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A Comparison of the Eastern and Western Models of Civil Society: A Socio-Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract: This article provides a comparative analysis of the history of the formation, the socio-philosophical foundations, and the political and spiritual characteristics of the Eastern and Western models of civil society. Whereas the Western model emphasizes the primacy of individualism, human rights, and public institutions that are relatively independent of the state, the Eastern model highlights the importance of collectivism, spirituality, social cohesion, and moral values. The article also analyzes the processes of developing civil society in Uzbekistan on the basis of a harmony between national values and modern democratic principles.

Keywords: civil society, democracy, Eastern model, Western model, political consciousness, spirituality, the rule of law, public oversight, social philosophy.

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1. Introduction

Under the present conditions of globalization, the formation of the information society, and the deepening of democratic relations, the problem of civil society has become one of the most pressing scholarly issues on a global scale. The comparative analysis of the Eastern and Western models of civil society, which took shape within different civilizational regions, is especially significant from a socio-philosophical point of view.[1]

Civil society manifests itself as a system of institutions that ensure the free activity of the individual in their relationship with the state, protect social interests, and exercise public oversight. However, this concept has taken shape differently in each civilization: whereas in the West civil society has rested mainly on individual rights and freedoms, in the East it has developed on the basis of spirituality, collectivism, and moral relations.[2]

The aim of this article is to analyze in depth the common and distinctive features of the Eastern and Western models of civil society, to reveal their socio-philosophical foundations, and to illuminate the distinctive features of the development of civil society in Uzbekistan.[3]

The concept of civil society has been interpreted with various meanings throughout the period extending from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary political philosophy. In order to trace these interpretations and to compare the two civilizational models systematically, the analysis that follows examines the key thinkers of each tradition.

2. Materials and Methods

The study is theoretical and is built upon a set of complementary methods of socio-philosophical inquiry. The comparative-historical method is used to trace the formation and evolution of the two models of civil society within their respective civilizational contexts. The method of socio-philosophical analysis serves to reveal the conceptual and value-based foundations underlying each model. Hermeneutic (textual-interpretive) analysis of primary sources makes it possible to clarify the original meaning of the thinkers' ideas, while the comparative method itself is employed to identify the common and distinctive features of the Eastern and Western traditions. A systems approach is applied in order to view civil society as an integral institutional system.[4]

The source base of the research comprises the primary texts of leading Western thinkers Aristotle's *Politics*, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *On the Social Contract*, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, the works of Karl Marx, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, and Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action together with the texts of Eastern thinkers, namely the *Analects of Confucius*, al-Farabi's *The Virtuous City*, and Alisher Navoi's *Mahbub ul-Qulub*. The development strategy of New Uzbekistan is also drawn upon as a source for analyzing the national model of civil society.[5]

3. Results

3.1. The Western Model of Civil Society

The ancient Greek thinker Aristotle regarded society and the state as an inseparable system. In his view, the human being is a "political animal" who cannot attain full perfection outside society. Substantiating the natural character of the state and of society, Aristotle writes: "The state is a creation of nature, and man is by nature a political animal; a human being who lives outside the state is either lower than humanity or higher than it" [6]. Aristotle did not use the term "civil society" in its present-day sense; however, his teaching on the "polis" (the city-state) is considered one of the earliest sources of the modern theory of civil society.

Later, Thomas Hobbes, in his work *Leviathan*, explains civil society through the theory of the social contract, and his views are regarded as one of the important stages of the modern theory of civil society. Hobbes describes the natural condition of man (the "state of nature") as an environment of disorder and danger. According to his famous expression, in the state of nature "the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" [7]. For this reason, in order to ensure security and peace, people conclude a mutual agreement – a social contract. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes substantiates a model of civil society that relies on a strong, centralized state and gives priority to security and social order. In this model, civil society is interpreted not as a force alternative to the state, but as a social order created and protected by the state. In this respect, Hobbes's views are, to a certain degree, close to the idea of cooperation between state and society that is found in the Eastern models.

