil society with capitalist society (or bourgeois society) and the problems in this equation are a starting point for Marx’s critique of civil society. Civil society for Hegel was not just the manifestation of bourgeois society; it was also a manifestation of the bourgeois *state*. Civil society for Hegel ‘includes not only the spheres of economic relations and formation of classes, but also the administration of justice as well as the organization of the police force and that of the corporations, that is two facets of traditional public law’ (Bobbio 1979: 28).¹⁰ Bobbio sees this understanding of Hegel’s as being wider than that of Marx.¹¹ This is an important issue that will be returned to later. Marx turns Hegel’s conception of civil society and its relation to the state on its head.

Civil society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of a given stage and, insofar, transcends the state and the nation, though, on the other hand, again, it must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality, and inwardly must organize itself as the state. (Marx and Engels 1970: 57)

For Marx, it is not the state that regulates and determines civil society, but the other way round: civil society is the regulator of the state. Civil society is the sphere of class struggle out of which comes its ideological manifestations, in particular, the state. The primary position that Marx gave to civil society contrasted with Hegel’s account of the civil society/state relationship: civil society does not pre-suppose the state; the state pre-supposes civil society. This distinction can be found in its clearest form in the base/superstructure concept of capitalist society. ‘Civil society, as such, only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure, has, however, always been designated by the same name’ (Marx and Engels 1970: 57). Marx equates civil society with economic society, or the base, while the state and its administrative apparatus belong in the superstructure, the epiphenomenon of class struggle. For Marx, it was not enough for the state to regulate civil society through law in order to alleviate its structural inequalities à la Hegel. Civil society does not find its ethical component in the state; rather it finds its *justification*. Bourgeois revolutions, exemplified by the French revolution, do precisely this. ‘Political revolution dissolves civil society into its component parts,

without revolutionizing and submitting to criticism these parts themselves' (Marx, 1977: 56). The solution to the class-based inequality in civil society is not one of an appeal to the state for regulation but instead the solution comes in the form of taking control of the state itself. As the state provides the legal justification for production and commerce in civil society, it is necessary to seize this power in order to transform civil society. Neocleous (1995: 405) clarifies Marx's argument: 'For Marx, it is the very nature of civil society that is the problem, its essence, its form as much as its content: hence *bürgerliche gesellschaft*. The intention then is not to alter the content ... but of transforming that form'.

Gramsci and civil society

Antonio Gramsci, the revolutionary Marxist and one-time leader of the Italian Communist Party, is the most important theorist of civil society on the socialist left in the twentieth century. He is also one of the most significant theoretical figures on the adult education left, both in relation to his interpretation of civil society, and also his understanding of hegemony and the role of intellectuals in society.¹² Gramsci provided a different twist on civil society to that of Marx or Hegel. The following famous definition of the two superstructural levels of capitalist society summarizes this understanding:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the state'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridicial' government. (Gramsci 1971: 12)

With this formulation, Gramsci reversed Marx's base/superstructure model, as he places civil society, not in the base, but in the superstructure.¹³ Although the economy is housed, à la Marx, in the base, it does not form part of civil society. This is not the only theoretical difference between Marx and Gramsci. There are two others of note. The first difference lies in the fact that Gramsci adopts a three-part, rather than a two-part conceptual framework. Unlike Marx, where civil society is synonymous with economic society, Gramsci distinguishes civil society from both economic and political society (Cohen and Arato 1992: 143). This also distinguishes Gramsci from Hegel. The second difference relates to, in another case, Gramsci's usage of a different conception of Hegelian civil society than that of Marx. Marx identified civil society with one component of Hegel's tripartite conception, the system of needs. By placing the economy outside of civil society, Gramsci does not (directly, it should be said) associate civil society with the system of needs, but rather with the system of corporations. This is what he means when he states that civil society is the 'ensemble of organisms commonly called private'. According to Cohen and Arato (1992: 143), Gramsci identified civil society with the system of corporations, and in doing so positioned it outside the direct field of economic society, because he 'recognized the new forms of plurality and association specific to modern civil society in modern churches,

unions, cultural institutions, clubs, neighbourhood associations, and especially political parties'.¹⁴

