

An Interpretive-Systemic Framework for the Study of Community Organizations¹

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This paper presents a conceptual framework for the systemic study of Community Organizations in contemporary societies. This framework is made up of two ideal-type models of Community Organizations. These models are structured around the notions of rights, social interaction, and the State. The first ideal-type model is based on a liberal conception of society, and the second model is grounded on communicative ethics as developed by Habermas for contemporary deliberative democracy. The relevance and limitations of such interpretive framework are discussed when a brief exploration on the social meaning of Community Organizations in Venezuela unveils grounds for further questioning about the role of COs in contemporary society.

KEY WORDS: interpretive systemology; community organizations; modern society; democracy; Venezuelan organizations

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of Community Organizations (COs) as efficient mechanisms to alleviate the conditions of the most disadvantaged sectors of society has been usually referred to as the main reason for their boom in the provision of welfare and care in industrial societies. Thus, it seems that the social conditions in which such discourse appears are crucial to understand and comprehend these types of organizations.

Following the trends of globalization and democratization around the world, the organization of different sectors of society in order to defend and promote their interests became a key aspect for the process of modernization and functional differentiation in society. This implied that Community Organizations (COs) became a political actor beyond the role of alleviation of marginal sectors in society. How does it happen? What are the implications of this “new” political role of COs in the whole society?

Furthermore, the involvement of COs in the support and care of the most disadvantaged sectors of society implies a re-definition of the welfare apparatus of the Modern State. In particular, it becomes more important in societies where the State was unsuccessful in the creation of a welfare apparatus. This makes us

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question the legitimacy and social appropriateness of substituting the State in the provision of welfare in current society when the increasing figures of poverty in countries, like Latin-American ones, that are running IMF programs to become competitive and attractive to foreign investments.

Consequently, it appears that the social implications of COs go beyond the issue of being efficient and efficacious in their performance. Indeed, it is necessary to consider the social, political, and economic conditions of these societies in which COs appear in order to grasp their social role.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERPRETIVE-SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK

Before presenting the interpretive framework for the study of COs, it is necessary to briefly comment on the structure of this framework.

The purpose of this framework is to help in the process of gaining systemic comprehension about a given phenomenon. This systemic comprehension is understood as the result of the debate carried out among different conceptions concerning the phenomenon of study. These different accounts allow the critical approach of some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about this phenomenon

The goal is not to exhaust the phenomenon as it appears in everyday situations. Instead, this goal is orientated to gain consciousness about the relative and contingent character of the phenomenon by disclosing different meanings and to consider them as possible modes of explaining the social sense of a given phenomenon. A full explanation on the epistemological grounds of this mode of inquiry can be found in Fuenmayor (1991b).

Therefore, the framework is made up of different modes of conceiving the phenomenon considering a common platform from which they can become differentiated and even opposed. This common platform allows the process of debate without the troubles of incommensurability. Obviously, such platform could also be critically studied.

In summary, the framework provides two contexts of meaning to understand the appearance and development of COs. It allows to make relative some of the usually taken-for-granted assumptions concerning COs. Hence, it attempts to increase the critical awareness about the COs as a social phenomenon which could become ideologically addressed.

3. THE INTERPRETIVE-SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

In contemporary society, it is usually taken-for-granted that human beings are searching for self-realization and that any action —individual or collective— should be measured in terms of this goal. COs are not an exception and they are considered as collective answers for the self-realization of members of society, in particular, those sectors considered as marginal.

However, self-realization of individuals is not an absolute objective and it is a

rather recent goal for human beings. In modern society, two modes of self-realization are considered as relevant for this interpretive framework. They are individual self-realization, measured in terms of material development and the improvement of his/her living material conditions and, self-realization understood as a collective process of constitution of an identity that enhances the development of a just society through political participation. It is important to point out that these two possibilities are not exhaustive of the mode of conceiving self-realization in modern society.

Considering these two modes of self-realization as the nucleus for two different possibilities of conceiving the role of COs in current society, then a next step is to identify key concepts upon which modern society is commonly distinguished. They are “social interaction”, “individual rights,” and the State.

Social cohesion appears because of the plurality of interests, and the inevitable conflict among them, which implies that an explanation about the grounds upon which society exists is required. It clearly contrasts with traditional societies in which individual will and choice are not present, and collectivities were prior to individuals. The second concept —individual rights— is made up of the limits imposed on the State and other individuals, to affect and influence the individual’s autonomy within a given sphere. Rights are the acknowledgment of an individual sphere for the self-definition of the individual in modern society. Finally, the third element that makes possible the notion of rights in modern society is the State, which separates individual autonomy from the public sphere.

In each model, there is a basic definition of the State, mode of social interaction, and a notion of rights.

