

The Epistemology of the Concept of Civil Society in the West and Iranian Interpretations

L'ÉPISTÉMOLOGIE DU CONCEPT DE LA SOCIÉTÉ CIVILE DANS LES INTERPRÉTATIONS OCCIDENTALE ET IRANIENNE

Vahid Amani Zoeram¹

Jayum Anak Jawan²

Lee Yok Fee³

Abstract: The article in first part is going to review the conceptual evolution of the civil society in the western political thought. It shows how the changes of dominant discourses in political thought and social transition in the west led to change of the interpretations of civil society. In second part the article illustrates Iranian scholars' interpretations on the concept of civil society in Khatami's era. Eventually the article concludes that common sense of civil society in Iran was affected by associational theories on civil society particularly Habermas's public sphere notion and Cohen and Arato's definition on the concept.

Keywords: Civil society; Political thought; Iran; Islamic culture; Public sphere

Résumé: Dans la première partie, l'article va passer en revue l'évolution conceptuelle de la société civile dans la pensée politique occidentale. Il montre comment les changements des discours dominants dans la pensée politique et la transition sociale en Occident conduisent à un changement des interprétations de la société civile. Dans la deuxième partie, l'article illustre les interprétations du concept de la société civile des chercheurs iraniens dans l'époque Khatami. Finalement, l'article conclut que le sens commun de la société civile en Iran a été affectée par les théories associatives sur la société civile, en particulier la notion de la sphère publique d'Habermas et la définition de ce concept de Cohen et d'Arato.

Mots-clés: société civile; pensée politique; Iran; culture islamique; sphère publique

¹ Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia.

² Prof., Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia.

³ PhD, Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia.

*Received 18 April 2010; accepted 6 August 2010

Civil society is a utopian ideal that has never been fully realized in any actually existing social system, and never will be.

(Alexander, 1998)

1. INTRODUCTION

Transformations of concepts show that the historical evolution of a concept is not only a narration of its gradual refinement and its degree of abstraction, but is instead the description of the degree of its validity, "the successive rules governing its usage and the manifold theoretical environments in which it developed and was given its final form" (Foucault, 1970). Epistemology of the concept demonstrates civil society has been had essential transformation in political thought in the west. This paper reviews various important interpretations of the concept of civil society in western philosophy as well as illustrates various interpretations on the concept in Iran.

The idea of civil society has considered as a necessary requirement to achieve democracy also for its survival. Nowadays civil society is really universal concept that has mentioned in the East Europe as well as Middle East and Latin America. However it is a shapeless term which doesn't have definite meaning, e.g. Hobbes used it as civilization period; Hegel imagined civil society as a stage between family and state; Edmund Burke called these the little platoons of society that form the basis of political life (Roskin, Medeiros, Cord, & Jones, 2008).

When a researcher investigates to understand on the issue of civil society, several challenges emerge. The first is the different usages of the concept by philosophers, sociologists and political scientists, because civil society is an interdisciplinary concept, moreover many scholars and philosophers contributed to the evolution of the concept. The second is that civil society as an ideal society has been used by most of politician as a way to attain democracy; therefore they interpret the concept based on their political interests. The third problem comes from the usage of the Western concepts in the context of Non-Western societies. Socio-cultural conditions in Non-Western countries causes reductionism or misunderstanding western philosophical concepts like civil society.

The above mentioned problems require a historical review on evolution of civil society concept. This paper is going to review the evolution of civil society concept and its different interpretations in the history of philosophy from Plato to Habermas in the West by a chronological arrangement.

In this longtime history, civil society has been understood in many different ways, and although there is much vagueness on the concept. However, Greek's philosophers did not use "civil society" as its contemporary meaning but historically, the root of civil society traced back to ancient Greek, therefore this review begins from Plato. Then the article pays attention to Medieval Ages that the pervasive influence of church and expending of feudalism changed the meaning of civil society in Europe. After that, the point of views of philosophers and thinkers since sixteenth to the end of nineteenth century will be reviewed. In the next part it presents some of the most important theoretical evolutions on civil society in the recent decades. Finally the article reviews some Iranian scholars' interpretations on the concept in Khatami's presidency era and indicates the influences of Islamic culture on these interpretations.

2. ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

In the ancient Greek "polis" as a political unit, was the small self-governing community and citizens were living in city or the country, but the government was entirely concentrated in the city by those citizens empowered by the constitution to exercise it. The government was carried on by Assembly (Ecclesia), which was formed by whole body of male citizens and met regularly ten times in the year and the Council of Five Hundred (Boule) that was an executive steering committee for the Assembly and finally the

Magistrates (Archons) in Athenian courts were the key stone of the democratic system in Athena (Sabine, 1973). Citizens had certain obligations towards the city: to worship the state Gods and take part in their cult, being recruited in military service, pay taxes, and obey the laws. There was also a large non-citizen population of slaves and perhaps of resident foreigners (Metics). The primary concepts like democracy, civil society and citizen appeared in this sphere.

Ehrenberg (1999) supposes that the first coherent formulation of civil society emerged in City-States of Greek where was considered people's live in separate spheres. In Greek's thought political power created civilization and Greeks separated themselves as citizens from others as barbarians moreover political active was the highest level activity in civil/political society for citizens. In this view, common good was attained through public debates and organized by public action.

