
Civil Society and the Public Sphere

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In the 1980s, the work of Hungarian and other Eastern European intellectuals was responsible for renewed attention to one of the core concepts of modern Western history, the idea of civil society. The events of 1989 catapulted this concern from academic circles to the broader public discourse. The phrase is now on the lips of foundation executives, business leaders, and politicians; it seems as though every university has set up a study group on civil society and the phrase finds its way into half the dissertations in political sociology. Too often, "civil society" is invoked without sorting out whether it means Milton Friedman's capitalist market policies or social movements like Solidarity or the sort of "political society" or "public sphere" beloved of thinkers from Montesquieu to Tocqueville to Habermas and once thought to exist mainly in cafes and coffeehouses.¹

The resurgence of the notion of civil society has brought it to the fore in discussions of the North American and Western European democracy as well as of the transition (one hopes to democracy) in Eastern Europe. Even more strikingly, the notion of civil society has begun to inform a range of new discussions of the practice and possibilities for democracy in East Asia. Analysts of the 1989 democracy movement in China, for example, locate one of the social bases of the protest in the emergence of new "civil society" institutions—small entrepreneurs,

1. See Charles Taylor, "Modes of Civil Society," *Public Culture* 3, no. 1 (1991):95–118 (which was originally published in Polish). Adam Seligman, *Civil Society* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *The Political Theory of Civil Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992). The last is by far the most substantial and theoretically developed modern treatment. Note, however, its strong Hegelian roots and relative neglect of Anglo-Saxon and French thought, including such key figures as Ferguson, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville. This affects in particular Cohen and Arato's discussion of the concrete social organizational bases for the democratic political culture they describe, including the important themes of intermediate associations and mediating institutions.

"think tanks," poetry journals—and simultaneously suggest that insufficient development of these institutions helps explain the failure of the protests.² Similar analyses inform considerations of the current democratization in Taiwan; it is argued that this democratization follows from the development of an active civil society rooted in business, educational institutions, and the media. Such analyses hold out the hope that somehow the development of capitalist economies (either in itself or along with other institutional changes) provides the necessary basis for the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. Would-be democrats in South Korea and Singapore watch for signs. Those in Hong Kong wonder whether special circumstances have blocked the normal path of history in their case or whether something is wrong with the model.

At the same time, with the demise of communist regimes, many democrats in Eastern Europe have shifted from a discourse of civil society—stressing the realms of autonomous social organization outside the control of the state—to a discourse of citizenship that often forgets that democracy depends not just on the attitudes of individuals but on the social organization of groups. Even more basically, like some counterparts in East Asia, many Eastern Europeans assume that capitalism is the necessary basis of democracy but entertain the question of whether capitalism only produces the civil society democracy needs after a necessary "authoritarian" tutelage. Early capitalism, they suggest, requires such strong institutions to provide order and manage the transition that democracy gets in the way. This is all the more true, they not implausibly suggest, in cases in which the new capitalists must compete in a world system full of more established capitalist economies. Democracy awaits the period when capitalism has produced a stable middle class.

The transition in Eastern Europe has thus produced much discourse; it has brought new interest in the social and cultural dimensions of democratic theory. But as we rush to fill what had too often been almost a vacuum in our consideration of democracy, it is important to keep certain conceptual distinctions relatively clear. One of these is suggested by the link between the general discourse of civil society and the more specific notion of a "public sphere." This too is a revival of an older discourse. It has roots in many different classical and modern distinctions of public from private and is revitalized by new readings of Hannah Arendt, by modern feminist theory, and perhaps above all by the work of Jürgen Habermas.³

2. See, e.g., Thomas B. Gold, "The Resurgence of Civil Society in China," *Journal of Democracy* 1 (Winter 1990): 18–31; and Andrew Nathan *China's Crisis: Dilemmas of Reform and Prospects for Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

3. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

Civil society and public sphere are not precisely equivalent concepts. Indeed, the importance of the concept of public sphere is largely to go beyond general appeals to the nature of civil society in attempts to explain the social foundations of democracy and to introduce a discussion of the specific organization within civil society of social and cultural bases for the development of an effective rational-critical discourse aimed at the resolution of political disputes. Accordingly, we should not follow the example of many recent analysts who have jumped on the bandwagon of enthusiasm for the two concepts, casually assuming that "civil society" and "public sphere" are more or less synonymous. The two terms have usefully different implications for developing the sort of sociological and cultural analysis needed by democratic theory. And just as we distinguish civil society from public sphere, we need also to keep the systemic claims of the economy and economic analysis distinct from other forms of social organization and analysis. Economic conditions certainly affect the public sphere and help shape civil society, but they ought not to be equated with either.

