

Civil society

A multi-layered concept

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abstract The author analyses the connections between social developments and the evolution of the theory of civil society (CS) (classical background, semantic shifts, re-emergence and open questions regarding future research). He distinguishes four layers of meanings of CS but focuses on selected research areas of CS *qua* associations (third sector, social capital, public sphere, civility). The aim is to provide access points, and a frame of reference, for a wide debate on a problematic in flux.

keywords civil associations ♦ civility ♦ civil society ♦ public sphere ♦ social capital ♦ third sector

Classical theory and the various meanings of civil society

Civil society (CS) is a widely used but complex concept, and we should be careful to identify the main ways it is being used in academic and public debates: a broad sense (CS1: a type of society), an intermediate sense (CS2: markets and associations) and two restricted meanings (CS3, associations and social networks of any kind, and CS4, a subset of associations that convey a moral message connected with the value of civility). Here, I analyse the meanings of this multi-layered concept as they are connected to each other and correspond to historical experiences.

The classical view

We may trace the origins of the concept of civil society to Aristotle's *koinonia politikè* (1943 [4th century BC]), to be translated in Latin as *civitas*, *civilis communitas* and lastly as *societas civilis*. The actual organization of the ancient *civitas*, or *polis*, combined what we call today public and private, secular and religious dimensions. As applied to a city-state such as Athens (and *mutatis mutandis* to Republican Rome), it denoted a complex institutional arrangement for a differentiated social body with a sizable commercial and agricultural ('private') sector, which required (most

clearly in the Roman case) a *corpus iuris* that made for a recognition of 'several' property and for a system of legal proceedings and jurisprudence allowing for the contractual liberty of a large part of the male population in charge of a household (*oikos*). As citizens, these people were engaged in 'public' debate, in the election of a wide array of magistrates and in sharing the burden not only of political decisions but also of the fighting needed to implement them. The city blended temporal concerns and a deep sense of the sacred, and rested on a careful ('religious') relation with divinities which protected the city as well as the families and the individuals of which the city was made.

Greek views were incorporated into the imaginary of the Roman Republic (Cicero, 1998 [1st century BC]), but, in terms of actual experience, by the late Roman Empire the old *polis* had become a thing of the past, and Aristotle's views or Athens' experience counted little when, at the time of Rome's fall, Saint Augustine elaborated a contrast between the city of man, a precarious arrangement for a modicum of peace, and the city of God, a city of pilgrims looking forwards to a celestial home. Yet, in time, and most clearly from the 9th century onwards, Christianity

opened the way for an agenda of reform (Taylor, 2007) of the city of man to make it closer to the city of God. This quest for a celestial Jerusalem in the *seculum* (Duby, 1976, 2010) looked for models in different directions. In northern Italy, for instance, local communities based on family networks and voluntary associations were deliberately arranged, and understood, as ‘cities of God’ (Thompson, 2005); and guilds, with their central values of brotherhood and mutuality, would be the central institutions of social, religious, economic and political life (Black, 1984). There was, also, a revival of Aristotle’s *Politics*, translated from Greek to Latin in the 12th century by Moerbeke (Hallberg and Wittrock, 2006), in a context in which Cicero’s influence was gradually more present. The idea of *polis* or *civitas* was taken over by Aquinas, understood as *communitas politica* or *civilis communitas*, in which a secular authority was checked and tempered by the natural rights of individual persons, families, associations and communities. The scope of the ruler’s authority was crucially restrained in moral matters (and lacked, for instance, *potestas docendi*), and subordinated to the common good.

The late Middle Ages witnessed several attempts to articulate an idea of a well-ordered political society in which a balance is struck between restraints onto the secular authority and an effective exercise of power in view of the common good, between a ‘liberal’ and a ‘civic’ reading of the city-state, or the *regnum*; such was the case of Marsiglio de Padova (13th century) and Leonardo Bruni (15th century). Bruni replaced the current Scholastic terms by *societas civilis*, while being an active participant in the actual politics of Florence, the arrangements of which were, in his view, similar to those of Republican Rome. In early modernity, the surge of strong royal domains and centralizing states pushed local experiments to the sidelines. However, once the traditional narrative of *societas civilis* was translated into the language of late scholastics, of natural law, natural rights and *ius gentium* in the 16th and 17th centuries, the concept of CS returned to a central position in the intellectual debate, as fitting not just small-scale societies or societies of the past, but large-scale societies of the time.

The Scots’ broad view of civil society (CS1)

Ideas and historical experiences are intertwined. The modern idea of a CS came gradually into fruition in the Netherlands and England (via Scotland) by contradistinction to an alternative Baroque sociopolitical order (Fumaroli, 2010) with its traits of a *court society*, an elaborate state apparatus, strong religious uniformity, a subordinated public sphere and an

economy subject to mercantilistic policies, presided over by an absolute monarchy, Spanish Habsburg style or French Bourbon style. The United Provinces and the United Kingdom checked the spread of this absolutist model, to defeat Spain and France both on the battlefield, and in a world of mores and ideas.