John Locke is considered one of the most important thinkers to have developed the theory of civil society. His views are set out mainly in his work *Two Treatises of Government*. Unlike Hobbes, Locke's theory is based on the idea of protecting the natural rights and freedoms of the individual. According to Locke, every human being possesses from birth the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to property, and the state is established in order to protect these rights. "People do not hand over their rights to the state in full. They entrust to the state only the authority to protect their rights. Therefore, the state must be based on the will of the people" [8]. Locke emphasizes that the power of the state must be limited: if the state violates rights, governs unjustly, or acts against the interests of the people, the citizens have the right to change it. Locke distinguishes the state from society. Civil society manifests itself through the activity of associations of free citizens, property owners, community organizations, and institutions of local self-government. No one not even a flawed government should stand above the law. This idea later became the foundation of the concept of the rule-of-law state.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau set out his views on civil society and the state mainly in his work *On the Social Contract*, and his model differs in certain respects from the theories of Hobbes and Locke. According to Rousseau, the sole source of power is the people, and the state must express the general will of the people. He writes: "Sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be transferred to anyone else" [9]. This idea is considered one of the important theoretical foundations of modern democracy. At the center of Rousseau's teaching stands the concept of the "general will": every citizen is an equal member of society; laws must express the general will; and the common interest must prevail over private interest. Rousseau defends the natural freedom of the individual, as in his famous statement: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau holds that the principal aim of civil society is to ensure the freedom and equality of the individual. He adopted a cautious attitude toward representative democracy, maintaining that citizens must participate directly in the affairs of the state and that political activism is a fundamental condition of civil society. For Rousseau, civil society is not only a political but also a moral unity: citizens must be patriotic, must defend the interests of the community, and must adhere to common values.

Hegel, one of the founders of German classical philosophy, is considered one of the thinkers who developed the theory of civil society most profoundly; his model is set out in his work *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel was among the first thinkers to analyze civil society as distinct from the state, interpreting it as an independent social sphere between the family and the state. He divides social life into three stages: first, the family the initial form of ethical unity; second, civil society – the sphere of private interests; and third, the state the common interest and the supreme ethical unity. According to Hegel, civil society is a system of economy and social relations in which people strive to realize their private interests. He writes: "Civil society is a system of needs" [10]. That is, the market economy, the division of labor, property relations, and professional associations constitute the foundation of civil society. Hegel regards the state not as a mere political organization, but as the highest expression of the ethical idea, as in one of his famous statements: "The state is the expression of the ethical idea in reality" [11].

Karl Marx's model of civil society is an economic-materialist and class-based model, in which civil society is explained not through human rights or political institutions, but through economic relations and class interests. Marx's theory holds an important place in the history of socio-philosophical thought because it reveals the significance of economic factors in the analysis of civil society. In his work *On the Jewish Question* he writes that "civil society is a social sphere in which private interests, material needs, and individual aspirations predominate" [12]. Marx assesses civil society not as a moral unity, but as a system of relations in which economic and private interests prevail. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* he states: "The state does not determine civil society; on the contrary, civil society determines the content and essence of the state." Here Marx criticizes Hegel's theory and emphasizes that economic relations and the social structure lie at the foundation of the state. Likewise, in *The German Ideology* he writes: "Civil society embraces all the material relations among people at a definite stage in the development of the productive forces." Marx thus emphasizes that economic relations constitute the foundation of civil society.

Unlike the liberal thinkers, Karl Marx interprets civil society not as an association of free citizens, but as a system of economic relations and class interests. In his view, civil society is not a product of the state; rather, the state is a product of civil society. For this reason, in Marx's theory the essence of civil society is revealed through private property, relations of production, and class structures.

