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**PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF
EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP: INTERNATIONAL
PERSPECTIVES AND PROJECTS**

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CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY RECONSIDERED

· *By Charles F. Bahmueller*

“Civil society” is on everyone’s lips, but not everyone means the same thing when they say it. Nor can anyone “accurately” define civil society. Ideas have no “essences” to discover in the absence of common agreement; the meaning of any word or idea is the way people use it. Today, after hundreds of publications and untold public discussions, including scholarly conferences devoted exclusively to the topic, no definition of civil society prevails, nor is one likely to do so. Because the term has become so prominent, writers often wish to claim it for their cause; as a result, definitions of civil society often reflect the function one wishes it to perform.

The Meanings of Civil Society

Principal bones of contention over the definition of civil society include whether the term should be primarily a normative or non-normative tool of social science; and whether we should consider economic and religious relations and even the family as part of it. Michael Walzer defines civil society as “the space of [politically] uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology—that fill this space” (1990, 293). It is not clear whether “interest” in this definition includes economic interest not organized to pursue public ends.

In their lengthy treatise on the subject, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato explicitly eliminate the economic sphere in this “working definition” of civil society: a “sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements and forms of public communications” (1922, ix).

By contrast, the late Edward Shils saw civil society as composed of three parts. One is a “complex of autonomous institutions,” including economic ones, distinguishable from family, clan, locality, or state; a second

is a portion of society that possesses "a particular complex of relationships between itself and the state and a distinctive set of institutions which safeguard the separation of state and civil society and maintain effective ties between them"; and the third is a "widespread pattern of refined or civil manners" (1991, 3).

Robert Hefner accepts the mainstream notion of civil society as the arena of voluntary associations, including "business associations" that extend "beyond the household but outside the state" (Hefner 1998, 5-6). This is more or less Hegel's view. Don Eberly, on the other hand, finds the possibility of loyalty a paramount defining feature of civil society. While he admits local economic relationships to the civil society arena, he excludes large scale, especially multinational corporations as incompatible with the emergence of loyalty that face-to-face associations are capable of generating (Eberly 1998, 22-23). Thomas Janoski applies an astute analytic hand in dividing the polity into state, public, private, and market spheres, locating civil society at certain overlapping areas of these spheres. He defines civil society as a sphere of public discourse among these four elements (Janoski 1998, 12-13).

Offering a somewhat different slant on civil society, Salamon and Anheier (1997) restrict the term to formally constituted "non-profit" organizations. They describe these organizations as a significant economic "sector" that contributes large-scale employment opportunities and expenditures to their respective national economies. They omit the family and highlight certain economic features of "civil society;" but it is not clear why they ignore the other historical meanings of the term.

Benjamin Barber views civil society as "civic space" that "occupies the middle ground between government and the private sector;" but, unlike nearly every other writer on the subject, he believes the civil society of his normative understanding had nearly disappeared from American life "by the time of the two Roosevelts" (1995, 281). In a later publication of 1996 Barber presents a view of civil society that amounts to a utopian fantasy, eliminating practically every organization currently included by myriad writers, since only a handful of groups could meet his stringent criteria for inclusion.

Excluding the economic sphere and including the family in many contemporary writers' views of civil society flatly contradicts Hegel's path-breaking concept of "civil society" as a competitive arena encompassing economic and other forms of social life lying between family and the state. In this view, followed by Marx and his adherents, civil society is a quasi-disorderly social realm where, among other things, the struggle for economic existence takes place. For Hegel, because civil society limits the

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forces inclining people to cooperate, the state must harmonize competing interests. Here civil society and state are not locked in competition, as they became in communist Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Instead, the state makes civil society liveable, perhaps even possible, by controlling its excesses.

Contrasting with primarily normative notions of civil society and those that find state and civil society necessarily in conflict, a prominent student of democracy offers a largely positive (empirical) view geared to the comparative study of democratic transition and consolidation. Here is the definition of Larry Diamond, co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy*:

[Civil society is] the realm of organized social life that is open, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from "society" in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state, and to hold state officials accountable. (1997, 5)

Like many definitions, Diamond's excludes familial, religious, and economic realms. He also warns that, although civil society organizations led the opposition to communist states in 1980s Eastern Europe, we should not see civil society as necessarily an adversary with the state, locked in a "zero-sum struggle." Thus, civil society so conceived can join the state to some degree in establishing and consolidating new democracies.

While these are but a few of the formulations of the concept of civil society, most of them illustrate the commonalities shared by nearly all definitions of the term. Civil society refers to voluntary social activity not compelled by the state. The accepted central, though incomplete, core characteristic of civil society is its composition of autonomous self-organized associations limited by a framework of law. Civil society is the location of independent thought and, within legal boundaries, voluntary action. This view of civil society recalls Tocqueville, for he found the American habit of self-organization for every conceivable purpose—as opposed to popular dependence on the state—uniquely American. He thought this uniqueness mitigated the social leveling and love of equality inherent in democracy.

One of the most profound, if not always clearly expressed, twentieth-century concepts of civil society came from Ernest Gellner, a Czech refugee from fascism who settled in Britain. Gellner's view of civil society reflects his experience with political extremism; he emphasizes the empirical and normative roots of our interest in it, not only for the study of democratic transitions, but also for understanding established democracies, especially our own.