3.1. The CO as an Instrument for Individual Self-Realization

The notion of individual self-realization as a primary and individually defined goal implies that an individual distances him/herself from his/her own interests, desires, and purposes. Hence, the individual becomes essentially an isolated and voluntaristic agent whose involvement in society is motivated by the use of society as an instrument for its own purposes (Nozick, 1974). This means to conceive social networks as instrumental webs for the fulfillment of individual projects.

From this instrumental character of social networks, a contract-based relationship among agents is the basis for social interaction. Each individual accepts the need of a neutral space in which contracts are guaranteed by an external component: the State. This space allows the reduction of uncertainties derived from the conflict among individual interests to a given and controllable dimension. In this context, contracts among individuals are the starting point for modern society. (See Hobbes, 1968).

The most immediate place to which each individual goes to acquire instruments for his/her own realization is the economic sphere because it is here where contracts are primarily defined. Consequently, the economic sphere acquires a key role as it defines a minimum set of conditions regarding contractual

relationships. Integration is achieved naturally through economic categories: the exchange of commodity and labor.

The autonomy of the economic sphere stems from the pre-eminence reached by money as a steering media in society. Material production is privileged above all other activity. Marx summarizes the instrumentality of the individual in modern capitalist society in the following terms:

What political economy and capitalist production presuppose –the integration of the individuals into a competitive structure and into a class– entails the abstraction not only of the individual’s activity but also of his needs and personality as well. It means that the individual has become from the standpoint of capital, a mere worker, a commodity and an instrument of labor equivalent in status to the machines that periodically replace him (Marx, 1963, my emphasis).

This function of the worker considered as instrument by the owner is complemented by the economic interaction among the owners of the means of production. Everything in such a society is ruled by economic imperatives.

3.1.1. The Notion of State

Following the notion of individual and social interaction previously presented; the role of the State can be defined following Habermas’ notion of the Capitalist State:

To protect commerce according to civil law, and to protect the market from self-destructive side effects. In addition, the state provides the prerequisites of production in the economy as a whole (i.e., education, transport, and communication), and defines the system of civil law that emerges from the process of accumulation (tax, banking, and business law) (Habermas, 1975 p. 35)

The State became functionally defined and designed to serve the development of the economic sphere as the way of securing the self-realization of individuals considering that each individual follows his/her own project. The “minimum State” becomes justified as an agent of protection in order to safeguard the conditions necessary for the realization of such projects (Nozick, 1974). In this regard, the main factors to be addressed by the State are risks and uncertainties in the social milieu.

The risks and uncertainties refer to the realization of individual projects and their contribution to society. Hence the State would provide a minimum set of conditions that do not imply the endangering of any individual project. For instance, poverty and marginalization are not seen as problems of society as a whole, but as the incapacity of the individual to satisfy their own interests (Nozick, 1974).

The issue to address now is the way in which the interaction between the State and the rest of society takes place.

3.1.2. Social Interaction as Strategic Intercourse

The functional definition of the State as devoted to the stimulation and

regulation of the economic sphere means that authority and legitimacy are also conditioned by an economic rationale. The groups of interests arising in society are a result of individual needs shared among different individuals. These needs are defined on a material basis, hence they are subject to an instrumental rationality based on an egocentric strategic calculus (Habermas, 1983). It implies that collective action is an aggregate of individual acts.

According to Tilly (1985), collective action in modern societies is understood as the mobilization of groups in order to satisfy the interests of their members. The way of conceiving mobilization as the social form to interact strategically is now developed. Mobilization consists in demonstrating concerns and opinions of a group of people to the rest of society. Its purpose is to inform the State and other members of society that there are a large number of individuals sharing a similar interest. Hence, it should become of public concern.

Therefore, the success of a mobilization depends on the number of members of the society involved. A large-scale involvement should be able to compel the State to consider as public the issue raised by such mobilization. The issue becomes general in terms of being valuable for the fulfillment of desires, goals, and purposes of a majority, or an influential sector of society.

The function of sectional groups is to search for a common interest held by different individuals to orchestrate individual action in the satisfaction of a specific interest.

The success of a mobilization requires, according to Tilly, the presence of an organization, availability of resources, opportunities, and strategies before engaging in any action (Tilly, 1985). The addressing of these factors requires a conscious and *rational engagement* in a process of institutionalizing the defense and promotion of interests held by different groups (ibid.). Accordingly, collective action is conceived in terms of a logic of strategic interaction and costs-benefit calculation (ibid.). Rational is understood in this context as rationality of means. Hence, mobilization is only evaluated on strategic terms.