The major difference between Marx and Gramsci, one with implications for political practice, is Gramsci's privileging of the system of corporations rather than the system of needs as the sphere of struggle. Both Marx and Gramsci viewed civil society as the focal point for revolutionary action, but their different interpretations over what constitutes civil society have implications for practice. It is at the point of production – the struggles between capital and labour – that Marx believes revolutionary action should be primarily waged. For Gramsci, it is the system of corporations – unions, educational and cultural institutions, voluntary associations – that provide the possibility of a counter-hegemonic revolutionary force. As he puts it (1971: 233), the superstructures of civil society 'are like the trench systems of modern warfare'. This difference in content can lead to different political strategies. The Marxist-Leninist variant used the method of a closely-knit disciplined vanguard party that would directly attack the forces of production. In Gramsci's version, the process of revolutionary struggle developed through the mobilization of the grassroots and their subsequent organization. This is the only major difference between Marx and Gramsci. Fundamental to both theorists is the belief that civil society is intimately connected to capitalism. Capitalism needed to be transformed in order to rid society of its class divisions. Of course, Marx believed that the state had to be overthrown in order to do this, while Gramsci believed in widening civil society until it 'swallowed' the state, but the end goal in both cases, was the same: the overthrow of capitalism. This is significant when considering the present heightened debate over civil society and its beginnings in the 'crisis of socialism'. When it is also understood that the 'concept of civil society most widespread today is fundamentally Gramscian' (Kumar 1993: 389), the civil society debate and the crisis of socialism can start to be connected with post-Marxist theories of civil society that occupy the main sphere of influence in this debate.

Post-Marxist theories of civil society

Kumar pointed to the problems in Eastern Europe with the collapse of state socialism, and the problems in the West concerning the welfare state, as the main reasons behind the renewed interest in civil society. Kumar is correct to a certain degree. He does, however, neglect the economic dimension, Livesay (1994: 102–103) clarifies the role of the economy and its place in these post-1989 debates, alongside that of the state.

This belated recognition on the left of the problems with statism – motivated by the collapse of state socialism, the fiscal crisis of the state and the political crisis of the welfare state in the West, and the inability of leftist parties to develop effective national economic programs in the wake of the increasing globalization of capital – has called forth a series of attempts by former neo-Marxists to develop 'post-Marxist' theoretical accounts of the contemporary situation and political programs designed to realize in new terms the traditional goal of the left – now the protection of the positive features of civil society against both the market economy and the administrative state.

Post-Marxism is not a belief system exclusive to theorists of civil society. It had already found its theoretical form in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) and Gorz (1982) among others. Although there are significant differences between those who constitute the post-Marxist intellectual turn, there can be said to be two unifying characteristics. First of all, they share a belief that Marxist theory has failed in its efforts to comprehend the continuing stability of the capitalist system. Secondly, there is a comprehensive rejection of the notion that the working class alone can act as the revolutionary subject of social change. However, responses to these beliefs differ among the post-Marxist left, differences that can have substantial implications for political practice.¹⁵ Regardless of this, post-Marxism has taken on a more practical-political form in the shape of a reconstituted civil society. The most powerful exponents of the post-Marxist theory of civil society are Cohen and Arato (1992).