What is at issue is the relationship between patterns of social organization and a certain kind of discourse and political participation, a public sphere in which rational-critical arguments rather than the statuses of actors are decisive. It is not helpful to collapse discourse or politics into social organization as though neither culture nor the wills of actors mattered. Neither is it helpful to forget how much democratic public life depends on specific kinds of social organization even though they do not necessarily and deterministically produce it.

In this essay, I will try to bring some focus to these issues. Although I will begin with some more general and abstract points, I will try to make the problems more concrete by considering the use of Habermas's notion of the public sphere of civil society to understand various aspects of modern "transitions to democracy." I will argue that we need to exercise care not to wrench the concept from its theoretical context and especially not to sever it from the notion of civil society or to collapse one into the other. I will give special attention on the one hand to nationalism and related issues of "identity politics," since these create difficulties for Habermas's conceptualization, while on the other hand, I will consider the problems raised by uncritical attempts to transfer Habermas's concept from its European context to that of "modern," especially early twentieth-century China.

I

The discourse of public sphere and civil society addresses three basic questions:

1. What counts as or defines a political community?
2. What knits society together or provides for social integration?

3. What opportunities are there for changing society by voluntary (especially political, state-oriented) collective action?

The first thing to recognize, implicit in my framing of these questions, is that society is not necessarily equivalent to either the political community or the state. Neither does the discourse of public sphere and civil society exhaust the possible answers to these questions. Nonetheless, this discourse is not comprehensible divorced from the attempt to answer these questions. At the same time, the discourse of public sphere and civil society transforms these questions, making certain conventional answers problematic.

The most common starting point in political discussion is the apparatus of rule, the state. It is, indeed, the creation of states as quasi-autonomous organizations (or actors) that produces the differentiation of politics from other aspects of social life and of discourse. As a result, it is not surprising that we are led to assume state-centered views of the constitution of political communities. Political communities are given their boundaries in the first instance by common subjection to a state. The outcomes of past struggles—conquests, inheritances, civil wars, anti-imperial revolts—are ratified through administrative centralization. Not all states are equally effective, but the effectiveness of some reinforces the assumption that states are the necessary objects of political communities, even where they are not their source.

There is, however, a paradox in the use of states to define political communities. States distinguish political communities from each other, for example, by drawing and enforcing boundaries, by sponsoring shared educational institutions, and by encouraging domestic and restricting foreign markets. At the same time, each state also functions as a specialized apparatus of rule and thereby distinguishes itself from the people subject to its rule. The extent to which the category of “the people” becomes locally meaningful depends on other factors: internal connections among people, occasions for collective action, ideologies that root citizenship in popular consent or in the capacity of rulers to serve the interests of the people, and so on. Nonetheless, its possibility is implicit in the division of rulers from ruled. It is thus available as a category of discourse even in traditional imperial China, even though its democratic and nationalist potentials begin full development only in early modern Europe.

The idea of civil society entered political philosophy and social theory as a way of describing the capacity of a political community to organize itself, independent of the specific direction of state power. Claims to such capacity were linked—notably in Locke—to rejections of the absolute authority of monarchs and assertions of the rights of popular sovereignty. Such arguments placed a new emphasis on the social integration of a people, on society as such rather than merely on the aggregate of subjects. In such a view, the state no longer defined the political

community directly, for its own legitimacy depended on the acquiescence or even support of an already-existing political community. This community is a crucial root to the modern notion of the nation and its simultaneous close link to and distinction from the state (as in the hyphenated term nation-state).

The notion of nation asserts first and foremost a definition of the political community of cultural similarity or common descent. Apart from the questionable accuracy of such claims, it needs to be noted that similarity and descent do not in themselves establish the internal organization of the community, let alone a capacity for self-organization outside the control of the state. For the early modern political thinkers who developed the idea of civil society, the crucial demonstration of such capacity came from the rise of self-regulating markets.

