CHAPTER 1

Civil society and social cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Background to the book

Order and anarchy grew out of several of my research interests. One originated in my doctoral research on social change in a cluster of French villages close to the Swiss border (see Layton 2000). I conducted several periods of fieldwork between 1969 and 1995, and relied on local archives to reconstruct continuity and change over a period extending back to the *ancien régime* that predated the French Revolution of 1789. The overwhelming impression I gained was that village life had remained remarkably orderly through a period that encompassed the 1789 Revolution, the agricultural revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (associated with the turmoil of the enclosures in England), military occupations in the Franco-Prussian and Second World Wars, and the post-war mechanisation of agriculture. Knowing something about English village life, I was also impressed by the comparative vitality of local democracy and the freedom 'my' villages had to manage common pasture and forest. While I was analysing this material, however, state socialism in Eastern Europe was collapsing; sometimes in a more or less orderly fashion, elsewhere disintegrating into civil war. Political thinkers in both

Eastern and Western Europe saw the creation of 'civil society' in the Eastern bloc as the key to future political stability, and believed this would be facilitated by the development of a market economy. Through my involvement in the World Archaeological Congress, I also learned about the civil disorder in northern India that surrounded the 1992 destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya, which Hindu fundamentalists claimed stood on the site of a Hindu temple marking the birthplace of the culture hero Rama. The World Archaeological Congress met in India on the second anniversary of the mosque's destruction, and plans to debate the role of nationalist archaeologists in promoting the mosque's destruction were met by angry demonstrations. WAC deferred the debate and subsequently met in Croatia, where it was able also to examine the destruction of churches, mosques and other cultural property in the recent war between Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia (Layton, Stone and Thomas 2001). These experiences demanded a better understanding of the processes that sometimes allow society to change peacefully but at other times create violent conflict. Throughout the 1990s first-hand anthropological accounts of violence and civil war were accumulating, providing ways of investigating the topic in closer detail.

The argument

Order and anarchy is a study of civil society, of the construction and breakdown of social order and of the role of violence in human social evolution. 'Anarchy' has two meanings. It is generally understood to refer to the breakdown of authority in society, leading to social disorder. For Kropotkin and his fellow anarchists in later nineteenth-century Russia, however, it referred to the freedom of local communities to organise their

lives through voluntary co-operation, the essence of civil society. Kropotkin actually visited the region in which my PhD research was conducted. He described how he drew inspiration from the voluntary associations he found among Swiss watchmakers: 'after a week's stay with the watchmakers, my views on socialism were settled. I was an anarchist' (Kropotkin 1972: 4). These opposed meanings reappear in recent debates about the definition of civil society. It is arguable whether the term 'civil society' can be applied to the institutions through which people pursue self-help and mutual aid against the state; the term is frequently confined to those non-governmental institutions that contribute to good order in the state.

Chapter 1 argues against restrictive definitions of civil society. It suggests the term can usefully be defined simply as 'social organisations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities'. The chapter argues against the view, proposed by Ernest Gellner (1994), Adam Seligman (1992) and Keith Tester (1992), that the capitalist market economy is uniquely conducive to the creation of civil society. It shows that John Locke and Adam Ferguson, the originators of the concept of civil society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, regarded civil society as much more widely applicable, associating it with social co-operation based on rational self-interest in all human societies. Historical and recent non-Western examples are given in support of Locke's and Ferguson's position. Civil society may support or it may undermine the unity of the nation state, depending on historical circumstances. Chapter 1 traces the origin of current, restrictive characterisations of civil society to the political agendas of those who debated the English agricultural enclosures that took place between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It argues that the currently popular usage of

the term 'civil society' is unhelpful to the general understanding of social dynamics.

In the course of chapter 1, a number of salient theories are introduced. Locke and his contemporaries are located in the Enlightenment, when the divine right of kings was challenged, and philosophers encouraged rational debate concerning how human society should best be organised. During the seventeenth century it was common practice to draw a contrast between the complex, seemingly contrived societies of contemporary Europe and the supposed natural condition of humanity. The difficulty was that no one had much idea what that natural condition might have been. It was therefore generally viewed through the mirror of the type of society the author sought to promote: as perpetual war or innocent peace. A century later, writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Ferguson had better anthropological accounts to draw on. The task of reconstructing the history of human society assumed greater interest with the geological revolution of the nineteenth century. Sudden understanding of the immense period over which humanity had existed led writers to place a series of intermediate stages between humankind's original condition and modern European society. Social evolution was held to move from the simple to the complex, and also from superstition to rationality. It was this beguiling equation that promoted more restrictive, idealistic notions of civil society. Contemporary small-scale societies were equated with the earlier stages in the universal process. The theory of evolution as progress was turned against English rural society during the enclosures, decisively shaping recent understandings of civil society. Even twentieth-century social scientists have found it difficult to shake off the notion that evolution is progressive. The sociologist Anthony Giddens, in rejecting evolutionary approaches, characterises them as seeking a mechanism of change that must be linked to a sequence of changes in which

types or aspects of social organisation replace each other across the whole spectrum of human history (Giddens 1984: 232).