Mobilizations in modern society are possible due to the existence of rights, guaranteed by the State, to organize, speak publicly, and demonstrate. Hence, the legitimacy of mobilization is assured by law, and the effort of organizers of such mobilizations is to achieve success at the operative level, and to calculate costs and benefits. That means that the relevance and scope of collective action are bounded by norms drawn up by the State, and in accordance with economic imperatives (ibid.).

The collective action therefore becomes strategic. Habermas conceives strategic action as being:

“concerned about the ‘objective world’ with at least two goal-directed acting subjects who achieve their ends by way of an orientation to and influence on the decisions of other actors, each of whom is orientated to his own success and behaves co-operatively only to the degree that this fits with his egocentric calculus of utility” (Habermas, 1983 p. 87).

Tilly considers the pre-eminence of strategic action in collective action as a mark of modernity. Tilly contrasts the rational orientation towards a specific goal in current mobilization with the spontaneous crowds of the past that were moved by passions and not by reason (Tilly, 1985).

As can be seen above, the State is functionally conceived to provide, and to secure the realization of contracts according to strategic rationality. This implies that unintended and independent laws governing commodity and labor exchange secure social cohesion. In this regard, those social forms devoted to mediate between the State and individuals are motivated by the same sort of rationality. Consequently, there is no need for a “Universal will”. On the contrary, strategic action suggests that co-operation takes place on the basis of an egocentric utility (Barragan, 1989) (Axelrod, 1984). The space for an unobstructed search of this utility is where the State is not allowed to intervene: the sphere of rights.

3.1.3. *Rights in an Instrumental-Economic Society*

Because of the strong bias of a contract-based view of society, it seems that rights should be orientated to reduce the uncertainty in the dealings among strategic actors (Hobbes, 1968) (Zimmerman, 1988). The theory of natural-rights seems to provide the answer to the notion of rights in this framework. Rights can be understood using the Kantian definition in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: “Each action is right which is such that the freedom of each individual can coexist with the freedom of everybody else according to a universal law (Kant, 1989)”

Wellmer, starting from this notion of rights, states:

Negative freedom, restricted by means of a general law which guarantees equal freedom of everybody, is the basic content of natural rights; and the basic achievement of the social contract is that the universal law mentioned in Kant’s definition becomes a *positive law*, enforced by a political authority which has the power to punish whoever violates the rights of others. Needless to say, the basic paradigms of these “inviolable” rights have always been property rights (Wellmer, 1990 p.228).

This notion of rights is important because it puts emphasis on the law as the means through which the State regulates negative freedom. Property rights constitute the core for the material realization of a society in which commodity exchange constitutes the main source of interaction among individuals. To be an owner means to be capable of bargaining with others. Even more, the being of an individual is based on having.

The emergence of rights centered on property is interpreted as a way of constraining the intervention of the State in the private sphere of autonomous individuals. Moreover, the assumption that economic relationships are governed by independent laws beyond the control of the State which develop in strategic interactions, means that rights can only be endorsed to individuals (Dworkin, 1977). Individual rights are considered to be valid notwithstanding the nature of the State.

Consequently, the task of defining rights has already been determined because they are limited by economic laws, which have developed without the intervention of human will.

Thus, the definition of rights results in a “technical” procedure to identify the minimum conditions to attain the economic independence of individuals. Obviously, it reduces uncertainty in the process of commodity exchange by limiting it to a strategic action defined by contracts approved by the State.

In summary, the role of the State in an instrumental-economic society develops in the space of strategic interactions among different groups of interests, and its main task is to regulate the side effects of this interaction in order to preserve the status quo. In this sense, rights are considered to avoid the violation of the private sphere of individuals engaged in strategic interaction.

The definition of the State as being functionally driven by the market, and the identification of the relationships between the State and the rest of society as economic relationships underline the utilitarian nature of modern society. Here then, the value of collective action is only measurable in terms of costs/benefits to each individual. Social interaction based on the strategic egocentric calculus becomes the basis for collective action (Tilly, 1985).

3.1.4. A Definition of CO in an Instrumental-Economic Society

In the context of an instrumental economic society a CO is defined as *an organization devoted to the pursuit of a goal common among individuals who value it in terms of its importance for the fulfillment of individual projects concerned with material conditions.*

This common goal arises as a result of a strategic calculation of costs and benefits, together with an evaluation of the uncertainty implied by the involvement of other individuals in pursuing a goal considered relevant to an individual’s self-realization.

The goal of a CO must be defined according to the “material” expectations of its members. This implies that actors involved in strategic interaction, their interests, and the criteria for decision-making are known before the interaction with other groups and the State began.

It is assumed that every individual has the same capacity to define his/her true interests, and that these interests are rationally definable and defensible within an economic framework. This “unencumbered self” (Sandel, 1982) with the capacity of distancing itself from circumstances and attempting to define the true interests articulating it, in such a way that they can be rationally pursued, suggests a reduction of the space of common interests to material needs.