In *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, Gellner sniffed out what he considered the single most significant functional goal of civil society: namely, to act as a force maintaining liberal freedoms. The key function of civil society pointed to Gellner's definition of it as "that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counter-balance the state and . . . can . . . prevent it from dominating and atomizing the rest of society" (1994, 5).

However, Gellner realized that this formula does not adequately specify the connection between civil society and liberty, since the definition just cited, as Marc Plattner has pointed out, could also apply to premodern pluralist societies, whose caste or "segmentary" nature oppressed the individual while checking the state. Later in the same work, Gellner described civil society as "a society in which polity and economy are distinct, where polity is instrumental but can and does check extremes of individual interest, but where the state is in turn checked by institutions with an economic base; it relies on economic growth which, by requiring cognitive growth, makes ideological monopoly impossible" (1994, 12).

In a later article, Gellner expressed more directly the uniqueness of modern civil society: it formed the conditions for the individual liberty of liberal democracy. As opposed to the ascriptive character of the human bonds of premodern societies, which contained, indeed trapped individuals, powerless to extricate themselves from the obligations and conditions of their birth, modern civil society places the individual in a different condition. Gellner called the liberal democratic citizen "modular man." This term means that individuals can detach themselves from one institution or commitment and reattach themselves to others; and this is what the denizens of liberal democratic societies do at will. "Yet," wrote Gellner, "these highly specific, unsanctified, instrumental, revocable links or bonds are effective! *This* is civil society: the forging of links which are effective even though they are flexible, specific, instrumental." These "links or bonds" are found throughout society (1995, 42).

We find more reasons for including economic, religious, and other organizations in broadly defining the idea of civil society when preserving liberal freedoms is the goal of that concept. Some ideas of political sociology can help us identify these freedoms.

In *The Politics of Mass Society* (1959), former University of California sociologist William Kornhauser studied societies in which weak social bonds affected significant numbers of socially and politically alienated individuals. Those with such relatively attenuated associations Kornhauser called "available" for recruitment to illiberal social movements. He associated various forms of social crisis, such as those caused by rapid indus-

trialization and economic depression, with the political extremism of chiliastic (“millennial”) appeals that threaten individual and social liberties. The growth of European fascist movements in the 1930s illustrates this idea.

One can imagine the psychic needs of the members of a society as a vast reservoir potentially available to demagogues and “saviors” who might threaten liberal freedoms if they gained power. One can also imagine myriad associations, especially religious ones, that make sufficient claims on this reservoir to preclude the significant influence of millennialists. Surely the associations that preserve liberal freedoms deserve inclusion in a concept of civil society centered on its freedom-preserving function.

Similarly with economic enterprises and associations, we can imagine such associations dividing up a reservoir of potential state power, which could threaten liberal freedoms—just as large-scale state ownership or control of the means of production and distribution historically have done. Even if they are not associations with the public purposes and involvements that gain them entrance to more restrictive concepts of civil society, they functionally divide and decentralize economic power, keeping it out of statist hands. Here too, a large range of economic organizations seem part of a social sector whose primary function is to protect the freedoms of established democracies, even if their role in establishing democracies is less clear.

It is worthwhile to notice a second meaning of “civil society.” In this second sense the term refers to society as a whole, including the state, which is distinguished by civility. It refers comprehensively to a society that contains civil society in its first meaning, an autonomous sphere regulated by the state but otherwise independent of it. Thus, civil society can have two meanings: an independent portion of society, and an entire society containing this independent part (Shils 1991, 4). We are concerned in this essay mainly with civil society as an autonomous sphere of voluntary action. However, this paper will end by exploring the link between civility and civil society in the second sense.

Finally, the view of civil society adopted here has both normative and positivist elements: it looks to “really existing” capitalist liberal democratic societies, including those that feature social democratic policies, and asks which autonomous self-organized groups and relations supply a foundation for a free society. This is its positivist element. Its normative aspect consists of explicitly choosing as society’s fundamental project to maintain the traditional pantheon of liberal freedoms.

This capacious concept of civil society—the whole range of civic action independent of formal political institutions—includes service associations, philanthropic groups, cultural groups, religious organizations, labor unions,

athletic organizations, and youth groups, plus many more in every imaginable field of interest or endeavor. The concept also embraces economic relations, organizations, and activities not owned or directly controlled by the state. All these elements play roles (though not always equal ones), however invisible, in sheltering, defending, or nurturing the conditions of liberal freedoms.

The Historical Roots of Civil Society

The idea of civil society has a long pedigree. Although it now relates to societies in different civilizations, including those in Asia and Africa, its roots lie exclusively in the West. The term comes from the Romans, who spoke of "*societas civilis*." One of ancient Rome's greatest achievements was its creation of the civil law. First codified in 450 B.C., the civil law underwent further centuries of development, reaching its apogee in the codifications achieved under Justinian in the early sixth century. In a sense, society for the Romans was the creature of the civil law, which came to regulate numerous features of social relations, including family and economy. Cicero extolled the function of law; for the Romans, to be civilized meant being subject to civil law.

Nevertheless, neither Greece nor Rome distinguished between state and society. This distinction became implicit only in early modern Europe. Although medieval Europe was conceived as a single society, its name, *Respublica Christiana* (Christendom), contained two elements, the secular and the sacerdotal. This division, unique to Western society, came about through the influence of Christianity, which brought divided loyalties between ecclesiastical and political authorities. The struggle between political and religious powers broadened as the Middle Ages waned and cities, increasingly proud of their emerging independence, gained the economic strength to resist the demands of external rulers. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "society" became sufficiently independent in fact or aspiration for theorists to take the key step of forming separate concepts for society and political order. Early modern Europe developed competing centers of power, distinguishing it from other major civilizations, and allowed the eventual development of what we know as "civil society."

