

Civil Society

'This is a fine book. At once readable and sophisticated, it is a challenging interpretation of the theoretical and practical significance of "civil society" as a concept and as a basis for action and hope about the future. Edwards writes with verve and lucidity, and draws upon his wide knowledge to reinforce his general points with an astonishing range of specific examples. It is, in my view, the best short treatment of the subject, and bound to be widely read and discussed.'

Professor Richard Falk, *Princeton University*

Is civil society *the* big idea for the twenty-first century? Or will the idea of civil society – confused, conflated and co-opted by elites – prove another false horizon in the search for a better world? By illuminating the uses and abuses of different theories and traditions in clear and engaging prose, this book will help readers of all persuasions to answer this question for themselves.

Drawing inspiration and examples from history and contemporary experience, Islam and Christianity, South and North, and activists and academics, the author gives voice to a rich and diverse account of civil society in its many different guises. In moving systematically through theories of associational life, the good society and the public sphere, exploring the neglected connections that exist between them and clarifying their implications for policy and practice, Michael Edwards provides a comprehensive, accessible and often humorous overview of one of the most important debates of our times.

This book will be essential reading for students of politics, public policy, development studies and international relations. It will also be read by all those interested in the role of civil society in the media, policy-making and NGO communities.

Michael Edwards is Director of the Ford Foundation's Governance and Civil Society Program.

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Michael Edwards
Swan Hill
April 2003

1 Introduction – What's the Big Idea?

Set into the wall of the Church of the Ascension on London's Blackheath is a small metal plaque. 'Fellowship is life', it reads, 'and lack of fellowship is death, but in hell there is no brotherhood but every man for himself.' John Ball, the leader of the Peasants' Revolt who spoke these words nearby in 1381, would not have thought of himself as part of 'civil society', but his sentiments have been echoed down the centuries by anyone who has ever joined a group, formed an association or volunteered to defend or advance the causes they believe in. Collective action in search of the good society is a universal part of human experience, though manifested in a million different ways across time, space and culture. In Sullivan County, New York, where I spend my weekends, I am surrounded by contemporary examples of this same phenomenon – the volunteer fire service, the free give-away of hay to those who can't afford to buy it for their pets, the music sale by Radio W-JEFF ('America's only hydro-powered public radio station'), the Interfaith Council Peace Vigil in nearby Liberty, the local HIV/Aids Taskforce and a myriad of groups catering to every conceivable affinity and interest. Yet Sullivan County remains economically depressed and politically forgotten, one more set of communities on the margins of a nation that is increasingly

violent, unequal and apparently incapable of resolving its own pressing social problems. A strong civil society, it seems, is no guarantee that society will be strong and civil.

Concepts of civil society have a rich history, but it is only in the last ten years that they have moved to the centre of the international stage. There are a number of reasons for this – the fall of Communism and the democratic openings that followed, disenchantment with the economic models of the past, a yearning for togetherness in a world that seems evermore insecure, and the rapid rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the global stage. Today, civil society seems to be the 'big idea' on everyone's lips – government officials, journalists, funding agencies, writers and academics, not to mention the millions of people across the globe who find it an inspiration in their struggles for a better world. Cited as a solution to social, economic and political dilemmas by politicians and thinkers from left, right and all perspectives in between, civil society is claimed by every part of the ideological spectrum as its own, but what exactly is it?

'Civil society', says the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington DC, means 'fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty.'¹ Don Eberly, a leading conservative thinker, goes even further: 'As the twenty-first century draws near', he says, 'a new term has surfaced in American political debate, carrying with it all of the collective longing of a nation looking for a new direction. That term is civil society.' This will surprise those on the left who see it as the seedbed for radical social movements. The Advocacy Institute, one of Cato's alter-egos, calls civil society 'the best way forward for politics in the post-Cold War world', 'a society that protects those who organize to challenge power' and 'the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and the tyrannical market'.² Not to be outdone, 'third way' thinkers like Anthony Giddens and Benjamin Barber claim that civil society – by gently correcting generations of state and market failure – could be the missing link in the success of social democracy. Meanwhile back in academia, civil society has

become the 'chicken soup of the social sciences', and 'the new analytic key that will unlock the mysteries of the social order'. The American writer Jeremy Rifkin calls civil society 'our last, best hope'; New Labour politicians in the UK see it as central to a new 'project' that will hold society together against the onrush of globalizing markets; the United Nations and the World Bank see it as one of the keys to 'good governance' and poverty-reducing growth; and – lest one sees this as a giant Western conspiracy – here is the autumn 2002 edition of China's semi-official news magazine *'Huasheng Shidian'* plagiarizing American civil society scholar Lester Salamon: 'the role of NGOs in the twenty-first century will be as significant as the role of the nation state in the twentieth'. These are strange bedfellows with ambitious dreams, but can they all be right?

Such chameleon-like qualities are not unique to 'civil society', but when the same phrase is used to justify such radically different viewpoints it is certainly time to ask some deeper questions about what is going on. An idea that means everything probably means nothing, and when the idea of civil society goes on sale to the highest bidder, its worth as a political and intellectual currency is likely to be devalued over time. At the very least, clarity about the different understandings in play is necessary if we are to have a sensible conversation, yet a glance through the civil society literature would leave most people rapidly and thoroughly confused. Depending on whose version one follows, civil society is either a specific product of the nation state and capitalism (arising spontaneously to mediate conflicts between social life and the market economy when the industrial revolution fractured traditional bonds of kin and community), or a universal expression of the collective life of individuals, at work in all countries and stages of development but expressed in different ways according to history and context. Since nation states in the developing world are largely a colonial creation and the market economy has only a fragile hold, civil societies in the South are bound to differ from those in the North. Some see civil society as one of three sectors (along

with the state and the market), separate from and independent of each other though overlapping in the middle. Others emphasize the 'fuzzy' borders and interrelationships that exist between these sectors, characterized by hybrids, connections and overlaps between different institutions and their roles. Some claim that only certain associations are part of civil society – voluntary, democratic, modern and 'civil' according to some pre-defined set of normative criteria. Others insist that all associations qualify for membership, including 'uncivil' society and traditional associations based on inherited characteristics like religion and ethnicity. Are families 'in' or 'out', and what about the business sector? Is civil society a bulwark against the state, an indispensable support or dependent on government intervention for its very existence? Is it the key to individual freedom through the guaranteed experience of pluralism or a threat to democracy through special interest politics? Is it a noun (a part of society), an adjective (a kind of society), an arena for societal deliberation or a mixture of all three?

It is not difficult to find support for any of these positions, and we will hear much more about the different arguments later in the book. But what is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall? One response would be to ditch the concept completely, as recently recommended by John Grimond in *The Economist* magazine. 'Civil society' appears as one of five leading articles in its flagship publication *The World In 2002*, only to be dismissed as a smokescreen for the 'usual suspects' (meaning 'NGOs and their self-selected agendas') and a 'woolly expression for woolly-minded people' – except, Grimond adds in case his message appears too nuanced, that this 'would be too charitable'. Though tempting, this would be a serious mistake, since although the civil society debate is 'riddled with ethnocentric assumptions developed in conditions that don't exist anywhere in the contemporary world', is 'no longer based on any coherent theory or principles', has been reduced to 'an ideological rendezvous for erstwhile antagonists', and is therefore 'ineffective as a model for

social and political practice', the concept itself is very much alive and kicking in the worlds of politics, activism and foreign aid.³ Therefore, 'the resultant intellectual confusion could well wreak havoc on the real world given the fact that civil societies have now been recognized as a legitimate area for external intervention.'⁴ Analytical rigour, conceptual clarity, empirical authenticity, policy relevance and emancipatory potential are all threatened when civil society becomes a slogan. But selective scorn, scholarly admonishment and attempts to enforce a universal consensus are unlikely to resolve this problem, now that such ideas have developed a life of their own, backed by powerful interests.

What, therefore, is the best way forward? I think it lies through rigour, since rigour enables different interpretations to be debated on their merits and demerits in the court of public deliberation. Without clarity and rigour, theories of civil society will be a poor guide to public policy and citizen action, whatever the values and goals at stake. At the very least, rigour can expose dogma that masquerades as truth, and challenge policy makers who have an ideological axe to grind. And, as I try to show in the chapters that follow, ideas about civil society can survive and prosper in a rigorous critique so long as we are prepared to abandon false universals, magic bullets and painless panaceas. The goal of this book is not consensus (something that would be impossible to achieve in the civil society debate), but greater clarity. And greater clarity, I hope, can be the basis for a better conversation in the future.

Civil society: a very brief history of an idea

The first step in achieving greater clarity is to identify the origins of different contemporary understandings of civil society in the history of political thought. This is not a theoretical book, nor a book about civil society theory, but to appreciate the ways in which theory has been muddled and misapplied in practice a quick tour through theory is essen-

tial. As Keynes's famous dictum reminds us, 'practical men in authority who think themselves immune from theoretical influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist', just as present-day 'civil-society builders' are motivated, consciously or not, by ideas that are deeply rooted in the past.

Fortunately, we are blessed with a number of books that already provide excellent and detailed accounts of the history of this idea.⁵ They show how civil society has been a point of reference for philosophers since antiquity in their struggle to understand the great issues of the day: the nature of the good society, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the practice of politics and government, and, most especially, how to live together peacefully by reconciling our individual autonomy with our collective aspirations, balancing freedom and its boundaries, and marrying pluralism with conformity so that complex societies can function with both efficiency and justice. Such questions were difficult enough to resolve in small, homogenous communities where face-to-face social interaction built trust and reciprocity, but in an increasingly integrated world where none of these conditions apply they become hugely more demanding. Yet the discussions that took place in the ferment of eastern Europe in the 1980s would surely have been familiar to Aristotle, Hobbes, Ferguson, de Tocqueville, Gramsci and others in the long roster of civil society thinkers that stretches back two thousand years. Though the profile of these ideas has certainly waxed and waned, arguing about civil society has always been a part of political and philosophical debate.

In classical thought, civil society and the state were seen as indistinguishable, with both referring to a type of political association governing social conflict through the imposition of rules that restrained citizens from harming one another. Aristotle's *polis* was an 'association of associations' that enabled citizens (or those few individuals that qualified) to share in the virtuous tasks of ruling and being ruled. In this sense, the state represented the 'civil' form of society and 'civility' described the requirements of good citizenship. Late medieval thought continued this tradition by equating civil

society with 'politically-organized commonwealths', a type of civilization made possible because people lived in law-governed associations protected by the state.⁶ The alternative, as Thomas Hobbes pointed out in his *Leviathan*, was 'survival of the fittest'.

