

Introduction  
Civil Society I, II, III: Constructing an Empirical  
Concept from Normative Controversies and  
Historical Transformations

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*

In 1990, when I first returned to Eastern Europe after the fall of the old regimes, I submitted a short essay to the Hungarian political weekly *Valosog* about the shock of encountering 'real' as opposed to 'ideal' civil society. Quoting briefly from that piece, which evidently was never published, can provide a bit of 'historical' atmosphere for the theoretical remarks which follow.

Just when intellectuals in Poland and Hungary were celebrating the return of civil society as an ideal, they have encountered it as a social fact. It's like a cold shower the morning after.

Almost single-handedly, Eastern European intellectuals reintroduced 'civil society' to contemporary social theory. Until they started talking and writing about it, it had been considered a quaint and conservative notion, thoroughly obsolete. Locke thought the civil realm necessary for freedom, of both the political and economic kind; the American Founding Fathers and Tocqueville alike believed that the independence of this realm formed the basis for everything good and right.

Once industrial displaced commercial capitalism, however, civil society took on a different, decidedly more ambiguous hue. Marx criticized it as merely formally free: 'civility' allowed privacy and selfish greed. Progressive intellectuals since then have wanted to eliminate civil society and set up a substantively good (read socialist and public) society in its place.

Eastern European intellectuals experienced that effort to create the good society first hand; they wanted to return to formal freedoms instead. To find a theory that embraced liberty without social guilt, they returned to the 18th century, when civil society was conceived in a positive way.

It was with these old fashioned ideas that the anti-communist revolutions were led, by intellectuals who made alliance with the few charismatic figures they could find. They articulated the inchoate frustrations of their nations, creating the 'people' in the very process of making the revolution in their name.

Now that they have carved out a civil society, however, intellectuals are not at all sure they want it. Neither are the charismatic leaders or the 'people' themselves. They are learning that civil society means more than

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civilian and anti-military. It also means citified, not only civil and cordial but also capitalist, thoroughly bourgeois. Kant translated civil society as *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. Literally, this meant a burgher, citydweller's society; it was also a synonym for the capitalist middle class.

In these new civil societies, market relations have assumed central importance. Pragmatic bargaining and the pushing and shoving of done deals are the orders of the day. Respecting formal rules, not pursuing some utopian conception of the good, is what holds such a society together. In postcommunist societies, it is about all one can hope for today, or have any right to expect. In this real civil society, intellectuals, charismatic leaders, and even 'the people' themselves may soon be out of a job.

When the intellectuals of Eastern Europe came to power, they thought they could have it all – enlightenment, capitalism, and democracy itself. The practical task of social reconstruction makes these social ideals difficult for the intellectuals to sustain. The utopian ideology they bring to their task, however, reduces even further the possibility of success . . .

In the good old bad days, opposition intellectuals coined the term 'real socialism' to dramatize how socialism in practice departed from the dream. It is time to start talking about 'real civil society'. (Alexander, 1990)

Virtually every important concept in the social sciences is the result of a striking kind of secularization process, a process that takes an idea from practical experiences, from the often overwhelming pressures of moral, economic, and political conflicts, to the intellectual world of conceptual disputation, paradigm dispute, research program, and empirical debate. Even after they have made this transition, of course, such concepts retain significant moral and political associations, and they remain highly disputed. What has changed is the terrain in which they are discussed, compromised, and struggled over. The intellectual field, after all, has a very distinctive specificity of its own.

We can recognize how this process resulted in the creation of such apparently 'classical' social science concepts as class, status, race, party, religion, and sect. More recently, we can observe a similar process of secularization with the emergence of concepts like gender, sexuality, and identity. The subject of the present volume is a concept, civil society, that is undergoing 'secularization' at the very moment we write. For a second time this idea has emerged into intellectual discourse from the ongoing tumult of social and political life. Once again, it must be conceptually refined so that it can be subject to more disciplined moral disputation and empirical social science.

The contributors to this volume push this secularization process forward in varied and important ways. In this introduction, I will try to do my part, suggesting that civil society has been conceived in

three ideal-typical forms which have succeeded each other in historical time. After situating these ideal types historically, and evaluating them theoretically, I will introduce an analytical model of the relationship between civil society and the other kinds of institutional spheres which compose society. I will suggest that only by understanding the 'boundary relations' between civil and uncivil spheres can we convert civil society from a normative into a 'real' concept which can be studied in a social scientific way.