Cohen and Arato on civil society

According to Cohen and Arato, civil society is 'a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication' (1992: ix). In terms of structure, Cohen and Arato view civil society in much the same way as Gramsci, in that it exists somewhere between economic and political society. Its content is also similar to Gramsci's civil society, in that it corresponds to the system of corporations that Cohen and Arato borrow from Hegel. This concept of civil society is Cohen and Arato's primarily normative understanding, rather than a descriptive one. Their descriptive understanding of civil society, like Hegel, contains all three systems, that of needs, justice, and corporations. It is the system of needs and the system of justice, corresponding to the economy and state influence respectively, which they want kept to a minimum. They explain this distinction between the actual condition of civil society and its potential one: 'The concept of civil society indicates a terrain in the West that is endangered by the logic of administrative and economic mechanisms but is also the primary locus for the potential expansion of democracy under "actually existing" liberal democratic regimes' (1992: viii).

This expansion of democracy is the main goal of social movements in civil society, an expansion that is possible due to the democratic base provided by the system of corporations housed within. There is a marked difference here between Cohen and Arato and Marx's understanding of civil society. Marx viewed civil society as the sphere of class struggle and exploitation, and in doing so, as noted earlier, is accused of adopting too narrow a definition of civil society from Hegel, the system of needs only. Cohen and Arato, on the other hand, value the 'great importance of a two-sided understanding of Hegel's concept of civil society' (1992: 96). The two sides to this understanding are *sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, and *antisittlichkeit*, its opposite. *Antisittlichkeit* comes in the form of the system of needs – the economy – that Marx saw as synonymous with civil society. The system of corporations, however, provide *sittlichkeit*, and in so doing, provide the potential for furthering democratic practices within civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992: 97).¹⁶ This democracy is endangered by the system imperatives of both the

economy and the state. Cohen and Arato argue that the economy and the state need to be kept at bay within civil society.¹⁷ On this point, Cohen and Arato assure readers that actors in civil society are not just on the defensive. As they state (1992: 565) in relation to new social movements, 'the politics of civil society is ... both defensive and offensive. Social movements seek to democratize civil society, to protect it from economic and political "colonization", and to exert influence on political society'.

It might seem that Cohen and Arato fit comfortably within a Gramscian strategy of civil society, of widening civil society until its universalization, or more concretely, until it included the state. This would seem to be true, as Gramsci and Cohen and Arato work with a tripartite scheme of economy, state and civil society. It is at this juncture, however, that one of the major distinctions between Marxists and post-Marxists becomes apparent. According to Cohen and Arato (1992: 71), a common position of all post-Marxisms is a 'revision of Marx's ... various political projects aiming at the reunification of the state and society'. They share this aim, arguing that it is also relevant to the economy/society relationship. They clarify this position on page 25, at the same time outlining what they see to be the present task of the left. 'The task is to guarantee the autonomy of the modern state and economy while simultaneously protecting civil society from destructive penetration and functionalization by the imperatives of these two spheres'.

The problem they identify in the modern world is the increasing *colonization of the lifeworld* by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy. They borrow this conceptual analysis from Jürgen Habermas (1987), who views the task of left politics in a similar fashion to Cohen and Arato, i.e. to reverse this trend of colonization. As Cohen and Arato put it (1992: 455), 'the project of a democratic civil society ... is obviously one of de-colonizing the lifeworld'.

The role of civil society outlined by Cohen and Arato is quite different to that of Gramsci. Gramsci viewed the problem of modern society to be one of class exploitation and the role of civil society was to develop organizations to eventually take over the state, and hence 'de-class' society. For Cohen and Arato, the problem concerns the colonization of ethical life by functional imperatives, and the role of civil society is to 'de-colonize' this ethical life in order to preserve the potential for democratic practices. This difference sets Cohen and Arato apart from the traditional goals of socialism. At the same time, it would be a mistake to label them purely as reconstituted social democrats, although there is enough apparent evidence to suggest this. From a closer reading of their text, it becomes clear that civil society for them is not just an end in itself (a conservative reading) or an instrument of social democratic fine-tuning. It is the privileged sphere of what they term a 'self-limiting revolution' (p. 25). They perceive this form of revolution as the (at least partial) solution to problems of structural inequality. Basically, the term signifies a strategy of successive reforms built on the assumptions of liberal democracies, in order to further their goal of democracy. This strategy could be referred to as 'radical liberalism'. The 'self-limiting revolution' they espouse, however, refers to the limits that must be placed on the radicalizing of democracy. This understanding of the limits of democracy sets Cohen and Arato apart from the socialist left. Pierson (1993: 180) clarifies the nature of the problematic in this regard.