Between 1750 and 1850, ideas about civil society took a new and fundamental turn in response to a perceived crisis in the ruling social order. This crisis was motivated by the rise of the market economy and the increasing differentiation of interests it provoked, as 'communities of strangers' replaced 'communities of neighbours'; and by the breakdown of traditional paradigms of authority as a consequence of the French and American revolutions. In contrast to Aristotle, Plato and Hobbes, the thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed civil society as a defence against unwarranted intrusions by the state on newly realized individual rights and freedoms, organized through the medium of voluntary associations. In this school of thought, civil society was a self-regulating universe of associations committed to the same ideals that needed, at all costs, to be protected *from* the state in order to preserve its role in resisting despotism. This was a theme taken up by a host of thinkers including James Madison (in his *Federalist Papers*), Alexis de Tocqueville (probably the most famous civil society enthusiast of them all), and – much later in time – by the 'small circles of freedom' formed by dissidents in eastern Europe, by the writers who celebrated them in the West (like Ernest Gellner), and by academics such as Robert Putnam who began to investigate the condition of associational life and its effects in Italy, the USA and elsewhere, spawning a whole new debate on 'social capital' in the process. The dominant theme in this debate was the value of voluntary associations in curbing the power of centralizing institutions, protecting pluralism and nurturing constructive social norms, especially 'generalized trust and cooperation'. A highly articulated civil society with overlapping memberships was seen as the foundation of a stable democratic polity, a defence against domination by any one group, and a barrier to anti-democratic forces.⁷

Today, this 'neo-Tocquevillian' tradition is particularly strong in the USA, where it dovetails naturally with pre-existing traditions of self-governance, suspicions about the state, and concerns about public disengagement from politics and civic life, and is closely linked to other schools of thought such as communitarianism, localism and the 'liberal egalitarianism' of Michael Walzer, William Galston and others.⁸ In contrast to classical liberals, liberal egalitarians recognize the debilitating effects of unequal access to resources and opportunities on the health and functioning of civil society. This is an important insight, and scholars have built on these ideas to construct a comprehensive critique of the neo-Tocquevillian tradition that focuses on the structural obstacles that prevent some groups from articulating their interests, the ethnocentrism or simple unreliability of assumptions about associations and their effects, and a failure to account for the impact of globalization, economic restructuring, political corruption and power relations of different kinds.⁹ Even this critique, however, reaches back through history to connect with much earlier debates about the ideas that developed during the Enlightenment. Hegel was the first of these early critics, focusing on the conflicts and inequalities that raged between different economic and political interests within civil society that required constant surveillance by the state in order for the 'civil' to remain. This was a theme taken further by Karl Marx, who saw civil society as another vehicle for furthering the interests of the dominant class under capitalism, and then by Antonio Gramsci – the person who 'may be single-handedly responsible for the revival of the term civil society in the post-World War Two period'.¹⁰ Although Gramsci reasoned in Marxist categories, he reached some conclusions that differed from his intellectual master, since in Gramsci's view, civil society was the site of rebellion against the orthodox as well as the construction of cultural and ideological hegemony, expressed through families, schools, universities and the media as well as voluntary associations since all these institutions are important in shaping the political dispositions of citizens.

Philosophers in the United States such as John Dewey and Hannah Arendt took Gramsci's ideas about civil society as an arena for contestation and developed around them a theory of the 'public sphere' as an essential component of democracy. By the 'public', Dewey meant the shared experience of political life that underpinned public deliberation on the great questions of the day. Anything that eroded this public sphere – like the commercialization of the media or the commodification of education – was to be resisted. Such ideas continue to resonate today among Americans committed to 'deliberative democracy', but it was in Europe that the theory of the public sphere reached its highest levels of articulation through the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas combined the Marxist tradition that exposes domination in civil society with the liberal tradition that emphasizes its role in guarding personal autonomy, and drew these different threads together through a complicated series of theoretical constructs concerning 'communicative action', 'discursive democracy' and the 'colonization of the life world'. For Habermas and other 'critical theorists', a healthy civil society is one 'that is steered by its members through shared meanings' that are constructed democratically through the communications structures of the public sphere.¹¹ Today, these ideas are echoed by theorists and activists on the left who see civil society as the site of progressive politics – 'the social basis of a democratic public sphere through which a culture of inequality can be dismantled' – and by political philosophers like John Keane who are attempting to construct a new vision of civil society that respects differences between groups by promoting non-violent engagement 'from above' (through state authority embedded in national constitutions and international law) and 'from below' (by channelling violent tendencies into non-violent associational life).¹²

This whistle-stop tour through history shows that ideas about civil society have passed through many phases without ever securing a consensus, even leaving aside all the other variants of civil society thinking that I have omitted in order to focus on the basics – such as non-Western theories or

theories about non-Western societies, scholarship about African-American civil society in the USA, feminist contributions to the debate and others. I will get to these contributions a little later, though most of my analysis will be skewed towards North America and western Europe, and the literatures they have spawned. Although work on civil society outside these contexts is growing, it has not yet reached a level at which systematic comparisons can be made, including the notion of 'global' civil society, a concept much in vogue but little interrogated by its enthusiasts. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the civil society debate will continue to divide scholars in fundamental ways, and although such divisions are never watertight, I want to focus in the rest of the book on three contrasting schools of thought that emerge from this brief discussion of the history of ideas: civil society as a *part* of society (the neo-Tocquevillian school that focuses on associational life), civil society as a *kind* of society (characterized by positive norms and values as well as success in meeting particular social goals), and civil society as the *public sphere*. After exploring each of these schools in detail, the latter part of the book shows how they are related to each other, and where such an integrated approach might lead in terms of public policy.

Each of these three schools of thought has a respectable intellectual history and is visible in the discourse of scholars, politicians, foundations and international agencies, but it is the first – civil society as associational life – that is dominant. It is Alexis de Tocqueville's ghost that wanders through the corridors of the World Bank, not that of Habermas or Hegel. Indeed, the first two schools of thought are regularly conflated – it being assumed that a healthy associational life contributes to, or even produces, the 'good society' in predictable ways – while the public sphere is usually ignored. This messy *mélange* of means and ends will be challenged extensively in the pages that follow, but before embarking on this investigation it is important to understand why such lazy thinking is so common. Why has this particular interpretation of civil society become so popular since the Cold War ended?

The rise and rise of civil society

There is no doubt that neo-Tocquevillian ideas about civil society have been a prime beneficiary of wider political and ideological changes that have redefined the powers and responsibilities of states, markets and voluntary associations over the last twenty years. At the broadest level, there are three ways in which societies can organize collective action – through rules or laws enforced by the coercive power of the state, through the unintended consequences of individual decisions in the marketplace, and through social mechanisms embedded in voluntary action, discussion and agreement. The weight attached to each of these models has shifted significantly over the last fifty years, with state-based solutions in the ascendancy from 1945 to the mid-1970s (the era of the welfare state in the North and centralized planning in the South), and market-based solutions in pole position from the late 1970s to 1990 or thereabouts (the era of Reaganomics in the North and 'structural adjustment' in the South). Disaffection with the results of both these models – the deadening effect of too much state intervention and the human consequences of an over-reliance on the market – required a new approach that addressed the consequences of both state and market failure. This new approach, which gained strength throughout the 1990s, went by many names (including the 'third way', the 'new localism' and 'compassionate conservatism'), but its central tenet is that partnership between all three 'sectors' of society working together – public, private and civic – is the best way to overcome social and economic problems. Civil society as associational life became central to the workings of this project, and this project – as a new way of achieving social progress – became identified with building 'societies that are civil'.

In addition, the political changes that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 gave the idea of civil society a prominence it had not enjoyed since the Enlightenment, but in a manner that also encouraged the conflation of ends with means. Civil society became both a rallying cry

for dissidents – a new type of society characterized by liberal-democratic norms – and a vehicle for achieving it by building social movements strong enough to overthrow authoritarian states. The paradigm case for the conflation of these two perspectives was Solidarity in Poland, though here as elsewhere in eastern Europe, associational life tended to be disregarded fairly quickly once the dissidents were elected into office. Nevertheless, the rise of direct democracy that was such a feature of political change in eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and large parts of the developing world during the 1990s remains a trend of global importance, perhaps as important as the invention of representative democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the balance between direct and representative democracy continues to shift in favour of the former – driven by disaffection with conventional politics as well as the attractions of alternative means of participation – the political role of voluntary associations (as the prime vehicles for organizing such participation) will continue to grow. As we shall see in later chapters, this role is fraught with difficulty both for voluntary associations and for the processes of politics, but it seems unlikely that the trend itself will be reversed.

Worldwide moves towards state retrenchment and privatization (even with the humanizing touches now applied by civil society) have promoted new levels of personal insecurity among the majority of the world's population against a background of global market integration, increased mobility of people and capital, and rapid social and technological change. Modernity, as Robert Bellah reminds us, is a 'culture of separation', while capitalism provides no collective identity to bring us together other than as consumers.¹³ Traditional social institutions and ways of dealing with such insecurities (like welfare states, labour unions and nuclear families) have been progressively dismantled during this process, leaving behind heightened levels of uncertainty and vulnerability. In these circumstances, a retreat to the familiar is to be expected, and this is exactly what voluntary associations can provide – a reassuring oasis of solidarity and

mutual support among like-minded people who provide each other with emotional as well as material support, from soup kitchens to self-help to spiritual salvation. Indeed, an additional reason for the rapid rise in interest in civil society over the last decade has been the collection of a mounting body of evidence that suggests that associational life plays a much more important social, economic and political role than was realized in the 1970s and 1980s. Civil society has been noticed, not just because of the rising public and political profile of NGOs and other groups, but because a body of evidence now exists to justify this profile, backed by specialist expertise in universities and think-tanks and supported with large amounts of money from research funding bodies, foundations and governments.

At the level of national development performance, this evidence shows that the synergy between a strong state and a strong society is one of the keys to sustained, poverty-reducing growth, because networks of intermediary associations act as a counterweight to vested interests, promote institutional accountability among states and markets, channel information to decision-makers on what is happening at the 'sharp end', and negotiate the social contracts between government and citizens that development requires – 'I'll scratch your back by delivering growth, investment and services; you scratch mine by delivering wage restraint or absorbing the costs of welfare.' Taiwan, one of the most successful of late industrializers, had over 8 million members in such intermediary groups by the early 1980s, including trade unions, student associations and local councils.¹⁴

At a more detailed level, it is useful to break down the developmental roles of civil society into three interrelated areas: economic, political and social. The economic role of civil society centres on securing livelihoods and providing services where states and markets are weak, and nurturing the social values, networks and institutions that underpin successful market economies, including trust and cooperation. As Lester Salamon and his colleagues have shown, voluntary associations the world over have become key

providers of human services (especially health and welfare), and now constitute a 1.1 *trillion* dollar industry.¹⁵ NGOs, religious organizations and other civic groups have always been significant service-providers; the difference now is that they are seen as the preferred channel for service provision in deliberate substitution for the state. In more radical formulations (like the World Social Forum), civil society is seen as a vehicle for 'humanizing capitalism' by promoting accountability among corporations, progressive social policies (like respect for labour rights) among governments, and new experiments in 'social economics' that combine market efficiency with cooperative values.

