The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

PATHWAYS مسارات
لما بعد النيوليبرالية: أصوات من الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا
Beyond Neoliberalism: Voices from MENA

NEOLIBERALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY:

Removing the Mobilizing Power of the Concept

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2024

Neoliberalism and Civil Society: Removing the Mobilizing Power of the Concept

According to a wide range of political and sociological literature, contemporary use of the term "civil society" has increased since the 1980s because of the noted role of social movements and civil society organizations in Eastern Europe's revolutions against communism and totalitarian regimes. Consequently, a global conviction assumes a direct link has been formed between the increasing role of civil society organizations and successful democratic transformation.

Despite this conviction, there is an obvious link between the rise of the use concept of civil society since the 1980s and the neoliberal wave that started in the same period. Jon Shefner and Harry F. Dahms argue that the term "civil society" has been used to delegitimize the state, as well as demonize its social and economic roles. However, the scholars admit that the term is closely tied collective action and social movements, which could be used to promote progressive ends. Nevertheless, the scholars claim that civil society does not describe or explain organized group actions better than other preexisting models, such as labor and social movements. Shefner and Dahms illustrate that civil society is a "wider label that is likely to overlook or ignore nuances" between different movements and groups[1].

Similarly, Azmy Bishara criticizes the common understanding of civil society in the Arab world, where it is portrayed as a non-political social space. This depiction alienates intellectuals from politics and questions of the state and democracy. Bishara explains that Arab intellectuals are preoccupied with two misconceptions about civil society. The first misconception reduces civil society to NGOs, such as research centers or human rights organizations funded from abroad. The second is the intellectual orientation that considers organic entities such as clans, sects, and trips as civil society groups that may balance the power of the state, which, in Bishara's opinion, leads to anti-civil, and not only anti-state results[2].

As Bishara describes it, civil society is a political and social space and part of the historical democratization process. He explains that the concept of civil society appeared first in the sense of a contractual society, meaning that individuals contract with each other to establish the state. According to this conception, this contractual relationship exists even in a totalitarian state that requires people to surrender fully their liberty in favor of its absolute power, as in Hobbes' philosophy. This early form of civil society replaced the previous societal structure in which relations were not contractual but centered mainly on primitive organic groups. Moreover, this form of civil society, described by Bishara, did not include any differentiation between state and society because the state itself, with its absolute power, was the new civil contractual society[3].

1 Shefner, J. and Dahms, H.F., 2012. Civil society and the state in the Neoliberal Era: Dynamics of friends and enemies. In Theorizing Modern Society as a Dynamic Process (pp. 235-261). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. Doi: 10.1108/S0278-1204(2012)0000030013
[2] Bishara, Azmy. Al-Mujtama' al-Madanī : Dirāsah Naqdīyah Ma'a Ishārah Lil-Mujtama' al-Madanī al-'Arabī. Markaz Dirāsāt Al-Waḥdah al-'Arabīyah, 1998, P 8.
[3] Ibid, PP. 77-100.

Later, the differentiation between the state and society emerged thanks to the absolute power advocated by Hobbes himself. To clarify, before the emergence of absolute monarchy in Europe the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, political authorities were inseparable from the feudal and social structures. A king was considered the first noble among the group of aristocratic nobles. After the emergence of the absolute monarchy, the nobles lost their political nature and turned into a social class with political privileges. The economy became the main sphere for this class, which later turned into the bourgeoisie. For the first time in history, a social class appeared that could use economic mechanisms, rather than those of political coercion, to achieve profit[4].

These developments were reflected in the contributions of liberal political philosophers, who were able to imagine a self-organizing society without the need for state intervention. Such a society would be economic, rather than political, according to Locke . Thus, classical liberal thought considered that every public sphere that does not belong to the state belongs to the market. Civil society itself is the market in early classical liberal thought. The concept has gone through many twists and turns, leading to the definition of it as a public space outside the framework of the state, the market, and organic structures[6].

Furthermore, several empirical pieces of literature explain how NGOs have become the most preferred vehicles of civil society at the expense of trade unions and other forms of civil society that are more politicized. For instance, David Hundt explains the Korean state has successfully taken advantage of NGOs to legitimize its neoliberal policies. The two largest progressive NGOs in Korea, Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice and People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, along with trade unions were invited to the first social pact proposed by the government between labor, business, and the government which was called "Tripartite commission". These NGOs supported the neoliberal reforms despite disagreeing with the majority of them because the NGOs supported the Chaebol reform specifically. The NGOs continued to support neoliberal reforms, emphasizing their independence from the labor unions that withdrew early from the commission and faced authoritarian repression. As a result, the NGOs "were complicit with social policy reforms that promoted the norms of self-reliance and minimal dependence on welfare." In return, these NGOs enjoyed some formal input in the policy-making processes, and some of their leaders were appointed as cabinet ministers. The justification for their strong relationship with the state is the state's adoption of some social welfare policies for all citizens, especially new health insurance policies. In reality, however, these policies were not sufficient and produced greater social suffering. As a result, the NGOs were described as supporting the construction of a "neoliberal welfare state."[7].