In reacting to the perceived threat of private interest, Plato understood civil society as an ethical community that is comprised of different elements which have different skills and perform different roles also it "fused truth, beauty, and goodness with knowledge, power, and the state" and "coordinates the activities of people with different skills and aptitudes" (Ehrenberg, 1999).

Plato's civil society was a politically controlled realm that was comprised of individuals who live in different spheres of association, but require the civilizing force of a strong state to counteract the centrifugal force of diversity (Leo, 2005).

Cohen and Arato believe that the first version of civil society appears in Aristotle under the heading of *politike koinonia*, (political society/ community) that is translated in Latin *societas civilis*. *Politike koinonia* in Aristotal's view is defined as a public ethical-political community that shaped by free and equal citizens under a legally defined system of rule (Cohen & Arato, 1992). Aristotle regarded the polis as the most inclusive and sovereign of all human association because all of them constitute for the purpose of "mere life" but polis is created for the purpose of the "good life"(Ehrenberg, 1999).

There are a number of important differences between Aristotle and Plato; Aristotle rejected Plato's drive to impose unity on civil society. He considered that polis is composed of a number of different kinds of men, so because of the variety of the men, it is impossible to suppose the unity of the elements of civil society as it was given by Plato. Moreover in contrast with Plato that denied private property and family life, "Aristotle's mixed state was based on the unitary household, just as the public based on the private and general was rooted in the particular". Additionally the influence of Socratic dictum on unity of "virtue" in Plato, caused to his conflation of "state and individual, public and private and politics and psychology" but Aristotle believed there are different virtues appropriate to different situations thus "civil society may be composed of unlike elements that move in spheres appropriate to their nature" in the other word "Civil society was the politically constituted community that organized separate spheres of life in the state and, in the process, permitted them to express the full measure of their limited ethical potential" (Ehrenberg, 1999).

As compared to modern concepts of civil society and state, Aristotle's notion lacked a border between state and society. Also the absence of differentiation between society and community in Greek's thought led to paradoxical concept of *politike koinonia*, since "it indicated one *koinonia* among many and, at the same time, the whole, a whole with parts outside itself" (Cohen & Arato, 1992).

Although the concept of civil society in ancient Greek was not equivalent with modern meaning of the concept but Aristotle's philosophy is important to the liberal discourse on civil society because it was Aristotle who first clearly articulated the distinction between the private and the public, between the life of the active citizen in his household and his life in the polis(Leo, 2005).

3. CIVIL SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL AGES

The Macedonians' attack ended the Greek concept of polis as a political unit. Afterward, appearance of Roman Empire and sovereignty of Church in Europe replaced Christian commonwealth to the concept of polis. Cicero (106-43 BC) as a Roman lawyer considered civil society equivalent of *res publica* (commonwealth) therefore *societas civilis* represented groups and individuals united by laws and

institutions. The development of Roman law which guaranteed individual right helped to separation private life from political community as a public life.

In the late third century AD, Diocletian established the practice of dividing authority between two emperors, one in the western part of the empire and one in the east, in order to better administer the vast territory. "In the Byzantine Empire, the idea of a politically constituted community persisted and the church was subordinated to the political and moral authority of emperor" (Galnoor, 2001). Collapse of Western Roman Empire led to creation of Feudalism in Europe. Feudalism was a system of politics, economy, culture, and society based on agriculture that political power was formed by small and loosely ruled.

Medieval philosophers were suspicious of human ability to "draw moral values" required for ethical association in the worldly state, whether by reason or conscious action, and instead located the redemption of a sinful civil society in the transcendent power and virtue of God. Christian doctrine emphasized faith and total obedience to ecclesiastic authority, which were antithetical to the self-interested forces operating in civil society. Pope Gelasius I offer the notion of two powers which ruled the world-the Pope/Church as overseers of spiritual interest and matters of salvation, and the Emperor/civil government concerned with "temporal matters of order, peace, and justice. The Gelasian's idea on separation of Church and state is however crucial because it highlights and supports a relevant historical fact in the development of the state and civil society, namely, that the state is distinct from and not inclusive of either a self-organizing or otherwise organized civil society (Leo, 2005).

After Gelasianism and medieval theory, the concept of universalism, whether Christian or political, lost some of its appeal in political theory. This paved the way for theorists like Martin Luther to propose not only the clear separation of the Church from the state, but also the separation of the state from civil society. Luther's attack on the authority of the universal Church and his preference for the liberated individual conscience solidified the existence of an "unassailable sphere of private life". In his view, man's free conscience was in direct relationship with God, as his maker. Therefore, neither Popes' sacraments laws, nor priests were necessary for salvation. According to Luther, the prince is better suited to the purification of the Church and defense of civil society because he wields the sword, the symbol of worldly power. By allowing the individual "a sphere of autonomy such as he had never known in medieval society," Luther secularized civil society and theorized its separation from political society (Leo, 2005). As Alexander reminds us none of these were real civil societies in the modern sense that formed gradually since sixteenth (Alexander, 1998).

4. THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY SINCE SIXTEENTH TO THE END OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau considered civil society as a stage in social evolution. According to Hobbes's theory, the state of nature or the condition without power state is perennial war status; pre-emptive strikes, insecurity and distrust leave us with lives that are solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. This situation threatened the basic right of human to self-preservation therefore individuals limited their sovereignty voluntarily by creating a civil society that governed by leviathan as an absolutely sovereign. This sovereignty is not limited by contract or natural rights. Men in civil society retain merely the right of self-defence because in the state of nature didn't have guarantee other natural rights. Thus the social contract in Hobbes's theory creates civil and political society jointly (Chandhoke, 2004). The important of sovereigns' rights consist; "applications of the principle of unconditional sovereignty, right to judge of what doctrines are fit to be taught them, right of legislation, right of judicature, right to make war, and peace, right of choosing all counsellours, ministers, magistrates, and officers, power of reward and punishment, right of appointing laws of Honor" furthermore the important of leviathan's duties consist; "duty to maintain essential of sovereignty, duty to teach the people, duty to make good, duty to administer equal justice, duty to tax equally, duty to choose good counselors, duty to make a right application of punishment and rewards" (Losco & Illiams, 1992).

Locke's state of nature is not in perennial war but is rather the situation that people forms families, create bonds, work, and the most important accumulate their property. However, the enjoyment of property is difficult in the absence of centralized authority. For this reason it was necessary for men to exit the state of nature, concentrate executive power in a central authority, and thus create the state. This state is a limited state. Unlike Hobbes' state, it is far from having a right for life and death over its subjects and only exists in so far as it is effective in ensuring and protecting the enjoyment of natural rights, especially the right to property. The compulsion to constitute a civil society was to protect and preserve freedom and to enlarge its (Baccaro, 2001). Locke's social contract is a double process; contract of society operates before the contract to form government is made so civil society forms before the state (McClelland, 1996). In contrast with Hobbs, Locke opposed monarchical rule and emphasized "that Absolute Monarchy, which by some Men is counted the only Government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of Civil Government at all" (Losco & Illiams, 1992) also Locke considered the basic right i.e. property for human in the state of nature that government should respect and protect them so it cannot be absolutely. In Locke's theory on government differentiation between the executive and legislative function isn't clear but he insists of the independence of the judges because a dependent judiciary is dangerous for Divine right (McClelland, 1996). In truth the distinction between political society and civil society in Hobbs and Locke's theories were not clear because they used civil and political interchangeably (Chandhoke, 2004).

For Montesquieu civil society (L'etat civile) is a context for the societal cooperation in the absolute power of the monarch that was not a realm separate from the monarchy (Galnoor, 2001). Montesquieu distinguishes between government and society. His "conception of civil society appears under a shifting terminology. In the context of monarchical government (which represents the modern state for him!) it meant, alternatively, the "intermediate powers," "the political communities," or "societies or communities" inherited from the epoch of estate dualism" (Cohen & Arato, 1992).

In Rousseau's philosophy civil society is between state of nature and state of war. It's a good condition for human kind but it doesn't have enough stability so it degenerates to state of war. He wrote "the first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying this is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society" and in the long time process, it caused many crimes, wars and murders (Losco & Illiams, 1992). This situation that threat human generation, prepared conditions for social contract, where man lose his natural liberty and he gains civil liberty. This social compact create a sovereign that is inalienable, indivisible and infallible also has some limits (Losco & Illiams, 1992).

Kant used the theory of civil society (*Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) in the meaning of political society inseparable from absolutism that require for stability of society, also it referred to the public sphere separable from the political power. Kant considered political sphere as the reserve of the state vis a vis civil society related to a sphere beyond the political system. Kant supposed the critical practice of exposing actual state policies restrains the absolute power. Kant's civil society (*Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) was composed of individuals from Prussian bureaucratic and bourgeois elites, educated and trained in the state schools and administrative offices, moreover it includes members of social clubs and associations, who could go up beyond the trapping of class or official status (Galnoor, 2001). Kant postulated a universal civil society based on the rule of law as the telos of human development and rejected any compromise with the corporate and estate powers of the absolutist era (Cohen & Arato, 1992).

For Adam Smith (1723-1790) civilized society consisted in self-regulating and interdependent networks of economic relations among individuals and groups, originating in the decisions of individuals competing in markets for goods, labor and capital. He proposed a separation between the civilized society of economic activity and the political sphere of the state and insisted on the liberation of labor, capital (including land), and goods from the network of relations of political society (Galnoor, 2001). Central to Adam Smith's theory is the concept of a self-regulating economy and society. It is as a member of this society that an individual can achieve both self-realization and benefit the social order. But this can be achieved only when this sphere is left alone by the political order (Chandhoke, 2004).

Adam Ferguson argued that an increase in self-control and 'subtlety' and a decrease in brute impulse are necessary for the emergence of civil society. He described that civil society "as the social bond that defines a nation, the fellow-feeling among members of a community that guarantees respect for law, protection of

property and regulation of authority” (Alexander, 1997). He considered the concept of civil society “as networks of self-governing and self-regulating voluntary associations, such as self-help groups and friendly or charitable societies” (Galnoor, 2001).

Hume’s theory is built around an essential distinction between society and government. Hume tries to explain “the mechanisms by which it both facilitates the production and exchange of goods and achieves sociable behaviors amongst individuals that go beyond mere abstinence from mutual harm” (Finlay, 2004). Hume’s civil society presents a complex account of the interplay between economic, social and political activities. However significance of free press and informal associations in Hume’s theory shows Hume’s concept of civil society is extremely near to the sense of modern civil society (Finlay, 2004).