Analyzing American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville shows that the principal force of civil society is voluntary associations. In his view, the independent associations of citizens strengthen democracy; community organizations counterbalance the power of the state; and local self-government serves as a school of democracy. As his famous statement puts it: "Unless citizens learn the art of association, democracy cannot be stable" [13]. Tocqueville's model is an associational model of civil society, that is, one based on associations.

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, in his work *Prison Notebooks*, develops Marx's theory and interprets civil society as a spiritual and cultural space relatively independent of the state. In his view, civil society includes educational institutions, the mass media, religious organizations, and cultural institutions. According to Gramsci, the governance of society is carried out not only by force but also through ideological influence; for this reason, civil society manifests itself as a field of ideas, a sphere of ideological competition, and an environment that shapes social consciousness. Gramsci's model is a cultural-ideological model of civil society.

The German scholar Jürgen Habermas, in his theory of communicative action, links civil society with the "public sphere." In his view, free communication, open discussion, and public opinion constitute the foundation of a democratic society, and he regards the culture of communication as the fundamental condition for the development of society. Civil society serves as a bridge between the state and society, a space that shapes public opinion, and a mechanism for making democratic decisions. Habermas's model is a communicative-democratic model of civil society.

3.2. The Eastern Model of Civil Society

In Eastern civilization, the model of civil society has manifested itself largely as a form of civil society resting on spiritual-moral relations, collectivism, social cohesion, and cooperation between state and society.

The Chinese thinker Confucius has no work specifically devoted to civil society, since the concept of "civil society" had not yet taken shape in his era. However, his views on social order, state governance, morality, the place of citizens in society, and collective relations are embodied in his principal work, the *Analects* (in Chinese, the "Lun Yu"). This work was compiled not by Confucius himself, but by his disciples on the basis of his thoughts and conversations. According to Confucius, the stability of society depends not on laws, but above all on the moral perfection of people. He says: "If you govern the people by laws and regulate them by punishments, they will try to evade the punishment. If you govern the people by virtue, a sense of shame will arise in them." Confucius regards the human being not as separate from society, but as a member of the family and the community, and holds that the ideal society must be based not on conflict but on harmony. In his teaching, every person bears a moral responsibility before the family, before society, and before the state. Although Confucius did not use the term "civil society," ideas such as a moral society, social cohesion, collectivism, responsible citizenship, and the harmony of state and society are expressed in his *Analects*. For this reason, contemporary researchers regard Confucius's views as one of the important spiritual-philosophical sources of the Eastern model of civil society.

Although Abu Nasr al-Farabi, the great thinker of the Eastern Renaissance, did not use the term "civil society," many important features of modern civil society can be found in his socio-philosophical views. His ideas about civil society are set out mainly in his work *The Virtuous City*. Al-Farabi calls the ideal society the "Virtuous City" (al-Madina al-Fadila). In his view, the individual cannot attain perfection in isolation but must live and act in cooperation with others. Al-Farabi writes: "Man is by his nature such a being that, in order to attain perfection, he needs to live together with many people". This idea is very close to the principle of social cooperation in civil society. The foundation of the virtuous society is the mutual aid and cooperation of people: according to al-Farabi, every person serves society, and society serves the perfection of every person. An important condition of the virtuous society is justice, which ensures rights, strengthens social stability, and ensures a balance of interests. Al-Farabi sees the foundation of social development in morality and spirituality, holding that knowledge, virtue, conscience, and purity must be the fundamental qualities of citizens. The inhabitants of the virtuous city participate actively in the life of society: they pursue the common interest, take part in public affairs, and feel a sense of responsibility. Al-Farabi does not set the state and society in opposition to one another; in his view, the state must serve the welfare of the people, and the people must contribute to common goals. Al-Farabi's model of civil society is a spiritual-moral and communitarian (collectivism-based) model, in which the principal aim of society is to ensure the spiritual and intellectual perfection of the individual. In this respect, al-Farabi's

conception of the “Virtuous City” serves as an important theoretical source for the Eastern model of civil society.