In their social role, civil societies are seen as a reservoir of caring, cultural life and intellectual innovation, teaching people – at least according to the neo-Tocquevillians – the skills of citizenship and nurturing a collection of positive social norms that foster stability, loosely collected under the rubric of 'social capital'. In turn, social capital is seen as the crucial ingredient in promoting collective action for the common good, or simply creating and maintaining the social ties that are essential if individuals are to function effectively in modern economies where the demands of exchange grow increasingly complex. The normative effects of voluntary associations lie at the core of the neo-Tocquevillian argument, though this is as much a moral as a social issue for them. In some ways this is to be expected, since many neo-Tocquevillians are conservatives and conservatives tend to look back in time to recreate what they consider to be the best of times, defined according to a particular set of moral standards. Liberals and social democrats, on the other hand, tend to look forward to better times to come, so they pay more attention to civil society as a vehicle for creating new solutions. The relative marginalization of theories of the public sphere is partly explained by the current ascendancy of conservatives and conservative thinking in Western politics.

In their political role, voluntary associations are seen as a crucial counterweight to states and corporate power, and an

essential pillar in promoting transparency, accountability and other aspects of 'good governance', the favourite term of foreign-aid donors in recent times. Especially where formal citizenship rights are not well entrenched, it is civil society that provides the channels through which most people can make their voices heard in government decision-making, protect and promote their civil and political rights, and strengthen their skills as future political leaders. Arguing from democratic theory, a strong civil society can prevent the agglomeration of power that threatens autonomy and choice, provide effective checks against the abuse of state authority, and protect a democratic public sphere in which citizens can debate the ends and means of governance. The role of NGOs and social movements in mobilizing opposition to authoritarian rule and supporting progress towards multi-party elections has been well documented in Africa, eastern Europe and Latin America.¹⁶ Over the last five years these functions have been extended to the global level, with NGO networks becoming increasingly influential in challenging the policies of the international financial institutions and establishing new norms of accountability. Civil society in this sense means 'people power' writ large.

On the surface at least, these arguments provide powerful support for the associational view of civil society. It would be disingenuous, however, to argue that official support for civil society is based purely on the findings of research. The fact that such support is 'good for business', as I have put it elsewhere, is also important.¹⁷ By this I don't mean the business sector (though recent moves by corporations to cosy up to NGOs is another illustration of this trend), but any attempt by official institutions to develop 'legitimacy by association' with citizens' groups which enjoy much higher levels of public trust. Developing positive relationships with civil society groups has become an essential 'pre-defence' against attacks from the same sector. Both the World Bank and the specialized agencies of the United Nations are opening their doors, slowly, to civil society groups in this fashion, and the political costs of retreating into the bunker would likely be

considerable in terms of their public image and support. Such trends raise the dangers of co-optation, of course, especially when NGOs already worry that 'support for civil society' means 'privatization by stealth', signifying the use of voluntary associations as a smokescreen for state retrenchment and corporate interests.

Since 2000, there have been signs that these high levels of interest and support are waning, confirming Alan Wolfe's judgement that the 'idea of civil society failed because it became too popular'.¹⁸ 'Civil society is passé' was the conclusion of a senior German government official in private conversation recently, 'it had its moment in the 1990s but now it's time to move on to something else'.¹⁹ Some of these critiques have been intelligent and helpful, reaffirming the practical value of voluntary associations but rejecting the 'conceits of civil society' as Neera Chandoke puts it, meaning exaggerated notions of their political importance or ability to replace the nation state (a fantasy akin to 'grasping at straws' according to David Rieff).²⁰ Others have been knee-jerk reactions to anti-globalization protests such as the 'battle of Seattle' and the skirmishes that followed – charges against NGOs as 'the leftover left' and 'loonies and paranoids', for example, that have graced the pages of *Newsweek* and *Time*.²¹ There are a number of reasons for this backlash, including fears from governments in the South that NGOs may be replacing the state in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia; confusion about 'who belongs' in civil society after the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001; worries about NGO performance, legitimacy, accountability and dependence on foreign funding; concerns among trade unions that NGOs have hijacked the name and functions of civil society for a narrow set of purposes and constituencies; public reactions against street violence among 'anti-globalization' protestors; and well-publicized cases of corruption in major charities.²² Overall, however, these criticisms are helpful since they remind us that civil society is, and should continue to be, the subject of debate, in part because any institution that grows

in influence must also be subjected to external pressure for accountability (NGOs now constitute a 'fifth estate' according to a recent worldwide opinion poll).²³

It is no longer possible to regard civil society as the preserve of a subset of privileged individuals – the citizens of the Greek *polis*, white male property-owners in eighteenth-century Europe, or the West, the North or the South. The idea of civil society has spread across the world to become a powerful leitmotif in politics and practice, yet it remains dominated by a narrow and disputed interpretation of what civil society is and does, and this narrowness threatens to erode its potential as a force for positive social change. Preserving this potential requires a simultaneous broadening of the debate to include other, less dominant, perspectives, and a much greater specification of what each of these perspectives has to contribute to a clearer understanding overall. And the starting point for that process is to break apart the assumptions that underpin the orthodox interpretation of civil society as the world of associational life.

2 Civil Society as Associational Life

In the late thirteenth century, Marco Polo was struck by the vibrancy of associational life in the Chinese city of Hangzhou, 'noted for its charitable institutions as for its pleasures'.¹ Public hospitals, market associations, free cemeteries, cultural groups and homes for the elderly abounded. No doubt earlier explorers would have seen similar things on their travels too, since associations like these have existed from at least the days of the Pharaohs. Human beings (or most of us at least) are social creatures, and joining groups that help us to resolve the problems of collective action (like water-users' associations in south Asia), advance the causes we believe in (like Amnesty International), find more meaning and fulfilment in life (like religious groups) or simply have some fun (like the choirs and bowling clubs beloved of Robert Putnam) is a universal part of human experience. A life lived without such opportunities would be severely – perhaps unremittingly – diminished. For some, voluntary association is the natural state of humankind, invested with almost spiritual significance. 'Human beings', writes J. Ronald Engel, 'are made for the life of free association, and that divine reality, the Holy Spirit, is manifest in all associations committed to the democratic pursuit of justice in the common life.'² Such attitudes are especially common in the

USA, where the health and vitality of associations are often taken – at least by Americans – as the 'envy of the world'.³ It was Alexis de Tocqueville that started this romance on his travels to the USA in the 1830s. 'Americans of all ages, conditions and dispositions', he declared in a now-famous passage from his book, *Democracy in America*, 'have a constant tendency to form associations.'⁴ Today, almost 800,000 Americans are members of volunteer fire brigades, for example (constituting 73 per cent of all fire-fighters in the country), something that is as quintessentially American as the bucket brigade and hand truck in centuries gone by.

This love affair has stirred passions on all sides of the political spectrum. Conservatives see associations as vehicles for rebuilding traditional moral values, while progressives see them as vehicles for rebuilding whole societies, and the world. Yet does this mean that voluntary action is always the best way to run a fire service, or reform society? As long ago as 1911, Max Weber warned against romanticizing the effects of associations in his address to a congress of sociologists in Frankfurt: 'the man of today is without doubt an association man in an awful and never dreamed of degree', he said, citing the negative effects on political engagement of the singing societies that were proliferating across Germany at the time – a fascinating anticipation of contemporary critiques of those like Putnam who praise the positive civic and political effects of choirs.⁵ Associations matter hugely and should be encouraged, but there is equal danger in expecting too much from associational life, as if it were a 'magic bullet' for resolving the intractable social, economic and political problems surveyed in brief in chapter 1. Increasingly, it seems, voluntary associations are expected to organize social services, govern local communities, solve the unemployment problem, save the environment, and still have time left over for rebuilding the moral life of nations. 'Don't ask us to carry more than our capacity and then blame failure on us', says the Peruvian NGO leader Mario Padron, 'we can't carry the load.'⁶

This chapter focuses on civil society as a *part* of society that is distinct from states and markets, the most common of the understandings in use today and the direct descendant of de Tocqueville's ideas about nineteenth-century America. Commonly referred to as the 'third' or 'non-profit' sector, civil society in this sense contains all associations and networks between the family and the state in which membership and activities are 'voluntary' – formally registered NGOs of many different kinds, labour unions, political parties, churches and other religious groups, professional and business associations, community and self-help groups, social movements and the independent media. This is the 'space of un-coerced human association' in Michael Walzer's famous definition, 'and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space'.⁷ The word 'voluntary' here needs a little explanation, since many such associations are run by paid professionals as well as volunteers. The key criteria are that membership is consensual rather than legally required, meaning that 'exit is possible without loss of status or public rights or benefits', and that voluntaristic mechanisms are used to achieve objectives, meaning dialogue, bargaining and persuasion instead of enforced compliance by governments or market incentives by firms.⁸ Whether such associations attract at least some voluntary contributions of time and/or money is a useful additional test. Nevertheless, as John Keane points out, 'civil society is an *ideal-typical category* . . . that both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally-protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that frame, construct and enable their activities'.⁹ The reality of associational life is much more complicated than this 'ideal' suggests.

Is there an 'associational revolution' at work in the world today?

Voluntary associations have existed in most parts of the world for hundreds of years. The rural peasants' cooperatives that sprang into action after the French Revolution, for example; the 'Young Men's Lyceum' in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln first practised his oratory in 1838; the nineteenth-century reform movements like Araya Samaj that pre-dated mass political action in India; and – despite the risks involved – the many dissident groups that remained active in eastern Europe throughout Communist rule. Over the last ten years, however, the expansion of some forms of associational life has been so rapid and so global that commentators have begun to talk of an 'associational revolution' or a 'power shift' of potentially momentous significance.¹⁰ Except in a small number of cases where authoritarian governments still block the development of voluntary associations on principle – like Myanmar (Burma) and Cuba – the numbers of registered non-profit organizations have increased at rates not seen before in history, especially in developing countries, which started from a lower base and received large amounts of foreign aid for investment in new and existing NGOs.

For example, the number of registered NGOs in Nepal increased from 220 in 1990 to 1,210 in 1993; in Bolivia from 100 in 1980 to 530 in 1992; and in Tunisia from 1,886 in 1988 to 5,186 in 1991.¹¹ The largest-ever survey of the non-profit sector in twenty-two countries found over 1 million such organizations in India by 1997, 210,000 in Brazil, 17,500 in Egypt and 15,000 in Thailand. According to the same survey, the non-profit sector in these countries accounted for one in every twelve jobs and almost 11 million volunteers. In Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya, the sector provides 40 per cent or more of all healthcare and education services delivered. And even in China, where government policy remains suspicious, the number of registered national

non-profit organizations increased to around 2,000 by 2001. Paralleling this increase in numbers has been the growth of individual NGOs to cover the provision of services to millions of people, especially in south Asia – over 2 million in the case of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, for example, over 1 million for the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, and over 7,000 villages in the case of Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka. Social movements like the movement of the landless in Brazil (with over 300,000 members and 20,000 'core activists' by 2002) have also grown apace.