As portrayed by the historiography of the 18th century (Pocock, 1999), the times seemed leading towards such new society. An expansion of overseas markets and deep demographic and agrarian transformations came along with far-reaching social, cultural and technological changes. A mosaic of regional communities became parts of a network of states. Governments engaged in a certain amount of dialogue with segments of their subjects, religious and political dissent was gradually permitted, markets and commercial transactions multiplied and a cultivation of manners spread among increasing numbers of the educated, wealthy sectors of society. ‘Free government, free trade, free conscience’ came, then, together. Thus, CS1 (limited government, markets, a public sphere and voluntary associations) became not a mere *concept* but the *historical horizon* of a significant part of Europe at the time. That horizon was reached in England in the first half of the 18th century (Langford, 1989; earlier in the Netherlands: Schama, 1988).

This is the context wherein the modern view of civil society emerges. With obvious precedents in Grotius, Puffendorf, Suárez and Althusius (Skinner, 1978) as well as Locke and Montesquieu, its *locus classicus* is the writings of the Scottish philosophers of the first half of the 18th century (Smith, Hutcheson, Hume, Millar, Lord Kames, and more particularly Ferguson, 1996 [1767]). With them, a broad view of CS came about as a framework of practices and institutions that brought together in a systemic whole the sphere of a polity defined by limited government, accountable to a representative body and to public opinion, under the rule of law, and by a ‘commercial and polite society’, a market economy and a society where voluntary associations play an important role.

The modern concept of CS1 had an obvious moral, normative dimension. In classical terms, Cicero’s ideal of an *optimus cives* and an *optima civitas* involved a moral appeal to live *civiliter*, as a good citizen and as an attentive *pater familias*. By the 18th century, CS1 was defined in contrast with barbarism (Pocock, 1999) and in close connection with the concepts of civility and civilization, terms which denoted a ‘good’ society. Politics was accompanied by a discourse of justification, with a concern for a sacred tradition, social cohesion, the due inclusion of ever larger parts of the population and the fulfilment of values such as those of liberty, equality, patriotism

or fraternity. An analogous argument applied to the economy, the good workings of which were to be compatible with, and requiring, the display of moral sentiments. Politics and the economy were never fully detached from the idea of achieving a good society, or at least, good or virtuous enough considering human fallibility (Hont and Ignatieff, 1985).

Hegel's turn and de Tocqueville's insight: transition from CS1 to more restricted views of CS

The prevailing use of the term CS over the last couple of centuries has shifted from CS1 (the Scots' version) to CS2 (markets and associations) and to CS3 and CS4 (associations). The point of inflection lies in Hegel and de Tocqueville in the first half of the 19th century. Hegel (1963 [1821]) inherits the Scots' broad view of CS but applies it to the UK or similar societies, that is, to an 'ethical community' (*Sittlichkeit*) (Pelczynski, 1971) made out of a limited government and a modicum of representative institutions, the rule of law (and administration of justice), a modest apparatus for social and economic policy *plus* markets and a set of social classes. He makes, then, a crucial step that leaves behind the classical as well as the Scottish tradition, by placing the British version of CS in a larger historical context, as a stage in a process leading to a (supposedly) superior kind of ethical community which he refers to by the name of 'state'. But there is an ambiguity here. Because this state, broadly considered, includes a 'strictly political state' and 'civil society' (CS2: economy and society), whereby the political state (a strong government and a robust bureaucracy) is in full charge, allowing room for markets to develop under its supervision, and for a plural society in which social classes, defined by their role in a division of labour, are the social basis for corporations. This state-based type of society (which Hegel saw coming when looking at the Prussian state of the 1820s and early 1830s) is a deeply disjunctive system, and prone to intractable conflicts if left to itself. This is why it needs a guiding light, the state (in a way reminiscent of the Baroque social imaginary) to preside over and shape society according to a higher reason (the Right Hegelian, conservative version). The alternative is to allow conflicts to run their course and present society to explode and give way to a radically different one (the Left Hegelian, radical version); in this vein, Marx (1994 [1852]) breaks Hegel's whole into the political state, that should whither away, and a civil society (CS2) composed of a market subject to fundamental contradictions and a class society in which two antagonistic classes engage in a struggle to the death.

