

[Fox on Wiarda, 'Civil Society: The American Model and Third World Development'](#)

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Howard J. Wiarda. *Civil Society: The American Model and Third World Development.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2003. xi + 170 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-4076-0; \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-4077-7.

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Innocents Abroad

Intended as a primer for U.S. policymakers and nongovernmental organization (NGO) personnel overseas, *Civil Society* argues that naive efforts to export U.S.-style democracy are doomed to fail. Too many Americans, Howard Wiarda believes, fail to understand that the American model is not only alien to other societies' traditions but can even be seen as a threat to their very foundations. The vision dominant in the United States is what Wiarda properly calls "liberalism," which he defines as "a system of free and unfettered associability, pluralism, and largely unregulated interest group or nongovernmental organization (NGO) activity" (p. 3).

Wiarda summarizes the familiar story of this idea's evolution: introduced by the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, it leaped across the Atlantic to be americanized by James Madison, was famously catalogued in its many manifestations by Alexis de Tocqueville, and came to be applied pragmatically by such politicians as Franklin Roosevelt. By the mid-twentieth century, the free play of diverse and often mutually antagonistic associations came to be defined in the United States as the very essence of liberty and the source of strength of the national government. But this American view was and remains unique. Almost everywhere else, Wiarda argues, the ideal system is the opposite of liberalism: "corporatism," which means "state regulation and control of interest group/NGO activity and even the creation of official, state-run associational life" (p. 3).

Wiarda traces one strain of corporatist thought from Plato to Thomas Aquinas and the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez, whose vision of a God-given, "exclusionary, hierarchical, and fixed system of civil society" continues to be influential in Spain, Portugal and Latin America (p. 16). The more modern, secular strain begins with Rousseau, whose vision "of the instant, spontaneous eruption of liberty ... led by a heroic, charismatic leader" representing the "general will" has provided justification for "[e]very subsequent dictator, strong man, or revolutionary elite in history, whether Augusto Pinochet on the right or Fidel Castro on the left" (p. 19). Marx, he asserts, was a "child" of Rousseau's, in that his contempt for the give-and take of parliamentary procedures echoed the Frenchman's impatience with "institutional restraints" (p. 19).

As elaborated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, corporatist ideology posited that trade unions, employers' federations, youth groups, and even sports clubs or associations of whatever kind should all mesh together harmoniously to serve a common purpose, coordinated and regulated

by the state. Mussolini called this tight bundle of associations the *fascio*, and when fused with extreme nationalism in Italy, Germany, Spain and other countries, corporatism became part of the ideology of fascism. Since the defeat of the Axis in 1945, fascism has been discredited (mostly), but corporatism marches on, continuing to guide policy in almost all parts of the world.

However, when Wiarda moves on to look at NGOs in four non-European world regions, the liberalism-corporatism dichotomy has limited explanatory value. In Sub-Saharan Africa, while he applauds Benin, Ghana, Mali, and Senegal for their "flourishing private talk-radio stations," which he sees as "hallmarks of civil society" (p. 49), it is only in South Africa that he sees hope for a more open and multi-polar civil society. However even here he discerns "the corporatism phenomenon" rearing its anti-liberal head, as the government has "granted a virtual monopoly to certain favored black civic groups so that they are able to dominate an entire sector of society" (p. 58). But the real problems are extreme poverty, the AIDS epidemic, and an explosion of criminal violence, all of which require citizens and the authorities to cope using a patchwork of improvised solutions whether apparently liberal or corporatist. In most of Sub-Saharan Africa, even if leaders sometimes quote liberal or socialist texts, it is their region's tribal and clan affiliations and the fierce conflicts between them, as well as obligations to hereditary and newly acquired clients, and the many conflicts arising from extreme poverty and lack of control over national resources that impel most of them to establish tightly controlled political systems with little tolerance for free associativeness.