Material need is the key element, which will assure co-operative behavior as considered from a strategic point of view. Here, debate and bargaining are reduced to the economic sphere. Beyond this sphere, the debate would involve value and moral frameworks, which are considered incommensurable. This means that the economic space is the only space in which individuals join others in order to achieve

a specific goal without major difficulties.

Hence, CO becomes instrumental (Sandel, 1982). This instrumentality refers to a strategic use of a social relationship to reach a goal considered primarily as an individual one. Co-operation emerges from the joint operation of independent individuals in the institutional framework of society.

Consequently, the search for individual well being through the organization of efforts and resources of a group of individuals constitutes the basis for COs.

COs ask for the satisfaction of conditions that secure every individual's self-realization, not including the space for exchange of social labor. The other agents in the networks of CO's actions are civil society and the State. Here, the relationships of COs in the civil society are competitive. They compete among themselves for scarce resources and to influence the actions performed by the State.

This general outline of COs based on the perspective of the State and society, as instruments for the individual's self-realization will be enriched by considering the mode of relationship with the State.

The strategic interaction developed by COs implies a clear definition of interests by each organization and the identification of opportunities and resources in such interactions. There appear to be two forms of "co-operative" mediation carried out by COs to access social resources. First, as an agent of the State in the delivery of public services and goods. Second, as a partner of the State in this delivery. These are the two forms of operations that are becoming central in the definition of the role of COs in present day society (Gutch et. al, 1990). The difference is the level of influence of COs in the actions executed by the State. As an agent, CO only performs operative tasks. As a partner, CO has a major involvement in the design of policies and their implementation in conjunction with the State.

3.1.5. Basic Operations of COs in an Instrumental-Economic Society

The framework, in which a CO can develop as an agent or partner of the State in the provision of material well being for communities, will condition its activities. Such conditioning can be summarized in the following way:

- a) A CO acts according to norms and procedures defined by the State in order to be acknowledged as a representative of sectional interests. Such norms exist to reduce the uncertainty among the different groups.
- b) A CO should calculate the cost-benefits of mobilization before engaging in it.
- c) Information flow between the State and a CO is constant and accurate in order to assure that both parties properly understand requirements of the community and their fulfillment.
- d) Information channels between a CO and a community are continuously updated to preserve the support of community members towards the organization. The uncertainty implied by the instrumental character of social relationships needs to be reduced to a minimum to secure support from each community.

- e) Mobilization attempts to make the State aware that some needs should be considered as public needs. These mobilizations should try to enlist as many sectors of the population as possible to be effective.

3.2 COs in a Deliberative Democratic Society

This interpretive framework is based on discursive ethics (Habermas, 1989) in which a synthesis between autonomous individual and the social conditioning of self-identity constitute a form of self-realization through social interaction. According to Habermas, “authentic” integration in modern society must allow pluralism of interests and the continuous search for a common ground in which differences are acknowledged.

This cohesive force, embodied in modern society by the State, is paradigmatically associated with a “deliberative democracy” (Habermas, 1996), which implies the definition and guarantee of rights that secure a public sphere in which individuals can come together and engage in a critical debate about the constitution of society as a whole. This takes place in order to consider political rights as a key concept in the notion of Modern State and social interaction.

The minimum conditions to secure the space for a public sphere are: a) allowing the involvement of any individual without any constraint other than the voluntary will of joining such a group; b) the existence of a set of rights that recognizes each individual to be equal before the law, and equal treatment of those interest-groups formed by individuals; c) the public sphere should constitute the source for a political definition of society as a whole, and be the core for legitimacy in society.

The fulfillment of these conditions implies reaching a legitimate rational agreement based on the search for truth. This means that a norm of action has validity only if “all those possibly affected by it would, as participants in a practical (normative) discourse, arrive at an agreement that such a norm should come into or remain in force” (Habermas, 1990 p.65). That implies a process of discursive argumentation.

According to Habermas, the normative ground of discursive argumentation is a claim for an ethics. Habermas suggests that the goal of any contemporary ethics is to:

Ensure the inviolability of socialised individuals by requiring equal treatment and respect for the dignity of each, and [to] protect the intersubjective relations of reciprocal recognition by requiring solidarity among individuals as members of a community in which they are socialised. (Habermas, 1990 p. 243-244).

Accordingly, socialized individuals interact among themselves through communication. They are assumed to behave as self-reflexive individuals who search for their true and genuine interests in society. This means that such ethics should refer to communicative processes: discourse ethics is therefore required.