In western Europe and the USA the pattern is more complex, with claims and counter-claims about the rise and fall of different types of association since the Second World War. Robert Putnam has built his reputation on the thesis that civic engagement in America as a whole has declined, though he recognizes that national non-profit organizations have increased from 10,299 in 1968 to almost 23,000 in 1997, as has membership in professional associations (at least in absolute terms), religious groups and small self-help groups (like Alcoholics Anonymous), and volunteering, especially among young people.¹² The Sierra Club grew from 114,000 members in 1970 to over 550,000 in 1996, and Greenpeace from a mere 250 members in 1971 to 1.7 million twenty-five years later. In contrast, membership in traditional mass-based organizations (like parent-teacher associations) and labour unions has declined significantly (by as much as 62 per cent in manufacturing and 78 per cent in construction). This analysis – that the shape of US civil society is changing – is also accepted by Putnam's critics, in terms of the facts of what is happening if not the gloomy interpretation of their implications. A similar pattern is evident in the UK, where 'mutual aid' associations and labour unions have declined since 1945 but NGOs and advocacy groups have grown substantially: Friends of the Earth, for example, increased its membership from 75,000 in 1988 to 200,000 in 1995, while Amnesty International's membership grew from 39,000 in 1987 to 108,300 five years later.¹³

At the international level, a new layer of NGOs and NGO networks has emerged over the last ten years to constitute a 'global civil society', or at least a transnational NGO community. Over 40,000 international NGOs and 20,000 transnational NGO networks are already active on the world stage, 90 per cent of which have been formed since 1970.¹⁴ They include famous names like Oxfam and Save the Children, successful campaigns like Jubilee 2000 on debt relief, global movements like the Hemispheric Social Alliance (which already claims to have 49 million 'members'), federations of community groups like Shack Dwellers International that links hundreds of thousands of people across three continents, and international associations of mayors, local authorities, business representatives, professionals, universities and writers.

However, despite this avalanche of figures we are left with only one unambiguous fact about trends in associational life worldwide: the numbers of formally registered non-governmental organizations have risen substantially since 1989. Every other important piece of information is disputed, either by evidence from different countries or cultures, by opinions from different schools of thought or ideological positions, or by those who discount the NGO phenomenon as a temporary 'blip' in world affairs that has been promoted by foreign aid during a time when civil society has been in fashion. Because the data for most of the world cover only registered organizations, trends in other areas of associational life are difficult to identify, especially those below the radar screen of academic research like community groups and grassroots movements. We do not know whether past developments are a reliable guide to the future (especially once NGOs are forced to rely on money raised from their own societies, not from foreign aid), and scholars cannot agree on what the broader implications of these trends might be. An 'associational revolution' or 'power shift' would surely signal structural changes in politics, economics and social relations, not just an increase in the numbers and size of NGOs at work on the margins. In any case, it makes

no sense to lump all non-profit organizations into a single category of 'associational life', from the Ford Foundation to a burial society in South Africa, or to fixate – as the foreign-aid community has done – on NGOs as the most important type of association among so many. The first source of disagreement concerns the thorny issue of which associations belong in civil society, and which do not.

Who is 'in' and who is 'out'?

The three-sector model of society implies that states, markets and non-profit groups are separate from and independent of each other – hermetically sealed, perhaps, in their own rationalities and particular ways of working. Yet even a glimpse at real institutions demonstrates that this is nonsense. Boundaries are always 'fuzzy' or fluid, and there are reasons why this is necessarily so – I, like you, am simultaneously citizen, neighbour, worker and consumer, and the qualities developed in one of these roles spill over into the others, one hopes with positive effects. Civil society and the state, for example, have always been interdependent, with states providing the legal and regulatory framework a democratic civil society needs to function, and civil society exerting the pressure for accountability that keeps elected governments on track. As Theda Skocpol has shown, effective US social policies between 1945 and 1980 worked through symbiotic ties that developed between government and locally rooted membership associations.¹⁵ This does not, of course, mean that civil society is part of the state or vice versa – they are clearly different sets of institutions – but if they are disconnected then the positive effects of each on the other can be negated. Whether states have more influence over civil society or civil societies over states has been a source of disagreement among scholars for 200 years or more, but clearly government policy can have a major impact on the strength and shape of associational life – think of attacks on the labour movement by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, or in more positive

vein, the encouragement of non-profit-sector service provision under 'New Labour' in Britain or Democratic and Republican administrations in the USA. However, if these links become too close and cosy, then governments can be captured by particular sets of interests in civil society (some examples are given below) and civil society may be unable to play its watchdog role on government. State institutions, therefore, cannot be part of associational life.

Sitting between associations and the state, however, is a grey area called 'political society' – meaning parties, political organizations and parliaments – that has divided civil society scholars into two rival camps. The first camp sees civil society as a crucial component of civil society, not because civic groups seek state power (they don't) or aggregate the interests of individuals into political settlements (they can't), but because they generate influence on politics through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussion in the public sphere. 'In the long run, democratic political societies depend for their health on the depth of their roots in independent pre-political associations and publics.'¹⁶ Solidarity in Poland was both a labour union and a political party in waiting, and social movements usually have implicit political agendas. In Rajasthan, for example, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, a 'non-party political formation' that works with workers' and peasants' groups, has already fielded candidates in local elections and is considering entering the race for office at the state level too.¹⁷ In countries like Indonesia with weak multi-party systems (or where parties are forbidden at the local level), alliances between national political formations on the one hand, and peasant movements and labour unions at the local and regional levels on the other, are developing rapidly.¹⁸ South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign began as an alliance of NGOs determined to change government policy on retroviral drugs for HIV/Aids patients, but is now developing some of the characteristics of an opposition against the background of rule by the African National Congress, but without a formal political identity. And leaders in countries like Chile, the Philippines

and Brazil under President Lula move regularly from NGOs to government and back. So linkages between civil and political society are natural, useful and to be encouraged, especially at a time when the balance between direct and representative democracy is changing in favour of the former.

The second camp shudders at the corrupting influence of politics on associations, since associations are assumed to be independent of any partisan political interests. If they weren't independent, they wouldn't be able to play the role that is claimed for them in cementing 'generalized' trust and tolerance across different political communities and promoting a genuine sense of the 'common interest'. Putnam and other neo-Toquevillians accept that apolitical associations can have political effects because of their influence on overall levels of political participation, including voting, though the evidence for and against this proposition is contested.¹⁹ However, this is not the same as formal political activity, and there are certainly examples of the damage that can be done when voluntary associations formally ally themselves with parties competing for votes. ADAB (the association of NGOs in Bangladesh), for example, joined forces with the Awami League in 1996, leading to new forms of patron-client relationships once the league had been elected into office.²⁰ In the USA, religious conservatives (through the Christian Coalition of America) represent approximately 18 per cent of the electorate, and regularly use their connections with senior Republicans on Capitol Hill and in the White House to influence public policy on reproductive rights, foreign policy, federal aid to faith-based organizations and other issues too. Similar examples, of course, could be cited from the Democrats, but that is not the point – any association that claims to promote the public interest is in dangerous water when it allies itself with a partisan political agenda. At the very least it might lose its favourable tax status; more importantly, it may forfeit its claims to represent the broader agenda of citizens in civil society. 'We're sick of politics' is a familiar refrain among community groups and volunteers.

For many, while trust may be the lubricant of civil society, hypocrisy is the Vaseline of political influence.

There has always been a strong strain of 'anti politics', as George Konrad calls it, among civil society enthusiasts, driven partly by the belief that civil society can organize and govern itself successfully without the need for government intervention, or government at all in the conventional sense of the word. This may be true at the scale of a New England town meeting, but it is unlikely to be effective at the national level, and even less in global regimes, despite the increasing importance of direct democracy in 'filling out' the processes of politics. Indeed, at global level these questions are even more complex because so few formal political structures exist across national boundaries to arbitrate between different interests – structures such as parties, parliaments, accountability mechanisms to constituents and so on. This makes it easier for NGOs to cross the boundary between civil and political society, direct and representative democracy, or 'voice and vote', in their international advocacy work, which is why there is so much discussion today about NGO legitimacy, accountability and representation.²¹ So while the state is definitely 'out' of civil society and the non-partisan political activity of associations is definitely 'in', everything between these two extremes remains an object of dispute. The only acceptable compromise seems to be that political parties are *in* civil society when they are out of office and *out* of civil society when they are in.

In case the situation is not sufficiently muddy, the boundary between civil society and the market is even less clear, especially in societies where market institutions are not well developed. Here again there is disagreement between those who fear for the purity of the civic spirit when contaminated by contact with business, and those like Ernest Gellner who argue that business – or at least the private-property relations and market institutions business needs to flourish – are inescapably a part of civil society. A strong tradition of civil society thinking (going back to John Locke) equates civil society with private economic activity, a tradition that is

echoed today by the increasing use of non-profit agencies in the provision of social (and some economic) services, especially to low-income groups. Critics of this tradition see civil society as a political phenomenon, consigning service-providers to the not-for-profit sector of the marketplace and insisting on the independence of citizens' groups from all economic interests. Both Michael Walzer and Christopher Lasch insist that civil society is a sphere of life – a market-free zone – in which 'money is devalued', while Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato conclude that 'only a concept of civil society differentiated from the economy (and "bourgeois society") can become the center of a critical social and political theory in market economies.'²² In practice, however, it is difficult to draw these distinctions in such a watertight manner. It was the market women of Sierra Leone, for example, who (acting collectively) thronged the streets of Freetown in 1996 and again in 1997 to ensure that democratic elections went ahead. Likewise, Ashutosh Varshney's research in India has shown that business associations that tie together the economic interests of Hindus and Muslims in Indian cities have been crucial in reducing the incidence of intercommunal violence (or exacerbating it where they are absent). And in Cuba, it is small-scale, informal enterprises that provide some space for independent organization where other forms of association are controlled by the state.²³

This confusion is partly due to a failure to specify what kind of 'business' is being talked about. The institutional and legally mandated aims of a multinational corporation like Shell or IBM, for example, are different to those of sections of the business community that exist, at least in part, to generate a social good or advance a collective interest, such as cooperatives, credit unions, community enterprises and public-private partnerships with NGO participation, though in the age of the 'civil (that is, socially and environmentally responsible) corporation', maybe this judgement needs revising too.²⁴ In developing societies where the formal sector of the economy is often very small, most economic activity takes place in the informal sector anyway where social and market relations, business and civil society are inextricably interwo-

ven. One also needs to distinguish between profit-seeking activities by individual enterprises and the civic or political role of business associations – like the Transatlantic Business Dialogue or a national chamber of commerce. Logically, the former would be excluded from civil society but the latter would not. Such associations could have an important role to play in encouraging attitudes of cooperation and trust, as well as representing the interests of their members.