The statist bias of the Hegelian tradition (Right

or Left) was foreign to the original Scottish (and in general, Anglo-Saxon tradition) which questioned the primacy of the political apparatus, and understood CS as a society moving in a mostly well-ordered way, notwithstanding problems to be attended by means of continuous reforms, and gradually opening spaces of political participation to ever larger sectors of society. Markets were assumed to create interdependencies, prosperity and a habit of peaceful compromises between conflicting interests. Last but not least, a myriad of associations helped to foster a sense of community. They had a public and a private dimension. They were part of a public sphere where common matters were debated, shared with politicians in face-to-face encounters and by means of the mass media (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Koselleck, 1988; Langford, 1989). At the same time, associations attended local constituencies, nurtured religious experiences and were enmeshed in social networks of friends and families. In this private space they found resources, incentives and opportunities for expressing their identity, solving problems and developing their own voice, *later* to be heard in the public domain.

This complex character of the associations (CS3) captured the imagination of de Tocqueville (1956 [1835–40]) when he visited the United States in the 1830s, and kept it at the heart of his depiction of the country. In his view, associational life (CS3) provided a number of entry points for people to exercise an influence on markets and politics, and was crucial for framing the debate that underlay the workings of both, as it was particularly suited to a reflective public moral debate. Thus, churches, universities, schools, media, professions and all kinds of associations would engage in such debate in connection to but at some distance from politics and markets.

The problem of social integration of modern societies, and a contemporary return of CS

From the master narrative of civil society to that of modern society, and the problem of social integration

CS1 provided a unified conceptual schema to understand modern western societies. Its components interact and fit with each other in an open system which combines a liberal (later, a democratic) polity, a market economy and a plural society. While each of these elements may be behind a complicated story, once they come together they tend to work as parts in an articulated process in a quest for an elusive equilibrium, neither to be fully achieved nor entirely lost from sight. The fact is, the basic lines of this

society endured in the Anglo-Saxon countries for more than 200 years; yet, the master narrative of civil society as a relatively orderly process was replaced in the social imaginary of the West by a view of modernity in which the social integration of society becomes problematic. Part of the reason lies in that Continental European peoples were far more impressed by the break with the past embodied by the French Revolution, than by the complex process of Anglo-Saxon reforms. Englishmen could be portrayed as enjoying the fruits of a revolution understood not as a break from the past but as the reassertion of historical liberties of old; by contrast, from the vantage point of Continental Europe, a sequence from the late 18th century to mid-19th century suggested a precipitous transition from a relatively orderly traditional society into a highly conflictual modern society.

The dismantling of the corporate order, the expansion of trade and industrial growth, urbanization and the emergence of the social question, a clash between church and secular culture and mass politics with nationalist masses playing a crucial role in it gave lieu to conflicts that could hardly be handled by the old foci of social integration or the new ones of markets, liberal politics and the cultural symbols of the time. Their failure opened the way for a new paradigm of modern society, that of an emerging sociological tradition. Once again, a theoretical corpus came out as a response to, and a way to make sense of, and help to handle, new historical developments.

In this new cultural idiom, transition from traditional society to modernity implied an increasing division of labour as well as institutional differentiation. However, there was a *limited fit* between the various institutional domains, and a new set of powerful challenges to social integration. The capacity of markets to increase prosperity was recognized by many, but their ability to integrate society was very much put into question. Politics seemed to encourage endless party conflicts or to assert aggressive nationalist claims (partly as a means to secure domestic cohesion). Bureaucracy could bring some measure of order but, in the last analysis, it was second to political decisions which responded mainly to a *raison d'état* that barely concealed a struggle for power, leading to unstable settlements. Despite much talk of a cultural programme of modernity, a normative consensus looked elusive. The secularization of the world, understood as an inevitable outcome of the ongoing process, left social order without a sacred aura (which in the past had been connected to a mythical, revelation religion), and a combination of a secular, civil religion and the development of instrumental rationality in the field of the

economy and politics could legitimate political and social authority only to a point.

A growing division of labour, industrialization, urbanization and mass migrations first created the impression of 'two nations', and that a conflict-prone class society was in the making; even though, soon enough, increasing social differentiation made for a desegregation of society into a plurality of mid-sized and small groups and individuals. Society seemed to gravitate towards either an endemic class struggle, wherein society became a battlefield, or an atomized society, or some unstable combination of individualism and various forms of collectivism. A clear trend (most visible in the modern city) was for individuals to be ever more loosely tied to the social whole. Loose, reversible connections redefined the individuals' attachments to social groups, and gave to their social ties a character of fragility and indeterminacy, from which many would try to escape into mass movements.