In the works of Alisher Navoi, the term “civil society” is not used in its modern sense; however, important principles of civil society can be seen in his socio-political, moral, and spiritual views. In particular, the works Mahbub ul-Qulub, Hayrat ul-Abror, and Saddi Iskandariy advance ideas of a just society, a spiritually cultivated individual, and service to the interests of the people. The central idea of Mahbub ul-Qulub, in particular, is that the development of society is bound up with the moral perfection of the individual, with justice, and with service to the interests of society.[14]

In Mahbub ul-Qulub the principal elements of civil society are indicated. With respect to just governance, Navoi emphasizes the responsibility of state leaders and officials before the people, holding that if the ruler is just, peace and prosperity are established in society. With respect to the active and responsible citizen, the work stresses that every person must perform their duty conscientiously and serve the interests of society an idea close to that of the active citizen in modern civil society. With respect to the primacy of the interest of society, Navoi gives priority not to private interest but to the interests of the people and of society, holding that the truly perfect human being must benefit others through their activity. In particular, his couplet “If you would be human, call him not a man / who feels no sorrow at the people’s sorrow” embodies Navoi’s views on the relationship between the individual and society, on social responsibility, and on the civic position.

4. Discussion

The comparative analysis shows that the Western and Eastern models of civil society differ primarily in their philosophical points of departure. The Western tradition — from Aristotle’s polis, through the social-contract theorists Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, to Hegel, Marx, Tocqueville, Gramsci, and Habermas gradually constructed civil society around the autonomous individual, natural rights, the limitation of state power, the rule of law, private property and economic relations, voluntary associations, and the public sphere of free communication. Within this tradition itself, however, there is considerable internal diversity: Hobbes’s state-centered model, Locke’s rights-based model, Rousseau’s model of the general will, Hegel’s system of needs, Marx’s economic-class model, Tocqueville’s associational model, Gramsci’s cultural-ideological model, and Habermas’s communicative-democratic model.

The Eastern tradition, represented here by Confucius, al-Farabi, and Navoi, approaches the same social reality from the standpoint of spirituality, morality, collectivism, social cohesion, and cooperation between state and society. Although these thinkers did not employ the term “civil society,” their teachings contain its essential principles moral responsibility, the active and conscientious citizen, just governance, mutual aid, and the primacy of the common good over private interest. The contrast between the two traditions is therefore not one between the presence and the absence of civil-society ideas, but one between two distinct emphases: the Western emphasis on individual rights and legal-institutional autonomy, and the Eastern emphasis on moral-spiritual cultivation and communal solidarity.[15]

At the same time, the two models are not mutually exclusive. Hobbes’s idea of cooperation between state and society, for instance, brings the Western tradition into a degree of proximity with the Eastern view, while al-Farabi’s emphasis on justice, active participation, and the responsibility of the state toward the people converges with central Western concerns. Under the contemporary conditions of globalization, the formation of the information society, and the deepening of democratic relations, these two models are increasingly drawing closer to one another.

For Uzbekistan this convergence is of direct practical significance. The national model of civil society developing in New Uzbekistan is grounded in the harmonization of national values and modern democratic principles that is, in combining the moral-spiritual heritage of the Eastern tradition with the legal-institutional achievements of the Western tradition. In this sense, the development of civil society in Uzbekistan may be understood

as a synthesis that preserves the spiritual and communal foundations characteristic of Eastern civilization while adopting the institutions of the rule-of-law state, individual freedoms, public oversight, and an active civic position.[16]

5. Conclusion

The results of the research permit the following conclusions. First, the Eastern and Western models of civil society took shape under the influence of different historical and civilizational factors. Second, the Western model is based on the rule-of-law state and individual freedoms. Third, the Eastern model rests on the principles of spirituality and social cohesion. Fourth, contemporary processes of globalization are leading to the mutual convergence of these models. Fifth, the national model of civil society developing within the progress of New Uzbekistan is based on harmonizing the positive aspects of both the Eastern and the Western experiences.

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