1
Introduction – What's the Big Idea?

Set into the wall of the Church of the Ascension on London's Blackheath is a small metal plaque. 'Fellowship is life', it reads, 'and lack of fellowship is death, but in hell there is no brotherhood but every man for himself.' John Ball, the leader of the Peasants' Revolt who spoke these words nearby in 1381, would not have thought of himself as part of 'civil society', but his sentiments have been echoed down the centuries by anyone who has ever joined a group, formed an association or volunteered to defend or advance the causes they believe in. Collective action in search of the good society is a universal part of human experience, though manifested in a million different ways across time, space and culture. In Sullivan County, New York, where I spend my weekends, I am surrounded by contemporary examples of this same phenomenon – the volunteer fire service, the free give-away of hay to those who can't afford to buy it for their pets, the music sale by Radio W-JEFF ('America's only hydro-powered public radio station'), the Interfaith Council Peace Vigil in nearby Liberty, the local HIV/Aids Taskforce and a myriad of groups catering to every conceivable affinity and interest. Yet Sullivan County remains economically depressed and politically forgotten, one more set of communities on the margins of a nation that is increasingly

violent, unequal and apparently incapable of resolving its own pressing social problems. A strong civil society, it seems, is no guarantee that society will be strong and civil.

Concepts of civil society have a rich history, but it is only in the last ten years that they have moved to the centre of the international stage. There are a number of reasons for this – the fall of Communism and the democratic openings that followed, disenchantment with the economic models of the past, a yearning for togetherness in a world that seems evermore insecure, and the rapid rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the global stage. Today, civil society seems to be the 'big idea' on everyone's lips – government officials, journalists, funding agencies, writers and academics, not to mention the millions of people across the globe who find it an inspiration in their struggles for a better world. Cited as a solution to social, economic and political dilemmas by politicians and thinkers from left, right and all perspectives in between, civil society is claimed by every part of the ideological spectrum as its own, but what exactly is it?

'Civil society', says the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington DC, means 'fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty.'[1] Don Eberly, a leading conservative thinker, goes even further: 'As the twenty-first century draws near', he says, 'a new term has surfaced in American political debate, carrying with it all of the collective longing of a nation looking for a new direction. That term is civil society.' This will surprise those on the left who see it as the seedbed for radical social movements. The Advocacy Institute, one of Cato's alter-egos, calls civil society 'the best way forward for politics in the post-Cold War world', 'a society that protects those who organize to challenge power' and 'the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and the tyrannical market'.[2] Not to be outdone, 'third way' thinkers like Anthony Giddens and Benjamin Barber claim that civil society – by gently correcting generations of state and market failure – could be the missing link in the success of social democracy. Meanwhile back in academia, civil society has

become the 'chicken soup of the social sciences', and 'the new analytic key that will unlock the mysteries of the social order'. The American writer Jeremy Rifkin calls civil society 'our last, best hope'; New Labour politicians in the UK see it as central to a new 'project' that will hold society together against the onrush of globalizing markets; the United Nations and the World Bank see it as one of the keys to 'good governance' and poverty-reducing growth; and – lest one sees this as a giant Western conspiracy – here is the autumn 2002 edition of China's semi-official news magazine '*Huasheng Shidian*' plagiarizing American civil society scholar Lester Salamon: 'the role of NGOs in the twenty-first century will be as significant as the role of the nation state in the twentieth'. These are strange bedfellows with ambitious dreams, but can they all be right?

Such chameleon-like qualities are not unique to 'civil society', but when the same phrase is used to justify such radically different viewpoints it is certainly time to ask some deeper questions about what is going on. An idea that means everything probably means nothing, and when the idea of civil society goes on sale to the highest bidder, its worth as a political and intellectual currency is likely to be devalued over time. At the very least, clarity about the different understandings in play is necessary if we are to a have a sensible conversation, yet a glance through the civil society literature would leave most people rapidly and thoroughly confused. Depending on whose version one follows, civil society is either a specific product of the nation state and capitalism (arising spontaneously to mediate conflicts between social life and the market economy when the industrial revolution fractured traditional bonds of kin and community), or a universal expression of the collective life of individuals, at work in all countries and stages of development but expressed in different ways according to history and context. Since nation states in the developing world are largely a colonial creation and the market economy has only a fragile hold, civil societies in the South are bound to differ from those in the North. Some see civil society as one of three sectors (along