Thus, social order needed integrative features hard to come by. Order based on the consensus of enlightened secular-minded elites, their lead duly followed by the masses (the positivist, Comtean dream), was a proposal hard to make it work. Order based on an ever-renewed equilibrium between conflicting forces, reinforced by an expansion of markets and welfare policies, recognition of civil and political rights, growth of science and diffusion of technical innovations, could not avoid acute political and cultural tensions, which were left unresolved by means of focusing on an internal enemy, a scapegoat (a class enemy, a racial enemy) or on an external enemy (aggressive nationalism and imperialism). In the end, modern western society bifurcated. An adjusted version of CS1, by now known as a democratic and capitalist society, endured, while an alternative type of modern society came out as a combination of state-planned economy, authoritarian or revolutionary politics, extreme social control and new political religions. This experience lasted about two-thirds of the 20th century; the fascist variant collapsed by the mid-1940s, the communist variant stayed around till the 1980s. By then, most people had realized the game was over, and in a paradoxical way, the 1968 displays of revolutionary enthusiasm convinced most young people they could find no inspiration for a better society in the actual working-class movements or communist societies of the time; in a few years, these very societies started walking their final steps before imploding and lapsing into oblivion. This was around the time for a revived interest in the old (and by now almost forgotten) theme of civil society (Hall, 1995; Keane, 1988), and for this concept to make a comeback as a type of society (CS1), as a

complex arrangement of markets and associations differentiated from the state (CS2) and, most prominently, just as associations (CS3 and CS4).

A revival of CS1 as ‘an order of liberty’, and the role of markets and associations (CS2) in democratic transitions and consolidations, and world governance

By the end of the second millennium, developments all over the world suggest the diffusion of a western model of society that blends liberal democracy, markets (*cum* a welfare system) and a plural society (a web of associations), and the very term CS (*qua* CS1) is used in Gellner’s work (1994) to characterize these societies. He contrasts CS1, first, with totalitarian societies and, then, to ‘Muslim societies’; these would be ‘ideocracies’, deeply impregnated by a strong faith, secular or religious, where cultural, political and economic power was closely combined. By contrast, CS1 applies to a society based mostly on spontaneous coordination, by means of cooperation and competition, between free agents. Gellner reminds one of similar contrasts, proposed in the political philosophy of a previous generation, between open and closed societies (Popper, 1971), an order of liberty and collectivism (Hayek, 1991), or ‘civil association’ and ‘association as enterprise’ (Oakeshott, 1996).

The concept of CS2 has been recently applied to explain processes of democratic transition and consolidation. It has been argued that a return of civil society creates the conditions for those political changes, since habits and institutions shaped by the experience of markets and associations are basic pre-conditions for democracy to come about and succeed in the long run. Activities in churches and universities, cultural debates and participation in social movements, such as unions or professional bodies, changes in the functioning of corporate villages and migratory movements proved essential for the emergence of democratic Spain (Pérez-Díaz, 1993). In Eastern Europe, associations were a fundamental factor in the transition from a totalitarian society to a liberal democracy; still, it was soon made clear that pressures from social movements combined with the public’s deep disappointment with the promises of a planned, socialized economy. Thus, the consolidation of a new political and social regime could only happen by making far-reaching reforms to develop a market economy, closely linked to the European economy and the world market. This, in turn, involved a change of mind in the cadres and ranks of social movements such as of *Solidarnosc* in Poland, for instance (Rychard, 2009). Similar arguments have been applied to Mediterranean and Latin American societies (Cardoso, 1989). They could

apply to Russia’s or China’s current changes from a totalitarian to an authoritarian capitalist regime pointing to a liberal polity. Were this the case, political changes would come hand in hand with the reinforcement of a market economy that would provide support for an associational world which, in turn, would be increasingly active in the public space (Olimpieva, 2009; Wank, 1995; Wong, 2000).

On a larger scale, Keane (2003) refers to a system of world governance in which markets and associations work in tandem, in a mix of cooperation and competition with political actors. They play an increasingly relevant role in making world governance more accountable and responsive to social demands (Anheier et al., 2001; Kaldor, 2003). In turn, this view of the interdependency of markets and associations, and world governance, at a global scale points to a much deeper change in the problematic of civil society. It pushes this problematic away from a legacy of ‘state-centric’ social sciences (Wallerstein et al., 1996), towards a context in which the western tradition (and western version of modernity) meets other civilizations (and ‘other modernities’: Eisenstadt, 2002). Hence, the increasing importance of research on ‘social hybrids’ regarding the various components of CS1. In the case of associations scholars are looking at the way in which a role analogous to that of modern associations may be played by tribal communities in Central Asia (Achylova, 1995), by traditional corporations (such as those in Ottoman Turkey: Mardin, 1995), or by the caste system in India (Randeria, 2006). By the same token, since all these various civilizations are anchored in Axial religions, increasing attention is being given to faith-based associations in Christian communities (Putnam and Campbell, 2010), to societal forms linked to the ideal of a harmonious, Confucian society in China (Bell, 2008; Wong, 2000), or to Muslim civil society (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2003; Hanafi, 2002).