This conception of evolution is utterly opposed to Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, the theory that underpins biological scientists' approach to evolution. I shall argue that because Locke's work preceded the substantially misguided theory of evolution as progress, and because Ferguson stated it in an early and innocuous form, their ideas speak directly to current issues in Darwinian theory. Darwin argued that random variations between individuals in a population have different consequences for survival in a particular environment. Those individuals whose physiology or behaviour is best suited to the local environment will have a higher probability of surviving and producing viable children than will those bearing less appropriate variants. Adaptations are judged solely in relation to local conditions; no adaptation is universally 'better' or 'more evolved' than another. Even Darwin had difficulty grasping the inherent relativity of his model of natural selection and had to write to himself that 'I must not talk about higher and lower forms of life' (Trivers 1985: 32). If Darwinian hypotheses are applied to the analysis of human social behaviour they do not ask whether some forms of behaviour are intrinsically better than others, merely investigate how social strategies aid individuals' survival through social interaction in specific circumstances. After completing my PhD in 1971, I spent seven years in Australia working with Aboriginal communities. Traditional Aboriginal social life is adapted to survival in often harsh and unpredictable environments. I became interested in the work of socio-ecologists such as Bruce Winterhalder and Eric Alden Smith, who had used Darwinian theory to show how variations in human behaviour can be explained as adaptations to different environments and modes of subsistence. Socio-ecology offers a scientific explanation for uniformity and variation in the construction of

social relations and will be relied upon at several points in the following analysis.

Chapter 2, 'Self-interest and social evolution', explores ways of applying a Darwinian approach to human social evolution. Chapter 2 contends that John Locke was right to argue that rationality is not a prerogative of Western civilisation, but characteristic of behaviour even in the simplest forms of social organisation. Game theory provides well-established models for exploring the rationality of social interaction in small groups, and I outline such key concepts as non-zero-sum games, the Prisoner's Dilemma, free-riding and ways of avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons.

The natural human condition is not, as Thomas Hobbes had claimed, one of perpetual war. The first part of the chapter gives ethnographic examples of the ways in which social order can be sustained in self-governing local communities, ranging from ephemeral gold rush communities to long-established villages. The second part argues that, since the breakdown of social order cannot be attributed to a natural human anarchy breaking free as the state loosens its grip, a more sophisticated theory of social order is needed. It draws on Darwinian theory to represent the evolution of social strategies, and the environments in which they are put into action, as a form of adaptation. A simplistic Darwinian model, which focuses only on the interaction of an organism and its environment, turns our attention away from the way that the interaction of individuals of different species, or people in different societies, can have cumulative effects on the ecology of individual behaviour. Chapter 2 therefore also introduces the concept of evolutionary 'fitness landscapes' to represent the cumulative effects of social interaction.

Chapter 3, 'The breakdown of social order', argues that if social order is to persist it must be economically sustainable.

Many recent ethnographic studies of social disorder implicate globalisation and 'structural adjustment' in the erosion of the nation state's ability to fulfil its social contract with citizens. Moreover, given the level of income created in the market economy and the state's limited ability to collect tax revenue, many Third World states cannot afford to sustain the bureaucratic government they inherited from the colonial era. Under such conditions, local civil society may offer better security. The existing social order breaks down when changes in the economic and social fitness landscape undermine the effectiveness of previously dominant social organisations and empower other strategies. Often these strategies already exist as part of the local cultural repertoire. They include adherence to kin and ethnic groups, feud and inter-ethnic violence. The distribution of force may drift away from the state to become concentrated in competing organisations within civil society.

The numerous cases of violent conflict in Europe, Africa and Asia during the 1990s seem to show that contemporary society is increasingly vulnerable to apparently mindless acts of destruction. Hobbes's pessimism appears justified. Chapter 4 looks carefully at this view, and criticises some of the more deterministic applications of Darwinian theory to human social behaviour. Evolutionary psychology, for example, argues that humans' capacity for social behaviour evolved during the time we were hunter-gatherers and has sometimes become inappropriate in the more complex societies of recent times. Some authors have even concluded that humans share a genetic disposition to violence with chimpanzees, and that culture provides an inadequate safeguard. Chapter 4 therefore looks at evidence for the evolutionary significance of human warfare. It argues that warfare and peacemaking are equally important in human social evolution. The chapter highlights common characteristics in tribal warfare and civil war within

nation states that arise from the pursuit of competing strategies in situations where resources are scarce, trust under threat yet the means to violence prevalent.