Of the many disputes which have surrounded the theory and practice of democracy, few have been more contentious than those that concern the proper *limits* of democratic decision making. While these arguments have often concerned the restrictions placed upon membership of the demos or the constitutional limits within which a democratic majority may impose its will upon a resistant minority, just as frequently and fiercely they have been debates about the economic limits of democracy.

The traditional aim of socialism has been to secure economic democracy, which would entail a radical transformation of the structures of capitalism. This is far from the agenda of Cohen and Arato. They argue (1992: 147) that their conception of civil society is 'the best way to flesh out this alternative precisely because it explores the limiting point where democratic control remains compatible with economic rationality'. The market in their formulation is to retain its autonomy.¹⁸

Habermas also wishes to avoid any form of social re-embedding, and his championing of new social movements is a reflection of their 'self-limiting' tendency. 'Democratic movements emerging from civil society must give up holistic aspirations to a self-organizing society, aspirations that also undergirded Marxist ideas of social revolution. Civil society can directly transform only itself, and it can have at most an indirect effect on the self-transformation of the political system' (Habermas 1996: 372). Cohen and Arato, for their part, concentrated on changing political decision-making through the influence of civil society, rather than influencing economic decision-making. They identify their position on the economic limits to democracy only in a note at the back of the book, where they state that although the role of civil disobedience is practically limitless in relation to political democracy, 'economic efficiency should not be sacrificed *in toto* to democratic pressure' (1992: 741). Cohen and Arato argue that the market economy is necessarily incompatible with the concerns of socialism, and therefore there are limits to what socialism can do. They accept the contradiction as necessary in our modern world. The ethical logic of civil society is of necessity limited by the efficiency logic of economic society.¹⁹

Discussion and conclusion: civil society, conflict and adult education

What does this discussion of civil society provide for adult educators? It offers adult education an understanding that civil society, the state and economy are interconnected. Emphases on the benefits of civil society need to be placed in the context of this interconnection. The discussion also highlights the fact that learning in civil society can have different objectives. One objective is the traditional socialist objective – the transformation of capitalism. The other objective concerns that of radical democracy – the furtherance of democratic practices. Although it is important to distinguish between these objectives, what is more significant is awareness of why these are worthwhile objectives in the first place. The traditional socialist objective of transforming capitalism is seen as worthwhile as it will eradicate class divisions. The radical democratic aim of furthering democracy, in the shape of Cohen and Arato at least, is beneficial

because it will presumably de-colonize the lifeworld, an objective shared by some adult educators.²⁰ These aims share a belief that modern society is characterized by conflict, conflict that can be won or lost in the 'trenches' of civil society. Although it could be viewed that the conflict in both is a similar one, as Livesay (1994) believes, i.e. a conflict between ethics and efficiency, this is not the case. Socialists understand the conflict to be one between classes. For radical democrats, the conflict arises between two different forms of societal integration, namely social and system integration. Both socialists and radical democrats can be labelled 'conflict' theorists, understandable given the fact that it is essentially a split between Marxists and post-Marxists.

In the post-Marxist scenario, the conflict is caused by the state and market overstepping their boundaries and colonizing the lifeworld, a conflict that may be characterized as one between the human and the non-human. It is as if the human race gave birth to a two-headed modernizing monster, which has unfortunately developed its own intelligence and set of imperatives – a Hammer horror version of Parsonian functionalism, the systemic fruits of the enlightenment coming back to haunt us.