A thriving research agenda of civil society *qua* associations (CS3, CS4)

Sociology’s traditional focus on associations, and current research agendas on social capital, the third sector and the public sphere

If by the end of the 20th century the West had become an almost unchallenged model and an ‘end of history’ seemed at hand, by the beginning of the new millennium a deep economic crisis questioned the capacity of liberal polities and markets to cope with the situation, even to understand it. Markets could not be trusted to increase society’s collective

knowledge by means of either the disperse, practical knowledge dear to Hayekians or the technical and sociopolitical expertise revered by Keynesians, as regulators and supervisors, state officials and politicians were caught off guard, their performance suggesting that the best we could expect from them was some prudence after the fact (Friedman, 2009). The sheer complexity of the problems made it difficult for politicians to understand them and for the demos to check its politicians and rectify their course. 'Left' and 'right' divisions notwithstanding, the situation seemed ripe for an establishment (politicians, economic elites and media) to push, *de facto*, the citizenry and lower levels of government to the sidelines, pointing to a variant of the oligarchical city of very old times (Plato, 1973 [4th century BC]: book VIII). Were this the case, by an ironical twist of history, modern democracies risked following the course of the Roman Empire, municipalities and regional governments left to handle their *local* concerns while the empire was taken care of in the corridors of the highest instances of power. Politics' and markets' failure would question their capacity to give direction and social cohesion to today's society; while opening for civil society *qua* associations an opportunity to step in.

From the beginning, modern social theory emphasized the integrative potential of associations (Gouldner, 1980). Hegel underlined the role of corporations, Marx appealed to the transformative, then, integrative, potential of the working class's organizations and de Tocqueville, sensitive to the harmful effects of the demise of intermediary bodies of the Old Regime in France, put his hopes in the spread of voluntary associations at the other side of the Atlantic. Durkheim (1984 [1893]), concerned with the anomic effects of the division of labour, looked to professions to nurture an ethos of service to the community and compensate for a prevailing pattern of utilitarian self-interest. For the next generation of US sociologists, facing a society in need of including ever larger waves of immigrants, problems of social integration loomed even greater. Parsons (1971) carved out an institutional domain for a 'societal community', where organizations, in particular (educational and) professional associations, would make a crucial contribution to a normative consensus. Other theorists would stress the conflicting character of this associational world without losing sight of its normative dimension. Pluralist theorists viewed social order as a moving equilibrium between competing interest groups sharing a minimal consensus on procedural rules (Truman, 1951); and a literature on social movements gave prominence to a strand of voluntary associations (labour, peasants, students, environmentalists, etc.) which mobilized

resources to defend their interests, assert their identities, articulate a normative stand and win acceptance/challenge the social order (Klandermans, 1992; Tilly, 1978; Touraine et al., 1984).

Building on these traditions, three research agendas of social sciences, on social capital, the third sector and the public sphere, have developed which highlight the public dimension of voluntary associations. The research agenda of social capital tends to assume, in the de Tocquevillian tradition, that most associations have a civil and civic character. Associations, made out of social ties or connections, are expected to play by the rules of reciprocity and cooperation, and to foster social trust; connections, norms of reciprocity and social trust defining social capital (Burt, 1992; Lin et al., 2001; Putnam, 2000, 2002; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). There is an impressive record of empirical research in the US and increasingly all over the world. A careful analysis of the evidence led Putnam (2000) to conclude there had been a decline of social capital in the US during the last generation. His findings have been subject to debate. Wuthnow (1998) points to the growing importance of loose connections or informal social networks to mobilize civic activism. Verba et al. (1995) suggest that participation has modestly increased at the level of local communities. Ladd (1999) asserts that a high level of social capital in the US may be related to a peculiar political configuration, an early separation of church and government and the particular dynamism of the US economy. In fact, church going went from a rather low level prior to the American Revolution to a sustained high level through most of the 20th century, and this may be the case, also, of individuals joining associations, volunteering and engaging in charitable funding.

The literature on the 'third sector', of non-profit/non-governmental associations, follows on the growth of voluntary associations (Anheier and Salamon, 2006; Yamamoto, 1995) and the diversity of associational forms, for instance, between those attending to service delivery, mutual help and forming public opinion or advocacy (Meijs, 2011). It draws attention to the complex, porous boundaries between civil society, markets and the state (and the family and religion). Salamon (2003) points out that growth in the US third sector has come hand in hand with a rapprochement between it and the world of markets and business: by the end of the last century, fees and charges make for nearly half of NGOs' total receipts, charitable fund-raising incorporates a variety of business practices, NGOs have increased their involvement in commercial ventures and, in general, the sector has absorbed a sort of market culture into its operations and its structures.