In this period of time the concept of civil society gradually differentiated from other social areas particularly from political sphere and state. Although this segregation wasn’t precisely in Hobsse and Locke’s theory but it found independent character in subsequent philosophers. However Smith’s civilized society, Ferguson’s civil society, Kant’s *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, and Montesquieu’s *L’etat civile*, even Rousseau’s civil society in earlier phase, symbolized positive images of civil society which made level the path of liberalism and democracy.

5. TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CONCEPT IN NINETEENTH CENTURY

In this century Hegel and Tocqueville in tow aspect expended the concept of civil society, Hegel in an idealist sense supposed civil society, separate from private and state sphere and Tocqueville based on this segregation tried to retain democracy with an associational definition of civil society.

Hegel in his book; *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* presented a distinction between the state and civil society (Finlay, 2004), in this book Hegel considers the form of the ethical life in three moments: family, civil society and the state which the family is shaped based on natural and functional requires and is also a voluntary union, as such it cannot shape the foundation of social life in general because families are temporarily and disintegrate into a plurality of families as children grow older, leave home and will form new relationships. This process creates civil society which without state individual’s greed and avarice causes instability in social order (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007). Civil society includes the system of needs and system of laws to the police and corporations (Cohen & Arato, 1992), therefore it is the area particularity, of the self-seeking individual interested with the performance of his privet need (Chandhoke, 2004). In other words, Hegel conceived civil society as a space where individuals with self-interests enter into a social relationship of interdependence with one another (Ku, 2002). Finally civil society in Hegel’s philosophy is “an important stage in the transition from the family to the state because it is the theatre where two principles of modern society – particularity and universality – are negotiated” (Chandhoke, 2004). Moreover in this philosophy state is considered “where universality is institutionalized as the highest form of ethical life, indeed as the actuality of the ethical Idea” therefore civil society “is not negatively defined as that area of freedom and rights where the state should not interfere” (Chandhoke, 2004).

In Tocqueville’s liberal political theory, state and society is entirely segregation each other therefore his dilemma was circumstance of control of state versus society also prevention of majority’s absolutism. For him modern state created a greater threat to human freedom than earlier states so its needs to restrict by free and voluntary associational groups inside society that we call it today civil society.

Tocqueville’s civil society was a solution to the threats of democracy which he attained by observing the functioning of civil associations in the American democracy. Tocqueville was marvel on American people’s “art of association” and supposed it as a significant cause for survival of democracy in America. For Tocqueville, democracy is a social condition and not just a form of government and Voluntary associations are necessary for the successful resolution of common problems (Whittington, 1998). Tocqueville reminds associational life has important social advantage for a democratic society: 1) Voluntary associations safeguard of liberty against despotism 2) Also they tempered the tendency towards rampant individualism and socialized Individuals. 3) Also associations are necessary to provide a bulwark

against the “tyranny of the majority” (Baccaro, 2001) in addition an active civil society encourages social cohesion and a stable social order (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007).

Marx changed Hegelian idealism to materialism but retained the method of dialectic and criticized his interpretation of state and civil society. Marx conceived the modern state as a part of superstructure which dependent on the economic basis (McClelland, 1996) and civil society is the stage where the dialectic between the social and political, between domination and resistance, between oppression and emancipation (Chandhoke, 2004).

Civil society, for Marx, is bourgeois society. It is built upon modern class inequalities. The state is not above civil society but an expression of class rule operating to maintain civil society and the dominant economic interests within it. In fact, the state appears as a separate entity sitting above society, but this is a mirage. The dominant interests within civil society are replicated through the interests of the state, a state over which the majority of us have no control (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007).

However, in Marx’s theory, if civil society is the source of inequality, it also contains the sources of opposition by way of the creation of a working class, therefore, it is the site of class conflict, inequality and struggle (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007), where the revolutionary transformation of economic relations will occur inside it (Galnoor, 2001). Therefore in his view, civil society is preceded and determined by the state.

It was Gramsci, which, isolated civil society from both the state and the economy therefore, by this dual autonomy, civil society could actually be the area of resist versus state power (Baker, 1998). Where the power of state operates to enforce invisible, intangible and subtle forms is civil society which, performs through educational, cultural and religious systems and other civil organizations by the contrast, the political society uses coercive apparatus such as prison, the judicial system, armed forces and police (Chandhoke, 2004). It means both of them accomplish the same function but by the different ways.

Hegel, Gramsci and Tocqueville helped to separation of civil society from state as a realm of power. Hegel separated civil society from family and state, Gramsci showed twofold function of civil society as realm of hegemony and an arena for resistant against state power and finally Tocqueville considered civil society as associational life which can help to survival of democracy.

6. REVIVAL OF THE CONCEPT IN THE LAST DECADES OF TWENTIETH CENTURY

Müller identifies four reasons for the raise of civil society in the end of 20th century in the western countries. Firstly the struggle against the communist totalitarian regime in the Center-Eastern Europe countries revived the idea of civil society. The second cause was the following as a consequence of collapse of these regimes for constructing the democratic in short period of time. Thirdly, increase in crisis in the welfare state after the communist regimes in 1980s led to revival of the concept. The fourth “cause is a reaction to new forms of social mobility and diversity and to the speed and scope of technological, economic and cultural changes that globalization has ushered in” (Müller, 2006). In addition increase in the new forms of social movements such as Women and Greens encouraged tendency to the civil society. Analysts of the movement believe the sufficient development of civil associations improve the protest movements (Chandhoke, 2004).