The most difficult and contested question about 'who is in and who is out' revolves around the definition of 'civil' and 'uncivil' society, a debate explored in chapter 3 because it concerns the nature of the 'good society', the role of the family and much else besides, not simply the characteristics of associations. But it is worth mentioning that models of associational life find it difficult to exclude any non-state or non-market institution so long as they meet the structural or analytical criteria for membership described above. Of course, some writers do exclude associations of which they disapprove, but not on any grounds that can be defended without considerable intellectual gymnastics and the imposition of a particular – and therefore partial – definition of the good, the bad and the ugly. Would the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (an NGO that lobbied the United Nations to abandon the commitments on women's rights made at the Beijing Conference in 1995) be excluded by pro-choice groups, and vice versa?²⁵ Is the National Rifle Association legitimate, or not, and who decides? In my view, structural models of civil society hold water only if all non-coercive associations are allowed to be included, but even if one agrees on 'who is in and who is out', would these judgements hold true across different geographical and cultural contexts?

Associational life in cross-cultural perspective

'The same is never the same' is a watchword of feminism, and the same applies to voluntary associations. Civil society theory, for the most part, has been developed in Europe and

the USA, and makes a series of assumptions about the rights and responsibilities of associations, the characteristics they should cultivate, and the roles they should play in society that may not travel well across countries, cultures and different periods in time. They may not even be accurate for different communities within the same country, like African-American associational life in America, for example, or Islamic voluntary associations in England. Yet a proper understanding of these traditions is essential if one holds to an associational view of civil society. Norms of participation are different among whites and African-Americans in the USA, for example, with the latter more likely to take part in protest and campaigning activities as part of an oppositional culture that characterizes many of their associations.²⁶ Islamic and Confucian cultures think differently about belonging, solidarity and citizenship, in part because of a stress on the collective rather than the individual. And in Africa, notions of the 'voluntary' are complicated by the continuing importance of identities that are inherited, not chosen.

For some, these are simple questions to answer: since civil society is the product of a specific period in the evolution of the West, it cannot exist, let alone prosper, in non-Western societies. For Ernest Gellner, John Hall and others, civil society and Islam are mutually exclusive alternatives because Islam as an institution cannot be left and entered freely. 'You can join the Labour Party without slaughtering a sheep', as Gellner famously remarked, 'and leave it without incurring the death penalty for apostasy'.²⁷ Times are changing, however, both for the Labour Party and for Islam. Recent Islamic scholars have shown that elements of voluntarism existed in traditional associations (such as guilds, trusts and foundations), just as new associations that would be clearly classified as voluntary in the West are beginning to emerge.²⁸ In Turkey, for example, independent associations of urban working women with freely chosen memberships coexist with Islamic associations that are closed to other faiths. There are certainly major problems in associational life in the Arab

world – co-option by the state, for example, that makes it difficult for associations to promote accountability – but this is not because such functions are impossible to play by definition.

The same applies in Africa, where cultural and religious institutions expressing a collective identity based on clan or tribe coexist with newer, cross-ethnic forms of association that have emerged in response to urbanization, education and the development of the market economy, including churches, labour unions, farmers' organizations, human rights NGOs and the independent media. Academic battles still rage between those who claim that African societies are too fragmented along particularistic lines to support any notion of the public good, and those who argue that traditional associational life in Africa carries with it the seeds of a true civil society, but on the ground in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and elsewhere this argument is already being answered by societies that are developing a richer tapestry of associational life containing threads from both these traditions.²⁹ Associations based on primordial attachments are a natural consequence of the ways in which African societies have been structured in the past.

In China and other Confucian-based societies, social memberships – at least historically – are non-optional and priority is given to the needs of the 'social whole', so it is no surprise that associations have always found it difficult to exist outside of government control. However, the Chinese government is trying to balance the economic advantages that NGOs bring to poverty-alleviation programmes with the political costs of associational life elsewhere, and is allowing state-sponsored GONGOS (government-organized NGOs) like the All-China Women's Federation increasing room to manoeuvre inside official structures, a position that gives them unusual access and potential influence.³⁰ These tensions will grow as the non-profit sector in China evolves, as in other countries with a similar cultural heritage such as Taiwan. The reality of associational life in non-Western cultures, then, is one of 'mix and match'. That is why civil

society watchers have so much interest in Israel, Turkey, China and Iran, where the combination of different associational cultures is particularly marked. Far from being a problem, the development of different varieties of civil society is a cause for celebration, because it means that the associations that emerge – hybrid, fluid and maybe surprising to commentators in the West – might be able to avoid some of the problems encountered by their Western counterparts, answering in the process the charge that they are simply pawns of foreign powers. However, even if one accepts that civil society exists in China, Africa and the Islamic world, are associations – as individual organizations – the correct unit of analysis to use?

Organizations and ecosystems

Neo-Tocquevillians often focus on non-profit organizations or the 'non-profit sector', which is a subset of associational life as a whole. More useful, in my view, is to take a systems view of associational life that looks at the different components of civil society and how they interact both with each other and with public and private institutions. Like a complex and fragile ecosystem, civil society gains strength when grassroots groups, non-profit intermediaries and membership associations are linked together in ways that promote collective goals, cross-society coalitions, mutual accountability and shared reflection. This is one generalization that does hold up across many different contexts: 'the landscape of the third sector is untidy but wonderfully exuberant... what counts is not the confusion but the profusion.'³¹ This is because theories of associational life rest on the assumption that associations promote pluralism by enabling multiple interests to be represented, different functions to be performed and a range of capacities to be developed. No one set of organizations could hope to cover more than a small subsection of these roles, capacities and interests, so institutional pluralism *within* civil society is essential.

Drawing from social capital theory, this means a balance between 'bonding' (connections within groups), 'bridging' (connections across them) and 'linking' (connections between associations, government and the market). Bonding may accentuate inequalities since associations will be used to promote the interests only of the groups concerned, and can lead to gridlock in the system as a result of special-interest politics. Bridging should reduce them over time as people dissolve their differences in a sense of the wider common interest, and linking should help all groups to prosper by making the right connections with institutions that can offer them support, resources, opportunities and influence.³² However, without the security provided by strong in-group ties, bridging may expose those on the margins to environments in which they cannot compete on equal terms, or benefit the few that can prosper at the expense of the many who are left behind.

Strongly bonded associations (like community organizations) are more effective when they link together vertically and horizontally to form cross-cutting networks and federations that can take the struggle to the next level, and alliances across the lines of class, race and religion that build from a strong grassroots base. ACORN, PICO and the Industrial Areas Foundation in the USA are good examples, as are the peasant federations studied by Tony Bebbington that connect small-producer groups together in Latin America.³³ But non-profit intermediaries or NGOs are also important, providing much of the 'connective tissue' of civil society by providing specialist support, capacity-building and advocacy services to broader networks and alliances. SPARC, an NGO in Mumbai, has developed a worldwide reputation for this kind of role in support of the Shack Dwellers International movement. Advocacy groups (often downgraded by neo-Tocquevillians on the grounds that they can be divisive) may be especially important.

When civil society networks join forces on a scale and over a time-span significant enough to force through more fundamental change, they can be classified as social movements.

Successful social movements (think civil rights in the USA, the movement of the landless in Brazil, and the environmental and women's movements worldwide) tend to have three things in common – a powerful idea, ideal or policy agenda; effective communications strategies to get these ideas into politics, government and the media; and a strong constituency or social base that provides the muscle required to make those targets listen and ensure that constituency views are accurately represented. When these three things come together, success is possible. In the USA, for example, the Living Wage Campaign has succeeded in getting legislation adopted in a number of states and cities despite a conservative Congress (including a 19 per cent pay rise for employees of municipal contractors in Chicago in 2002), while STISSS, the healthcare workers' union in El Salvador, has recently persuaded government to outlaw the privatization of healthcare because of its effects in excluding the poor.³⁴ Arguably, the most successful social movement in America over the last twenty years has been the rise of neo-conservatism, anchored in the associations of the religious right (like the 'Promise Keepers' and the 'Moral Majority'), but well connected both to think-tanks – like the Heritage Institute – and to the Republican Party.³⁵

As in a real ecosystem, all parts need to be present and connected if the system is to operate effectively. Remove or weaken one part, or strengthen others artificially, and the system breaks down. An insufficient density, diversity or depth of associations leaves societies more vulnerable to authoritarian rule because the ecosystem cannot withstand external shocks. For example, if only one independent newspaper or watchdog organization exists, governments can easily throttle dissent (think of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe), but if thirty exist, at least some will survive (think of Kenya, Chile or even China). Worst of all is homogeneity, the Achilles heel of ecosystems both natural and social. Yet real associational ecosystems are replete with gaps, weaknesses and donor-led conformity. Labour unions in the USA

today represent only one-third of the workers they represented fifty years ago.³⁶ Informal associations at the grassroots are often ignored or neglected, but they were vital to the struggle, for example, against apartheid in South Africa or for democracy in China today – like yard and street resident committees, burial and temple societies, farmers' associations and youth clubs. Theda Skocpol has made a special study of the decline of 'locally rooted but nationally active' cross-class membership associations in the USA like the American Legion and the AFL-CIO (the umbrella movement for the US labour movement), arguing that US civil society has moved 'from membership to management' over the last forty years.³⁷ Progressive social movements are weak in the USA, even with its strong tradition of associational life. This is partly because the liberal establishment tends to be divorced from grassroots activism, just as grassroots activists tend to be weakly linked to the centres of power in Washington DC.

If concentrated power is bad for democracy in general, it is difficult to argue that it is good for civil society, yet some of the trends in associational life over the past decade have come dangerously close to this effect. There has been a worldwide professionalization of the non-profit sector and a gradual distancing of associations from their social base – in part the result of foreign aid and government funding that is driven by strong neo-Tocquevillian tendencies among donors. Funds have gone overwhelmingly to NGOs in capital cities, while Northern NGOs have dominated the emergence of transnational advocacy networks. This is not strengthening civil society, but promoting certain associations over others on the basis of preconceived notions of what civil society should look like. Even if one rejects the thesis that civil society is in decline, it is impossible to ignore the fact that its shape is changing in important ways in every part of the world. This is to be expected, since associational life is never static, but even if the associational ecosystem maintains its health and strength while its shape is changing, does it follow that this will have predictable effects?