The modern capitalist market thus appeared first in the discourse of civil society and democracy not in its currently familiar guise as a putatively necessary *support* for democracy. Whether or not free markets are necessary for political freedom, the crucial early contribution of markets to the idea of civil society was as a *demonstration* of the possibility of self-organization. Markets led thinkers like Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith to the idea that the activity of ordinary people could regulate itself without the intervention of government.

One of the enduring themes of sociology has been the demonstration that social organization is not limited to the alternatives of state and market. Class structure (rooted in production relations rather than markets as such), functional integration at the level of institutions, and concrete networks of social relations have all been adduced not only as accounts of the way in which society is organized but as arguments for the capacity of "peoples" to organize themselves independently of (or at least beyond) state direction. Nothing in these various sociological claims, however, necessarily put the emphasis on the self-conscious political action of ordinary people. Most of the social self-organization discussed under the rubric of "civil society" and then simply of "society" was held to go on "behind the backs" of self-conscious social actors. Most, but not quite all.

Along with parts of political theory sociology kept alive another strand to the discourse of civil society. Where the dominant early tradition followed Ferguson and Smith in stressing the economic-systemic character of civil society, this other tradition followed Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville in stressing social relations entered into by autonomous agents.⁴ The Eastern European and East

4. The distinction between these two strands in the discourse of civil society is the main point of Taylor, "Modes of Civil Society." Taylor does not really address marxism, which might with equal justice either share the credit for keeping alive the discourse of the possibility that self-aware agents might actively create the society in which they live, or share the blame for blurring the distinction between deterministic discourse about economic systems and the possibility of social relations created by autonomous agents.

Asian discourses of the 1980s—and much recent usage generally—blurs important distinctions between the two strands.⁵

A claim can be made then that a political community—society—might be created and organized through the autonomous action of its members.⁶ Theories differ, of course, as to who or what should be considered a “member” or as to the unit of this autonomous action. Is it class? Nation? The individual? A corporation? Any appeal to autonomous action depends on the existence of “free” actors. Whether these are understood to be collectivities or individuals, some account must be given (or assumed) of how such actors are formed and sustained. For example, Habermas’s account of the availability of free actors for participation in the public sphere turns on the development of a “private” realm that provides individuals with the identity and support to constitute such free actors.

Raising the possibility that society could be not only self-organizing but also the product of self-conscious, intentional organization transforms the discourse of civil society. The discussion assumes that the self-conscious, intentional direction of society comes from a plurality of actors (since if there were only a single actor it would be the state or a ruler, and thus we would not be discussing the capacities of “society” distinct from the state).⁷ Because of this plurality of actors,

5. This point is also made in a very different way by Cohen and Arato (see n. 1). They want to get away from a simple opposition of state to all other social organization (the sort of usage that resulted in a discourse of “society versus the state” in Eastern Europe). They place an important stress on the role of social movements in democratic process and on “resources of solidarity” that enable individuals to join together in collective action to limit the power of state or economy (see chap. 9, esp. p. 472). Yet, drawing primarily on readings of Hegel and Habermas, they generally neglect the French tradition and treat social organization primarily in terms of notions of system integration developed by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. Rather than call attention to the reified and therefore antidemocratic nature of the description of social life as impersonally steered “system,” they simply accept as given that much of social life is so organized. Crucially, they accept without challenge the idea that power is a steering medium in the same sense as money. They also accept the Parsons-Luhmann understanding of economic life as simply a self-regulating functional system steered impersonally by money. They thus either neglect or reject the marxian notion of the way in which capitalism structures not only the economy but the categories of economic understanding (a) so that money appears as the primary element in the economic system, (b) so that the centrality of capital accumulation is obscured, and (c) so that the system appears as necessary rather than transcendable. Such a view is elaborated in Moishe Postone, *Marx’s Critique of Money, Labor and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Their sociological theory thus marginalizes the role of direct social relations—the kinds of structures studied, for example, under the rubric of social networks, and the basis of the communities.

6. I focus here only on the extent to which political society might thus be created, leaving aside both the question of how much autonomy might be exercised by agents in “nonpolitical” relationships and where the boundary, if any, lies between “political” and “nonpolitical” relations.

7. One of the merits of Hannah Arendt’s classic discussion in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) was her stress on the link between plurality and the idea of the public. See also the discussion in Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the

the ways in which they relate to each other and conjointly exercise influence or control over the organization of society become central. To oversimplify somewhat, there are two basic models for this: power and uncoerced agreement.⁸ Let us postulate that while there are no purely uncoerced agreements in this world, there are nonetheless variations in the extent to which power—especially the transitive exercise of power by some actors against others—explains agreements and actions.