### **Civil Society I: Inclusiveness as Sacralization**

It is well known that in its modern, post-medieval, post-Hobbesian form, 'civil society' entered into social understanding only in the late seventeenth century, with the writings of figures like Locke and Harrington (see Seligman, 1993). Developed subsequently by the Scottish moralists, especially Ferguson and Smith, by Rousseau, and by Hegel, and perhaps employed energetically for the last time by Tocqueville, 'civil society' was an inclusive, umbrella-like concept referring to a plethora of institutions outside the state. Definitely it included the capitalist market and its institutions, but it also denoted what Tocqueville called 'voluntary religion' (non-established Protestant covenantal denominations), private and public associations and organizations, all forms of cooperative social relationships that created bonds of trust, public opinion, legal rights and institutions, and political parties.

It is vital to see that in this first period of its modern understanding, civil society I (CSI) was endowed with a distinctively moral and ethical force. As Hirschman (1977) has shown in *The Passions and the Interests*, the civilizing qualities associated with civil society most definitely extended to the capitalist market itself, with its bargaining, its trading, its circulating commodities and money, its shopkeepers and its private property. Identified by such terms as *le doux commerce*, the processes and institutions of the capitalist market were benignly conceived - at least by the progressive thinkers of the day - as helping to produce qualities associated with international peace, domestic tranquility, and increasingly democratic participation. Capitalism was understood as producing self-discipline and individual responsibility. It was helping to create a social system antithetical to the vainglorious aristocratic one, where knightly ethics emphasized individual prowess through feats of grandeur, typically of a military kind, and ascriptive status hierarchies were maintained by hegemonic force. Hirschman shows, for example, that Montesquieu can be understood as providing high ethical praise for capitalism in its early phase. Benjamin Franklin's

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famous and influential *Autobiography*, filled with vain self-regard and identifying public virtue with the discipline and propriety of market life, might be said to provide an equally important example of a more popular, more bourgeois, but perhaps not less literary kind.

The decidedly positive moral and ethical tone attributed to market society underwent a dramatic transformation in the early middle of the nineteenth century. The development of capitalism's industrial phase made Mandeville's famous fable of capitalism's bee-like cooperation seem completely *passé*. As Hirschman tells this story, the pejorative association of capitalism with inhumane instrumentality, domination, and exploitation first emerged among radical British political economists like Hodgkins in the 1820s and 1830s. Marx encountered this Manichean literature in the early 1840s and he provided it with a systematic economic and sociological theory. His voice, while by far the most important in theoretical terms, was in historical terms only one voice among many. The emerging hatred of capitalism, its identification with all the evils of feudal domination and worse, was expressed among a wide and growing chorus of utopians, socialists, and republicans. It is noteworthy that the new industrial capitalists and their liberal economic spokesmen did not shy away from this new view of capitalism as an anti-social force. Brandishing the doctrine of *laissez-faire* in a rather anti-Smithean way, their motto seemed to be, 'society be damned!' There exists no better representation of this growing self-understanding of the antagonism between an evil, egoistical 'market' on the one hand, and 'society' in the moral and collective sense on the other, than Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1957), a book which served in the post-war period to perpetuate the very theoretical misunderstandings I am problematizing here.

#### **Civil Society II: Reductionism as Profanation**

In social theory this dramatic transformation of the moral and social identity of market capitalism had fateful effects on the concept of civil society. As Keane (1988) was the first to point out, the connotations of this fecund concept now became drastically narrowed. Shorn of its cooperative, democratic, associative, and public ties, this second version of civil society (CSII) came to be pejoratively associated with market capitalism alone. Marx's writings between 1842 and 1845 reflect and crystallize this reduction in a remarkably clear and influential way. Not only is civil society now simply a field for the play of egoistical, purely private interests, but it is now treated as a superstructure, a legal and political arena

produced as camouflage for the domination of commodities and the capitalist class. For Marx, industrial capitalism seemed only to consist of markets, the groups formed by markets, and states. Society in the collective and moral sense was dissolving. Only the submerged and repressed cooperative ties established by working class production, Marx believed, could provide the basis for collectively binding social organization.

It is not surprising that in this social and intellectual situation, in the middle of the nineteenth century, civil society as an important concept in social theory shortly disappeared. If it was no more than an epiphenomenon of capitalism, it was no longer necessary, either intellectually or socially. In the context of the ravages of early industrial capitalism, social and intellectual attention shifted to the state. Substantive rather than formal equality became the order of the day. Issues of democratic participation and liberty, once conceived as inherently connected to equality in its other forms, became less important. Strong state theories emerged, among radicals and conservatives, and bureaucratic regulation appeared as the only counterbalance to the instabilities and inhumanities of market life. In the newly emerging social sciences, mobility, poverty, and class conflict became the primary topics of research and theory. In social and political philosophy, utilitarian and contract theories assumed prominence, along with the neo-Kantian emphasis on justice in terms of formal rationality and proceduralism at the expense of ethical investigations into the requirements of the good life.