Mixed ventures between associations and government agencies come in various guises; for instance, in the form of *quangos*, or of local communities (Blond, 2010); or in that of partnerships between government, unions and business associations, with strong participation of associations in government and parliamentary commissions (Trägårdh, 2007; see also Rothstein, 2002). In the US, grant-giving foundations have played a strategic role, through funding and advice, in the associational world (Anheier and Hammack, 2009; López Novo, 2008); their influence has helped to define educational, human rights and social policies for many decades. These professional, secular-minded contemporary foundations are the last avatar of a very long tradition of classical philanthropy (Veyne, 1990), Christian as well as Muslim charities and educational initiatives (Hoexter, 1998) and other religious institutions.

Another strand of social research focuses on associations' role in the public or civic sphere, and the way in which they develop a normative discourse and influence politics while keeping a distance from political power (Alexander, 1998, 2006; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Walzer, 1991). This normative discourse hinges on the character of the values and virtues civil society should be based on, and ultimately on the virtue of 'civility'. In its minimal version, civility means the virtue of treating political and other opponents as members of the same community (Carter, 1998; Rouner, 2000; Shils, 1997; Smith, 2002), on the expectation this should facilitate political debates and social transactions, thus reduced to a merely 'civil' virtue (Seligman, 1995). Alternatively, we may adopt a larger version that includes a ('civic') reference to mutuality, brotherhood and a common good. Civility points, then, to *vivere civile*, to a way of life whereby people form a community on the grounds that they communicate with each other and try to persuade each other with arguments pertaining to the common good of them all. Social integration is searched for, and eventually arrived at, partly as an instrument to other ends and partly as an end in itself.

In fact, research on the economic, political and communicative context shows they may foster, or impede, the development of associations' participation in the public sphere. Economic institutions (markets, private property) allow associations to gather economic resources and entrepreneurial and organizational capacities; and Alexander (2006) insists, also, on the role played by regulatory institutions, such as law (rule of law, rights and procedural guarantees) and democratic politics (parties, voting, electoral campaigns), and by communicative institutions (notably the mass media and the new media of the Internet et al.) which supply associations with

the means to create and reinforce social ties and access to information and means of persuasion. However, the same institutional context can work in different ways. Markets may work as complex conversations that imply a substantial measure of mutual recognition, and an awareness of the social situation that the economic agents share and their implicit agreement on some common moral grounds (Pérez-Díaz, 2009; Rothschild, 2001), or otherwise, as a place where merely self-interested agents meet in an exchange distorted by strong asymmetries of information and power, with a view to attaining their short-term self-interested goals. Similar dilemmas apply to democratic politics and communicative networks. Democratic politics, viewed as an ongoing debate about a common good on the grounds of a substantial measure of agreement about what this common good is (Purcell, 1973) *differs from* politics premised on a view of democracy as a mere proceeding to elect political leaders and a system of checks and balances between power holders, or as a mechanism to enforce the ruler's will over political rivals and subordinate groups. A web of associations and communicative networks may be understood as conducive to some form of an all-encompassing moral community, or alternatively, as a battlefield for different organizations unable to genuinely communicate with each other while eager to express their identities and impose their views on the rest.

So, while research on the public sphere is a very promising line of enquiry, the obvious caveat is that not all associations share such civil spirit (Alexander, 2006; Field, 2003; Keane, 2003). The actual associational world has a 'bright' (civil) and a 'dark' (uncivil) side, and all shades in between. Even in associations with a civil discourse, the role of rank-and-file members may be reduced to a minimum (Skocpol, 2003), and in any participatory association (Insole, 2004) there is an easy step from communal decision-making to decisions being made by a core of militants who exclude their opponents and manipulate their social base (Ehrenberg, 1999). Moreover, history shows, associations may be connected with, and instrumental to, sectarian, demagogic, uncivil policies. Societies such as the mafia, with a family core, and an ethics of mutual respect and strong social cohesion, would be a sort of 'uncivil society' (Kopecky and Mudde, 2003; Pérez-Díaz, 2002). Religious zealots or secular fanatics, which may be adherents to 'political religions' (Voegelin, 2000) belong also in a world of associations. Totalitarian movements have nurtured, and enjoyed the support of, webs of associations, with intense participation of large masses of population and a rhetoric of altruism and brotherhood of a very uncivil kind (Armony, 2004).