The last 25 years have witnessed the surprising expansion of NGOs and civil associations across the world. Particularly it was welcomed by those societies where there was a merger of state and economic power, combined with a level of political exclusion. In these states the notion of civil society offered a concept that could mobilize the people against a corrupt, unjust and unequal form of society (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007).

In international perspective increase in the number of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INOGs) led to the forming of Global Civil Society. In Keane’s (2003) view revival of the old language of civil society, new forms of communication, new awareness given by peace and ecological movements on

world system, implosion of Soviet-type communist system, the world-wide growth spurt of neo-liberal economics are some of the reasons for the creating of the Global Civil Society.

The significance of civil society in both aspects of national and international caused it located simultaneity in the center of democratic and globalization studies. In the next part, are reviewed some of the most important of definitions and interpretations on civil society in recent years.

Müller from an empirical perspective distinguishes two basic approaches to the concept of civil society: socio-cultural and reductionist. The reductionist approach contains the left-wing and the right-wing interpretations and the group of socio-cultural approaches divides three main formation of the issue: generalist, maximalist and minimalist (Müller, 2006). Generalists such as Gellner and Victor Pérez-Díaz consider civil society as a concept competing with democracy which its basic distinction is the existence of a limited and accountable public authority (Müller, 2006). For John Keane, William Sullivan, Edward Shils and Charles Taylor as maximalists, civil society is a “platform of institutions outside the state sphere, compassing the market economy and its institutions, public opinion, political parties, public and private associations and the wide variety of forms of social co-operation that establish ties of commitment and relationships of trust” (Müller, 2006). Jeffrey Alexander, Andrew Arato, Jean Cohen and Jürgen Habermas are classified as minimalists. In minimalist interpretation, “civil society is defined as a sphere, or sub-system of society that is analytically— and to some degree also empirically—separate from the spheres of politics and the economy but also from other social spheres perceived as not engaged in supporting the solidarity of individual members” (Müller, 2006).

According to these approaches civil society has been understood in different ways. For example:

Aratu and Chohen (1992) “understand “civil society” as 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”.

For Janoski civil society is “a sphere of dynamic and responsive public discourse between the state, the public sphere, consisting of voluntary organizations, and the market sphere, concerning private firms and unions” (Warleigh, 2001).

Diamond considers civil society as “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, [and] that is bound by a legal order or a set of shared collective rules” (Tusalem, 2007).

Civil society for Bobbio “is the place where economic, social, ideological and religious conflicts originate and occur and that state institutions have the task of solving them either by mediating or preventing or repressing them” (Hearn, 2001).

Gellner considers civil society as a “diverse set of non-governmental institutions, which is strong enough to counterbalance the state” (Hearn, 2001).

Chandhoke (2004) summarized six interpretations on civil society. In first version, all that do not belong to state are belong to civil society, including households, religious, networks, communities, work places and other associations which can be termed private (Chandhoke, 2004). Second, civil society is considered as a private sphere, against state as a public sphere. Moreover in the other version of liberalism it is family which is private, and everything else, including civil society, is public. Third, it mediates as the site of the public discourse between public opinion and the state. Fourth, civil society is the site where the state intervenes to shape public opinion and perceptions, so that it can create consent for its own policies. Fifth, civil society as a political forum becomes the arena of political democracy that creates a community which is engaged in participative and deliberative functions. In sixth version it is the institutions of the market which shape civil society therefore civil society is considered as an economic forum.

The earlier of twentieth century Parsons as a sociologist rarely used the concept of civil society but his differentiation between tradition and modernity helped to clarify the concept of civil society. His “concept of a societal community that is distinguished from the economy, the polity, and the cultural sphere represents a synthesis of the liberal concept of civil society as differentiated from the state with the stress on social integration, solidarity, and community” (Cohen & Arato, 1992). It seems the concepts of societal

community and *Gemeinschaft* type of solidarity for Parsons has some characteristics of civil society in associational meaning.

Habermas considers civil society as institutional sphere that constituted by voluntary associations such as; churches, independent media, organizations of gender, race and sexuality cultural associations and sport clubs, outside the sphere of the state and the economy (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Public sphere and civil society in Habermas's theory depend to each other. For Habermas some institutions in Europe such as salons and coffee houses organized discussion among private people that inclined to be in progress; hence they had a number of institutional criteria in common; "first they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether", "secondly, discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned", "thirdly, the same process that converted culture into a commodity established the public as in principle inclusive" (Habermas, 1989). He divides society in two spheres; private sphere (include two spheres; intimate sphere or family and private economy) and public sphere (include public sphere and public authority sphere or state) which civil society in the minimum sense refers to the sphere of the private and bourgeois economy also in the broader sense it means all the sphere of society juxtaposed to the state (Cohen & Arato, 1992). An ideal public sphere asserts itself as a bulwark against the systematizing effects of the state and the economy. The public sphere is located in civil society and it is where people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learns about facts, events, and the opinions, interests, and perspectives of others in an atmosphere free of coercion or inequalities that would incline individuals to acquiesce or be silent. This involvement develops the autonomy of individuals and is a learning process. This discussion or discourse on values, norms, laws, and policies generates politically relevant public opinion. These discussions can occur within various units of civil society. But there is also a larger public sphere that mediates among the various mini-publics that emerge within and across associations, movements, religious organizations, clubs, local organizations of concerned citizens, and informal social networks in the creation of public opinion (Fleming, 2000).