The legacy of this century-long distortion of the capitalism/civil-society relationship has had regrettable effects. Identifying society with the market, ideologists for the right have argued that the effective functioning of capitalism depends on the dissolution of social controls. Secure in the knowledge that civil society is the private market, that economic processes by themselves will produce the institutions necessary to promote democracy and mutual respect, they have disbanded public institutions that helped crystallize social solidarity outside the marketplace without moral qualms. Yet if, for the right, the capitalism/civil-society identification suggested abolishing society, for the left it suggested abolishing markets and private property itself. If civility and cooperation were perverted and distorted by capitalism, the latter would have to be abolished for the former to be restored. In this task, the big state became the principal ally of the left, and progressive movements became associated not only with equality but with stifling and often authoritarian bureaucratic control.

In the last decade, as is well known, revolutionary social and cultural events have created the circumstances for a renewed

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intellectual engagement with civil society. Big state theory has lost its prestige, economically with the falling productivity of command economies, morally and politically with the decline of state communism and bureaucratic authoritarian regimes. Within social science there is now more interest in informal ties, intimate relationships, trust, cultural and symbolic processes, and the institutions of public life. In political and moral philosophy, there has been a return not only to democratic theory but – under the influence of renewed interest in Aristotle, Hegel, and pragmatism – to hermeneutical investigations into the lifeworld ties of local culture and community.

### **Civil Society III: Analytical Differentiation as Realism**

These theoretical developments, and the social processes they inform and reflect, have allowed us to understand civil society in a clearer manner than before. More precise and more specific than the all-inclusive umbrella idea of CSI, more general and inclusive than the narrowly reductionist association of CSII, there is growing recognition of, and interest in, civil society as a sphere that is analytically independent of – and, to varying degrees, empirically differentiated from – not only the state and the market but other social spheres as well.

With the emerging understanding provided by *Civil Society III* (CSIII), it is more clear than ever before that earlier conceptions mistakenly linked not only individualism (its emergence) but also the collective sense of social obligation (its decline) with market society. Individualism (see, for example, Taylor, 1989) has a long history in Western societies, as a moral force, an institutional fact, and a set of interactional practices. It has a non-economic background in the cultural legacy of Christianity, with its emphasis on the immortal soul, conscience, and confession; in Renaissance self-fashioning; in the Reformation's new emphasis on the individual relation to God; in the Enlightenment's deification of individual reason; in Romanticism's restoration of expressive individuality. Institutions that reward and model individuality can be traced back to English legal guarantees for private property in the eleventh century; to the medieval parliaments that distinguished the specificity of Western feudalism; to the newly independent cities that emerged in late medieval times and played such a powerful historical role until the emergence of absolutist states. The economic practices of market capitalism, in other words, did not invent moral (or immoral) individualism. They should be viewed, rather, as marking a new specification and institutionalization of it, along with other

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newly emerging forms of social organization, such as religious sect activity, mass parliamentary democracy, and romantic love.

Just as individualism in its moral and expressive forms preceded, survived, and, indeed, surrounded the instrumental, self-oriented individualism institutionalized in capitalist market life, so did the existence of 'society'. As Margaret Somers (1993) has shown, civil ties and the enforcement of obligations to a community of others were part of the fundamental structure of many British towns centuries before the appearance of contemporary capitalist life. The notion of a 'people' rooted in common lineage, of the community as an ethnos, formed the early basis for an ethically binding, particularist conception of nationhood from at least the fifteenth century, as the writings of Liah Greenfield (1992) and Rogers Brubaker (1996) suggest. The egoistical, impersonal, and morally irresponsible practices of early industrial capitalism were not checked by some kind of 'protectionist' movement that grew mysteriously out of nowhere, as Polanyi seems to argue in his description of the reaction to 'market society'. To the contrary, this protectionist movement, acting in the name of 'society', emerged precisely because there already existed strongly institutionalized and culturally mandated reservoirs of non-market, non-individualistic force in Western social life. It was from these sources that, as Patrick Joyce (1991) has most recently shown, there emerged protests against capitalism on behalf of 'the people'.