In East Asia, "corporatism" and "liberalism" seem even less relevant. It is not Aquinas or Rousseau but Confucius who, by Wiarda's own account, is the point of reference for filial and group obligations so overwhelming that they make liberalism's idea of individual autonomy--and thus the formation of civic groups unapproved by the state--almost inconceivable. For this reason "civil society in the sense of vast networks of independent associations standing between the individual and the state and serving as a check on governmental authority" barely exists in this region (p. 68). Does that mean that Asians are less free than Westerners? Wiarda does not say, but his emphasis on such nascent civil society associations as he finds implies that they will be freer when they have them.

As for the region that Wiarda calls "the Middle East and Islamic society," stretching from North Africa to Malaysia, Egypt since Nasser might be described as "corporatist," but the term hardly applies to the Arabian kingdoms or theocratic Iran. In most of the area, tribe, clan, and rigid religious rules make "unfettered sociability" a heretical fantasy.

Wiarda is best known for his many books on Latin America, and it is in this region that his concept of corporatism is most persuasive. The seventy-year rule of the PRI in Mexico, the Vargas governments in Brazil, and Peronism in Argentina during and since Perón all seem to fit the description, and the impulse to regulate all civic associations is strong throughout the region. Wiarda excludes from his study the one country with the most highly developed civil society in the region, Cuba, no doubt because he does not consider it democratic, and of course American-funded NGOs there are not encouraged and must act surreptitiously. In general, civil society is far more developed in Latin America than in the other three regions, but outside of Cuba--where dozens of associations, from trade unions to neighborhood groups, are mobilized regularly for public works and relief in emergencies--civil society contributes little to either economic development or democratization in Latin America. In fact, in Latin America generally, "the growth of pluralism and civil society seems to lead not necessarily to stability but to division, fragmentation, and even political breakdown" (p. 89).

Why should this be so? A major reason is that so much of this civil society is dependent on foreign, mostly U.S., funding. Even when they conduct undeniably useful projects, say for example in public health, the foreign-based NGOs' very presence emphasizes and even encourages dependency rather than the kind of independent, self-starting associations envisioned by de Tocqueville. And of course their motives are suspect. Such suspicions can arouse great hostility, making it harder for the NGOs to do their work. "In all my case study countries" in Latin America, Wiarda writes, "I sensed growing tension between the governments involved and the foreign based civil society groups" (p. 104).

Latin Americans and others have good reason to be suspicious. In Latin America and in other areas, the U.S. government and the foundations it influences increasingly require that NGOs implement U.S. policies, for example in regard to family planning as a condition to receive funds to combat AIDS. Beyond that, U.S. funding through the National Endowment for Democracy and other agencies has even supported movements to overthrow uncooperative governments, as in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and U.S. funding was also critically supportive of the short-lived coup of April 2002 in Venezuela.

Most recently, "the US House of Representatives approved appropriations of \$9 million in 2006 and \$9 million in 2007 for groups opposing the government of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, according to information minister Andres Izarra, who complained that the beneficiaries of the aid are promoting abstention in the country's August 7 municipal council elections and encouraging civil disobedience." [1] While the United States may vaunt its "liberalism" at home, it projects a kind of corporatism abroad, in that it seeks to subordinate other people's civil societies to the U.S. government.

Meanwhile the Internet and all the other modern communications make the dream of a truly free and open society a motivating force even in the most repressed societies. However, as Wiarda cautions, this dream will not be realized by "importing" the American model. If it grows at all it will have to grow naturally, within and not against local traditions, in the give-and-take of conflicting demands of the various sectors of each country's population. Americans working abroad who understand these limits and are sensitive to local aspirations may be able to assist their hosts to find their own ways to widen opportunities. If they butt in naively and demand that their hosts replicate U.S. ways, they will only retard the process.

Civil Society will be useful reading for anyone working in NGOs abroad who does not already have a wide grounding in comparative political theory. In a classroom, its short, concise, and polemical assertions should prove an excellent starting point for lively debate and a stimulus to further reading in the theorists that Wiarda here touches upon lightly.

Note

[1]. Weekly News Update on the Americas, no. 808, July 24, 2005. Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York (via LACYORK), wnu@igc.org.

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