John Locke took the "key step" of distinguishing the state and society. He used the term civil society, but not in our sense, since for him the state was part of "civil society." But he distinguished the political order from "the community" and placed the moral basis of the political order on the consent of the "community," that is, on society. The political order springs from and is authorized by society. Society creates political institutions to protect itself, and it changes them whenever it likes to do so. In this regard,

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it is no accident that Locke's great predecessor Thomas Hobbes pointedly refused to separate state and society, arguing that no society can exist without the state. Left to itself, Hobbes argued, society would disintegrate. The independent social orders implied by separating state and society could lead only to catastrophic conflict based primarily on religious differences. From this view, Hobbes could draw only deeply authoritarian conclusions.

It is a great historical irony that Lockean liberalism rested on Hobbes' premises of natural human liberty, equality, and consent as the basis for legitimate obligation. However, for Locke the separation of state and society led not to disaster but to salvation: a community with an adequate consciousness of its own rights and the confidence to challenge authority could tame the political powers that traditionally threatened and devoured human beings' "natural rights." Accordingly, if these powers trampled members' rights, such a community could and would justifiably overthrow them. Government might be necessary and inevitable; but the "community" would tolerate *this particular government* only so long as it respected the rights of its masters—the community that established this governing body for its own protection.

As for Hobbes' amply justified fears of religious (today we would add "ideological") conflict, Locke recommended the Dutch remedy he had experienced at first hand during his enforced escape to the Netherlands: toleration, or in other words, religious liberty. One consequence of this remedy was the existence of numerous independent religious groups: liberty implies pluralism. Liberty also implies conflict, as Hobbes knew so well. However, through historical blindness he could not see that under certain conditions this conflict could remain within acceptable bounds. And he could not see that moderate conflict is a positive force, that conflict is a condition of liberty. When acceptable opinion is unitary, there is no space for plural voices; there is no place for dissent; and liberty is lost.

Later, many saw the crux of "civil society" in the capacity of independent groups—including those beyond religion—to maintain their liberty against encroachments from other groups and the state. James Madison had said as much in *The Federalist* 10, writing that liberty necessarily gives rise to numerous competing factions; but if a polity contained a multiplicity of competing factions, a single dominant group, a "majority faction" damaging to the public good would be far less likely to emerge.¹

Also in the eighteenth century, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson linked the development of polished manners—civility—to the growth of modern society, which they called "civil society." Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* never defined the subject of its title exactly; the work is mainly a history of "civilization." Ferguson's civil society appears to

mean a modern society whose manners are "polished," whose arts and letters flourish and, above all, whose government is not despotic. In this society urban life and commerce flourished; we know it today as pluralist society.

Centrally concerned with moral and intellectual progress, Ferguson declined to apply the adulatory title "civil society" to the despotic governments of China and India, however well administered, on account of their despotism. His statement that it is "in conducting the affairs of civil society that mankind find the exercise of their best talents as well as the object of their best affections" suggests *participation in public affairs* as an important element of "civil society" because of its educative ability to invigorate the higher faculties (1967, 155). He specifies the centrality of attention to public affairs for the well being of *civil society* in remarking.

[I]f a growing indifference to objects of a public nature, should prevail, and under any free constitution, put an end to those disputes of party, and silence that noise of dissension, which generally accompany the exercise of freedom, we may venture to prognosticate corruption in the national manners. (1967, 256)

Thus, although "civil society" for Ferguson was a sort of society as a whole, attention to public matters lay at its core.

By the nineteenth century, the autonomous associations of civil society became the breathing room of a social order no longer ceaselessly pressed by authority in every sphere of life. And, as the example of religious liberty suggests, the new freedom of liberal society that grew in nineteenth century Western Europe and America was not simply political freedom: it was, as the French theorist Benjamin Constant said, a freedom unknown to the ancient world. It was personal liberty pursued openly in public or behind closed doors in a new, hitherto unknown, realm: a private sphere guaranteed by the state to the individual acting alone or in association with others.²

With the thought of Tocqueville, civil society's "liberal substance" comes to full consciousness. His sophisticated political sociology leads us to a clearer understanding of the role of free association in liberal democracies, especially in the American ("new world") conditions of relative social equality. In these circumstances, individuals seldom attempt to act alone, on their own account; they must associate together to do what government would do otherwise. Leaving the field of private enterprise to government, he believed, would be catastrophic: "The morals and intelligence of a democratic people would be as much endangered as its business and manufacturers if the government ever wholly usurped the place of private companies" (1990, 108). The free associations of the United States played such a critical role in the well-being of society that Tocqueville wrote the following at

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the end of his chapter titled "Of the Use Which the Americans Make of Public Associations in Civil Life":

Among the laws that rule human societies there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased. (1990, 110)

In retrospect we see that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century separation of state and society was a step of great significance. It allowed theorists to conceive society as a social and psychological space in which the individual, alone or associated with others, could view the acts of public officials from a critical perspective. The separation of state and society in liberal political thought crafted a powerful theoretical justification for limiting the powers of the state regarding its citizens. As viewed from the perspective of liberal writers from Locke to Tocqueville, society occupies a position of moral superiority in its relations with the state. The state is merely the extension and servant of society. We are close to the idea that the purpose of the state is to protect the autonomous life of individuals in society.