As this brief historical discussion suggests, civil society and capitalism must be conceptualized in fundamentally different terms. Civil society should be conceived (Alexander, 1997) as a solidary sphere in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes gradually to be defined and to some degree enforced. To the degree this solidary community exists, it is exhibited by 'public opinion', possesses its own cultural codes and narratives in a democratic idiom, is patterned by a set of peculiar institutions, most notably legal and journalistic ones, and is visible in historically distinctive sets of interactional practices like civility, equality, criticism, and respect. This kind of civil community can never exist as such; it can exist only 'to one degree or another'. One reason is that it is always interconnected with, and interpenetrated by, other more and less differentiated spheres which have their own criteria of justice and their own system of rewards. There is no reason to privilege any one of these non-civil spheres over any other.<sup>1</sup> The economy, the state, religion, science, the family – each differentiated sphere of activity is a defining characteristic of modern and post-modern societies. We are no more a capitalist society than we are a bureaucratic, secular, rational one, or indeed a civil one.

Rather than try to reduce the contemporary social system to the identity of one of its spheres, I would suggest that we acknowledge social differentiation both as a fact and as a process and that we study the boundary relationships between spheres. The contributors to this volume share my particular interest in the boundary relations between what might be called the civil and non-civil spheres. I believe, in fact, that the social history of 'capitalism' can be illuminated in precisely these terms.

**Boundaries between Civil and Non-civil Spheres: The  
'Capitalism' Problem Revisited**

One can speak of civil and non-civil boundary relationships in terms of facilitating inputs, destructive intrusions, and civil repairs. Boundary tensions can seriously distort civil society, threatening the very possibility for an effective and democratic social life. These distorting forces are destructive intrusions; in the face of them, the actors and institutions of civil society can make repairs by seeking to regulate and reform what happens in such non-civil spheres. Yet such subsystem interpenetration can also go the other way. Some of the goods and the social forms produced by other spheres actually facilitate the realization of a more civil life. Conservative theorists and politicians, not to mention the elites in these non-civil spheres themselves, are inclined to emphasize the facilitating inputs of non-civil spheres to the creation of a good social life. Those on the liberal and radical left are more inclined to emphasize the destructive intrusions that these interpenetrations entail, and the repairs that must be made as a result. Neither side of this argument can be ignored in the effort to theorize the relation between civil society and other kinds of social institutions in a general way.

That the economic sphere in its capitalist form facilitates the construction of a civil society in important ways is a historical and sociological fact that should not be denied. When an economy is structured by markets, behavior is encouraged that is independent, rational, and self-controlled. It was for this reason that the early intellectuals of capitalism, from Montesquieu to Adam Smith, hailed market society as a calming and civilizing antidote to the militaristic glories of aristocratic life. It is in part for this same reason that societies which have recently exited from communism have staked their emerging democracies on the construction of market societies in turn. Yet, quite apart from markets, industrialization itself can be seen in a positive vein. By creating an enormous supply of cheap and widely available material media, mass production lessens the invidious distinctions of status markers that separated rich and poor in



more restricted economies. It becomes increasingly possible for masses of people to express their individuality, their autonomy, and their equality through consumption and, in so doing, to partake of the common symbolic inheritance of cultural life. Facilitating inputs are produced from the production side as well. As Marx was among the first to point out, the complex forms of teamwork and cooperation that are demanded in productive enterprises can be considered forms of socialization, in which persons learn to respect and trust their fellow partners in the civil sphere.

In so far as the capitalist economy supplies the civil sphere with facilities like independence, self-control, rationality, equality, self-realization, cooperation, and trust, the boundary relations between these two spheres are frictionless; structural differentiation thus seems to produce integration and individuation in turn. It is clear to all but the most diehard free marketers, however, that an industrializing, market economy also has put roadblocks in the way of civil society. In the everyday language of social science, these blockages are expressed purely in terms of economic inequalities, that is, as class divisions, housing differentials, dual labor markets, poverty, and unemployment. These facts only become crystallized in social terms – as social problems produced by the dynamics of public opinion and social movements (Alexander, 1996) – because they are viewed as destructive intrusions into the civil realm. Economic criteria are, as it were, interfering with civil ones.