In the Marxist scenario, two classes of people – capitalists and workers – are in conflict. The imperatives of the capitalist class have colonized the lives and needs of workers, enmeshed them in an insatiable desire for profit and surplus value. This type of conflict is of course more 'messy', as there are obvious connotations of violent revolution and radical transformation. It is less fanciful, and definitely less romantic, than the conflict envisaged by post-Marxists. But at the same time it is more horrific. It is difficult to imagine a revolution over faceless non-human 'imperatives'.

This paper has been concerned with clarifying historical debates over the civil society/state/economy relationship. But what appears to be the crucial issue in the debate over the politics of civil society, and hence, adult education, is the state/economy relationship. Marxist analyses of civil society are built on political economy, on a belief that the two are interconnected. In the post-Marxist analysis, they are kept separate. The state is neither the epiphenomenon of class struggle nor the site of direct domination. State and economy have their own separate imperatives. Political economy, a traditional Marxist tool for understanding capitalist development, is redundant in the post-Marxist scenario.²¹

At this stage, it should be noted that socialism and radical democracy are not necessarily mutually exclusive political projects. One may form part of the other or at least complement the other at a particular stage of development.²² At the same time, question marks remain over the championing of civil society in the field of adult education. There is a need to be careful in appropriating a concept like civil society. The lack of analysis of political economy can lead to an uncritical acceptance of ideas that, although sounding as if they came readymade for adult educators' concern with learning potentials and participation, can blind us to the real workings of power in society, particularly those that come in the shape of the 'state' and 'civil society'. Accepting Gramsci's definition of civil society, we adult educators work in civil society, regardless of political outlook. There is no need to reject civil society as a theoretical and practical endeavour. There is a need, however, to problematize it. 'It is... important not to romanticize civil society. Frequently the state and dominant classes achieve their hegemony through the organizations of civil society. ... On the other hand,

much of the momentum for change has come from adult education and movements in civil society' (Fleming 1998: 7). Understanding the political economy of civil society is one important way of moving towards a re-invigorated tradition of radical adult education.

Notes

1. See Picon (1991), Tandon (1992, 1994), Elsey (1993), Hall (1993), Merrifield (1997), Jackson (1997), Welton (1997), Fleming (1998) and Maruaton (1999).

2. Civil society has also been championed by the right, generally taking the form of a defence of liberal democracy against socialism (Shils 1991, Goodwin 1992, Norton 1992). Here, civil society is an end in itself, a sphere of freedom within the context of representative democracy and encapsulating the activities of the free market economy.

3. Howe (1989), Jacob (1991), Shils (1991), Kumar (1993), Castiglione (1994) and Ignatieff (1995).

4. Seligman (1992, Chapter 1) outlines in depth the meanings of these terms and their implications for ancient jurisprudence and classical political thought.

5. For a more detailed account of the Scottish enlightenment and its understanding of civil society, see Waszek (1988).

6. See also page 110, paragraph 157, where Hegel outlines, in three phases, the process of movement from the family, through civil society, and into the state. For Hegel, civil society is the only place where the ethical mind can secure its freedom, only as long as it is welded to the state or, more accurately, 'the constitution of the state'.

7. See Cohen and Arato (1992: 97), Castiglione (1994: 89) and Neocleous (1995: 396).

8. As Hegel himself puts it (1967: 124, paragraph 187), 'individuals in their capacity as burghers in this state are private persons whose end is their own interest'. Knox, in his notes to the *Philosophy of Right* (p. 355, paragraph 187, note 46), points out that burghers is translated from the German *bürger* (bourgeois in French). Burgher is someone 'of a town as distinct from the citizen (citoyen) of a state'. Civil society, or *bürgerliche gesellschaft*, is a society of burghers 'men interested in civil as distinct from political life'. This is why the relations in civil society are defined as socio-economic rather than political ones.