Civil Society, Authoritarianism, and Totalitarianism

We understand the idea of civil society more clearly by comparing its position in liberal democracy to that in other systems of government. Liberal democracy legally permits and protects all social activity within a wide latitude. By contrast, authoritarian regimes seek to regulate and control civil society with an intensity that provides the very measure of its authoritarianism.

However, under full-scale totalitarianism civil society disappears altogether, as the state demands total control of every group and all forms of social expression, organized or not; nothing lies outside political control. Thus the state politicizes all organized social activity.

The Soviet Union, for example, made independent political expression illegal, and it treated dissidents harshly. The regime tolerated no social organization independent of the state. But with the end of totalitarianism, social and political groups quickly emerged, and expression of all kinds sprang up spontaneously. Even in such Soviet satellites as Poland, the far less virulent post-Stalinist regime tolerated no independent social organization, with the significant exception of the Catholic Church. Polish loyalties to the Church were so powerful that the regime tolerated it solely out of necessity. But in Russia itself the Russian Orthodox Church was more or less run by the KGB, the secret police.

In the satellite countries, once Stalinism had run its course, small cracks in the edifice of state control appeared. Although scouting organizations

were under state control, individual scout leaders could often be alone with their troops and teach them heterodox, or at least independent views. However, such exceptions do not materially depart from the preceding description of civil society's suppression under Soviet-style communism.

Civil Society in Communist Eastern Europe: Resistance to Illegitimate Government

Ironically, the character of the post-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe gave rise to the currency that the term "civil society" enjoys today. After Soviet tanks shattered the hopes of the Prague Spring of 1968, and the satellite countries settled into the stagnant political torpor of the Brezhnev era, political action seemed clearly useless; surely political action directed toward changing the state was unavailing. The only politics at hand appeared to be that of the cynical and self-seeking. Most men and women had to squeeze what meaning they could from apolitical careers and the private life of family and friends.

This situation was the context in which Eastern European philosophers resurrected and refurbished the idea of civil society in the late 1970s and early '80s. Since the worst of Stalinism was an unpleasant memory and only a rotting autocracy hung over the present, these thinkers could conceptualize civil society as a new arena of independent, imaginative ethical thought and action uncorrupted by the state.

The idea of civil society took center stage in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia and later in the Baltic Republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as a program of resistance to communism. At first only the courageous few dared to carry on secret or even open independent activity, as the police harassed or broke it up. Men and women like Vaclav Havel, who insisted on creative expression independent of the state, went to jail. In Poland even before the Solidarity movement, a so-called "floating university" traveled from flat to flat in Warsaw in defiance of the regime. Moreover, though repeatedly attacked by the police, the "university" made a point of carrying on its activities openly.

With the advent of Solidarity in 1980, a new hope arose that civil society could save society as a whole from a limitless future of bleak communist rule. Here at last was more than a glimmer of social activity independent of state domination; here was the self organization of society, a new home for moral resistance to an illegitimate government, for an "anti-political politics." Bronislaw Geremek, the Polish historian and Solidarity leader imprisoned for his activities, describes the purpose of independent action in civil society:

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Moral resistance, though seemingly hopeless against systems that are based on political and military force, functions like a grain of sand in the cogwheels of a vast but vulnerable machine. The idea of a civil society—even one that avoids overtly political activities in favor of education, the exchange of information and opinion, or the protection of the basic interests of particular groups—has enormous anti-totalitarian potential. (1992, 4)

So long as it did not openly pursue political ends, civil society might act as a "cocoon," gradually enclosing and marginalizing the apparatus of state control. In Czechoslovakia the Charter 77 movement took up the mantle of civil society to oppose an oppressive state. In the Baltic Republics, a variety of nationalist movements, "citizens' committees," and other organizations sprang up spontaneously in the late 1980s, an open struggle for separation from the Soviet Union. Under the conditions of "weak" totalitarianism prevailing in Eastern Europe, civil society appeared as an arena of social action in which morally whole men and women could find their wholeness confirmed. And they could draw large numbers of the previously quiescent into active resistance. In this way, organizing civil society can play a major role in creating democratic societies as well as strengthening both new and developed democracies.

The functions of civil society in transitions to democracy in Eastern and Central Europe have recurred around the world in varying degrees. "In South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, . . . South Africa, Nigeria, and Benin (to give only a partial list), an extensive mobilization of civil society brought critical pressure for democratic change" (Diamond 1994, 5). Even in China, which has not begun a recognizable transition to democracy, Chinese as well as foreign scholars have seen the applicability of civil society (Shu-Yub Ma 1994, 181-185). Thus, if the concept of civil society previously applied only to the West, the cultural diffusion of Western ideas combined with economic and social development have gone a great distance toward universalizing this pregnant idea, despite charges of "Western imperialism" against Western scholars applying the civil society idea to non-Western societies.³ Thus, even in the face of counterclaims by cultural relativists, the concept of civil society is nearing universality.