Habermas believes civil society should be considered as created of those more or less instinctively "emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, regulated to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere" (Staats, 2004).

In general Habermas refers civil society to the realm of social relations free from interference of political power. Independent civic institutions such as political parties, unions, academic associations, free media, the press and so on in civil society protect citizens' rights against political and economic powers. In fact civil society guarantees public sphere versus digressions since public sphere has been suppressed by state and economic powers. Deliberative democracy as ideal state in Habermas theory needs a powerful and active public sphere and ideal public sphere is located in civil society.

In so far this historical review demonstrates there was any consensus on the meaning of the civil society. Moreover it always had not been regarded as a positive concept even traditional Marxism had pessimistic view on civil society. Recently the role of civil society in the process of democratization has led to forming a positive opinion on the concept. In minimal interpretation of civil society in recent decades, it is considered generally as a sphere of social interaction apart from market, state and family sphere that includes non-governmental organization, social movements, public media, and voluntary associations. In this sphere citizens pursue their private interests in peaceful autonomous groups, apart of states and market's oppressions. Civil society in its turn protects individuals' rights against state power and economic forces. In methodological term in the context of western philosophy the concept refers to distinguish between: forms of governance other than the state; non-state forms of organization; associations, organizations and institutions which are intermediate between the state and the family; voluntary associations; non-governmental associations; economic pressure groups; professional organizations of various kinds; practices of civic freedom; and social movements (Hudson, 2003).

7. HOW IRANIAN THINKERS HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY?

As above literature shows, various western theories of civil society have shaped based on particular historical condition in Europe, therefore it is hardly to attribute one of the theories to political, economic and social situations in non-western countries. Iran as Muslim country dominated by Islamic government has had different cultural, social and historical conditions in comparison with the West. By the reason it needs to great caution for applying western theories to analysis social and political conditions in Iran. The concept of civil society is constructed based on liberalism and humanism in the context of western philosophy therefore there are some basic distinctions between the concept and Islamic principles. However efforts for compatibility between Islam and the concept led to some reductionism on the concept in one side, and on the other side it caused to rise some new interpretations on Islamic ideas by Muslim scholars in Iran.

When multiple concept of civil society rose in Iran, politicians and intellectual interpreted it based on their own view. While some reformist politicians were attempting to reconcile the concept with Islamic culture, some scholars emphasized the concept is a nonreligious concept that is compatible with all society such as Islamic society and third groups were opposing the concept as a western idea. This part looks for how Iranian in Khatami's era understood the concept of 'civil society' in the context of Iranian culture.

Opponents of civil society criticize who attempt to adapt civil society with Islam. From religious view Sadegh Larijani, Mohebbian and Vaezi believe civil society is not compatible with Islam due to their different foundations. Civil society is established based on secularism, pluralism, liberalism and humanism in the West; that all these ideologies are totally in contradiction with the Islamic principles. For instance Larijani asserts in all theories on civil society in the West public sphere is separated from private sphere and this have led to decrease the role of state and law in society but Islamic society in contrast with civil society is dominated by divine law not by manmade law therefore Islamic society does not adapt with civil society (Larijani, 1998). However this group emphasizes that Islamic society is constructed based on divine legitimacy but in the theory of civil society legitimacy is originated from people, consequently they are not well-matched.

In contrast with opponents of civil society most of reformists was protecting civil society as a prescription for political development in Iran the time but they had not common interpretation on the concept. Kamrava (2001) divides variety of Iranian interpretations on the concept of civil society in two groups. First group are the thinkers who regard civil society as "the rule of law" such as Khatami, Lahiji and Sahabi and so on. Second group include who consider civil society as a cultural term such as Alavitabar, Mohammadi and others. For instance, Mohammadi (1999) regards civil society as a society in which independent nongovernmental organizations (independent on manner of formation and management) represent and advocate the needs and interests of various groups of citizens and this organizations are or can be ways for citizens to participate in political domain.

Chaichian (2003) provides six interpretations on civil society that are presented by Iranian intellectuals and political activists. In coming part, Chaichian's framework is applied for classifying the variety of interpretations on the concept of civil society in Iran.

In a liberal interpretation, Ghanizade considers civil society as a realm outside of the state that protects citizens and market's institution from state's interventions (Ghanizadeh, 1998). In addition, Ghanizadeh (1998) believes free market far away state's interferences is a prerequisite condition for civil society.

In developmentalist-pragmatic interpretation, Amirahmadi defines civil society as "a sphere between the state and citizens (or the family) which regulates the behavior of these two poles toward one another" (Amirahmadi & Gladstone, 1996, p. 15).