The centrality of culture and agency and of associations of a civil kind (CS4)

The way associations and institutional contexts work depends, on the micro level, on the way people use them and the meanings they attach to them. It depends on people's culture, by this meaning not on people using a cultural idiom, but on them making a commitment to a set of values and translating it into their actual behaviour, into a way of life. In some societies, a strong majority holds onto a set of basic beliefs that provide people with a sense of shared traditions, possibly a sense of mission, while allowing for minority positions to be expressed and argued for; this may take the form, at times, of a sort of civil religion, for instance, in the US (Bellah and Hammond, 1989) or the Nordic countries (Sørensen and Stråth, 1997). But in today's world, both on a global scale and, increasingly so, on a national scale, many people live in a plural, post-Durkheimian society (Taylor, 2007) in which there are substantial moral disagreements. One way or another, individuals are invited to be part of a normative debate and choose their side in it; but the way they do so is related to their social settings.

Modern man has been defined as self-centred and self-interested, as a 'modular man', able and inclined to play different roles in different environments, and to develop highly specific, unsanctified, instrumental, revocable links to diverse parts of society (Gellner, 1994); or as a 'buffered self', aware of the possibility of disengagement from any community (Taylor, 2007). Archer (2007) proposes a wider range of possibilities as she analyses various degrees of reflexivity, and refers to people who may be communicative reflexive (and follow the social mores of the group), autonomous reflexive (and focus on means to attain those goals) and meta-reflexive (and question and argue about these goals or values); then, she perceives an elective affinity between these meta-reflective people and a world of voluntary associations engaged in a moral conversation in the public and private spheres, that may end in playing the role of monitoring or active citizens (Moro, 2005; Schudson, 1999).

The point is, individuals make engagements, with various degrees of reflexivity, partly because of their own individual moral sentiments and arguments, and partly because they are connected (however problematic this connection is) to their social settings and the ways of life practised in them. This partial dependence of individual moral commitments on social context applies to the whole range of individuals' often conflicting experiences: of self-assertion, as autonomous agents playing out self-interested strategies in the economy, politics and social life; of altruism, love or benevolence in

response to situations of dependence and vulnerability that ask for recognition and care (MacIntyre, 1999); and of a search for security and pleasure by means of dominating or exploiting others. For people to work out the tensions built in these conflicting experiences, they cannot simply rely on the increased amounts of information, free time and physical energy provided for by economic growth, technology and science, health care, etc.; they have to go back to a debate on morals, which requires sorting out what good judgement and good character mean, and some basic insight of what a good society is, these moral debates being intertwined with practical engagements to cope with the problems of the day.

Thus, people are in for a contest whose subject matter is different ways of life. MacIntyre (1990) refers to the discussion in a university as a forum for a reasoned, restrained disagreement between different cultural traditions; but, when we go from the contained milieu of academics to that of large societies, we find cultural traditions and ways of life which are embedded in complex settings where associations play a crucial role. This is why the web of associations looks like a crucially important location for the various normative arguments to be made, since moral arguments are only plausible and credible not *qua* mere doctrines but *qua* mores anchored in the ways of life of social networks and family networks, local communities, voluntary associations and nets of friends and 'communities of choice' (Friedman, 1995).

CS4 as nurturing ways of life and as the bearer of a moral project

In the end, we may understand the important insight that lies in the views of those who focus on CS4, that is, a subset of truly civil associations engaged in a search for a virtuous, good society as defined by the ideal of civility broadly understood and the close ideal of a society of reflective (even meta-reflective) individuals, and therefore, by the ideal of a deliberative society. We can even think of CS4 metaphorically as the bearer of an important moral project (Alexander, 2006; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Habermas, 1992; Keane, 2003; Kocka, 2004; Wagner, 2006; Walzer, 1991). This is a promising line of enquiry, and action, provided we are sensitive to the limits of collective deliberation (Pennington, 2003) and moral virtue that apply to CS4 too. It lies in the twin dangers of trying to recreate a new avatar of a collective historical protagonist Hegelian style (maybe in a partnership with the state) and to build up the place for over-articulated but self-righteous communities eager to express themselves and communicate on their own terms, a new Tower of Babel.

At the same time, we may discern in the practices and arguments of contemporary civil society worldwide a sort of *telos*, coming out partly as a result of deliberate moral work, the eventual development of axiological rationality (Boudon, 2010), and partly as an unintended consequence of trends and events in a world out of human control. This *telos* might be taken as a confirmation of the old gnostic dreams: that we are on our way to a control of fate, or, in the words of Edmund Wilson (1998), on the threshold of a new era of ‘volitional evolutionism’, the human species deciding what to do with its heredity. Alternatively, it may be taken as a helpful delusion, a Platonic myth, that could entertain our hopes, and may even contain a kernel of truth.

This ‘kernel of truth’ fits into the original project of the forerunners of the modern theory of civil society; and this allows us to end by going back to the beginning of this story. The Scots had an acute sense of the frailty of institutions and the limits of human agency, and thought civil society (CS1), far from being a result of evolutionary laws or a robust historical trend, was a fragile and superficial order, in which human agency might have some input, depending on institutional and cultural conditions and other circumstances.