The Functions of Civil Society in Liberal Democracy

Larry Diamond has outlined ten "democratic functions" of civil society (1994, 11). Its *first* and most basic function is limiting state power, accomplished primarily by two linked efforts. Civil society must both monitor the abuse of state power—such as corruption or vote fraud—and also mobilize society to protest such abuses, thereby undermining the legitimacy of undemocratic governments. *Second*, civil society supplements the role

of political parties in stimulating political participation. *Third*, civil society can develop attributes such as toleration and moderation crucial to democratic development. *Fourth*, it creates channels other than political parties for "the articulation, aggregation and representations of interests," not least at the local level. *Fifth*, voluntary associations can create interests that transcend the fault lines of region, religion, class, or ethnicity and the like. *Sixth*, voluntary associations recruit and train potential political leaders. *Seventh*, such organizations may help to build democracy in a variety of other ways, such as in monitoring election procedures. *Eighth*, civil society can widely disseminate information useful to individuals in playing their roles as democratic citizens. *Ninth*, civil society can help to achieve the economic reforms without which democracy is unlikely to take root. And *tenth*, the well-functioning of civil society may (benignly) strengthen the emerging democratic state by pressuring it into patterns of behavior that enhance its legitimacy.

Actually or potentially, civil society has other indispensable functions, some of which overlap those just mentioned, in the liberal democratic order. We can hardly exaggerate their importance. Unless these functions and those enumerated above operate at least minimally, the situation of liberal democracy is precarious indeed.

Integrates Individuals and Groups. One of civil society's key functions is its capacity to integrate lone individuals or exclusive groups into the larger social order by offering avenues of social contact, alliance, and cohesion. This function is significant because modern society tends to separate people from each other. Today economic forces often encourage mobility, sending untold millions from the countryside to cities, where they find themselves relatively alone. In these conditions, primary social connections, such as family, school, and community associations are weak or broken. Sociologists find that these individuals of all ages are prone to serious pathologies, including substance abuse, suicide, crime, and membership in such extremist groups as religious and ideological cults and violent political organizations. Civil society can be a cohesive force against the fragmentation of modern life. Associations draw relatively lone individuals out of themselves into potentially meliorative social contact, providing avenues of involvement to direct interest and purpose and building networks of trust. Civil society can also positively affect isolated groups, peacefully integrating ethnic and other minorities into society without a surrender of their identity. The socializing forums and networks of civil society are not a panacea for alienating conditions. But they can prevent some social pathologies; and they have the capacity to ameliorate and in some cases to restore social health.

ticipation. *Third*, civil society moderates other than political parties and associations of interests," not least can create interests that transcend ethnicity and the like. *Sixth*, civil society moderates political leaders. *Seventh*, civil society moderates in a variety of other ways. *Eighth*, civil society can moderate individuals in playing their roles as help to achieve the economic growth to take root. And *tenth*, the (civil society) strengthen the emerging patterns of behavior that enhance its

other indispensable functions, in the liberal democratic order. Unless these functions and those of the situation of liberal democ-

of civil society's key functions are not exclusive groups into social contact, alliance, and modern society tends to separate forces often encourage mobilization to cities, where they find their primary social connections, and associations are weak or broken. All ages are prone to serious crime, and membership in religious cults and violent political forces against the fragile, relatively lone individuals out of contact, providing avenues and building networks of trust. Organized groups, peacefully integrated without a surrender of their tasks of civil society are not a prevent some social pathology and in some cases to restore

Disperses Power and Protects Individuals. A second and essential function of civil society lies in its ability to disperse power. It does so by creating numerous centers of thought, action, and loyalty. The *independence* of these separate associations and organizations from direction by the state characterizes civil society's dispersal of power. A result of this dispersal is that the associative life of civil society can protect the individual in significant ways. Membership in civil society associations can act as psychological, social, and economic barriers between individuals and political or social forces that demand submission against the individual's will. The varieties of associational solidarity available in developed civil society can strengthen individual or group resolve and resources against external pressures to conform or capitulate. There is a further way in which civil society protects individuals, groups, and society as a whole from the abuse of power. According to an argument of James Madison in *The Federalist*, liberty spontaneously gives rise to organized interests. The variety of independently organized interests and points of view fostered by fully developed civil society makes it less likely that any one group or interest will dominate society, abusing its power to the detriment of other groups' rights or the public good.

Supplements or Substitutes for Government Programs. In addition, the activities of some organizations of civil society supplement or substitute for government programs by providing similar services of their own. For example, community groups share such tasks as caring for the sick, the aged, and the disabled; they also care for the able-bodied poor, homeless, or mentally deficient. National, regional, or local associations may organize programs that parallel other government activities. Churches, labor unions, private foundations, neighborhood, or other organizations may engage in activities related to health, education, social welfare, recreation, or numerous other activities that have the effect of dispersing power by offering alternative sources of government services.

Mediates Between Individuals and the State. The organizations and activities of civil society may also act as mediator between the individual or family and the state. Especially in large, modern political systems individuals may feel dwarfed by the scale of the modern state and unable to make their voices heard. Membership in labor unions, religious organizations, and professional associations, for instance, provides a context and opportunity for discussion of all levels of public issues. Many independent organizations involve themselves in political issues; through membership and participation individuals can hear their voices in the councils of power more clearly than through formal political representation alone. In this way membership in nongovernmental organizations can result in a more stable

society by linking individuals to the community as a whole and to its political institutions.