3.2.1. *Discourse Ethics as a Basis for a Deliberative Democratic Society*

The formal properties that *discursive argumentation* would have to possess in order to reach an unbiased consensus are the conditions of an “ideal speech situation.” According to this ideal, debate is assumed without the constraints imposed by power, wealth, tradition or authority. The conditions of an ideal speech situation are:

First, each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; second, each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, and explanations, and to challenge justifications...Third, all must have equal chances as actors to express their wishes, feelings, and intention; and fourth, the speakers must act as if in contexts of action there is an equal distribution of chances “to order and resist order, to promise and to refuse, to be accountable for one’s conduct and to demand accountability from others” (Benhabib, 1986 p. 285)

The first two conditions are considered as “conditions of symmetry.” The last two conditions are referred to as “conditions of reciprocity” with respect to existing action contexts, and they require a suspension of situations of untruthfulness on the one hand, and of inequality and subordination on the other.

These sets of conditions refer solely to rules that should be followed by participants “*if they were to strive for an agreement motivated by the force of the better argument alone*” (Cohen and Arato, 1992). If this is not the case, then they will not be engaged in discursive argumentation.

This is considered as a weak point in discourse ethics. However, when the process is oriented to define fair norms governing society, the force of the better argument becomes the driving force in society if it wants to become legitimate in a pluralistic society.

Habermas reformulates the Kantian categorical imperative to make it compatible with the procedural rules of argument with other human beings as follows: each member has to *offer his/her “maxim to everyone with the aim of discursively testing its claim to universalizability.”* The emphasis shifts from what each can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm” (Habermas, 1990; p. 67).

So far, it is an ethical formula that emphasizes the relevance of discursive argumentation among autonomous rational individuals. Hence, there is an ethical basis for the composition of a public sphere that should deal with the pluralities emerging in a differentiated society. Consequently, these ethics become the framework on which social interaction develops.

3.2.2. *Social Interaction as Communicative Intercourse*

The process of communicative debate is the nucleus for social interaction. Cohen and Arato establish: “the only way to find out what, if anything, is common to us all, what should be the domain of legal regulation, what forms of political

decision-making are legitimate, what should be left to the autonomous subject's personal judgment, and what must be compromised with" (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p.355) is through practical debate. This is a key condition for a community in modern society orientated by a discursive ethics. The synthesis between an acknowledgment of a plurality of interests and a common nucleus for social norms is then possible.

The previous synthesis implies a conscious composition of a collective identity which provides the "minimum criterion, with respect to content, of the legitimacy of norms in the negative sense as *that which cannot be violated*" (Cohen and Arato, 1992 p.368). This is the disclosing of conditions upon which laws and rights are defined in each society.

This collective identity is composed of the discovery or re-appropriation of traditions, memories, values, and social practices that are sources of solidarity that can sustain the rational core of a political collective identity, which is subject to the procedures of public communication (Cohen and Arato, 1992).

Accordingly, the group's common identity has two components that allow it to mediate between particular interests held by the group and the metanorms of a discourse ethics. They are:

- (1) the postconventional universal dimension which implies self-reflection and a non-traditional attitude to problematic norms;
- (2) the dimension of a particular tradition, the source of content, which, however, involves specific modes of institutionalising discourses, basic rights, and particular traditions for applying metanorms. When questioned, these can be opened up to discussion on the basis of the former attitude without thereby bursting the framework of the common identity (Cohen and Arato, 1992 p.373).

The nucleus of identity lies in the will to reveal the contingent character of traditions without necessitating the continual destruction of such traditions. The processes through which collective identity is composed from an individual's standpoint assume that individualization is reachable through the communicative processes of socialization in the context of a speech community and in an intersubjectively shared Lifeworld. Individuals acquire a unique identity only as members of a collective, and simultaneously, they acquire a group identity as well (ibid.).

Such insight allows a comprehension of the process of identity as made up by two complementary aspects: One universalizing, in that people learn to orientate themselves within a universalistic framework that is to act autonomously [in Kant's sense]. On the other hand, they learn to use this autonomy to develop themselves in their subjectivity and singularity (Habermas, 1987a).

The collective and individual identities require a recursive development between them to be continuously reinforced through socialization processes. This implies solidarity among individuals intended to enrich both poles, collective and individual.

The notion of solidarity embodied in discourse ethics implies an ability to identify with the non-identical, the acceptance of the other as “one who must be accorded the same chance to articulate identity needs and arguments as one would like oneself” (Cohen and Arato p. 383). Solidarity is thus rooted in the experience that each must take responsibility for the other, because as consociates they all share an interest in the integrity of their common life context.