In developmentalist-democratic interpretation, Ganji explains, "that civil society serves as a shield to protect the government from citizen's over-expectations, as well as the citizens from government excesses"(Chaichian, 2003, p. 30). In Ganji's definition, civil society is a network of associations that are volunteer and independent from state, which joins citizens together based on common interests (Ganji,

2000). Moreover in Jalaeipour's (1999) interpretation, the core of civil society is the right of activity for institutions, organizations, councils and social groups independent from state power.

As Islamic – democratic interpretation, Sorosh (1998) considers civil society as a civilianized society against non-civilianized society that individuals tend to social order inside it. In addition, he regards four requirements for civil society: to form a kind of social contract by individuals, to accept political and intellectual pluralism, citizens' religious faith, and liberty of information and knowledge. Faith to God as a prerequisite for civil society separates Sorosh from secular interpretation of civil society in the western philosophy. In fact Sorosh characterize civil society as democratic and moral society.

Khatami who presented civil society as his agenda in seventh presidency election offers an institutional-Islamic interpretation on the concept. He identified his view on civil society in the Organization of Islamic Countries Summit in Tehran:

In the civil society that we espouse, which is centered around the axis of Islamic thinking and culture, however, personal or group dictatorship or even dictatorship of the majority and elimination of the minority has no place. In such a society, man, due to the very attribute of being human, is venerated and revered and his rights respected. Citizens of the Islamic civil society enjoy the right to determine their own destiny, supervise the administration of affairs and hold the government accountable. The government in such a society is the servant of the people and not their master, and in every eventuality, is accountable to the people whom God has entitled to determine their own destiny. Our civil society is not a society where only Muslims are entitled to rights and are considered citizens. Rather, all individuals are entitled to rights, within the framework of the law (Khatami, 1998).

While the Western civil society, historically as well as theoretically, is derived from the Greek city-states and the later Roman political system, the civil society we have in mind has its origin, from a historical and theoretical point of view, in "Madinat ul-Nabi." Changing "Yathreb" to "Madinat ul-Nabi" was not just a change of name, nor did the change from "Ayyam-ul -Jahiliyah" (Days of Ignorance) to "Ayyam -Ullah" (Days of Allah/God) represent just an alteration of designation. "Madinah" is not soil and territory just as "Yaum - Ullah" does not stand for time (Khatami, 1998).

Citizen rights, the rule of law, and accountability of government are important characteristics of civil society in Khatami's interpretation. As Verma (2004) points out, in Khatami's political theory civil society implicates on rule of law; in addition he articulates Islamic tradition with forms of religious associations of public in Toqueville's thought. In fact, Khatami suggests an Islamic interpretation on civil society that is appropriate for Islamic society such as Iran. Khatami (2008) emphasizes civil society is necessary to the right of to determine destiny and prevents from dictatorship. Moreover, civil society comes out as civic institutions that represents people's demands and transfer them to government (Khatami, 2008).

Finally in sixth interpretation, Hajjarian presents a secular interpretation on civil society. Hajjarian (1998) criticized who want to offer an Islamic version of civil society and emphasizes since religious language is that of obligations, it is hard to accept a civil society based on religious. In this interpretation, civil society inherently is secular and incompatible with religious therefore, Khatami's interpretation of the concept about similarity between "Madinat ul-Nabi" and civil society is not acceptable (Hajjarian, 1998).

In addition above thinkers there is an Iranian scholar that had influenced on the debate of the civil society in Iran extensively. Bashiriyeh (1999) in his book under the title of *Civil society and political development: writing on political sociology* asserts civil society is a realm of social relations versus state area and far away state's direct interferences that includes a set of associations, private institutions and organizations. It is domain of ideological, economic and social struggles. In fact Bashiriyeh considers all nongovernmental organizations as component of civil society. This interpretation of civil society had become common in the reform era since some of reformists in Khatami's state were Bashiriyeh's student previously in Tehran University.

8. CONCLUSION

A comparison between various theories on the concept of civil society in the West and different interpretations on civil society in Iran demonstrates Iranian scholars were notably affected by western theories from associational interpretation aspect on the concept of civil society. Even though there was not unique understanding on the concept but opponents and advocators both were aware on philosophical principals of civil society in the West. Nevertheless, most of them were aware that civil society at the common meaning refer to development of independent institutions separate of the state, which help to the process of democratization. In addition, it shows that the concept based on the Islamic culture of Iran has indigenized and the thinkers try to adapt it with Iran's situation. Iranian thinkers, under influence of western philosophers such as Habermas, Aratu and Cohen, consider civil society as a social sphere between state and privet sphere that predispose conditions for rule of law and democracy. Ultimately, the review illustrates that except some conservatives that believe civil society is contradiction with Islamic society the majority of Iranian reformists have favorable views on civil society and consider it as a prescription in the process of social and political development. A prominent point in this review is the failure of reformists to present a common interpretation on the concept which was the main reason to fail civil society in Iran the time.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, J. C. (1997). The Paradoxes of Civil Society. *International Sociology*, 12(2), 115-133.
- Alexander, J. C. (1998). Civil Society between Difference and Solidarity Rethinking Integration the Fragmented Public Sphere. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 92, 1-14.
- Amirahmadi, H., & Gladstone, D. (1996). Towards a Dynamic Theory of the State and Civil Society in the Development Process. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 16, 15-25.
- Baccaro, L. (2001). *Civil Society, NGOs, and Decent Work Policies: Sorting out the Issues*. Geneva. International Institute for Labour Studies Geneva.
- Baker, G. (1998). Civil Society and democracy: *The Gap between Theory and Possibility*. *Politics*, 18(2), 81-88.
- Bashiriyeh, H. (1999). *Civil society and political development: writing on political sociology*. Tehran: Olum-e Novin.
- Chaichian, A. M. (2003). Structural Impediments of the Civil Society Project in Iran. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 44, 19-50.
- Chandhoke, N. (2004). *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.
- Cohen, J. L., & Arato, A. (1992). *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ehrenberg, J. (1999). *Civil Society the Critical History of an Idea*. New York New York University Press.
- Finlay, C. J. (2004). Hume's Theory of civil Society. *European Journal of Political Theory* 3, 369-391.
- Fleming, T. (2000). *Habermas, Democracy and Civil Society: Unearthing the Social in Transformation Theory*. Retrieved 25 January, 2008, from http://adulthoodeducation.nuim.ie/department_staff/documents/HABERMASDEMOCRACYANDCIVILSOCIETY.pdf.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998). Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for Civil Society? *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49(2), 210-233.