Forms and norms

The claim that economic and political success is directly related to the strength and health of associational life is common to neo-Toquevillian thinking, especially the work of Robert Putnam, based first on his comparison between northern and southern Italy and more recently on his monumental surveys of 'social capital' in the USA. In Putnam's view, associations breed social capital and social capital breeds success – the 'forms' of associational life produce the 'norms' of the good society. Putnam's work has since spawned a thriving debate, but if everything related in this chapter is true – that the depth of the 'associational revolution' may have been exaggerated; that fundamental uncertainties remain about the boundaries of civil society, political society and the market; that associational life varies greatly across context and culture; that associational ecosystems are full of gaps and disconnections; and that civil societies are always 'works in progress' – then it stands to reason that the link between forms and norms will be complex, contingent and contested. A strong civil society, as noted in chapter 1, would not necessarily make society strong and civil. Why not?

3

Civil Society as the Good Society

When the Egyptian scholar-activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim stood up to defend himself in front of the Supreme State Security Court in Cairo one July day in 2002, he focused on one key phrase, 'civil society',¹ by which he meant a society where all could be free to speak their minds and have their voices heard. Although accused on spurious grounds of financial mismanagement as the head of a prominent Egyptian NGO, the Ibn Khaldoun Centre, Ibrahim was arrested because he – and by extension 'civil society' – was perceived to pose a threat to the reigning political order. Not many of us would be as brave or principled as this, but all of us carry in our hearts and minds a vision of the world as we would want it to be – ruled, at the most general level, by love and forgiveness, truth and beauty, courage and compassion. Even in an age obsessed by terrorism, mercifully few people wake up each morning to plan the final details of an attack on the World Trade Centre or the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, select their targets for a killing spree at the local high school, or identify which of their opponents are next in line for ethnic cleansing. Of course, the details of the good society are subject to a never-ending debate about ends and means, necessary compromises and trade-offs between different interests and objectives, but the idea of the good society

5 Synthesis – Unravelling the Civil Society Puzzle

At this point in the argument it is customary to choose one model of civil society over the others and so terminate the debate. Either one takes the well-worn route of the revivalists (associational life as the key to the good society), or one trudges down the 'road less travelled' (civil society as a puzzle rather than a solution), ending up, after a few turns to the left, in the outer reaches of critical theory, or searching for ways to combine state, market and civil society building into a joint attack on social problems. The good news is that there is no need to treat the civil society debate as a zero-sum game in which one model is accepted to the exclusion of the others, and every reason to embrace a holistic approach that integrates elements of all three schools of thought explored in chapters 2, 3 and 4. This is because civil society gains strength both as an idea and as a vehicle for social change when the weaknesses of one set of theories are balanced by the strengths and contributions of the others, a line of argument that enables us to focus on insights that lead to more effective action rather than worrying in the abstract about which theory is correct. In reality, each of these three perspectives has a great deal to offer.

Visions of the good society help to keep our 'eyes on the prize' – the normative goals of poverty reduction, non-

discrimination and the revitalization of democracy that, as chapter 3 pointed out, require coordinated action across many different institutions. Being clear about ends and means helps to guard against the tendency to promote certain institutions over others as a goal in and of itself – voluntary associations over states, for example, or markets over both. However, the vision of the good society says little about how such goals are going to be achieved, and associational life does seem to be an important – if incomplete – explanatory factor in most contemporary settings. As explored in chapter 2, structural definitions of civil society are useful in emphasizing the gaps and weaknesses of associational ecosystems that need to be fixed if they are to be effective vehicles for change. Remember that it was dissatisfaction with both state-led and market-driven ideologies that underpinned the rise of interest in civil society in the first place. Chapters 2 and 3 also stressed, however, the differences and particularities of associational life that generate competing views about the ends and means of the good society. Without our third set of theories – civil society as the public sphere – there would be no just and democratic way to reconcile these views and secure a political consensus about the best way forward. Public spheres enable citizens to sort through their differences and achieve at least a functioning sense of the interests they hold in common so that they can be translated into norms, rules and policies that govern one or another aspect of social and economic life. In turn, a healthy associational ecosystem is vital to the public sphere, since it is usually through voluntary organizations and the media that citizens carry on their conversations.

Each set of theories, then, is related to the others, but not, unfortunately, in any universal or easily predictable way. The truth is that these connections are extremely complex, especially when comparisons are made across very different contexts. Although some theorists posit a direct transmission belt between associational life, positive social norms and the achievement of specific social goals, there is little comparative empirical evidence to support their conclusions, and the

evidence that does exist suggests one almighty mess – every generalization has at least ten exceptions, and each lesson learned has at least ten qualifying conditions – the ‘ifs’, ‘buts’ and ‘maybes’ that characterize real social change. Are associational life and the public sphere dependent or independent variables in relation to the good society, or are they either or both depending on the circumstances? Are they ‘things’ that can be factored into models or by-products of the interaction between politics, economics, culture, social structure and state-building as they operate through the long march of history? As the scale of inquiry increases from the local to the global, the number and range of intervening variables is certain to increase, making these equations more complicated still. So how *does* a strong civil society make society strong and civil? This is the most important question in the civil society debate, but it is also the most difficult to answer, and hence the least explored. What new light does the combination of these three models shed on the civil society puzzle?

Associational life, the public sphere and the good society

How does the shape of associational life affect the health of the public sphere and the goals of the good society, in both of the senses outlined in chapter 3 – the development of generalized social norms and the achievement of particular social objectives? These are probably the most complicated relationships of all, so it is necessary to consider them at some significant length.

In the most general of terms, many studies confirm that democratic consolidation is difficult to achieve without a strong associational ecosystem, since independent associations provide the channels or mediating structures through which political participation is mobilized and states are held accountable by their citizens. Mark Warren breaks down these ‘democratic effects’ into three categories: supporting

public spheres of democratic engagement, encouraging the capacities of citizens for democratic participation and deliberation, and effects that underwrite democratic institutions through representation, legitimization and resistance.¹ The influence of popular movements in helping to overturn authoritarian rule in Africa, Asia and Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s testifies to the importance of these effects even where associations have been relatively weak. Whether democracy delivers other goals regularly identified with the good society – such as poverty-reducing growth and social inclusion – is not so clear cut, though in the long run democracy seems to be better at solidifying the contracts and coalitions that progress demands. There is, at least, no evidence that the reverse is true, in other words, that the economic transformations characteristic of development require authoritarian rule, even if certain countries have experienced such regimes during their transitions (compare South Korea, China and Taiwan, for example, with Botswana, Hong Kong and Mauritius). Recent research on ‘social capital’ (which is not the same as associational life, though closely related), confirms that the strength, spread and connectivity of social networks does have an important influence in economic terms. World Bank research in Indonesia found that membership in local associations had a bigger impact on household welfare than education, especially if their membership was socially heterogeneous and overlapped with membership in other such groups. There is some evidence that these positive effects hold at the national level too, though this evidence is disputed.²

However, there are widely varying accounts of the transmission mechanisms involved in these relationships, with three schools of thought being particularly influential, at least in the USA where the literature is most extensive: the ‘civic culture’ school (like Robert Putnam) sees associational life in general as the driving force behind the consolidation of positive social norms on which the good society is built; the ‘comparative associational’ school (like Theda Skocpol) sees particular configurations of associational life as the key to

securing policy reforms that the good society requires; and the 'school of sceptics' (like Nancy Rosenblum) disputes the links between 'forms and norms' implied in either of these formulations in favour of more complex interactions between different associational ecosystems and their context. Most of the evidence from Third World contexts comes from studies of the development-NGO sector, which as we have seen is a small subset of civil society and therefore not directly comparable, and most treatments of 'global' civil society ignore these questions completely.³

The civic culture school

The arguments of this first school of thought were explored in brief in chapter 2. According to their line of reasoning, 'civic engagement' or 'civic culture' – meaning a composite of associational life and voluntary interaction – are independent variables that provide societies with sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity (by creating expectations that favours will be returned), channels of communication through which trust is developed (by being tested and verified by groups and individuals), templates for collaboration (that can be used in wider settings), and a clear sense of the risks of acting opportunistically (that is, outside networks of civic engagement, thereby reinforcing cooperative behaviour, or at least conformity with 'civic values'). Assuming they are distributed broadly enough throughout the population, these positive social norms will produce a 'society that is civil', and – assuming good people make good democrats – they will also create a constituency to support the social, economic and political reforms that are necessary to combat poverty and discrimination. The emphasis here is on 'generalized social capital', since, even if some of it is used for purposes defined as 'bad', enough will be left over to make its overall effects an influence for the 'good'. Scholars like Putnam back up these hypotheses with reams of data that purport to show that 'social capital' in the USA is declining (particularly traditional forms of civic and political participation), and that

as a result, America is heading for a crisis of social breakdown, political passivity and economic stagnation.⁴

Putnam's thesis is, of course, a great deal more nuanced and sophisticated than this brief summary suggests. Nevertheless, it has generated a large amount of criticism on empirical grounds (by those who question what has happened over time to different types of association), and conceptual grounds (by those who claim that Putnam draws the wrong conclusions from data they accept). Others criticize the conflation of 'civic' with 'liberal democratic' values (which makes associational life a transmission belt for norms that may be dominant, but not necessarily democratic), and the inversion of causes and effects – arguing that trends in social capital are dependent on factors outside of civil society, not the other way around. A common thread in these critiques is a question that connects Putnam and his colleagues to the second school of thought identified above: how can radically different forms of civic participation produce the same effects? If associational life varies as much as was described in chapter 2, then something magical and mysterious must be happening in society at large to produce the generalized effects that Putnam predicts. The natural extension of this line of questioning is to claim that different associations do indeed have different normative and substantive effects, so that the goals of the good society rest not on strengthening civic participation in general but on identifying which particular forms of participation are both lacking and important. In this sense, the key to the civil society puzzle lies through qualitative changes in associational life, not quantitative movements either 'up' or 'down'.