This notion of community in modern society helps to define the role of intermediate institutions between individuals and the State as being *the composition of a collective identity from a self-reflective and critical standpoint, which is capable of evaluating this identity from the metanorms of discourse ethics, and allowing the autonomy of individuals.*

Consequently, if discourse ethics is ruling the process of legitimating, then the existence of democracy is required in order to allow and stimulate pluralism.

Habermas defines democracy as *all political orders that satisfy a procedural type of legitimacy, in the sense of the procedures validated by discourse ethics.* It implies a “self-controlled learning process” (Habermas, 1975) that is capable of promoting institutional change.

The process of learning through which social interaction develops is based on the presence of institutions devoted to a discursive validation and justification that ensures democratic participation of all concerned, in order to reach a law accepted as legitimate by the members of society. In particular, it should provide the basis for the legitimation of a key component for the development of a democratic order: the definition of rights. The issue of rights becomes paramount in this context because it implies the exercise of control on the State by autonomous individuals through the process of legislation, and debate about the binding character of such laws.

3.2.3 The State under Conditions of a Deliberative Democracy

The State in this context can be defined as: *The set of institutions devoted to guarantee the existence of a public sphere in which a search for the formation of the public will is done under conditions of fairness, equality, and justice. These conditions constitute the primary rights for every individual, and the basis on which any other right can be defined.*

The duties of the State unfold in two planes. A first one referred to the preservation and guarantee of a public sphere structured through an aggregation process from local to national institutions. In this sense, the State should reinforce the political involvement through civic education allowing the enrichment of a democratic culture in society. The second plane refers to the guarantee of a minimum set of material conditions in order to minimize that conditions of inequality and marginalization emerging from the market invade and distort such public sphere. In a nutshell, to preserve the basic conditions that allows the search for social justice, equity and fairness.

3.2.4. *Rights in a Deliberative Democratic Society*

Rights become the first and minimum element for the democratic organization of society in which discourse ethics play a legitimating role. Formally, rights represent a voluntary self-limitation of State power. However, they are not only the result of positive (written) legislation proposed by the State. They are also socially composed and realized (ibid.). This definition of rights in the social space demands the participation of individuals in the public sphere, because it is here where the demands for the protection of basic rights can be successful. It implies an institutionalization of discourses asking for rights and supporting them. Furthermore, discourse ethics also provides a basis for justifying rights in society. *The main claim is to identify at the core of basic rights, the “right” to assert rights on the part of the citizenry* (Cohen and Arato, 1992).

Following the argument presented by Cohen and Arato, *basic rights can be interpreted as normative requirements for participation in practical discourses about society* (Cohen and Arato, 1992). The existence of civil and political rights is necessary conditions for the institutionalization of democracy and for the development of a practical discourse between autonomous individuals. In this context, autonomy refers to collective autonomy as it was defined before. In summary, the metanorms of rational discourse “demand” the principle of basic rights.

Finally, these basic rights “enter in neither as possible contents of a discussion nor as limits to the reach of a possible discussion, but rather as *the constitutive principles of discussion itself*” (Cohen and Arato, 1992 p. 400, my emphasis).

This way of considering rights signifies the regaining of the value of public sphere and civil society as the terrain for democratically disputing and exercising rights in modern society. Following Lefort, *the symbolic significance of rights is the open possibility of fighting for the fuller realization, expansion, reinterpretation, and creation of new rights* (Lefort, 1986).

Thus, it appears that the importance of a discourse ethics in a democratic society is the possibility of making relative the notion of rights as being defined from a participative and active engagement in public spaces.

From this general account of discourse ethics as constitutive of a democratic society, it appears that *civil society can be conceived of as the space in which the exercise of democratic legitimate procedures occurs. It becomes separated from the State and from economy*. It means the overcoming of an authoritarian conception of civil society, and the rejection of the idea of civil society being guided by the economic imperatives, as envisaged by Hegel and Marx (Cohen and Arato, 1992). Furthermore, in terms of the differences in modern society between System and Lifeworld, discourse ethics appears as guiding the process of rationalization so that instrumental reason is not left as the only source of legitimacy in society.

The public sphere and voluntary associations articulating the Lifeworld and the System from a discourse ethical standpoint perform the role of mediation

between modern civil society and the form of representative democracy in the State:

... A plural, dynamic civil society finds in a parliamentary structure the most plausible general framework in which the conflicts of member groups and individuals can be politically mediated, rival interests can be aggregated, and the possibility of reaching a consensus can be explored. Parliamentary structures of interest aggregation and conflict mediation, on the other hand, work well only if there is a more or less open articulation of these on the social level. In short, in representative democracies, political society both presupposes and must be open to the influence of civil society (Cohen and Arato, p.413)

It is in civil society, and in its organizational forms that the principle of democratic legitimacy can go further because the mechanism of communicative interaction has fundamental priority in this space³. In these types of organizations, participation on a small-scale would always be possible, and as Tocqueville hoped, not only would they become the real substance of democratic local government but a basis for processes of self-education that can lead to a democratic political culture (Tocqueville, 1955).