Even where power is minimally involved, uncoerced agreements may not be fair, wise, or well-understood by those who are parties to them. In touting the political virtues of civil society, early modern and Enlightenment thinkers were as concerned to challenge unexamined tradition and unmediated passion as to disperse power among a plurality of political actors (probably more so). The two causes were, however, joined in the formation of what Habermas called the public sphere of civil society, an arena of deliberative exchange in which rational-critical arguments rather than mere inherited ideas or personal statuses could determine agreements and actions. It was an operationalization of civil society's capacity for self-organization, one that emphasized plurality and reason. It was also a social formation that depended in various ways on civil society for support.

II

The basic question guiding Habermas's exploration of the public sphere was, To what extent can the wills or opinions guiding political action be formed on the basis of rational-critical discourse? This was a salient question primarily where economic and other differences give actors discordant identities and conflicting interests.

For the most part, Habermas took it as given that the crucial differences among actors would be those of class and political-economic status. He focused on how the nature, organization, and opportunities for discourse on politically significant topics might be structured so that class and status inequalities were not an insupera-

Liberal Tradition, and Jurgen Habermas," pp. 73-98 in C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

8. Putatively intermediate models like "persuasion" can be (and commonly are) analyzed in terms of the extent to which the persuasion (or other influence of one actor over others) is or is not produced by power. Even appeals to culture as the source of agreement divide on the question of whether cultural commonalities that actors assume (rather than examine) are matters of power (e.g., "hegemonic culture") or must be seen as uncoerced, perhaps because they are constitutive of the identities of actors.

ble barrier to political participation.⁹ The first issue, of course, was access to the discourse. This access was not so simple as the mere willingness to listen to another's speech but also involved matters like the distribution of the sorts of education that empowered speakers to present recognizably "good" arguments. Beyond this there was the importance of an ideological commitment to setting aside status differences in the nonce egalitarianism of an intellectual argument.

Habermas's approach, however, and that of many working in the frameworks of marxism and critical theory as well as classical liberalism, has the flaw of treating interpersonal differences primarily as matters of economic interest. This is doubly problematic. In the first place, it leads to neglect of many other kinds of differences—notably those of gender. Habermas recognizes the gendered construction of the classical bourgeois public sphere but passes it by almost without comment. Even when Habermas later acknowledges the importance of gender inclusion/exclusion, he has a hard time seeing the issue as anything other than a matter of the representation or nonrepresentation of one interest group among many; he has difficulty with the notion that the exclusion of women raises more basic categorical issues.¹⁰ The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century public sphere was structured, in other words, not just by a sliding scale of inclusion/exclusion but also by a categorical incapacity to thematize certain categorical differences among people as appropriate topics for public discourse.

The second problem is perhaps even more theoretically basic. In *Structural Transformation*, Habermas treated identity formation as essentially private and prior to participation in the idealized public sphere of rational-critical discourse. The "intimate sphere" of the family and the institutions of private life generally created people (men) who were able to enter the public sphere. The economic circumstances that supported individual autonomy were certainly important, but

9. Habermas's initial focus was on the bourgeois public sphere, one already shaped by class-structured exclusion even while it "bracketed" other economic and status differences among those included. In the later end of his book, Habermas analyzes the transformation of the public sphere—largely, in his eyes, a degeneration—that resulted from the specific forms in which it became more inclusive. Most directly, inclusivity brought a transformation in scale and thereby a reliance on "mass media." At the same time, the larger public sphere was subject to greater manipulation by specialized agents like public relations professionals and in general by a substitution of more instrumental use of language and images for a genuine rational-critical discourse (a concern that continues into Habermas's later work). Habermas's account of this degeneration of the public sphere makes a number of good points but shares many of the problems of "mass culture" critiques generally. It also tends to foreclose investigation of the conditions under which a serious public exercise of reason might be organized at a scale appropriate to democratic participation in contemporary politics; this must surely involve some level of reliance on media that Habermas dismisses as almost intrinsically foreign to rational-critical discourse (cf. C. Calhoun, "Populist Politics, Communications Media, and Large Scale Social Integration," *Sociological Theory* 6 [no. 2]: 219–41).