The stratification of economic products, both human and material, narrows and polarizes civil society. It provides a broad field for the ‘discourse of repression’ (see Chapter 6), which pollutes and degrades economic failure. Despite the fact that there is no inherent relationship between failure to achieve distinction in the economic realm and failure to sustain expectations in civil society – the lack of connection being the very point of the construction of an independent civil realm – this connection is continually made. If you are poor, you are often thought to be irrational, dependent, and lazy, not only in the economy but in society as such. The relative asymmetry of resources that is inherent in economic life, in other words, becomes translated into projections about civil competence and incompetence. It is often difficult for actors without economic achievement or wealth to communicate effectively in the civil sphere, to receive full respect from its regulatory institutions, and to interact with other, more economically successful people in a fully civil way (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Finally, material power as such, power garnered only in the economic realm, too often becomes an immediate and effective basis for civil claims (see Walzer, 1983). Despite the fact that the professionalization of

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journalism has separated ownership and effective editorial control, through their power to purchase newspapers as private property, capitalists of different political stripes can and do fundamentally alter some of the communicative institutions that are central to civil society.

Yet to the degree that civil society exists as an independent force, economically underprivileged actors have dual memberships. They are not just unsuccessful or dominated members of the capitalist economy; they have the ability to make claims for respect and power on the basis of their only partially realized membership in the civil realm. On the basis of the implied universalism of solidarity in civil society, moreover, they believe these claims should find a response. They broadcast appeals through the communicative institutions of civil society; organize such social movements demanding socialism or simply economic justice through its networks and public spaces; and create voluntary organizations, such as trade unions, that demand fairness and freedom of expression to wage employees. Sometimes they employ their space in civil society to confront economic institutions and elites directly, winning concessions in face-to-face negotiations. At other times, they make use of regulatory institutions, like law and the franchise, to force the state to intervene in economic life on their behalf. While these efforts at repairs often fail, they often succeed in institutionalizing 'workers' rights'. In this situation, civil criteria might be said to have entered directly into the economic, capitalist sphere. Dangerous working conditions are prohibited; discrimination in labor markets is outlawed; arbitrary economic authority is curtailed; unemployment is controlled and humanized; wealth itself is redistributed according to criteria that are antithetical to those of a strictly economic kind.

The kinds of tense and permeable boundary relationships I have described here cannot be conceptualized if capitalism and civil society are conflated with one another – as they are in *CSI* and *II*. Only if these realms are separated analytically can we gain some empirical purchase not only on the wrenching economic strains of the last two centuries but on the extraordinary 'repairs' that have been made to the social fabric in response. There is no doubt, indeed, that in the boundary relations of capitalist economy and civil society the interplay of facilitating input, destructive intrusions, and repairs will continue in the future. In the process, new economically related civil issues, workplace democracy for example (Bobbio, 1987), will become the focus of public spotlight.

**Non-Economic Boundary Relations Between Civil and Uncivil Spheres**

I have tried to separate civil society and capitalism, however, not only better to conceptualize economic strains but to challenge the identification of 'capitalism' with 'society', that is, to challenge the very notion that the society we live in can be understood under the rubric of capitalism. Markets are not, after all, the only threats, or even the worst threats, that have been levied against democratic civil life. Each of the other non-civil spheres has also fundamentally undermined civil society in different times and different ways. In Catholic countries, Jews and Protestants have often been construed as uncivil and prevented from fully entering the civil life. For most of the history of civil societies, patriarchal power in the family transferred directly into the lack of civil status for women. Scientific and professional power has empowered experts and excluded ordinary persons from full participation in vital civil discussions. Political oligarchies, whether in private organizations or in national governments themselves, have used secrecy and manipulation to deprive members of civil society of access to information about crucial decisions affecting their collective life. The racial and ethnic structuring of primordial communities has distorted civil society in terrible ways.

In fact, the identification of capitalism and civil society is just one example of the reductive and circumscribing conflation of civil society with a particular kind of non-civil realm. Indeed, in the course of Western history the anti-civil intrusions I have referred to above have been so destructive that the social movements organized for repair, and the theorists who articulate their demands, have sometimes come to believe that these blockages are intrinsic to civil society itself. Socialists have argued that civil society is essentially and irrevocably bourgeois; that, as long as there are markets and private property, participants in the economic realm can never be treated in a respectful and egalitarian way. In a homologous manner, radical feminists have argued that civil societies are inherently patriarchal, that the very idea of a civil society is impossible to realize in a society that has families which allow men to dominate women. Zionists, similarly, have argued that European societies are fundamentally antisemitic. Black nationalists have claimed that racism is essential, and that the civil realm in white settler societies will always, and necessarily, exclude blacks.

On the basis of arguments I have presented here, I would suggest that these radical arguments for emancipation from civil society are neither empirically accurate nor morally compelling. They

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generalize from particular historical instances of highly distorted and oppressive boundary relations, drawing the illegitimate conclusion that the civil sphere must always be distorted in this particular way. On this faulty basis, they project utopian societies, communism for example, which deny the necessity for a universalistic civil sphere, utopian projects which claim to abolish boundary conflicts altogether. What they really deny, however, is the pluralism, complexity, and inevitably conflict-ridden nature of democratic social life. The separation of capitalism and civil society points, then, to the need to recognize the relative autonomy that exists between civil society and other kinds of social spheres, a relative autonomy which sometimes manifests itself in highly destructive interpenetrations but can also allow highly effective repairs.