with the state and the market), separate from and independent of each other though overlapping in the middle. Others emphasize the 'fuzzy' borders and interrelationships that exist between these sectors, characterized by hybrids, connections and overlaps between different institutions and their roles. Some claim that only certain associations are part of civil society – voluntary, democratic, modern and 'civil' according to some pre-defined set of normative criteria. Others insist that all associations qualify for membership, including 'uncivil' society and traditional associations based on inherited characteristics like religion and ethnicity. Are families 'in' or 'out', and what about the business sector? Is civil society a bulwark against the state, an indispensable support or dependent on government intervention for its very existence? Is it the key to individual freedom through the guaranteed experience of pluralism or a threat to democracy through special interest politics? Is it a noun (a part of society), an adjective (a kind of society), an arena for societal deliberation or a mixture of all three?

It is not difficult to find support for any of these positions, and we will hear much more about the different arguments later in the book. But what is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall? One response would be to ditch the concept completely, as recently recommended by John Grimond in *The Economist* magazine. 'Civil society' appears as one of five leading articles in its flagship publication *The World In 2002*, only to be dismissed as a smokescreen for the 'usual suspects' (meaning 'NGOs and their self-selected agendas') and a 'woolly expression for woolly-minded people' – except, Grimond adds in case his message appears too nuanced, that this 'would be too charitable'. Though tempting, this would be a serious mistake, since although the civil society debate is 'riddled with ethnocentric assumptions developed in conditions that don't exist anywhere in the contemporary world', is 'no longer based on any coherent theory or principles', has been reduced to 'an ideological rendezvous for erstwhile antagonists', and is therefore 'ineffective as a model for

social and political practice', the concept itself is very much alive and kicking in the worlds of politics, activism and foreign aid.[3] Therefore, 'the resultant intellectual confusion could well wreak havoc on the real world given the fact that civil societies have now been recognized as a legitimate area for external intervention.'[4] Analytical rigour, conceptual clarity, empirical authenticity, policy relevance and emancipatory potential are all threatened when civil society becomes a slogan. But selective scorn, scholarly admonishment and attempts to enforce a universal consensus are unlikely to resolve this problem, now that such ideas have developed a life of their own, backed by powerful interests.

What, therefore, is the best way forward? I think it lies through rigour, since rigour enables different interpretations to be debated on their merits and demerits in the court of public deliberation. Without clarity and rigour, theories of civil society will be a poor guide to public policy and citizen action, whatever the values and goals at stake. At the very least, rigour can expose dogma that masquerades as truth, and challenge policy makers who have an ideological axe to grind. And, as I try to show in the chapters that follow, ideas about civil society can survive and prosper in a rigorous critique so long as we are prepared to abandon false universals, magic bullets and painless panaceas. The goal of this book is not consensus (something that would be impossible to achieve in the civil society debate), but greater clarity. And greater clarity, I hope, can be the basis for a better conversation in the future.

Civil society: a very brief history of an idea

The first step in achieving greater clarity is to identify the origins of different contemporary understandings of civil society in the history of political thought. This is not a theoretical book, nor a book about civil society theory, but to appreciate the ways in which theory has been muddled and misapplied in practice a quick tour through theory is essen-

tial. As Keynes's famous dictum reminds us, 'practical men in authority who think themselves immune from theoretical influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist', just as present-day 'civil-society builders' are motivated, consciously or not, by ideas that are deeply rooted in the past.

Fortunately, we are blessed with a number of books that already provide excellent and detailed accounts of the history of this idea.[5] They show how civil society has been a point of reference for philosophers since antiquity in their struggle to understand the great issues of the day: the nature of the good society, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the practice of politics and government, and, most especially, how to live together peacefully by reconciling our individual autonomy with our collective aspirations, balancing freedom and its boundaries, and marrying pluralism with conformity so that complex societies can function with both efficiency and justice. Such questions were difficult enough to resolve in small, homogenous communities where face-to-face social interaction built trust and reciprocity, but in an increasingly integrated world where none of these conditions apply they become hugely more demanding. Yet the discussions that took place in the ferment of eastern Europe in the 1980s would surely have been familiar to Aristotle, Hobbes, Ferguson, de Tocqueville, Gramsci and others in the long roster of civil society thinkers that stretches back two thousand years. Though the profile of these ideas has certainly waxed and waned, arguing about civil society has always been a part of political and philosophical debate.

