



MULTIPLE MODERNITIES, PUBLIC  
SPHERES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA  
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The two months (June–July) that I spent at Wiko in 2005 were among the most relaxing and stimulating ones that I have experienced in many years. When I came in the beginning of June after a period of rather intensive work that was also combined with some health problems, I did not know what exactly to expect, either in terms of conditions of living technical support framework or of relations with Wiko Fellows, most of whom were already there from the beginning of the academic year.

With respect to these problems I encountered a series of extremely pleasant surprises – the staff of Wiko was extremely supportive in arranging the physical conditions of my stay. The apartment was wonderful and all the arrangements – from arranging for help in the apartment to the provision of meals from the Institute and the wonderful personal attitude and solicitude of the staff – made the stay very easy and comfortable.

Moving to the more academic aspect of my work – the wonderful services of the library, the help of Petria Saleh and the arrangements for typing were extraordinary – all these added up to a wonderful combination of relaxation and stimulation. At the same time the contact with other Fellows proved to be most stimulating – new horizons were opened up and continual discussion proved to be of great interest – for which I am deeply grateful.

All these helped me very much in my work on several themes, among them the analysis of civil society – the topic on which I also gave my lecture on “The Non-Liberal Civil Society”.

The focus of this lecture was a critical examination of the prevalent conception of civil society, in which the core of civil society was perceived as being in the activities of individuals bearing natural rights disembedded from ascriptive, religious or corporate frameworks, acting as free agents in the public sphere, with a strong secular orientation and religion relegated to the private sphere. These activities were above all pursued in voluntary associations and the individuals pursuing them were also seen as the source of legitimation of political actions and regimes.

The liberal conception of civil society as the harbinger of democracy and of economic development became intensified and to some extent transformed with the emergence of a neo-liberalism and its expansion throughout the world, quite often depicted as the epitome of successful globalisation. It was promulgated above all by many aid and development agencies as well as by NGOs – especially in Eastern European, Asian and African countries. In this conception of civil society, governmental activities had to be minimised, creating broad spaces for free voluntary activities – and for the market economy, which in its turn would also reinforce the development of such spaces.

Several assumptions have been inherent in this discourse civil society. One was that civil society constitutes an autonomous ontological entity confronting another such entity – the state and possibly also the market; second, that there is a contradiction between vibrant civil society and a strong state, i. e. that a burgeoning and vibrant civil society can develop only in a weak state that presumably will not threaten its autonomy; third, building very much on the Toquevillean heritage, that voluntary associations constituted the central core of the civil society and hence also implicitly at least of democratic societies. Fourth, there often loomed also an implicit – but sometimes even an explicit – assumption, to be found also in many theories of modernisation, that these basic characteristics of a full-fledged civil society will be basically similar in all modern societies.

But the expansion of modernity of intensified globalisation was accompanied by very important developments that cast doubt on some of the basic assumptions of this conception of civil society and that call for a critical re-examination thereof, a re-examination that is also of crucial importance for the understanding of contemporary social and political dynamics, the contemporary modes of crystallisation of multiple modernities.

Among the most important of such developments have been first, the overall experience of Indian democracy; a very vibrant democratic system in which different groups – above all, different highly transformed caste or communal groups – played a very important role in promoting the democratic process. Second, several Islamistic, especially feminist Islamist movements in many Near and Middle-East countries – movements that are obviously religious – do not accept the liberal premises of the sovereignty of the individual, but at the same time they promulgate strong claims for different groups and individuals to have autonomous interpretations of religious tenets and practices; they strongly emphasise the importance of individual religious sensibility and they promulgate the constitution of new social and public spaces independent from the state and from the religious establishments.

The third series of developments challenging the assumption of the “liberal” conception of civil society comes from the experience of the impact of the different NGOs and development agencies that, in societies in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia or Africa, propagate the development of voluntaristic agencies based on purely individualistic premises and of neo-liberal economic assumptions and that often give rise to new clientistic relations and which are also determined by economic developments.

All these illustrations – and many others – clearly indicate that many of the assumptions of the liberal or neo-liberal conceptions of civil society, especially the assumptions about the relations between the development of distinct types of individualistic voluntary activities and the extension of autonomous political participation and democratic practices, do not hold and indeed have to be critically re-examined.

During my stay at Wiko I focused on the analysis of – and hope to continue to work on – the implication of these developments for the comparative study of civil society within the frameworks of the general problems of multiple modernities. In this I was greatly stimulated by many discussions at Wiko.