Educates Citizens for Democracy. Another function of the associational life of civil society is to be a school in the arts of democratic citizenship. The associative life of civil society is the seedbed for a variety of skills vital to democratic life. Political participation is a leading virtue of democracy, since it requires at least a minimum of participation to function adequately and ensure itself against internal atrophy and decay. While it is not necessary for democracy's survival that everyone participate in ways that require political skills, a certain degree of participatory ability, spread throughout society, is a necessary staple of democratic life. In its absence, only an elite takes action, and to the degree that it does so democracy rests on more or less shaky foundations. We must remember that democracy *must reproduce itself*. It must train each new generation in the ideas and practices of citizenship. The organizations of civil society can provide training ground for democratic action. Participating in meetings, recruiting members, organizing activities, speaking in public, and practicing quiet persuasion are some of the activities in which civil society can cultivate the arts of civic membership. Further, as organizations are self-governing, participation in them promotes the experience and values of democratic citizenship by allowing the *experience of internal autonomy*. At the same time, the associational life of civil society preserves key values against the corrosive effects of modern culture. In many cases, it can promote an experience of social pluralism by acquainting individuals with others unlike themselves. This experience may go far toward fostering essential democratic virtues, such as respect and toleration for others. A political culture requires such virtues if it is to perpetuate democracy.

Promotes Creativity. Creativity also characterizes developed civil society. Where threats and intimidation inhibit the spontaneous interchange of ideas, creativity wanes, except in a few hardy souls. Even where the creative process continues in private, it often lacks open or full expression. But regimes that protect the independent thought and association of civil society allow creative forces to flourish. Many forms of creativity are crucial to liberal democracy. Economic well-being in today's world economy depends on creative innovation. The inhibition of the interchange of ideas in the former Soviet Union placed economic prosperity in the "Information Age" beyond its reach. State bureaucracies are notoriously adverse to change. But modern societies face deep and compelling difficulties, ranging from inadequate education, environmental disasters, international economic competition, and ethnic strife to drug addiction, crime, and disease. Only the full expression of human creativity can hope to deal with them. In drawing

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a curtain around civil society its ability to relieve or resolve not survive in the long run i creative force of civil society ing these problems.

Extends Exclusive Loy meditated deeply upon the is associational opportunities. Tocqueville observed that vishness by showing individu and well-being of others, no rightly understood.'"⁴ Mem thing else: it draws people ou encourages moral and ethical sibility. In some instances, en ety may contain and soften et membership in an all-encom exclusive identities, multiple alties that hold group conflic

Liberates the Individu belong to groups involved in or the like, no one group's p associations protects membe any one group's monopoly o multiple memberships avail ability to choose among alte The ability to choose is freec ilar groups consuming the wl dom promoted by multiple rr up his argument in the phrase plural loyalties possible in th vidual. But a single, all-enc person; and practical circum ic support, may preclude the from commitment to a singl advocate government polici ment from single loyalties.

Civil Society, Civility, an Associations of civil so morally defensible ends. Th

a curtain around civil society, the closed society simultaneously suffocates its ability to relieve or resolve these dilemmas. Liberal democracy also cannot survive in the long run if modern social problems go unchecked. The creative force of civil society is a potentially abundant well-spring for resolving these problems.

Extends Exclusive Loyalties. In the nineteenth century Tocqueville meditated deeply upon the importance of civil society and its congeries of associational opportunities. Two of his conclusions are most relevant here. Tocqueville observed that voluntary associations can temper narrow selfishness by showing individuals the "connections between their own affairs and well-being of others, nourishing a democratic politics of 'self interest rightly understood.'" Membership in voluntary associations does something else: it draws people out of themselves and, through associational life, encourages moral and ethical concern for others, fostering an ethic of responsibility. In some instances, emerging democracies have found that civil society may contain and soften ethnic and national conflict. Instead of exclusive membership in an all-encompassing identity leading to conflict with other exclusive identities, multiple memberships in civil society foster plural loyalties that hold group conflicts in check.

Liberates the Individual. Tocqueville also noted that if individuals belong to groups involved in religion, economic interest, politics, service or the like, no one group's perspective can dominate them. The variety of associations protects members from psychological or practical coercion by any one group's monopoly on their knowledge, attention, and loyalty. The multiple memberships available in civil society thus promote individuals' ability to choose among alternative points of view and courses of action. The ability to choose is freedom itself. Thus membership in cults and similar groups consuming the whole person represents the opposite of the freedom promoted by multiple memberships in civil society. Tocqueville sums up his argument in the phrase "multiply your associations and be free." The plural loyalties possible in the liberal democratic state can liberate the individual. But a single, all-encompassing loyalty may well capture the whole person; and practical circumstances, such as a lack of alternative economic support, may preclude the independence of those wishing to withdraw from commitment to a single loyalty. For this reason liberal writers today advocate government policies that ease practical impediments to detachment from single loyalties.

Civil Society, Civility, and Liberal Democracy

Associations of civil society have not always supported liberal and morally defensible ends. The influence of civil society associations may

run counter to the positive influences just described, and the protection of civil society by the liberal democratic state will not always appear in a positive light. As Ghanaian scholar Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi has shown, some associations, such as many in African civil society, undermine transitions to democracy (1996, 121-129). Organizations may be thinly veiled ethnic enclaves; trade unions are vulnerable to co-optation by the government; religious groups may be docile before authority rather than demanding positive change; the private sector is weak and cannot provide material support for independent non-governmental organizations; traditionalist associations may perpetuate anti-democratic hierarchialism and inequality; and so on.