Focusing more on the position and philosophical or mental transformations of charity NGOs within neoliberal contexts, Cihan Tugal, in his book Caring for the Poor: Islamic and Christian Benevolence in a Liberal World, introduces the concept of "neoliberal benevolence" to describe the fast-growing charitable orientation in the 1990s and 2000s in both Turkey and Egypt. The main feature of this neoliberal benevolence is the "progression from an ethics of interdependence to one of self-reliance." The book, in addition, captures

[4] Ibid, P 53.
[5] Ibid, pp. 102 - 107.
[6] Ibid, P. 23-27.
[7] Hundt, David (2015), Neoliberalism, the Developmental State and CivilSociety in Korea, Asian Studies Review, 39:3, 466-482.
[8] Tuğal, Cihan. Caring for the Poor: Islamic and Christian Benevolence in a Liberal World. United Kingdom: Routledge, 2017, PP 1,2.

two other models of charity associations: communitarian and redistributive. Both association types are fairly similar in terms of their espoused values; while redistributive associations are affected by neoliberal orientation in determining the deserving of aid, "communitarian associations" emphasize the hegemony of the upper classes over the poor[8].

The affiliates of neoliberal charities assume that the main reason for poverty is the characteristics of poor individuals. These affiliates allocate their funds to the career development of their recipients: the deserving poor, who are differentiated from the undeserving poor. Communitarian charity institutions, meanwhile, assume that the main reason for poverty is the moral deficit of society. They also allocate their funds only to the deserving poor, who are classified as "deserving" based on moral biases. The book accuses the two models of seeking to establish a high-class hegemony over the poor: "while neoliberal associations desired to tame the poor so that they would be dependent and hardworking, communitarians domesticated them so they would be dependent on the rich and thankful to God." There is a third model of charity institution described in the book as "redistributive," which is concerned with the poor who are ignored by other charities. These groups are often politically risky populations, such as Palestinians in Gaza. The goal of this third charity type is to redistribute wealth internationally, yet their internal structure is neoliberal, in that they use the same procedures as neoliberal associations to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving poor. Tugal argues that this redistributive trend as it occurs in Islamist charity associations, emphasizes neoliberalism at home and redistributionism in the world, and is a far-right reaction to the context of the global economic crisis of 2008. Moreover, Tugal goes so far as to claim that such redistributive associations might become marks of the post-liberal world[9].

To conclude, neoliberal policies in the MENA region include a wide range of policies, rules, and practices aimed at benefiting from the work of civil society organizations, which take different forms across countries and time periods. For instance, in Mubarak's Egypt, the state depended on independent NGOs, and specifically charity institutions, including those belonging to political Islam movements, to provide social services to millions of Egyptians. In contrast, Sisi's Egypt, while it continues depending on charity to provide social services and fund some developmental projects undertaken by the state, has adopted an approach that could be seen as corporate organizing of charity institutions to make their activities and spending subject to full supervision of the state, its developmental projects, and social protection plans.

The preceding review may be useful for analyzing civil society politics within neoliberalism in the MENA region. To illustrate, neoliberal politics in the region, since the 1980s, have benefitted from the non-political concept of civil society, which led intellectuals and a wide range of the old leftist currents to abandon political work in favor of focusing on social or intellectual work within the rising framework of NGOs. Progressive intellectuals and politicians left the religious currents to occupy the main place in the political arena[10]. This shift, in turn, directed public opinion toward identity politics rather than issues of social justice and wealth distribution. In addition, neoliberalism in the MENA region has benefitted from some people's insistence on considering organic entities, including clans and sects, as civil society organizations

[9] Gürel, B. (2019). Cihan Tuğal, Caring for the Poor: Islamic and Christian Benevolence in a Liberal World. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. xii 246 pages. New Perspectives on Turkey, 60, 148-152.
[10] Bishara, Op.Cit, P 15.

and claiming that they are necessary to balance the power of the state. This view tends to reinforce ethnic identity and regional divisions at the expense of class identities and demands for social justice and wealth redistribution.

Moreover, the contemporary concept of civil society empties civil society of its political content, linking it to the market and capital values, and supporting the state's withdrawal from social services.

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