Characterising civil society

In the work of influential recent writers such as Ernest Gellner (1994) and Adam Seligman (1992), the concept of 'civil society' is central to the analysis of stability and instability in the nation state. As the post-Second World War socialist regimes of Eastern Europe began to crumble, there was widespread optimism about the ability of people to come together to promote a common interest in self-determination, in democracy, through the medium of civil society. Western governments who aided the dismantling of socialism contended that a free market economy promoted self-reliance, and thus participation in civil society. The alleged absence of civil society under socialism was taken as proof of its intrinsic connection with capitalism. During the next few years, however, faith in the universal development of civil society was shaken by events such as the rise of ethnic nationalism in former Yugoslavia. Whether civil society could be said to exist in such cases was questioned. Relationships based on kinship and ethnicity appeared categorically opposed to those underpinning civil society; they seemed, in Adam Seligman's (1992) terms, primordial, not rational. A number of questions are therefore addressed in the first part of the chapter.

- How should 'civil society' be defined?
- Is civil society necessarily associated with a commercial economy (as Gellner and Seligman argue) or can it occur under different regimes (as Hann and White contend)?
- Does civil society necessarily tend to support or undermine the state?

In the second part of the chapter I review what John Locke (1632–1704) and Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) actually wrote about civil society, showing that they intended the concept to have much wider application than its current usage. The third part of the chapter therefore explores how the current, circumscribed and politically biased approach originated and how alternative, equally useful approaches have been marginalised.

The Enlightenment concept of civil society was first formulated by Locke (1960 [1689]) and Ferguson (1995 [1767]). During the mid-1980s, political scientists in both Eastern and Western Europe advocated creating a civil society in Eastern Europe as a way of pushing back the state (Hann 1990; Khilnani 2001). The fact that the concept of civil society was coined during the period when Western European society was undergoing the great transformation from feudalism to mercantile capitalism was considered decisive by analysts writing in the 1990s. Because the concept was invented at the time when the divine right of kings was challenged, and the new bourgeoisie pressed for the abolition of feudal social order, it was assumed that civil society itself was born at that time.

The anthropologist and political philosopher Ernest Gellner (who died in 1995) was a true child of the Enlightenment, convinced of the unique rationalism of European culture since the birth of mercantile capitalism. He grew up in Prague, but emigrated with his parents to England in 1939. After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, he returned to Prague to promote the particular type of civil society associated with a market economy. According to Gellner, only a market economy ensures that contractual associations are sufficiently flexible and adaptive to create civil society (Gellner 1994: 100). Market society allows the individual to enter and leave specific-purpose, limited associations without elaborate blood ritual. (Gellner parodies the structure of traditional

societies.) Only the market promotes the rational pursuit of self-interest, or what Gellner (77) curiously calls 'a disinterested pursuit of interest'. Many in Eastern Europe were at first willing to accept this claim. Given the sudden abandonment of communism people were, as Janine Wedel (1998) writes, looking for quick answers to the problem of preserving social cohesion. The only alternative seemed the Western capitalism advocated by international agencies.

Recent proponents of civil society have argued for a narrow definition that fails to do justice to the breadth of vision of the concept's originators. As Steven Sampson discovered, Western models do not always match Eastern realities; procedures cannot be exported successfully if their institutional social framework is absent. Problems that are solved in the West by commercial or voluntary associations are often solved by kin, local networks and ethnic groups in other societies (Sampson 1996: 125). In the post-Soviet era, millionaire/billionaire former communists and other Russians have searched in vain for a bourgeoisie committed to democracy, productive economic behaviour and civil society (Kingston-Mann 2003: 94). Mass privatisation in Russia did not create civil society, but profit-seeking oligarchs and gangsters who hired private armies and intelligence-gathering teams, and perpetrated frequent car-bombings and contract murders (Kingston-Mann 2003: 109).

DEFINING CIVIL SOCIETY

The sociologist Alvin Gouldner characterised civil society as a medium through which people 'can pursue their own projects in the course of their everyday lives; and as ways of avoiding dependence on the domination of the state . . . [through] patterns of mutual and self-help' (Gouldner 1980: 370–1). Elizabeth Dunn (1996: 27) describes civil society as 'the