

Abstract

The concept "civil society" is one of the more contentious and hotly debated concepts among contemporary writers on the subject. From a historical point of view, it denoted varied aspects of society, depending on the thinker in question and the specific historical conditions he wrote in. Current writers on the subject are typically not agreed on its definition, components, conditions for its emergence, and role. As a result, a virtual "chaos" of meaning and reference prevails.

This study seeks to deconstruct "civil society" discourse through close analysis of varied texts for the purpose of uncovering the reasons behind this discordant debate. It is indeed surprising that given the plethora of writings on the subject, hardly any systematic and wide-ranging study exists that seeks to unravel what lies behind disagreements on the subject.

The main thesis of the study is that there exists different and varied "agendas", "projects", and "aims" in the service of which "civil society" is pressed, and that this is the main factor that explains the varied meanings, components, conditions for emergence, and role of civil society in the relevant literature. The study shows that the specific conditions of each area, country, or case, also influence the terms of the debate among contemporary writers.

A key argument of the study is that in contrast to the descriptive language used by most writers on the subject, "civil society" is essentially a normative concept "masquerading" as a descriptive term, without a universally accepted referent in a specific and agreed upon form of social organization. This illicit transition from descriptive language to what "civil society" ought to mean, is tied to the specific purpose, aim, or assumptions of the writer in question, and the service and function "civil society" ought to perform from the perspective of each writer.