### **About This Volume**

There are two genres in the rapidly growing contemporary literature on civil society, and it is fair to say, I think, that neither has really succeeded in illuminating CSIII.

One genre (for example, Keane, 1988; Calhoun, 1992; Seligman, 1993; Hall, 1995) devotes itself primarily to purely theoretical treatments of the idea of civil society, either celebrating the return of CSI or pessimistically declaiming, usually in the tradition of CSII, the impossibility of sustaining a civil society today. The present collection differs from these efforts by being frankly empirical in a sociological sense. Rather than voting yes or no on the 'idea' of civil society, the contributors to this volume convert the abstract idea into an operational sociological concept, and they use it to examine the messy to-and-fro, pulling and pushing that occurs when the normative idea is institutionalized. In doing so, these chapters illustrate the potential social scientific utility of CSIII. They show how the revival of 'civil society', as both social realm and normative conception, produces a vital new empirical tool for analyzing the structural and cultural processes of actually existing societies. *Vis-à-vis* more utopian treatments, on the one hand, the contributors to this volume exhibit a more cautious and often skeptical attitude about the possibility of realizing the ideals of civil society as such. *Vis-à-vis* the more skeptical philosophical attacks on the very idea of civil society, on the other hand, these contributions demonstrate that, to one degree or another, important elements of the utopian promises of civil society have, in fact, been incorporated into actually existing social systems.

There is, however, a second and very different genre of civil society literature, one which employs the concept to examine particular and specific contemporary developments in this or that

'transitional' society. While these treatments, typically by political scientists (for example, Stepan, 1985; Diamond, 1992), certainly contribute to the secularizing process I described at the beginning of this introductory essay, they suffer from a decided lack of attention to the broader theoretical issues of contemporary debate. Indeed, they tend to employ the archaic, all-inclusive approach of CSI. Precisely because it offers a way of broadly contrasting democratic and undemocratic societies, such an umbrella concept often suffices as Victor Pérez-Díaz suggests in Chapter II, below, for the comparative purposes of transition studies. Its usefulness does not, however, extend to the task of comprehending the dynamics of differentiated and conflicting social spheres after democracy in the political sphere has become institutionalized. In this collection, by contrast, while the sociological contributors engage in a great deal of empirically specific analysis, and do refer to issues of the transition, they apply 'civil society' in a manner that remains sensitive to the broader theoretical issues of contemporary debate and are continuously concerned with the limitations on, and possibilities for, the continued viability of a civil sphere in complex and conflictual differentiated systems.

In Part I, the contributors to *Real Civil Societies* discuss how the hierarchies and other exigencies of economic, political, and organizational life make it difficult to institutionalize the highly universalistic, often utopian norms and structures of civil societies. While Elisa Reis, Michael Pusey, and Luis Roniger concentrate on the particular empirical cases of Latin America and Australia, they also use civil society as a comparative concept to consider the implications of their findings in general theoretical terms.

After forcefully laying out the extraordinary scale of economic inequality in Brazil and Latin America more generally, Reis asks how such verticality could not fail to make the democratic and egalitarian ideals of civil society more difficult to realize in practice. She suggests, indeed, that the political invocation of civil society in the Brazilian context often serves to mask existing social inequalities by evoking markets and civil liberties rather than the need for an egalitarian and interventionist state. Nonetheless, Reis not only employs the civil society concept in a deeply evocative way but suggests that the reach of civil discourse can in principle be broadened. In fact, Reis argues that it must be if it is to become a less ambiguously progressive force for deepening democracy in a substantive sense. If Brazil, and other Latin American countries, are going to escape from what Edward Banfield called 'amoral familism', Reis argues, there will have to be the renewal of social struggles for real civility.

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The analyses of Roniger and Pusey complement and elaborate the points Reis has made. Pusey makes use of the civil society concept to highlight the human and social deficits of the 'Thatcherite' free market economies that Australian Labor and Conservative governments alike have pursued over the last two decades. On the one hand, Pusey's discussion demonstrates that the complex, decoupled nature of the subsystems of contemporary society makes archaic any notion of civility as a seamless overarching principle of social integration and coherence. On the other hand, he shows how the idea of civil society, properly conceptualized in a truly sociological way, can provide criteria for critical empirical and moral evaluation *vis-à-vis* the activities, both hierarchical and instrumental, that emanate from society's other, non-civil spheres.