In classical thought, civil society and the state were seen as indistinguishable, with both referring to a type of political association governing social conflict through the imposition of rules that restrained citizens from harming one another. Aristotle's *polis* was an 'association of associations' that enabled citizens (or those few individuals that qualified) to share in the virtuous tasks of ruling and being ruled. In this sense, the state represented the 'civil' form of society and 'civility' described the requirements of good citizenship. Late medieval thought continued this tradition by equating civil

society with 'politically-organized commonwealths', a type of civilization made possible because people lived in law-governed associations protected *by* the state.[6] The alternative, as Thomas Hobbes pointed out in his *Leviathan*, was 'survival of the fittest'.

Between 1750 and 1850, ideas about civil society took a new and fundamental turn in response to a perceived crisis in the ruling social order. This crisis was motivated by the rise of the market economy and the increasing differentiation of interests it provoked, as 'communities of strangers' replaced 'communities of neighbours'; and by the breakdown of traditional paradigms of authority as a consequence of the French and American revolutions. In contrast to Aristotle, Plato and Hobbes, the thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed civil society as a defence against unwarranted intrusions by the state on newly realized individual rights and freedoms, organized through the medium of voluntary associations. In this school of thought, civil society was a self-regulating universe of associations committed to the same ideals that needed, at all costs, to be protected *from* the state in order to preserve its role in resisting despotism. This was a theme taken up by a host of thinkers including James Madison (in his *Federalist Papers*), Alexis de Tocqueville (probably the most famous civil society enthusiast of them all), and – much later in time – by the 'small circles of freedom' formed by dissidents in eastern Europe, by the writers who celebrated them in the West (like Ernest Gellner), and by academics such as Robert Putnam who began to investigate the condition of associational life and its effects in Italy, the USA and elsewhere, spawning a whole new debate on 'social capital' in the process. The dominant theme in this debate was the value of voluntary associations in curbing the power of centralizing institutions, protecting pluralism and nurturing constructive social norms, especially 'generalized trust and cooperation'. A highly articulated civil society with overlapping memberships was seen as the foundation of a stable democratic polity, a defence against domination by any one group, and a barrier to anti-democratic forces.[7]

Today, this 'neo-Tocquevillian' tradition is particularly strong in the USA, where it dovetails naturally with pre-existing traditions of self-governance, suspicions about the state, and concerns about public disengagement from politics and civic life, and is closely linked to other schools of thought such as communitarianism, localism and the 'liberal egalitarianism' of Michael Walzer, William Galston and others.[8] In contrast to classical liberals, liberal egalitarians recognize the debilitating effects of unequal access to resources and opportunities on the health and functioning of civil society. This is an important insight, and scholars have built on these ideas to construct a comprehensive critique of the neo-Tocquevillian tradition that focuses on the structural obstacles that prevent some groups from articulating their interests, the ethnocentrism or simple unreliability of assumptions about associations and their effects, and a failure to account for the impact of globalization, economic restructuring, political corruption and power relations of different kinds.[9] Even this critique, however, reaches back through history to connect with much earlier debates about the ideas that developed during the Enlightenment. Hegel was the first of these early critics, focusing on the conflicts and inequalities that raged between different economic and political interests within civil society that required constant surveillance by the state in order for the 'civil' to remain. This was a theme taken further by Karl Marx, who saw civil society as another vehicle for furthering the interests of the dominant class under capitalism, and then by Antonio Gramsci – the person who 'may be single-handedly responsible for the revival of the term civil society in the post-World War Two period'.[10] Although Gramsci reasoned in Marxist categories, he reached some conclusions that differed from his intellectual master, since in Gramsci's view, civil society was the site of rebellion against the orthodox as well as the construction of cultural and ideological hegemony, expressed through families, schools, universities and the media as well as voluntary associations since all these institutions are important in shaping the political dispositions of citizens.