The comparative associational school

One of the most influential writers in this second school of thought is Harvard academic Theda Skocpol, whose detailed historical studies in America have charted the shift from a 'civic world centered around locally-rooted and nationally-active membership associations' to one centred around

professional advocacy groups and social service providers that may have large numbers of supporters, donors or clients, but very rarely members in the true sense of the term.⁵ The associations Skocpol mourns include the American Legion, labour unions (which claimed over 12 per cent of all American adults as members in 1955), parent-teacher associations (PTAs, which claimed 9 per cent), and a whole roster of organizations named for forest creatures like elks, moose and eagles (sadly no one seems to have organized around raccoons, bats or skunks). Because they represented a substantial cross-income and cross-interest social base (though predominantly white), these associations were able to form coalitions that were powerful enough to pressure the federal government to pass a series of reforms that raised basic standards of health, education and welfare across America – like the GI Bill of 1944. As in successful developers like Kerala, West Bengal, Botswana and South Korea later in time, associations like these constituted ‘highways’ between government and citizens along which information, pressure and accountability could travel. Skocpol’s research shows that such associations have declined dramatically in the USA since the Second World War – by 43 per cent for the AFL-CIO for example, 60 per cent for the National Congress of PTAs, and 70 per cent for the Masons.⁶ The result, summarized in the title of Skocpol’s 2003 book, is ‘diminished democracy’ – an ‘advocacy universe that magnifies polarized voices and encourages class-biased policy outcomes’ (that is, outcomes biased against the interests of the great majority of the public), and which is the result of combining ‘too-ready routes to participation by small groups of activists with intense commitments to (often) extreme causes, coupled with obstacles to routine participation by ambivalent citizens with everyday concerns’.⁷

Why is the decline of such associations important? The first reason has already been mentioned – their success in pushing through broad-based welfare gains has been endangered by the collapse of cross-class, local-to-national bridges between civil society and government, as witness the failure of both

Democratic and Republican administrations during the last thirty years to reform the US health, education and welfare systems. It cannot be coincidental that rising inequality and concentrated power in America have paralleled the decline of nationally federated associations such as labour unions. We also saw in chapter 4 how – like rocks in a stream – engagement across interest groups in the public sphere can moderate extremist positions toward a political consensus on difficult reforms, requiring overlapping memberships in different voluntary associations so that civil society can ‘escape any particular cage’.⁸ In addition, traditional associations tended to be financed through membership dues (not government contracts, philanthropy or foreign aid), which helped to keep members and leaders in close connection with each other, promoted accountability to a social base, and encouraged leadership development among low-income people instead of among elites claiming to act ‘on their behalf’. And, since the skills of democracy are best learned through practice rather than in the classroom or by reading fund-raising leaflets sent by mail, the increasing dominance of lobby groups and service-providing NGOs may threaten the norm-generating effects of associations by reducing citizen involvement to cheque or letter writing and attendance at the occasional rally – the ‘junk food’ of participation as Sidney Verba calls it.⁹

Similar arguments have been made in other contexts too. Community activists in both North and South, for example, argue that grassroots membership organizations that are internally inclusive and democratic are the key to civic life since they encourage direct involvement by disenfranchised groups in economic and political processes, and take on the structural barriers that limit equal participation and the equal distribution of public benefits – groups like the Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky, for example, the People’s Rural Education Movement in Orissa, India, and the landless movement in Brazil. Ashutosh Varshney’s work on inter-communal conflict in Indian cities like Ahmedabad suggests that one particular configuration of associational life –

organizations that tie together the interests and activities of Hindus and Muslims – is the crucial factor in preventing outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence, and managing riots successfully when they do break out.¹⁰ When associations are composed exclusively of one ethnic group then they cannot mediate in the interests of the whole (think Rwanda, Lebanon and the Balkans as well as India or northern Nigeria). But when organizations deliberately bring different groups together – like the neighbourhood peace committees Varshney studied in his work – then negotiated settlements are possible.

The common theme of these studies is that the shape of associational life matters greatly in determining the influence of civil society on broader social goals, partly through effects on the health of the public sphere, and partly through effects on positive social norms. These are powerful arguments, but not, I think, conclusive. Varshney's work has been criticized by other scholars who cite changes in employment and industry, migration and state responsibilities in India as just as important to the incidence of conflict as civic life per se.¹¹ The cross-constituency membership associations lauded by Skocpol and the grassroots groups praised by social activists are not guaranteed to secure the goals of the good society, especially if measured by the achievement of universal rights. As she herself admits, the great protest movements of the 1960s for civil and women's rights did not fit her model, since although new membership associations were vital – like the Southern Christian Leadership Council and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee – such movements were driven forward by a combination of grassroots protest, radical activism, and professional lobbying, not by traditional cross-interest associations like PTAs and the American Legion. And although whites did play a role in the civil rights movement, the movement was overwhelmingly African-American in character, just as the women's movement was driven by women and the gay rights movement was driven by gays and lesbians. The fact that all three movements achieved substantial gains shows that associations that rep-

resent a particular constituency can be just as effective in achieving the goals of the good society, if not more so – unless perversely, equal rights are not included. Citing 205 cases of socially progressive legislation passed by the US Congress between 1963 and 1991, Jeffrey Berry concludes that the growth and influence of Washington DC-based 'citizens' lobby groups' is good for democracy and the public interest. 'These are not thin citizens', he says, 'but full-bodied activists, and the nation needs more of them, not less.'¹² People who join such groups are more likely to participate in other aspects of the political process (including voting), and be members of other groups where they do more than write a cheque – helping to produce those overlapping memberships that all schools of thought see as crucial. The problem lies not with the activities of public-interest lobbying, but with the fact that they empower only some parts of the US population, a problem that is taken up below. Equally, many traditional membership associations did not fight for broad-based social reforms but for narrow concerns like gun ownership (the National Rifle Association grew dramatically when it allied itself with partisan politics in the 1970s) and the prevention of abortion (by the National Right to Life Committee, founded in 1973). The evangelical religious movements that have grown so substantially in the USA and elsewhere also tend – unlike Protestant churches in the past – to channel their members' commitments into intra-congregational rather than community-wide activities and concerns.¹³

The school of sceptics

These qualifications have been elaborated in great detail by my third school of thought, which consists of writers who accept that the structure of associational life is shifting in important ways to suit a rapidly changing context, but deny that these shifts have any a priori consequences. In part, this is because new routes to participation are expanding even while older ones are in decline. *Pace* Putnam ('kids today just

aren't joiners'), soccer clubs, environmental organizations, self-help groups, churches and the anti-globalization movement are exploding, and many of these newer associations – which Skocpol dismisses as professional lobbyists – do have large numbers of members (the Sierra Club for example, or the National Organization of Women).¹⁴ Some – like the American Association for Retired Persons – also involve them in activities beyond cheque writing, and even in organizational governance. So while the decline of traditional associations may have some negative consequences, the rise of associational life that is more inclusive overall (even if previously excluded groups have to organize around their own interests, at least initially) is surely a good thing. As stressed elsewhere in this book, strong bridges require strong bonds. Changing patterns of civic life may simply reflect a necessary reordering so that civil society remains a positive force as circumstances change. In this school of thought, the key to the civil society puzzle lies in making the connections between the changing structures of associational life in general, the particular effects of individual organizations, and factors in the external context, interactions that defy easy categorization or generalization since all the variables in the equation are mutually dependent.

Following this line of argument, one would not expect any necessary correlation between the characteristics of associations and their normative effects, a reality that is recognized even by the godfathers of compassionate conservatism like John Dilulio, former director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. 'We do not know', he says after reviewing ninety-seven rigorous studies of faith-based civic associations and their work, 'whether America's religious armies of compassion . . . necessarily out-perform their secular counterparts.'¹⁵ Research by scholars in the USA like Deborah Minkoff and both Mark Warrens (yes, there are two of them, each working separately on civil society and politics), shows that contentious organizations regularly foster norms of democracy and cooperation, since when people secure their rights and entitlements they become

more willing to collaborate with others.¹⁶ Minkoff's work shows that the most effective non-profit organizations are, in any case, 'hybrids' that combine elements of advocacy, service-provision, capacity building and political action – they are rarely 'one thing or the other'. 'Congregations', as David Campbell puts it, 'are not just contractors but sites and resources for church based coalitions and organizing networks' that play an increasing role in politics as well as service.¹⁷

The most detailed interrogation of the 'forms and norms' debate comes from Nancy Rosenblum, who finds that the effects of associational life on the moral dispositions of their members, and hence on the health of democracy, are complex, fluid and often surprising.¹⁸ Associations that are often dismissed by neo-Toquevillians – like self-help and identity-based groups or street gangs of young people – may have important democratic effects, since, even though their members, resembling Narcissus, may only talk about themselves, at least they take turns in doing so, learning in the process a little of the reciprocity that underpins cooperation and active citizenship. This is an important observation, given that such self-help groups (like Alcoholics Anonymous and Weightwatchers) had over 25 million members in the USA by 1996.¹⁹ Conversely, associations that are singled out for neo-Tocquevillian praise have a mixed and often disappointing record as schools for participatory citizenship, since participation may not extend beyond the group and into the wider world of politics. Associational cultures are diverse and often contradictory, but they may still produce important benefits by articulating neglected voices in the public sphere or developing new loyalties and capacities among their members. Some small groups have the same problems as large bureaucracies (think dysfunctional families) while others show strong commitments to internal democracy, equity and self-criticism. Only 'hate groups', Rosenblum concludes, are unambiguously negative in their effects.

Therefore, the ideal of civic associations as 'mini-democracies' is not essential to the argument that democracy

depends on a vigorous associational life. It follows that legislation to enforce internal structures and characteristics in line with public values is unlikely to be effective – accountability to a social base, for example, or democratic elections of their leaders. Encouraging such qualities may be desirable, but attempting to enforce them may, as Hannah Arendt once observed, be the beginning of a slippery slope to ‘totalitarianism as the end point of unremitting congruence’.²⁰ This is an uncomfortable conclusion for civil society enthusiasts, since it implies that associations can practise undemocratic or discriminatory behaviour and still qualify as members – like the Salvation Army’s refusal to hire gay employees. Is the preservation of civil society as a protected zone of pluralism a more important objective than enforcing universal standards in a society that is civil? The public sphere must decide the answer to this question, in court if necessary, as it did when the US Supreme Court forced the Minnesota Jaycees to accept women members in 1984.²¹

Outside the USA, the debate on ‘forms and norms’ is less well researched, and contexts are much more varied. This makes it difficult to draw comparable conclusions, but those studies that exist suggest a similarly complex picture. Different forms of association, or associations with different characteristics, may have similar effects, and the factors that seem to mark out ‘high performers’ – like flexibility, accountability and learning – are shared by successful public and private sector institutions too. A recent Ford Foundation study of civil society and governance across twenty-two countries found that associational life does contribute to democracy and state accountability, but not as much as was thought, and only when certain conditions are met – alliances and coalitions between associations, for example, inclusive membership, and independence, including as much domestic funding as possible.²²

‘Values-based’ NGOs in developing countries do not automatically perform more effectively, since performance depends on the contexts in which they operate and the goals of the work they do – different organizational structures and

characteristics are required, for example, to operate effectively in service-provision, policy advocacy, and capacity building among members or beneficiaries. A clear vision or mission, a balance between economic development and political empowerment, strong vertical and horizontal linkages to draw in resources and connect poor people to public and private institutions, and the multiplier effect of strengthening people’s own capacities and leadership are common denominators, but they may not be achievable in authoritarian settings or where resources are in short supply. Even if they are, research in Asia and Latin America has shown that ‘we cannot say *a priori* that any one type of organization is inherently more or less responsive to, or representative of, the needs of the rural poor’.²³ Where the empowerment of under-represented groups is top priority, building membership-based, internally democratic associations into social movements is likely to be crucial, but in other contexts more traditional forms of organization may be more important. Many of the global social movements that have emerged during the last decade have experimented with new and less structured forms of internal decision-making, management and accountability, but it is not yet clear whether these innovations have fed through into stronger collective norms or substantive results.²⁴ As in the case of the USA described above, it is not the presence or extent of associational life that makes the difference by itself, but the character of pluralism and the actual activities of different types of association as they are shaped by history and contemporary context.