3.2.5. A Definition of CO in a Deliberative Democratic Society

The main task for COs in this framework is to become engaged in social learning processes and identity formation through the promotion of public spheres and a discursive ethics within a wide range of institutions. This could be achieved through a self-limiting radical democracy that reaches equilibrium between democratic elitism and passivity. More specifically, the COs should develop the following policies:

1. The redefinition of cultural norms, individual and collective identities, and the form and content of discourses (*Politics of identity*).
2. The search for recognition of political society, of new political actors and their empowerment to obtain benefits for those whom they represent (*Politics of inclusion*).
3. The modification of the universe of political discourse to incorporate new identities, needs and norms. (*Politics of influence*).
4. The democratization of political and economic institutions in order to assure the permanence of successes accomplished in the previous three processes (*Politics of reformation*) (Cohen and Arato, 1992).

This implies the development of organizations that can exert pressure to obtain inclusion in the economy and the public administration (a strategic/instrumental mode of action is indispensable at this level) in order to assure that money and administrative power are not becoming the only steering media in

³ This priority stems from the voluntary character of institutions and the assumed independence from money and power as steering media.

society.

4. THE COs IN UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES. THE CASE OF VENEZUELA

In the following paragraphs, a brief description of Venezuelan COs shows the appropriateness and some of the limitations of this interpretive framework to comprehend the social role of COs. A more detailed account can be found in Ochoa (1992) (1996).

The main task of Venezuelan COs is to mediate between the State and communities. This has two dimensions: the provision of material services, and the political influence. It is important to remark that in any case the State plays a key role.

In the first dimension, related to provision of material resources, COs were shown to perform it on a direct or indirect basis. The direct provision refers to processes through which grassroots organizations deal directly with the State based on the organizational ground of the State. In this sense, CO plays a role of monitor of needs of community and channel for distribution of services and goods. The indirect provision implies the involvement of intermediate organizations, which are capable of providing a bridge between grassroots organizations or communities, and the State. These organizations (usually Foundations and Non Governmental Organizations) are defined in order to fulfill needs in a specific issue (i.e., childcare, education, and housing). These organizations are not defined by spatial considerations but in terms of specific problems in which they develop some expertise.

In any case, involvement of the State is required in order to fulfill needs of specific communities or interest groups. The relevance of the State in performing this task suggests that there is an implicit political dimension in this provision.

Considering the political influence, COs are considered as political actors which develop their activities in two related directions. First, they engage in political struggle to ensure that benefits of the community can be maximized and negative effects of some public decisions minimized. This is usually performed through political influence in each specific case when a community considers that its interests are affected. Second, COs engage in asking the State for a fair and democratic treatment of those interests concerning the community. That usually means a claim for democratic procedures in public decision making.

It is important to remark that in both cases, a community does not only refer to a geographically bounded group of people, but to any group of people who share an attribute which becomes relevant for the members of the group as a whole. Although empirical data reveals that geographical conditions are important, it does not necessarily mean that all political mediation is limited to geographical issues (World Bank Report, 1992)

Finally, COs are considered as instruments for political clientelism, a form of mediation between State and communities in which electoral support is exchanged

for material provision.

Considering Venezuelan COs from each account of COs previously developed will unveil some aspects regarding Venezuelan COs and the appropriateness of the interpretive framework.

4.1. Venezuelan COs in an Instrumental-Economic Society

The involvement of Venezuelan COs in the provision (indirect or direct) of material services or goods reveals that the framework of an instrumental economic society is appropriate to highlight some characteristics of Venezuelan COs. Consequently, a role of Venezuelan COs would be to search for individual self-realization. This individual self-realization can be considered as urgent for a majority of Venezuelan population who experienced an impoverishment process without receiving any significant help from welfare services of the Venezuelan State. Indeed, COs could be considered as private-orientated mechanisms to regain access to services and goods through the joint efforts of people excluded from the market.

This social meaning of CO is reinforced by the emergence of COs in marginal urban settlements devoted to provide basic services and goods, which are unreachable through conventional mechanisms. This provision does not imply any political concern about a collective project for the development of these settlements. It is very common among inhabitants to consider that living in a marginal sector is a temporal condition that will be overcome through individual success. This probably explains why there are more requests for the fulfillment of immediate needs and a rather apathetic attitude towards needs whose satisfaction implies long-term projects.