Contrary to later interpretations of modernity articulated in a key mood of self-assertion, self-creation or the invention of a new world under human control, Prometheus style, the key mood underlying the Scots’ conception of a modern CS was one of self-restraint, suggesting an acute sense of the cognitive and moral limits of humans, and a humility with both Christian and classical, Stoic, roots. Thus, the Scots were inclined to make as realistic an assessment of human nature as possible. The practical question they faced was how reasonable people subject to conflicting feelings and desires could organize their conduct in such a way that the partially intended but mostly unintended results of their activities and interactions would contribute to a social order which, while adapted to their environment, and thereby providing a modicum of guarantees for peace and prosperity, would allow for a maximum degree of freedom for the individuals and their associations. The Scots’ response to this question was a repertoire of prudent recommendations including an appeal to heed traditions tempered by the use of rational criticism and by political moderation. Their appeal to virtue was based on a judicious appraisal of the capabilities and inclinations of different social strata, professionals, civil servants or political groupings. They had mixed expectations regarding all of these groups, including the mingling classes, which they did consider to have a share of decency and

common sense, but never to be the bearers of a grand world historical project.

Today’s civil associations may be tempted to feel, sometimes, peripheral to the ‘big game’ of the protagonists of wealth and power. Still, they can work out their elective affinity with the Scots’ main line of thought and tempered predicament. Then, they may reconsider their normative engagement in the light of the western and world experience of the last three centuries, revisit their links to markets and democratic politics, in global times, and, to be fair, include a touch of detachment about their own record. This may provide them with a sense of their potential and their limits, to accomplish a unique historical task.

Annotated further reading

- Alexander JC (2006) *The Civil Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
An extended discussion of civil society’s participation in the public space and of its institutional context, with special attention to civil (and uncivil) movements and the role of mass media.
- Aristotle (1943 [4th century BC]) *Politics*, trans. B Jowett. New York: The Modern Library.
A classical theory of the ideal *polis* (including both ‘state’ and ‘society’) and of the best existent *poleis* under particular circumstances. He combines ethics, politics and historical experience in ways deeply influential on western thought.
- Cohen J and Arato A (1992) *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
A major contribution to review the re-emergence of the discourse of civil society and to offer an interpretation of the concept based, in large part, on Habermas’s discourse ethics.
- De Tocqueville A (1956 [1835–40]) *Democracy in America*. New York: Mentor.
The classical work on the crucial role of associations in democratic life and democratic culture, which has inspired a long and distinguished tradition of research and debate.
- Ferguson A (1996 [1767]) *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
The main statement of the Scottish Enlightenment on modern civil society. The author is sensitive to the potential and the limits of civil society (broadly considered) viewed as a stage in the adaptive evolution of humankind, the result of human action but not of human design.
- Gellner E (1994) *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*. New York: Penguin Group.
A powerful reassertion of a broad view of civil society as opposed to totalitarian societies and other ‘ideocracies’.
- Hegel GWF (1963 [1821]) *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. T Knox. London: Oxford University Press.

The starting point for a more restricted view of civil society as opposed to the 'political state'.

Keane J (2003) *Global Civil Society?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

On the general trend of civil society (*qua* associations and markets) to be part and parcel of an increasingly entangled web of political, economic and social organizations worldwide.

Putnam R (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Touchstone.

On the theory of social capital as a crucial resource of associations and social trust, and its possible decline in contemporary societies, with substantial empirical research.

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résumé L'auteur analyse les connexions entre les changements sociaux et l'évolution de la théorie de la société civile (CS) (le légal classique, changements sémantiques, re-émergence et questions ouvertes pour une future recherche). Il distingue quatre niveaux de signification de CS mais il centre son attention sur quelques champs de recherche de CS qua associations (troisième secteur, capital sociale, espace publique, civilité). L'objectif est celui de proportionner points d'accès, et un cadre de référence, pour un débat élargie sur une problématique en flux.

mots-clés associations civiles ♦ capital social ♦ civilité ♦ société civile ♦ sphère publique ♦ troisième secteur

resumen El autor analiza las conexiones entre los cambios sociales y la evolución de la teoría de la sociedad civil (CS) (trasfondo clásico, cambios semánticos, re-emergencia y cuestiones abiertas para la investigación futura). Distingue cuatro niveles de significado de CS pero centra su atención en algunas áreas seleccionadas de investigación de CS qua asociaciones (tercer sector, capital social, esfera pública, civilidad). El objetivo es proporcionar puntos de acceso, y un marco de referencia, para un amplio debate sobre una problemática en evolución.

palabras clave asociaciones civiles ♦ capital social ♦ civilidad ♦ esfera pública ♦ sociedad civil ♦ tercer sector