9. 'When civil society is in a state of unimpeded activity, it is engaged in expanding internally in population and industry. The amassing of wealth is intensified by generalizing (a) the linkage of men by their needs, and (b) the methods of preparing and distributing the means to satisfy these needs, because it is from this double process of generalization that the largest profits are derived. That is one side of the picture. The other side is the subdivision and restriction of particular jobs. This results in the dependence and distress of the class tied to work of that sort, and these again entail inability to feel and enjoy the broader freedoms and especially the intellectual benefits of civil society' (Hegel 1967: 149–150).

10. These three sections outlined by Bobbio correspond to Hegel's three moments of civil society: the system of needs (economic relations); the administration of justice; and the police and the corporation. (See Hegel 1967: 126, paragraph 188).

11. Bobbio is joined here by Shils (1991), Weiner (1991), Cohen and Arato (1992) and Castiglione (1994).

12. See, for examples, Hakken (1983), Ireland (1987), Allman (1988), Allman and Wallis (1990), Cohen (1996, 1999), Holst (1999) and Mayo (1999).

13. See Bobbio (1979) for a more detailed description of this reversal.

14. There are logical inconsistencies in Gramsci's interpretation of civil society. Gramsci's confusion as regards the relationship between civil society and political society, in particular, has been the subject of much discussion (See, for examples, Anderson 1977, Hall *et al.* 1977, Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, and Bobbio 1979). Gramsci has provided at least three interpretations of the relationship between civil and political society. In one instance, the state is contrasted with civil society (1971: 12); in another paragraph, he states that 'in actual reality civil society and the state are one and the same thing' (1971: 160); while in another section of his notebooks, the state is said to comprise both political society and civil society (1971: 160).

15. Laclau and Mouffe, although sharing these above beliefs with Cohen and Arato, and also classifying themselves as radical democrats, employ a different understanding of capitalism and its relations of production. As they state (1985: 178), 'every project for radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, as it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination; but socialism is *one* of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice-versa'. It shall become clear in this section that Laclau and Mouffe are not quite as post-Marxist as Cohen and Arato.

16. Cohen and Arato explain this more clearly in an endnote (1992: 628–629). 'Unlike the Marxian conception ... Hegel's theory of civil society doesn't stop at the system of needs. On the contrary, Hegel's most important insight with regard to civil society is his recognition that it involves the principle of *voluntary association* and, with it, new forms of solidarity, egalitarian participation, membership, and ethical life. It is precisely the function of the associations of civil society (corporations, estates) to provide a context in which

new forms of solidarity, collective identity, and common interest can emerge. Their most important function is to mitigate the centrifugal tendencies of the system of needs, bind individuals together in a common purpose, and temper the egoism of self-interest'.

17. Civil society, for Cohen and Arato, cannot and does not exist totally separate from either economic or political society. The notions of economic and political society 'refer to mediating spheres through which civil society can gain influence over political-administrative and economic processes' (Cohen and Arato 1992: x). This is what they mean by a sphere of social interaction between economy and state.

18. This belief is evident in their discussion of the Polish Solidarity organization and its relationship to the capitalist economy. 'The writers of the Polish democratic opposition are forced to face the harsh reality that only the restoration of the market, beyond *any* model of social reembedding, could master the Polish crisis and produce a viable, modern economy' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 76). They share this belief with neo-liberal commentators such as Hayek (1982), who argue that democracy cannot exist without capitalism. Although neo-liberalism and radical democracy cannot be said to have similar political objectives, on this particular issue they tend to agree.

19. Ehrenberg (1999) provides a different account to Cohen and Arato of the 'self-limiting' revolution espoused by the Polish opposition. He points out (p. 192) that the commitment of dissidents to the self-limiting principle – a principle that would not directly challenge the state – 'faded as Eastern Europe's crisis intensified'. He argues that (p. 195) the self-limiting ideology – anti-statism, spontaneous self-organization, interest and self-actualizing activity – eventually resulted in an embracement of the market and the liberal state. Its early champions had 'ignored economic matters and were never asked to explain how a 'self-limiting' sphere could fail to end with the full-scale introduction of capitalism'. As Ehrenberg states on page 198, it was not civil society that re-established itself in the countries of Eastern Europe, it was capitalism.