Moreover, since individuals frequently abuse their freedom, liberty can be perverted. Freedom of association can lead to the creation of groups that range from the dubious to the distasteful to the morally indefensible. Not every aspect of civil societies as we find them, as opposed to how we might imagine them, is good or desirable. But if the state guaranteed the ethical worthiness of civil associations, it would assault the very liberty that liberal democracy aims to protect. For example, if the liberal state had the power to suppress religious or quasi-religious groups it found distasteful, it could curtail the religious liberty of everyone.

Nevertheless, the necessity to preserve democratic liberties does not mean that "anything goes" in the life of civil society if liberal democracy is to remain truly liberal. The actions of hate groups have often crossed the line between the permissible and the forbidden. Irrational, distasteful, or even loathsome speech ought to be protected, but not incitement to violence or violence itself. In principle, liberal toleration extends to every loyalty that allows others their own loyalty.

Finally, what about civil society in relation to the ideal and practice of civility? Civil society in this context refers to its second meaning identified at the beginning of this essay, society as a whole including an independent portion. Edward Shils, one of the most searching analysts of links between civility and civil society, has argued that, despite a loose equating of liberal society with civil society, they are not exactly the same. The key difference between them, he argues, lies in the degree of civility that characterizes a truly *civil* society. In this view, civility is *the* virtue of civil society. In this view, it is more than good manners; it is also a form of political action which strongly implies that antagonists are also members of the same society, that they participate in the same common identity. Treating others civilly marks them as members of the same moral universe, just as not doing so excludes them. Thus incivility implies gross alienation.

In this perspective, "a society possessing the institutions of civil society needs a significant component of ordinary citizens and politicians who

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exercise the virtue of civility' preponderates; in others, it is individuals occupy positions of authority to concentrate in key segments. Civility, which is fully compatible with those with more civility animus. Most importantly, civility precludes extreme partisanship. As self-interest, so an aspect of this discourse cannot exist without it.

Conclusion

Although the idea of civilly accepted core of meaning organizing associations of society who uses the term, civil society (theoretical and empirical) aspects. Civil society combines the non-stand the ways in which civil liberties—freedom of religion—as well as a private real business.

We have also seen how the peculiar conditions of Western Christendom, medieval Europe, such as the division of sacred and secular. After the seventeenth century European countries, such as the Netherlands, religious toleration, which is autonomous groups. The exitian doctrine, separated church and state version of this separation. United States of America, together with other autonomous these social divisions formed. The release of individuals from that they could change their political efforts. In a word, they were fixed and unchangeable) categories no longer contained in.

Beginning with John Locke, the theory what had been occurring

scribed, and the protection of ill not always appear in a positive light. Imah-Boadi has shown, some society, undermine transitions may be thinly veiled ethnic optation by the government; rather than demanding positive action, they cannot provide material support; traditionalist associations and inequality; and so on. To use their freedom, liberty can be used to the creation of groups that are morally indefensible. Not only as opposed to how we might have a state guaranteed the ethical result, but the very liberty that liberal democracy had the power to take away if it found distasteful, it could

democratic liberties does not exist if liberal democracy groups have often crossed the line. Irrational, distasteful, or even incitement to violence, but not incitement to violence, extends to every loyalty

to the ideal and practice of its second meaning identified, including an independent analysis of links between a loose equating of liberty and the same. The key difference of civility that characterizes the virtue of civil society. In this form of political action which members of the same society, that treating others civilly marks just as not doing so excludes

the institutions of civil society—citizens and politicians who

exercise the virtue of civility” (Shils 1991, 11). In some persons civility preponderates; in others, it is at a low ebb. Society benefits when civil individuals occupy positions of authority, with visible civility. Civility needs to concentrate in key segments of society, but it must also permeate society. Civility, which is fully compatible with robust debate, is contagious, for those with more civility animate the potential civility in those around them. Most importantly, civility protects liberal democracy from the dangers of extreme partisanship. As self-discipline is an imperative for self-government, so an aspect of this discipline is the practice of civility. Ordered liberty cannot exist without it.

Conclusion

Although the idea of civil society is subject to debate, it has a generally accepted core of meaning centering on the roles of the autonomous, self-organizing associations of society; and we have seen that, depending on who uses the term, civil society has both normative and positive (prescriptive and empirical) aspects. An important way of viewing the concept of civil society combines the normative and the positive in seeking to understand the ways in which civil society fosters and defends traditional liberal freedoms—freedom of religion, association, speech, the press, and so on—as well as a private realm that, within legal boundaries, is no one’s business.

We have also seen how the concept of civil society arose from the peculiar conditions of Western Civilization, the several divisions of power in medieval Europe, such as independent cities, but especially from the West’s division of sacred and secular powers and loyalties found in Christianity. After the seventeenth century’s bloody wars of religion, some Western European countries, such as the Netherlands and England, instituted a policy of religious toleration, which in turn created a plurality of legally tolerated autonomous groups. The existence of these groups, combined with Christian doctrine, separated church and society in much of Europe. The American version of this separation, established under the Constitution of the United States of America, became “the separation of church and state.” Together with other autonomous social groups such as those found in cities, these social divisions formed the basis of what is now called civil society. The release of individuals from the obligations of medieval society meant that they could change their position in society more and more by their own efforts. In a word, they were free in a new sense. The “ascriptive” (inherited and unchangeable) categories provided by medieval law and its social order no longer contained individuals.