Philosophers in the United States such as John Dewey and Hannah Arendt took Gramsci's ideas about civil society as an arena for contestation and developed around them a theory of the 'public sphere' as an essential component of democracy. By the 'public', Dewey meant the shared experience of political life that underpinned public deliberation on the great questions of the day. Anything that eroded this public sphere – like the commercialization of the media or the commodification of education – was to be resisted. Such ideas continue to resonate today among Americans committed to 'deliberative democracy', but it was in Europe that the theory of the public sphere reached its highest levels of articulation through the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas combined the Marxist tradition that exposes domination in civil society with the liberal tradition that emphasizes its role in guarding personal autonomy, and drew these different threads together through a complicated series of theoretical constructs concerning 'communicative action', 'discursive democracy' and the 'colonization of the life world'. For Habermas and other 'critical theorists', a healthy civil society is one 'that is steered by its members through shared meanings' that are constructed democratically through the communications structures of the public sphere.[11] Today, these ideas are echoed by theorists and activists on the left who see civil society as the site of progressive politics – 'the social basis of a democratic public sphere through which a culture of inequality can be dismantled' – and by political philosophers like John Keane who are attempting to construct a new vision of civil society that respects differences between groups by promoting non-violent engagement 'from above' (through state authority embedded in national constitutions and international law) and 'from below' (by channelling violent tendencies into non-violent associational life).[12]

This whistle-stop tour through history shows that ideas about civil society have passed through many phases without ever securing a consensus, even leaving aside all the other variants of civil society thinking that I have omitted in order to focus on the basics – such as non-Western theories or

theories about non-Western societies, scholarship about African-American civil society in the USA, feminist contributions to the debate and others. I will get to these contributions a little later, though most of my analysis will be skewed towards North America and western Europe, and the literatures they have spawned. Although work on civil society outside these contexts is growing, it has not yet reached a level at which systematic comparisons can be made, including the notion of 'global' civil society, a concept much in vogue but little interrogated by its enthusiasts. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the civil society debate will continue to divide scholars in fundamental ways, and although such divisions are never watertight, I want to focus in the rest of the book on three contrasting schools of thought that emerge from this brief discussion of the history of ideas: civil society as a *part* of society (the neo-Toquevillian school that focuses on associational life), civil society as a *kind* of society (characterized by positive norms and values as well as success in meeting particular social goals), and civil society as the *public sphere*. After exploring each of these schools in detail, the latter part of the book shows how they are related to each other, and where such an integrated approach might lead in terms of public policy.

Each of these three schools of thought has a respectable intellectual history and is visible in the discourse of scholars, politicians, foundations and international agencies, but it is the first – civil society as associational life – that is dominant. It is Alexis de Tocqueville's ghost that wanders through the corridors of the World Bank, not that of Habermas or Hegel. Indeed, the first two schools of thought are regularly conflated – it being assumed that a healthy associational life contributes to, or even produces, the 'good society' in predictable ways – while the public sphere is usually ignored. This messy mélange of means and ends will be challenged extensively in the pages that follow, but before embarking on this investigation it is important to understand why such lazy thinking is so common. Why has this particular interpretation of civil society become so popular since the Cold War ended?

The rise and rise of civil society

There is no doubt that neo-Tocquevillian ideas about civil society have been a prime beneficiary of wider political and ideological changes that have redefined the powers and responsibilities of states, markets and voluntary associations over the last twenty years. At the broadest level, there are three ways in which societies can organize collective action – through rules or laws enforced by the coercive power of the state, through the unintended consequences of individual decisions in the marketplace, and through social mechanisms embedded in voluntary action, discussion and agreement. The weight attached to each of these models has shifted significantly over the last fifty years, with state-based solutions in the ascendancy from 1945 to the mid-1970s (the era of the welfare state in the North and centralized planning in the South), and market-based solutions in pole position from the late 1970s to 1990 or thereabouts (the era of Reaganomics in the North and 'structural adjustment' in the South). Disaffection with the results of both these models – the deadening effect of too much state intervention and the human consequences of an over-reliance on the market – required a new approach that addressed the consequences of both state and market failure. This new approach, which gained strength throughout the 1990s, went by many names (including the 'third way', the 'new localism' and 'compassionate conservatism'), but its central tenet is that partnership between all three 'sectors' of society working together – public, private and civic – is the best way to overcome social and economic problems. Civil society as associational life became central to the workings of this project, and this project – as a new way of achieving social progress – became identified with building 'societies that are civil'.