20. See Welton's edited volume (1995).

21. Cohen and Arato (1992: 702) refer to political economy in one of their endnotes. They discuss Thomas McCarthy's critique of Habermas's over-reliance on systems theory, which blinds him to questions of political economy. Cohen and Arato argue that Habermas's theory could only include political economy 'at the cost of reductionism with respect to the state and of illusions'. They refer to an unpublished 1971 manuscript *Is a critique of political economy at all possible?* in support of their argument that political economy is redundant as an analytical tool when it comes to civil society.

22. Gamble (1987: 122) views socialism and radical democracy in this way, believing that, in relation to Britain and class politics, the 'real way forward may lie in combing insights from both'.

References

- ALLMAN, P. (1988) Gramsci, Freire and Illich: Their contributions to education for Socialism. In T. Lovett (ed.) *Radical Approaches to Adult Education: A Reader* (London: Routledge), 85–113.
- ALLMAN, P. and WALLIS, J. (1990) Praxis: Implications for 'really' radical adult education. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 22(1), 14–30.
- ANDERSON, P. (1977) The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci. *New Left Review*, 100, 5–78.
- BECKER, M. (1994) *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century: A Privileged Moment in the History of England, Scotland, and France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- BOBBIO, N. (1979) Gramsci and the conception of civil society. In C. Mouffe (ed.) *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 21–47.
- BRYANT, C. (1993) Social self-organisation, civility and sociology: A comment on Kumar's 'civil society'. *British Journal of Sociology*, 44(3), 397–401.
- CALHOUN, C. (1993) Civil society and the public sphere. *Public Culture*, 5(2), 267–280.
- CASTIGLIONE, D. (1994) History and theories of civil society: Outline of a contested paradigm. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 40, 83–99.
- COBEN, D. (1996) Revisiting Gramsci. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 27(1), 36–51.
- COBEN, D. (1999) *Radical Heroes, Gramsci, Freire and the Politics of Adult Education* (New York: Garland).
- COHEN, J. and ARATO, A. (1992) *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press).
- CUNNINGHAM, P. (1992) University continuing educators should be social activists. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 18(2), 9–17.
- EBERLY, D. (2000) The meaning, origins and applications of civil society. In D. Eberly (ed.) *The Essential Civil Society Reader: Classic Essays in the American Civil Society Debate* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield), 3–15.
- EHRENBERG, J. (1999) *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press).
- ELSEY, B. (1993) Voluntaryism and adult education as civil society and the 'third way' for personal empowerment and social change. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 12(1), 3–16.
- FERGUSON, A. (1995) *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers).
- FINGER, M. (1989) New social movements and their implications for adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 40, 1, 15–22.