Is any generalization possible?

Because they take great care to disaggregate different influences from their results, writers in this third school of thought tend to be the best guides to associational life and its effects, but they leave us with a huge amount of diversity and little by way of general conclusions that could be utilized in practice. So let me offer four preliminary generalizations. First, the nature of these links depends how one

envisions the goals of the good society, or more precisely the means by which these goals are realized in practice. The 'civic culture school' sees generalized social norms as the driving force of broader social change and associational life in general as the vehicle through which these norms are strengthened. The 'comparative associational school' sees specific policy changes as the key to the good society, supported by mechanisms in the public sphere that enable the necessary political coalitions to be constructed. Certain forms of association will be important to these reforms, while others may be irrelevant, or destructive. Not so, say those in the 'school of sceptics', since one cannot know in advance whether any sort of association is more likely to produce the effects these other authors claim. In this line of reasoning, the best that can be done is to promote as much associational freedom, capacity and social inclusion as possible, and let civil society sort the rest out for itself.

On closer inspection, these three schools of thought are not mutually exclusive, since the goals of the good society are most likely to be achieved when an enabling environment for all associational life is combined with support for specific associational forms that are missing from the civil society ecosystem. So my second generalization is that it is the ecosystem that matters, not the characteristics of its individual components. Overlapping memberships, cross-interest coalitions, hybrid organizations, and the appropriate mix of bonding and bridging, grassroots groups and intermediaries, advocates and service-providers, are more likely to make associational life a handmaiden of broader social progress. Some kinds of association will be crucial to political accountability, but not to trust and cooperation, while others may encourage social norms but have little impact on policy reform. So the stronger, more diverse and independent the civil society ecosystem can be, the greater the chance that these positive interactions will be sustained over time, thus addressing a consistent weakness in the ability of non-state forces to push for continued reforms once the early stages of democratic consolidation have been completed.

Thirdly, within this ecosystem, one kind of organization does seem especially important. These are the associations that, in Martin Luther King's words, practise the 'love that does justice', encouraging their members or supporters to live up to their social obligations as well as their individual moral values, connect their 'individual life worlds to public spaces, encourage collective judgments, and create networks of communication'.²⁵ The combination of these two levels of action – the individual and the structural – seems best suited to building the dispositions that are crucial both for democracy and for the good society, meaning a willingness to care for the common good and to address the barriers that stand in its way. Here, the moving force is social energy specifically directed at problems of injustice and exclusion, not generalized social norms. Associational life that ignores the structures of power or substitutes for state responsibilities is unlikely to contribute very much to these crucial dispositions.

Fourth, a level playing field for citizen action is critical to the forms–norms link, since otherwise the public sphere cannot operate effectively and associational life, even when effective, will privilege some groups at the expense of others. 'The decisive element in social action is the exercise of power', writes James Luther Adams, 'and the character of social action is determined by the character of the power expressed.'²⁶ The problem is that these conditions – equality, diversity, independence and a supportive context for citizen action – cannot be obtained by civil society acting alone. Rather, they must be anchored in the broader setting of the good society, where associations are the dependent variable and government or market action are determinant.

The good society, associational life and the public sphere

Freedom, democracy and equality before the law are generally taken to be characteristics of the good society, not just in their procedural or liberal-democratic forms but – across

many different cultures and expressions – as basic aspects of human integrity and functioning. The achievement of these conditions has important consequences for non-state action, so the good society is likely to influence the health of the public sphere and the shape of associational life just as much as they, in turn, affect macro social goals. The relationships between civil society in each of its guises are reciprocal. Take equality and independence, two of the conditions already deemed essential to the proper functioning of civil society as a force for positive social change. In chapter 3, we saw how difficult it is for voluntary associations to address the structural problems of inequality, discrimination and the institutionalized concentration of social power, since the guarantor of universal rights and entitlements has to be the state. Only countervailing structures of authority can introduce increasing reciprocity into the general constitution of a society in which serious asymmetries exist. So government action is vital if associational life and the public sphere are to generate both equal opportunities for private interest to be represented and a genuine sense of the public interest too. Otherwise, only certain voices, interests and associations will be heard. This is especially important because there is a close correlation between unequally distributed social resources and the negative functioning of these networks and associations. Relationships between equals, remember, are the raw material of trust, since only from security do people reach out and make connections with others. Social, economic and political equality are therefore preconditions for the ability of civil society to nurture consensus, encourage collective deliberations, and achieve democratic outcomes in which all can participate fairly.

Calls to 'participate more', however, often ignore the economic difficulties that strip people on low or insecure wages of the time and energy to do precisely that, especially when privatization shifts ever greater burdens onto voluntary associations, families and women in the absence of a welfare state. If people feel exploited by the economic systems in which they work, ignored by the political systems in which they vote, and excluded by social systems that discriminate

by race, gender or sexual orientation, it is not surprising that 'exit' often seems a better option than 'voice'. The fact that they do still participate, volunteer and organize is obviously a cause for celebration, but it cannot be taken for granted. It is governments' responsibility to deal with the root causes that keep citizens from participating, and participating equally, in associational life and the public sphere, and that means market regulation as well as legislation to promote security and the guaranteed satisfaction of basic human needs. Economic segregation in labour and housing markets separates citizens from one another and makes civil society alliances much more difficult to cement, just as the changing structure of work makes organization and collective bargaining much more difficult. This may be one reason why the current wave of democratization in much of the world is not producing results in welfare and redistribution of the kind that occurred in earlier waves after 1945. Hence 'a more assertive labor movement would do more to revive civil society than any amount of moralizing about the bad habits of the poor'.²⁷ It is easy to forget that women played a major role in American voluntary associations in the nineteenth century in part because they were disenfranchised in the formal political sphere, or that it took the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to legitimize attempts by voluntary organizations to advocate legally for political equality, not just to break down racial segregation in associational life and cross-race coalitions. Was it accidental that the Reagan administrations of the 1980s demobilized social movements through budget cuts and challenges to non-profit status among advocacy groups, just as the administration of George W. Bush is emphasizing civil society's service-delivery role? These tactics have become routine in many other countries. Whether by design or default, governments can have profound effects on the shape of associational life, for good or for ill, and the outcomes associated with civic engagement in liberal theory are obviously contingent on the political context of a democratic government. 'Good government creates good citizens', as a Palestinian activist put it to researcher Amaney Jamal, not the other way around.²⁸ In the

absence of good government, associations, as in Palestine, may simply be co-opted into patron–client relationships.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the need for legal protection of freedoms of association, speech and information, and for a government-brokered balance between the rights and responsibilities of non-profit organizations in systems of formal accountability. The central importance of independence has been a common theme in the argument to date, since if associations are beholden to business interests or the state, or if the public sphere is captured by commercial concerns or the demands of official secrecy, then their roles may be fatally compromised. This causes obvious difficulties for civil society in authoritarian settings, or in contexts like Islam where state and society (or government and religion) are inextricably intertwined. In these settings, independent oversight of power and authority may be impossible, though accountability mechanisms can still operate at other levels and in other ways. Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, for example, is supportive of a greater role for citizens in discussing the politics of an Islamic state even while the prospects for Western-style voluntary associations remain bleak. For many progressive Muslims, the absence of civil society in the Islamic world is the result of a political conflict between oppressed and oppressor, not a religious conflict between Islam and the West.²⁹

Hence, the solutions to any perceived malaise in associational life – as well as many of the problems – lie outside of civil society in actions by governments and by business. This is why consensus on those actions is a vital part of solving the civil society puzzle, an observation that returns us once again to civil society in its role as the public sphere.

The public sphere, associational life and the good society

As we have seen, public spheres are important both because they surface potential solutions to good society problems,

and because they mobilize constituencies in support of these ideas. Since a good deal of space has already been taken up with exploring these effects we can simply remind ourselves that a functioning public sphere is therefore vital to associational life and the goals of the good society. Public spheres provide the spaces within which associations articulate their interests and objectives, enabling groups to sort through their differences and legitimize a consensus that is just and democratic. Governments and business, as the saying goes, 'have the right to do what they do, but publics have a right to be offended by it', and use those concerns to pressurize for change. Adam Seligman goes so far as to claim that contemporary societies have the opportunity to resolve the 'two poles of the civil society dilemma (group based ideas of the good versus universalistic claims of human rights) in a way that has not been possible since the mid-Eighteenth Century'.³⁰ A democratic public sphere is central to this claim.

Conclusion

An integrated approach to civil society that unites elements of all three models increases the utility of this idea both as an explanation and as a vehicle for action. Standing alone, associational life, the public sphere and the good society are each incomplete. Side by side, there is at least a chance that their strengths and weaknesses can be harmonized, and that all three can benefit from a positive and conscious interaction. An inclusive and well-articulated associational ecosystem can be the driving force of the good society, but the achievements of the good society are what make possible the independence and level playing field that underpin a democratic associational life. Without a functioning public sphere neither would be possible, since there would no space for associations to operate in defining the good society's ends and means. This is just as true at the global level, where states remain the duty bearers of international treaties,

transnational networks are essential to enforce compliance, and a global public sphere (sadly lacking to be sure) is required to foster debates about international norms. An integrated approach like this should enable the design of interventions that are more likely to be effective, since – rather than isolating particular parts of the puzzle and failing to see where the other pieces fit – all the relevant factors can be addressed collectively, and in some rational order. What does that mean in practice?

6 So What's to be Done?

In most cases, asking civil society scholars to distil policy and practice from their theories is akin to seeking help on plumbing from the local vicar. An embarrassing silence, followed by the sound of pairs of shuffling feet, is the usual accompaniment to the obvious question – so what should we *do*? Those who do attempt to answer this question fall into moral exhortations about improved personal behaviour (a typical response from the 'civil society revivalists'), romantic assumptions about community or movement building (especially common on the left), or – worst of all perhaps – a series of recommendations based purely on what the author thinks the donors and the politicians want to hear. The result is usually an anaemic shopping list made up of NGO capacity building, boot camps for better citizens, and calls to return to some imaginary past where people were nicer to their neighbours and the land flowed with milk, honey and social capital. Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* closes with a long list like this, couched in almost evangelical tones: 'So I set before America's parents, educators . . . and young adults the following challenge . . . that bridging social capital will be substantially greater than it was in their grandparents' era', a task guaranteed to set the pulse racing among teenagers nationwide. It doesn't seem to have occurred to the good