However, this account from an instrumental economic society is not complete. When considering their relationships with the State, it seems that a routinization of the process of asking support from the State is not necessarily an appropriate strategy to deal with a State that is retiring from its social duties. At this time, the Venezuelan State is refusing to fulfill needs that were exclusively satisfied by the State a few years ago. Hence, it seems that strategic interaction is not present in Venezuelan COs in order to mobilize people to get any material support from the State.

Finally, the presence in the formal discourse of Venezuelan COs of issues such as solidarity, social change and political participation (see Ochoa, 1996) suggests that individual self-realization is not the only goal orienting the actions of these organizations. If one considers that they are just means to promote COs, one wonders about the need of such motivation in a society propelled by individualism.

4.2 Venezuelan COs in a Deliberative Democracy

The claim for democratic participation, solidarity and pluralism appearing in public discourse regarding Venezuelan COs (Ochoa, 1996) suggests that these organizations play a key role in the development of a democratic society. Indeed, it

was argued that engagement of marginal sectors in projects based on democratic principles would form a mechanism to improve the performance of the State in dealing with social issues (Ochoa, 1996). In short, democratic organization in marginal sectors is the basis for the improvement of their own condition. It could be considered that self-realization is conceived as a collective project and rooted on the possibility of making collective identity possible.

However, when considering some tendencies in the majority of Venezuelan CO's, engagement in deliberative democratic experiences is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a presence of solidarity and the search for a collective project that suggests a collective self-realization. But on the other hand, the political dimension of such projects does not go beyond the boundaries of local issues. That means, the political struggle does not reach the core of administrative power in society. Indeed, its impacts on peripheral sectors of the dominant elite. Consequently, although COs are considered by themselves and other political actors as engaged in a relevant political struggle, their influence on the political definition of the whole society is far from being significant.

In this regard, the process of economic impoverishment has been witnessed by a majority of Venezuelan population without any possibility of claiming about the illegitimacy in the distribution of national wealth. Venezuela's main income is from oil revenues owned by the State. Hence, it becomes unjust and illegitimate that only 20% of richer population in Venezuela get 90% of these revenues. Even more, it is meaningless for marginal sectors of society to struggle for the incorporation in the market when figures show that they would be still in a weak position to engage in strategic interaction as the market is usually dominated by oligopolies and monopolies.

Finally, it is important to remark that there is a trend in the CO sector to leave aside the political struggle and to concentrate its efforts to incorporate marginal sectors in an economic structure that violates the grounds of democracy and justice. The paradox is that political struggle will return when these sectors reach economic strength. In a society based on unjust mechanisms of wealth distribution and unfair competition it rather seems an unreachable project.

5. THE COs IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The previous comments on Venezuelan COs could be easily expanded to COs in other countries; not only underdeveloped but also in advanced ones. It seems that globalization and reform of the welfare State are generating more exclusion in every society. Figures of poverty in Europe and all around the world suggest that more people will require support for their survival. Obviously, the differences between being poor in Europe and being poor in Venezuela are huge, but the issue of illegitimacy is growing in every society. This means that the number of COs, oriented to support disadvantaged sectors of society, will experience a boom in the following years. However, one wonders about their role in society. It was a common belief in past years, that COs would bring social justice and fairness in societies.

Nowadays, this goal seems unreachable.

The priority of an efficient organizational apparatus for economic production without any political concern about the expectations of every sector of society is a dogmatic acceptance of the pre-eminence of functional over political legitimacy that seems to be a characteristic of current society. However, one wonders about the appropriateness of such a cultural value when it is unreachable and meaningless for a majority of the population in every society.

Finally, it should become clear that it is essential to COs to deal with this inversion of social legitimacy in which functional elements appear to determine the boundaries of political discourse and debate. If there is a concern for disadvantaged sectors, then the struggle seems to begin with the recognition of the relative character of those functional imperatives that excludes large proportions of people from society.

6. CONCLUSION. THE APPROPRIATENESS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

Dealing with this inversion on social legitimacy shows us the relevance of considering COs as instruments for the self-realization in contemporary society. Particularly, the unveiling of these two possibilities highlights some of the trends present in the mode through which COs perform their task.

It could be argued that this interpretive framework covers a wide range of empirical manifestation of COs in current society. However, in this account there is a historical taken-for-granted assumption: the State and the notion of rights. A question that remains open is about the possibility of considering another form of social integration in which the State and rights are not central. This possibility is only suggested in the model of a deliberative democratic society, and a more careful conceptual exploration on social integration beyond the influence of the State is needed.

This brings us at the edge of this paper to ask about the critical and emancipatory role attributed to COs. Indeed, the question suggests that revealing social sense of COs could imply the disclosure of new forms of social interaction. Whether COs are emancipatory in the sense of a betterment of society for all, or it is emancipatory only in the sense of bringing new forms of social bonding without any other concerns still remains to be answered.

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