Beginning with John Locke, writers began to recognize in political theory what had been occurring in society. They demanded the wholesale aban-

donment of such doctrines as the claim to a Divine Right of Kings, the notion that political authority is a top-down affair in which God grants sovereignty directly to monarchs. This idea meant that inferiors could not question monarchs. Their powers were legally unlimited. Instead, Locke and his followers divided society and government and saw society ("the community") as the superior power in relations between society and government. Society *needs* government, but only that government which respects the freedom of individuals (buttressed by what they now called "rights") and the autonomy of the independent groups these individuals created. In the nineteenth century, Tocqueville showed how self-organized, autonomous social groups play a paramount role in maintaining the freedoms of the world's most advanced democracy. He saw how social structure and liberty are interrelated.

By the twentieth century, this relationship became better known and studied. These countless varieties of autonomous associations became known as civil society, which theorists understood as the indispensable social underpinning of liberal freedoms. While scholars studied the idea of civil society in universities, it lacked any special significance outside academic circles. But in the 1980s in Eastern and Central Europe, this idea became prominent for theorists living under communist oppression. They saw society's capacity for self-organization independent of the state as its moral salvation, however much a weak totalitarianism might persecute such efforts at independence.

As communist rule began to weaken and then crumble, the civil society idea gained momentum in the East. It spread to the West as autonomous organizations across the Baltic States of the Soviet Union and the satellites of Central Europe, such as Solidarity in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, sprang up, gaining deep admiration from champions of civic and personal freedom. Also in Poland, the independence of the Catholic Church had proved impervious to communist domination. By the 1990s scholars were showing how autonomous associations in societies around the world could play key roles in transitions to democracy.

We have also seen that the civil society question does not just concern transitions to democracy. These transitions are important subjects for academic study that can have an impact on emerging democracies. Academic studies can demonstrate to emerging leaders, for example, which strategies in the struggle for democracy have borne fruit. But to understand how autonomous associations function in securing liberal freedoms for established democracies also, we need a more encompassing concept of civil society.

This essay has focused on the ways in which civil society can promote the values and practices of liberal democracy. Of course we have seen it

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does not always do so. Civil society can act as the social basis of liberty as the West and, increasingly, other places globally, understand liberty. This social basis allows states to decentralize and divide power, to extend loyalties across social fault lines, to promote civic literacy and civility, to foster responsible leadership—and so on through the potential functions outlined above.

However, I conclude with a warning. Civil society is now so much in vogue, and traditional politics so out of fashion or distrusted in some quarters, that we are in danger of catching the "Eastern disease"—the marked tendency of the populations of Central and Eastern Europe, so inured to the evils of the state and its corrosive politics, to take refuge in the anti-political strategies of civil society. The idea of civil society, immensely important as it is, may be in the process of colonizing all we consider bright and shining in public life, relegating the "dubious" field of politics proper to a permanently tarnished, even ignoble status. This would be a grave error; because civil society as it actually exists has its own imperfections and shortcomings, and because, for all its actual and potential virtues, civil society has a limited reach. It does not and cannot rule society as a whole. The body politic rules society as a whole through the medium of the state, the formal agencies of government.

In these circumstances we must recall the overarching and integrative role of *citizenship*, a concept that unites governance of civil society with the government of society as a whole—as body politic or nation. The idea of citizenship transcends civil society narrowly understood to include involvement in the deeply serious matters that concern political power, whose interest and duty it is for citizens to monitor and influence.

Civil society may influence law and policy, but in democracies citizens' representatives create and implement them. Elected public officials wield the power that in developed democracies, *inter alia*, defends citizens against domestic and foreign perils, protects them from destitution, regulates industry, administers justice, promotes prosperity through monetary and fiscal policies—or fails to perform these *vital* functions to a greater or lesser degree.

Those who see the nation-state in decline too often overlook these facts in their haste to advance their political predilections and agendas. Moreover, a vast international or global order is beyond both the practical comprehension and the psychic reach of ordinary men and women, who withdraw into privacy when confronted with an overwhelming political space, where they feel lost and disempowered. The idea of citizenship of a defined group ("We the people") within a defined area is aggregative and inclusive. It embraces the social dimensions of civil society's governance and the polit-

ical dimensions of society's formal government. Citizenship remains the indispensable civic idea to which civil society necessarily is subordinated.

Notes

1. Clinton Rossiter, ed. *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. New York: New American Library, 1961, pp. 77 ff. James Madison (Publius) argued that social pluralism thwarted majoritarian tyranny and protected liberty.
2. See Benjamin Constant's brilliant essay, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared With That of the Moderns" in Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *Benjamin Constant: Political Writings*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 308-328.
3. Zbigniew Brzezinski has recently suggested that the charge of "imperialism" leveled against the West by Asian authorities and their minions in authoritarian regimes such as Malaysia and Singapore actually express differences in the stage of development, not evidence of unbridgeable cultural chasms in a world of relative value. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, "New Challenges to Human Rights," *Journal of Democracy* 8 (April 1997): 3-7.
4. See Nancy Rosenblum's insightful article, "The Moral Uses of Civil Society: Three Views", in PEGS: *Newsletter of the Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society*, University of Maryland, Supplement to 3 (Summer 1993).

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