Mick Wilson on understandings of civil society

The task set for this short text is to consider the role of art and artists in: (i) supporting a sense of possibility within civil society; and (ii) preventing the shutting down of social and community discourses now regarded as outmoded by various institutional and political interests. These are quite daunting themes to address. Indeed, simply communicating what is at stake in these themes is perhaps already a task that exceeds what is possible in a thousand words. However, fools rush in...

The first step must be to consider what is at stake in these terms 'civil society', 'community', the 'social' and so forth. The term 'civil society' has had a long currency in both popular and political discourses going back to the 17th century. From the 18th century onward, civil society has had some degree of linkage with questions of culture. However, it is notable that in the post-WWII era, the term 'civil society' began to gain increased significance internationally with the emergence of various forms of civil rights movements.[1]

These new paradigms of social, economic, cultural and political protest and mobilisation attempted to move beyond both traditional models of party-politics and classic schemes of violent revolution. In doing so, the civil rights movements – used here in a very broad sense to include movements around race, gender, colonialism, poverty, natural resources, health reform, educational reform, community and local development – placed new emphasis on the kinds of solidarities and exclusions that establish the day-to-day viability of ordinary social existence. These movements brought political attention to bear on how citizens get along and cope with living together, contesting things between themselves and pursuing different group interests, while maintaining some form of social cohesion. These new civil society mobilisations made great importance of the ties and binds of everyday life and of the rules of ordinary day to day public encounter.

Civil society, which in the nineteenth century had been identified with the world of the social that lies outside the immediate control of the state (and which had often been collapsed into meaning 'the market' as the space of 'private interests') began to acquire a new sense: increasingly, civil society pointed to the spaces and forms of association, collective action, self-organisation, and public activity that were neither

reducible to the state nor to the market. Most importantly, civil society became identified as a space where dissent – dissent from the agendas of state bureaucracy and from the demands of wealth accumulation – could be manifest, could be spoken, could be made palpable. (Civil society is not simply about spaces of discussion and consciousness-raising: it also has a strong experiential dimension concerning the potency of self-organisation and the liberating encounter of people with each other in the very act of simply coming together to consider whatever issues matter for them.) If in the 1950s the American black civil rights movement was the most prominent mass media representation of this kind of mobilisation arguably the Polish "Solidarity" movement became the iconic mass media image of such civil society movements for the 1980s.[2] The collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s onward has been key to the resurgence of interest in civil society as a third force to counter-balance the potential excesses of the state and of the market.

This very summary outline hopefully indicates that the concept of civil society is not fixed and finalised: It is a category of political and social thought in flux. The very notion of 'civil society' is the site of a great deal of debate and contest – some believing that the category is simply too woolly to be practically useful. For some the concept civil society becomes reduced to the issue of 'community' – association on the basis of identity and 'belonging together' in order to contest both the state and the market. For others it becomes reduced to the issue of 'social capital' – the networked integration and social cohesion of individuals actively pursuing their private interests and advantages. In practice the term is typically used in a way that keeps a multiplicity of meanings in play simultaneously. Like most concepts that have a complex history and a multi-faceted richness, the diffuse layers

of meaning within the idea of civil society are at times found useful for thinking with, and at other times met as blockages to making matters clear.

Just as the idea of civil society has shifted and changed over the course of its history, so too have the ways in which the idea has been challenged and co-opted by different ideological positions. When Margaret Thatcher famously declared there is no such thing as Society she demonstrated a particular kind of hostility to civil society that is associated with the heroic individualism celebrated by neo-liberalism.[3] When, today, David Cameron speaks of "the Big Society" we see a co-opting of civil society ideas into the neo-liberal project of shrinking the range of state-provided services and withdrawing from the social responsibilities of the post-WWII welfare state.[4]

Arguably, there has been a different trajectory within the Irish state as regards the co-option of civil society ideas and practices through state mechanisms. In the 2000s the formalisation of an already tacit rule, into an explicit regulation, meant that 'Organisations working in diverse areas – development aid, childcare, Travellers – were told that if they took money from government, which most do, they may not criticise.'[5] This 'strings-attached' co-funding by government is consistent with a broader pattern of the Irish state undermining the critical function of civil society and self-organised mobilisation. Brian Harvey points this out, citing a ruling by the Revenue Commissioners in denying charitable status to a leading voluntary organisation, that asserts that charities:

> must avoid (a) seeking to influence or remedy those causes of poverty which lie in the social, economic and political structures of countries and communities; (b) bringing pressure to bear on a government to procure a change in policies or administrative practices and (c) seeking to eliminate social, economic, political or other injustice and must operate exclusively for charitable purposes.[6]

So where do artists and art sit within these questions of civil society, dissent and community and other forms of self-organisation? There are three broad strategies that have emerged, which overlap with each other: (i) the community arts paradigm elaborated over several decades and often closely aligned with the community development model of civil society activation and mobilisation; (ii) the public culture paradigm emerging in the last decade which is often closely aligned with the question of political and social imaginaries that seek to posit alternate models of self-organisation and the political, in a manner that contests the idea of community, by emphasising dissent and 'public-ness' as a condition of contest and debate, and also increasingly makes use of the idea of the commons and shared self-government of resources used in common; and (iii) the public intellectual and activist paradigm which sees the artist and the arts in general as the bearer of an independent critical voice that calls attention to injustices, exclusions, erasures, and silencing of other voices and issues in society and establishes common cause with various constituencies in modes of protest and dissent. These strategies are not all equally activated in Ireland, however, they are each faced with a shared and recurrent problematic. This is in broad terms, the tension between the agency and investments of the arts and the pragmatics and priorities of social and political mobilisation.

The artist, like other professional civil society workers (community development worker, charitable foundation CEO, NGO fund-raiser, community educator) is caught up in a career project that may often have imperatives that are not readily aligned with the emergent needs of a given constituency or domain. The professionalisation of civil society as a work-domain for artists creates particular challenges when the reputational and professional advancement of the arts practitioner, and the project of self-marketing inherent to arts careers, is further considered.

However, this is just a problematic – it is not an absolute impasse. Part of the development of new arts practices here is the consideration of alternate models and understandings of civil society. This is easily said in the abstract language of a short text. It is, like many interesting things, much much harder to do.

[1] This interpretation is of course open to dispute: for an interesting discussion of the issues with reference to the civil rights movement in the US in the mid 20th century, see Jeffrey C. Alexander (2006) The Civil Sphere, Oxford University Press, pp. 638-651.

[2] ibid

[3] Thatcher famously said, talking to Women's Own magazine, October 31 1987: 'you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families' See [http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689] (7/9/2011)

[4] Cameron claimed, in a manner that reverses the polarities of Thatcher's rhetoric while maintaining the basic demand for withdrawal of the state, that 'the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism.' [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx] (7/9/2011)

[5] Brian Harvey (2009) 'Ireland and Civil Society: reaching the limits of dissent', in Deiric Ó Broin and Peadar Kirby (eds.) Power, Dissent & Democracy: Civil Society and the State in Ireland, A & A Farmar, p. 31.

[6] ibid.