The same dual strategy is followed by Roniger. After showing that the historical idea of civil society emerged as an alternative to the hegemonic patron-client principle of traditional society, Roniger goes on to suggest that, nevertheless, patronage is a phenomenon that is impossible to eliminate from even the most democratic and civil of contemporary societies. He shows how patronage hierarchies and the institutions that grow around them challenge the egalitarian and participatory ideals and practices of civil societies. Yet, Roniger also demonstrates that, under certain social conditions, patron-client networks can articulate positively with 'modernity' and 'democracy', contributing to the fuller realization of a civil society by allowing democratic processes to control the informal organizations of society.

Goran Ahrne's highly original theoretical discussion, which concludes this first part on 'Uncivil Hierarchies', carries these points through in regard not to a particular case study but in relation to organizations as such. Ahrne points out the remarkable parallels between emerging debates about civil society and the long-standing arguments that have taken place inside organizational theory. Demonstrating that the latter are organized around similar utopian goals - participation, democracy, and community - Ahrne shows that the important advances in organizational sociology, from Michels to Selznick and Lipset to the neo-institutionalism of today, have come from studying how empirical pressures and processes force a departure from these normatively highly valued outcomes. On the basis of this example, he challenges social scientists involved in the civil society debate to stop using utopian discourse and to start using social science theory and ideas. Even the highly imperfect realization of civil society ideals, Ahrne warns, depends on putting institutional arrangements into place that can offset the kinds of forces that, organizational studies have shown, derail democracy, participation, and equality.

If Part I of *Real Civil Societies* is designed to thematize the challenges that social hierarchies pose to the idealization of civil society that is so rampant in contemporary discussions, Part II, 'Bifurcating Discourses', is designed to achieve the same kind of 'reality testing' in the cultural realm. Democratic theorizing has virtually always described the thrust toward civil society as emanating from a monological normative discourse that is positive, progressive, emancipating, and utopian – in short, sacred in a secular sense. In my own approach, by contrast (see Chapter 6), I have tried to demonstrate that this civil discourse, whether theoretical or popular, has always contained within itself a contradictory theme that is negative, reactionary, repressive, dystopian – in short, profane. These internal cultural dichotomies, I suggest, have provided the basis for classifying and justifying the exclusion of various groups – racial, ethnic, gender, national, and religious – in the course of the centuries-long existence of real civil societies.

In their contributions, Philip Smith and Ronald Jacobs build upon this framework even while elaborating, applying, and revising it in significant and original ways. Smith relativizes civil society discourse by showing how much it has in common with the dichotomous cultural structures of the fascist and communist movements that challenged it. At the same time, however, he demonstrates that a small number of dramatic semiotic inversions in communist and fascist codes, and a significantly different emphasis in some of their binary pairs, both represent and contribute to the world-historical conflicts between these movements.

For his part, Jacobs makes a major contribution by demonstrating how the dichotomizing semiotic structure of civil society allows it so easily to assume a racialist form. He documents this theoretical observation through an interpretive reconstruction of the principal African-American and white majority newspapers in Los Angeles during the civil disturbances in the city's south central area during the 1960s and 1990s, in the Watts and Rodney King 'riots', respectively. Jacobs shows how the binary model of democratic and anti-democratic discourse, systematically related to different narrative forms, can provide a model for tracing the intricate back-and-forth dynamics of the intense struggles for hegemony and legitimation that ensued between police, politicians, community groups, and communicative institutions during these crisis periods.

'Arbitrary Foundings', Part III of *Real Civil Societies*, demonstrates that, contrary to the idealized, teleological discourse of CSI, the historical origins of civil societies are thoroughly contingent. Although some of the particular historical actors who struggle to create democracy may be fully committed to a civil society program,

others will just as strongly be opposed. Even groups who are committed to the ideals of civil society, moreover, may not be prepared, either culturally or institutionally, to carry these ideals out in their actual practices.

Piotr Sztompka shows that this realistic paradox seems very much to be the case in contemporary post-communist Poland. Sztompka suggests that, by reason of its historical foundations in the struggle against the pseudo-public of state communism, the contemporary discourse of Polish civil society has been unsuccessful in gaining the trust it needs to perform effectively its solidarizing and legitimating tasks. Because citizens remain highly suspicious of the public sphere, real civil society often remains a hollow shell behind which privatistic and fragmenting institutional processes and interactional practices continue to play themselves out.