- FLEMING, T. (1998) Learning for a global civil society. *The Adult Learner, the Journal of Adult Community Education in Ireland*, 3–13.
- FREIRE, P. (1998) *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Lessons to Those Who Dare Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- GAMBLE, A. (1993) Shaping a new world order: Political capacities and policy challenges. *Government and Opposition*, 28(3), 325–338.
- GOODWIN, C. (1992) Political economy and civil society. *History of Economics Review*, 17, 1–11.
- GORZ, P. (1982) *Farewell to the Working-Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (Boston: South End Press).
- GRAMSCI, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart).
- HABERMAS, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press).
- HABERMAS, J. (1996) Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (Cambridge: MIT Press).
- HAKKEN, D. (1983) Impacts of liberation theology: The case of worker's education. *Journal of Education*, 165(1), 113–129.
- HALL, B. (1993) Learning and global civil society: Electronic networking in international non-governmental organizations. *International Journal of Computers in Adult Education and Training*, 3(3), 5–24.
- HALL, S., LUMLEY, B. and McLENNAN, G. (1977) Politics and ideology in Gramsci. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 10, 45–75.
- HAYEK, F. (1982) *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- HEGEL, G. (1967) *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Trans Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- HOLST, J. (1999) The affinities of Lenin and Gramsci: Implications for radical adult education theory and practice. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(5), 407–421.
- HOWE, S. (1989) A working idea. *New Statesman and Society*, 2(70) 32–33.
- IGNATIEFF, M. (1995) On civil society: Why Eastern Europe's revolutions could succeed. *Foreign Affairs*, 74(2) 128–136.
- IRELAND, T. (1987) *Antonio Gramsci and Adult Education: Reflections on the Brazilian Experience* (Manchester: Centre for Adult and Higher Education, University of Manchester).
- JACKSON, K. (1997) The state, civil society and the economy: Adult education in Britain. In S. Walters (ed.) *Globalization, Education and Training: Impacts and Issues* (London: Zed Books), 47–56.
- JACOB, M. (1991) The enlightenment redefined: The formation of modern civil society. *Social Research*, 58(2), 475–495.
- KUMAR, K. (1993) Civil society: An inquiry into the usefulness of an historical term. *British Journal of Sociology*, 44(3), 375–395.
- LACLAU, E. and MOUFFE, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso).
- LACLAU, E. and MOUFFE, C. (1987) Post-Marxism without apologies. *New Left Review*, 166, 79–106.
- LIVESAY, J. (1994) Post-Marxist theories of civil society. *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, 14, 101–134.
- MARUATONA, T. (1999) Adult education and the empowerment of civil society: The case of trade unions in Botswana. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(6), 476–491.
- MARX, K. (1977) On The Jewish question. In D. McLellan (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 39–62.
- MARX, K. and ENGELS, F. (1970) *The German Ideology, Part 1* (New York: International Publishers).
- MAYO, P. (1999) *Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action* (London: Zed Books).
- MERRIFIELD, J. (1997) Finding our lodestone again: Democracy, the civil society and adult education. In P. Armstrong, N. Miller and M. Zukas (eds) *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: Research in the Education of Adults*. Proceedings of the 27th Annual SCUTREA Conference, Birkbeck College, University of London, July 1997 (UK: SCUTREA), 321–325.
- MOUFFE, C. and SASSOON, A. (1977) Gramsci in France and Italy—a review of the literature. *Economy and Society*, 6, 31–68.
- NEOCLEOUS, M. (1995) From civil society to the social. *British Journal of Sociology*, 46(3), 395–408.
- NORTON, A. (1992) Markets and civil society. *IPA Review*, 45(2), 60–65.
- PICON, C. (1991) Adult education and popular education in the context of state and NGOs. *Convergence*, 24(1–2), 80–92.
- PIERSON, C. (1993) Democracy, markets and capital: Are there necessary economic limits to democracy? In D. Held (ed.) *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 179–199.
- SELIGMAN, A. (1992) *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: Free Press).
- SHILS, E. (1991) The virtue of civil society. *Government and Opposition*, 26(1), 3–20.
- TANDON, R. (1992) Civil society is the first sector. *Development*, 3, 38–39.
- TANDON, R. (1994) Learning in civil society—Adult education in the reality. *Adult Education and Development*, 43, 330–337.
- THOMPSON, J. (1983) *Learning Liberation: Women's Response to Men's Education* (London: Croon Helm).
- WASZEK, N. (1988) *The Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel's Account of 'Civil Society'* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers).

- WEINER, R. (1991) Retrieving civil society in a postmodern epoch. *The Social Science Journal*, 28(3), 307–323.
- WELTON, M. (ed.) (1995) *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning* (New York: SUNY Press).
- WELTON, M. (1997) In defence of civil society: Canadian adult education in neo-conservative times. In S. Walters (ed.) *Globalization, Adult Education and Training: Impacts and Issues* (London: Zed Books), 27–38.