In addition, the political changes that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 gave the idea of civil society a prominence it had not enjoyed since the Enlightenment, but in a manner that also encouraged the conflation of ends with means. Civil society became both a rallying cry

for dissidents – a new type of society characterized by liberal-democratic norms – and a vehicle for achieving it by building social movements strong enough to overthrow authoritarian states. The paradigm case for the conflation of these two perspectives was Solidarity in Poland, though here as elsewhere in eastern Europe, associational life tended to be disregarded fairly quickly once the dissidents were elected into office. Nevertheless, the rise of direct democracy that was such a feature of political change in eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and large parts of the developing world during the 1990s remains a trend of global importance, perhaps as important as the invention of representative democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the balance between direct and representative democracy continues to shift in favour of the former – driven by disaffection with conventional politics as well as the attractions of alternative means of participation – the political role of voluntary associations (as the prime vehicles for organizing such participation) will continue to grow. As we shall see in later chapters, this role is fraught with difficulty both for voluntary associations and for the processes of politics, but it seems unlikely that the trend itself will be reversed.

Worldwide moves towards state retrenchment and privatization (even with the humanizing touches now applied by civil society) have promoted new levels of personal insecurity among the majority of the world's population against a background of global market integration, increased mobility of people and capital, and rapid social and technological change. Modernity, as Robert Bellah reminds us, is a 'culture of separation', while capitalism provides no collective identity to bring us together other than as consumers.[13] Traditional social institutions and ways of dealing with such insecurities (like welfare states, labour unions and nuclear families) have been progressively dismantled during this process, leaving behind heightened levels of uncertainty and vulnerability. In these circumstances, a retreat to the familiar is to be expected, and this is exactly what voluntary associations can provide – a reassuring oasis of solidarity and

mutual support among like-minded people who provide each other with emotional as well as material support, from soup kitchens to self-help to spiritual salvation. Indeed, an additional reason for the rapid rise in interest in civil society over the last decade has been the collection of a mounting body of evidence that suggests that associational life plays a much more important social, economic and political role than was realized in the 1970s and 1980s. Civil society has been noticed, not just because of the rising public and political profile of NGOs and other groups, but because a body of evidence now exists to justify this profile, backed by specialist expertise in universities and think-tanks and supported with large amounts of money from research funding bodies, foundations and governments.

At the level of national development performance, this evidence shows that the synergy between a strong state and a strong society is one of the keys to sustained, poverty-reducing growth, because networks of intermediary associations act as a counterweight to vested interests, promote institutional accountability among states and markets, channel information to decision-makers on what is happening at the 'sharp end', and negotiate the social contracts between government and citizens that development requires – 'I'll scratch your back by delivering growth, investment and services; you scratch mine by delivering wage restraint or absorbing the costs of welfare.' Taiwan, one of the most successful of late industrializers, had over 8 million members in such intermediary groups by the early 1980s, including trade unions, student associations and local councils.[14]

At a more detailed level, it is useful to break down the developmental roles of civil society into three interrelated areas: economic, political and social. The economic role of civil society centres on securing livelihoods and providing services where states and markets are weak, and nurturing the social values, networks and institutions that underpin successful market economies, including trust and cooperation. As Lester Salamon and his colleagues have shown, voluntary associations the world over have become key

providers of human services (especially health and welfare), and now constitute a 1.1 *trillion* dollar industry.[15] NGOs, religious organizations and other civic groups have always been significant service-providers; the difference now is that they are seen as the preferred channel for service provision in deliberate substitution for the state. In more radical formulations (like the World Social Forum), civil society is seen as a vehicle for 'humanizing capitalism' by promoting accountability among corporations, progressive social policies (like respect for labour rights) among governments, and new experiments in 'social economics' that combine market efficiency with cooperative values.

In their social role, civil societies are seen as a reservoir of caring, cultural life and intellectual innovation, teaching people – at least according to the neo-Tocquevillians – the skills of citizenship and nurturing a collection of positive social norms that foster stability, loosely collected under the rubric of 'social capital'. In turn, social capital is seen as the crucial ingredient in promoting collective action for the common good, or simply creating and maintaining the social ties that are essential if individuals are to function effectively in modern economies where the demands of exchange grow increasingly complex. The normative effects of voluntary associations lie at the core of the neo-Tocquevillian argument, though this is as much a moral as a social issue for them. In some ways this is to be expected, since many neo-Tocquevillians are conservatives and conservatives tend to look back in time to recreate what they consider to be the best of times, defined according to a particular set of moral standards. Liberals and social democrats, on the other hand, tend to look forward to better times to come, so they pay more attention to civil society as a vehicle for creating new solutions. The relative marginalization of theories of the public sphere is partly explained by the current ascendancy of conservatives and conservative thinking in Western politics.