Zaret's bold historical reconstruction of the process by which public opinion came to play a decisive role in the English democratic revolution further underscores how contingent are the foundations of real civil societies. He shows that printing was a technical innovation introduced for purely commercial reasons. In other words, in contrast to the more teleological renderings of the emergence of public opinion offered by the 'grand theories' of civil society, the actual reasons for public opinion's appearance were more humble – not explicitly related to the project of the bourgeois class, Puritan religion, or democratic revolution. Yet, when public opinion did emerge, Zaret shows, it immediately began to play a decisive role, allowing the radical moral discourses of Puritanism and democracy to be widely disseminated and, eventually, internalized by conservatives and revolutionaries alike. Drawing a contemporary lesson from his historical case study, Zaret suggests that, contrary to many postmodern jeremiads, the contemporary extensions of printing in commercial mass media today – whether in television or cyberspace – cannot be understood as, in themselves, playing an inherently blocking or facilitating role in the creation of more civil societies.

Pérez-Díaz takes this contingent approach to the origins of real civil societies in an extremely interesting direction by applying it to the problem of the European Community. Employing the civil society concept to offset current preoccupation with the economic and political dimensions of unification, Pérez-Díaz argues that neither cross-national markets nor supranational units like voluntary associations or bureaucracies are sufficient to create the solidarity and trust upon which the construction of a democratic European Community depends. What must be added to these ingredients, if a compelling identity of 'Euro-citizen' is to be sustained, is a vivid,



European public sphere. The creation of such a civil sphere depends, however, on greatly intensifying the level of pan-European public discussions. Whereas dialogues about compelling contemporary issues – such as economic policy or official scandals – are presently carried out within the framework of individual nation-states, Pérez-Díaz argues that they must be upgraded to a European frame of reference. Yet this reframing will only occur, he shows, if new kinds of narratives are created. National separateness is fueled by stories tying the salvation of individual states to interstate antagonism, narratives that gained intensity from early modern times until the end of World War II. In the watershed post-war era, policies for European unification first arose, along with new origin myths that linked the birth of 'Europe' to the heroic overcoming of earlier catastrophes. Only if this kind of mythology is expanded and elaborated, Pérez-Díaz insightfully points out, will it succeed in capturing the imaginations of intellectual elites and the masses of lay citizens alike, and only if they are inspired in this imaginative way will there develop the collective effervescence upon which the creation of a truly European public sphere depends.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this collection is twofold. Its first ambition is to draw the attention of 'working sociologists' to the concept of civil society. Its second aim is to show how this concept must be redefined if it is to make the transition from a normative and political idea to a concept that plays an important role in theoretical and empirical social science alike. It is rare for a conference-based volume to achieve the intellectual coherence of this collection, and rarer still for it to contain contributions of such high competence and originality. This attests, I believe, to the importance of the concept 'civil society' to the future of the social sciences.

### **Notes**

1 In this regard, I cannot entirely agree with the characterization of my theoretical position that Víctor Pérez-Díaz offers in the compelling essay that concludes this volume, 'The Public Sphere and a European Civil Society' (Chapter 11). Differentiating 'minimalist' approaches to civil society as a distinctive subsystem (which he identifies as the position of me and Habermas) from 'maximalist' approaches that apply 'civil society' to entire social systems, Pérez-Díaz argues that the latter approach has the advantage of suggesting necessary linkages between a democratic public sphere and the spheres of economy, state, family, and ideology. By contrast, he suggests, minimalist approaches overemphasize the relative importance of the public sphere, denigrating the role of other subsystems and playing up

community and participation in a utopian way. As my discussion above suggests, however, analytically differentiating 'civil society' (CSIII) does not necessarily involve privileging it *vis-à-vis* the social or moral contributions of other spheres. What it does involve is specifying the distinctive contribution of the civil sphere. Not only can the specificity of contemporary 'boundary conflicts' be explained in this way but the contingencies of the construction of civil society can be effectively modeled. For, as Pérez-Díaz's own empirical discussion of the birth pangs of a European civil society illustrates, the presence of capitalist markets and democratic state structures does not guarantee that a viable public sphere will emerge. CSIII is the only approach that can model a *variety* of relations between civil and non-civil spheres. This is not to say that the umbrella notion of civil society – Pérez-Díaz's 'maximalism' – is never warranted. For the purposes of criticizing authoritarian states, the demand for a 'civil society', can effectively mobilize actors against a 'state society'. Analytically, however, this broad usage actually refers to a social system that contains a relatively autonomous civil sphere in the sense of CS III.

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