- Foucault, M. (1970). The Archaeology of Knowledge. *Social Science Information*, 9, 175-185.
- Galnoor, I. (Ed.) (2001) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences (Vols. 3)*.
- Ganji, A. (2000). *Architectural Reformation (Eslaah-Gari-ye Me'maraneh)* Tehran: Tarh-e No.
- Ghanizadeh, M. (1998). *Civil Society, Freedom, Economy and Policy* (Jameeye madany, azady, eghtesad va siyasat) Tehran: Tarh- Now.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hajjarian, S. (1998). *Civil Society and Iran Cotemporary (Jame'-e ye Madani va Iran-e Emrooz) Civil Society and Iran Cotemporary (Jame'-e ye Madani va Iran-e Emrooz)*. Tehran: Naghsh-o-Negar Publications.
- Hearn, J. (2001). Taking Liberties: Contesting Visions of the Civil Society Project. *Critique Of Anthropology*, 21(4), 339-360.
- Hudson, W. (2003). Problematizing European Theories of Civil Society. In D. C. Schak & W. Hudson (Eds.), *Civil Society in Asia*. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Jalaeipoor, H. R. (1999). *After the Scond Khordad: A Sociologic Review on Iran's Civil Movement 1997-1999* (Pas az Dovome Khordad) Tehran: Kavir.
- Kamrava, M. (2001). The Civil Society Discourse in Iran. *Brirish Journal of Middle Estern Studies*, 28(2), 165-185.
- Keane, J. (2003). *Global Civil society?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khatami, M. (1998). *President Khatami Calls for Islamic Civil Society and Understanding of Western Civilization*. Retrieved 26 October, 2009, from <http://www.muslimmedia.com/archives/features98/khatami.htm>
- Khatami, M. (2008). Retrieved 26 October, 2009, from <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8710161339>
- Ku, A. S. (2002). Beyond the Paradoxical Conception of `Civil Society without Citizenship. *International Sociology* 17(4), 529-548.
- Larijani, S. (1998). Relationship between Religious and Civil Society (Nesbate Din va Jamee ye Madani). *Andisheh Hozeh*, 14, 118-136.
- Lavalette, M., & Ferguson, I. (2007). Democratic language and neo-liberal practice: The problem with civil society. *International Social Work* 50(4), 447-449.
- Leo, O. U. (2005). *Beyond Liberal Political Morality: A Critique of State Colonization of Civil Society in Canada*. University of Alberta, Edmonton.
- Losco, J., & Illiams, L. (1992). *Plitical Theory Classic and Contemporary Readings (Vol. 2)*. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- McClelland, J. S. (1996). *A History of Western Political Thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Mohammadi, M. (1999). *Iranian Civil Society; Theoretical Contexts and Obstacles (Jameeye Madaniye Irani; bastarhaye nazary va mavane)* Tehran: Markaz.
- Müller, K. B. (2006). The Civil Society-State Relationship in Contemporary Discourse: A Complementary Account from Giddens' Perspective. *BJPIR*, 8, 311-330.
- Roskin, M. G., Medeiros, J. A., Cord, R. L., & Jones, W. S. (2008). *Political Science an Introduction*. New Jersey: Printice hall.

- Sabine, G. H. (1973). *A History of Political Theory*. Illinois: Dryden Press.
- Soroosh, A.-K. (1998). *Religion and Civil Society (Deen va Jame'e-ye Madani) Civil Society and Iran Contemporary*. Tehran: Naghsh-o-Negar Publications.
- Staats, J. L. (2004). Habermas and Democratic Theory: The Threat To Democracy of Unchecked Corporate Power. *Political Research Quarterly* 57(4), 585-594.
- Tusalem, R. F. (2007). A Boon or a Bane? The Role of Civil Society. *International Political Science Review*, 28(3), 361-386.
- Verma, V. (2004). *Malaysia State and Civil Society in Transition*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.
- Warleigh, A. (2001). Europeanizing Civil Society: NGOs as Agents of Political Socialization. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 39(4), 619-639.
- Whittington, K. E. (1998). Revisiting Tocqueville's America: Society, Politics, and Association in the Nineteenth Century. *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, 21-32.