10. See, however, his discussion of this point—particularly in response to challenges from Nancy Fraser—in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.

Habermas does not rest content with this kind of support from "civil society." A fuller sense of identity formation was crucial because it alone distinguished the plurality of voices in the public sphere from the simple range of "objective" interests. Because they were distinctive individuals and members of distinctive cultural groupings, in other words, the members of the public sphere might bring different views and opinions to their collective discourse without these being merely reflections of preset interests based on their social positions.

This notion, however, locates identity formation entirely in the realm of private life and therefore outside of politics and public discourse. It is because of this that Habermas cannot see any positive public role for what today is called "identity politics." On the contrary, these attempts to affirm or reshape identities through public action appear in *Structural Transformation* as degenerative intrusions due first to growing democratic inclusiveness and second to public relations manipulation. Habermas dates this confusion of the public and private spheres especially to the postwar era.

Interestingly, versions of the same periodization (with a more positive valuation) appear in "new social movement" theory (where identity politics is treated as new by contrast to the settled interest politics of the labor movement). But in fact social movements blurring the public/private distinction and engaging in identity-formation/reformation have been important throughout modernity. The early nineteenth century, for example, saw an efflorescence of new social movements that challenged the public/private distinction and brought identity politics into the forefront of the public sphere: utopian socialism, abolitionism, religious revival.¹¹ These were often pushed to the background in the heyday of the institutionalized labor movement, social democracy, and corporatism, though perhaps never to the extent as history written under the spell of those economically focused movements suggests.

Perhaps the most important version of identity politics is the pervasive modern reliance on the idea of nation. Nationalism was a central feature of many new social movements of the nineteenth century. Moreover, despite repeated academic expectations that it would soon vanish into the mists of the archaic past from which it was allegedly a survival, nationalism has proved itself integral to the present era. Nationalism is, for example, an ideology all the *more* important because of globalization, instead of being merely rendered nonproblematic by it.

Nationalism is commonly brought forward as the claim that certain cultural similarities should count as *the* definition of political community. As hinted at the beginning of this article, nationalism as community poses a basic challenge to theories of democracy and civil society. Nationalism threatens not only bellicosity

11. See C. Calhoun, "New Social Movements of the Nineteenth Century," *Social Science History*, forthcoming.

toward rivals but repression of internal difference. Most common versions of the discourse of nationalism, in other words, treat the nation as unitary and its members as essentially similar and equivalent—denying the plurality that was crucial to the idea of democratic self-government through the public sphere of civil society. Nationalism addresses the crucial question of what constitutes the “self” of self-rule, a question theories of democracy and civil society commonly avoid. It does so, however, in a way that substitutes cultural similarity for effective self-organizing social relations. At the same time, the illusion of historical givenness or naturalness obscures the extent to which nations and other political communities are constituted in struggle (and sometimes through manipulative invocation).

This is not to say that nationalism is not linked to the democratic claims made on behalf of civil society. On the contrary, the notions of nation and civil society share crucial aspects of common origin. Notably, for example, both were invoked in early modern attempts to assert sovereignty from below, to ground the rights of “peoples” against monarchs. In its classical formulation of the French Revolution, the idea of nation is understood as rooted not in primordial inheritance but in the collective action of the people. This opens prospects for the incorporation of immigrants who are prepared to enter into a civil society of citizens. But nationalism coexists frighteningly easily with societal integration through economic systems, state power, and manipulation of culture by demagogues and public relations agencies, and it can be the enemy of rational-critical discourse in the public sphere as a way of making political decisions and determining social organization.

III

A political public sphere is successful, we might argue following Habermas, when it provides for a discourse about shared societal concerns that is both rational-critical and influential. Such a public sphere depends on a favorable organization of civil society. It is not enough that there simply *be* civil society or even civil society more or less autonomous from the state.

It is here that we can see why the too-easy elision between the concepts of civil society and public sphere is the bane of current discourse on transitions to democracy. There is a strong temptation to leap from the presence of business institutions, free housing markets, newspapers, and telephones to the presumption that civil society prospers and democracy will inevitably follow. This problem is not unique to the current discourse on Eastern Europe. It besets also the attempt to use the Western notions of civil society and public sphere in various non-Western settings where social transformations are examined for hints of coming democracy. This is not so problematic where the concepts are used simply to