In their political role, voluntary associations are seen as a crucial counterweight to states and corporate power, and an

essential pillar in promoting transparency, accountability and other aspects of 'good governance', the favourite term of foreign-aid donors in recent times. Especially where formal citizenship rights are not well entrenched, it is civil society that provides the channels through which most people can make their voices heard in government decision-making, protect and promote their civil and political rights, and strengthen their skills as future political leaders. Arguing from democratic theory, a strong civil society can prevent the agglomeration of power that threatens autonomy and choice, provide effective checks against the abuse of state authority, and protect a democratic public sphere in which citizens can debate the ends and means of governance. The role of NGOs and social movements in mobilizing opposition to authoritarian rule and supporting progress towards multi-party elections has been well documented in Africa, eastern Europe and Latin America.[16] Over the last five years these functions have been extended to the global level, with NGO networks becoming increasingly influential in challenging the policies of the international financial institutions and establishing new norms of accountability. Civil society in this sense means 'people power' writ large.

On the surface at least, these arguments provide powerful support for the associational view of civil society. It would be disingenuous, however, to argue that official support for civil society is based purely on the findings of research. The fact that such support is 'good for business', as I have put it elsewhere, is also important.[17] By this I don't mean the business sector (though recent moves by corporations to cosy up to NGOs is another illustration of this trend), but any attempt by official institutions to develop 'legitimacy by association' with citizens' groups which enjoy much higher levels of public trust. Developing positive relationships with civil society groups has become an essential 'pre-defence' against attacks from the same sector. Both the World Bank and the specialized agencies of the United Nations are opening their doors, slowly, to civil society groups in this fashion, and the political costs of retreating into the bunker would likely be

considerable in terms of their public image and support. Such trends raise the dangers of co-optation, of course, especially when NGOs already worry that 'support for civil society' means 'privatization by stealth', signifying the use of voluntary associations as a smokescreen for state retrenchment and corporate interests.

Since 2000, there have been signs that these high levels of interest and support are waning, confirming Alan Wolfe's judgement that the 'idea of civil society failed because it became too popular'.[18] 'Civil society is passé' was the conclusion of a senior German government official in private conversation recently, 'it had its moment in the 1990s but now it's time to move on to something else.'[19] Some of these critiques have been intelligent and helpful, reaffirming the practical value of voluntary associations but rejecting the 'conceits of civil society' as Neera Chandoke puts it, meaning exaggerated notions of their political importance or ability to replace the nation state (a fantasy akin to 'grasping at straws' according to David Rieff).[20] Others have been knee-jerk reactions to anti-globalization protests such as the 'battle of Seattle' and the skirmishes that followed – charges against NGOs as 'the leftover left' and 'loonies and paranoids', for example, that have graced the pages of *Newsweek* and *Time*.[21] There are a number of reasons for this backlash, including fears from governments in the South that NGOs may be replacing the state in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia; confusion about 'who belongs' in civil society after the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001; worries about NGO performance, legitimacy, accountability and dependence on foreign funding; concerns among trade unions that NGOs have hijacked the name and functions of civil society for a narrow set of purposes and constituencies; public reactions against street violence among 'anti-globalization' protestors; and well-publicized cases of corruption in major charities.[22] Overall, however, these criticisms are helpful since they remind us that civil society is, and should continue to be, the subject of debate, in part because any institution that grows

in influence must also be subjected to external pressure for accountability (NGOs now constitute a 'fifth estate' according to a recent worldwide opinion poll).[23]

It is no longer possible to regard civil society as the preserve of a subset of privileged individuals – the citizens of the Greek *polis*, white male property-owners in eighteenth-century Europe, or the West, the North or the South. The idea of civil society has spread across the world to become a powerful leitmotif in politics and practice, yet it remains dominated by a narrow and disputed interpretation of what civil society is and does, and this narrowness threatens to erode its potential as a force for positive social change. Preserving this potential requires a simultaneous broadening of the debate to include other, less dominant, perspectives, and a much greater specification of what each of these perspectives has to contribute to a clearer understanding overall. And the starting point for that process is to break apart the assumptions that underpin the orthodox interpretation of civil society as the world of associational life.