THE POSSIBILITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

ITS CHARACTER, CHALLENGES AND TRADITIONS

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1. Civil society as a composite ideal character and its historical distortions.

As we enter an age of increasing uncertainty and our nations face the challenges posed by the rise of plural societies and an international order in a state of flux, we may be well advised to reassess the cultural and institutional traditions of civil society, and trace those traditions back to their sources. We might then find a conception of polity and society and a basic attitude that were fairly well-balanced, hopeful yet demonstrating a full awareness of our cognitive and moral limits, which, in sum, could prove useful. This is what I shall be suggesting here, together with some refinements of the theory and an emphasis on the historical contingency of an ideal character of this nature, its eventual distortions and the loose fit existing between its different elements. I shall also be suggesting that we ground our hopes and, eventually, a guarded optimism about the future of civil society, not on any basic foundation, but on our own capacity to make prudent moral proposals, to understand their implications, to anchor them in the appropriate traditions, and thus to help these proposals materialize through institutional experimentation. In other words, I shall be suggesting we trust in our own ability to choose the right tradition, to use our limited cognitive and moral resources the best we can, and to take advantage of every local circumstance. There are neither firm trends to cling to, nor guarantees of any sort, but this may be the interesting part of it.

"Civil society" refers to an attempt to theorize about (Oakeshott, 1990, 1-30) a specific historical experience: an on-going, uninterrupted tradition of a core of socioeconomic and political institutions (interconnected with some key cultural dispositions) in some North-Atlantic nations dating back at least two to three centuries. Other nations, notably in Continental Europe, have joined in that tradition more recently and in a more fractured and discontinuous way. Of course, other countries have experimented with similar institutions at one time or another and, as there seems to be some agreement that these experiments have been successful, there is today a fairly strong world-wide trend towards achieving them. The institutional core consists of the following combination of political and socioeconomic arrangements: a government which is limited and accountable, and operates under the rule of law; a market economy (implying a regime of private property); an array of free, voluntary associations (political, economic, social and cultural); and a sphere of free public debate. At

the same time, real, historical civil societies have always been specific nations which have survived and eventually prospered within a framework of alliances and enmities with other nations, civilized or not. The common goal of survival as a nation was taken for granted in normal times, while eloquently stated in times of duress. There were national interests other than sheer survival which required the appropriate domestic and foreign policies. The inner dynamics of some of their basic societal components may have led those nations to take the world as the theater for their operations: following in the wake of their expanding markets, propagating their ideas (their Christian faith, democratic ideals, or scientific knowledge) or demanding the recognition of the entire world. Military and political considerations usually preceded or accompanied those societal moves.

Civil societies, therefore, are hybrids, composite or secondary ideal characters formed from a combination of what Oakeshott considered the two primary ideal characters of (what he refers to as) the "modern European state" (Ibid. 185) : an association in the character of a "civil association" and an association in the character of an "association as enterprise", with, in my opinion, a bias in favor of the "civil association". A "civil association" is an association with no purpose of its own, exclusively oriented towards insuring the general, abstract and universalistic rules everyone would be obliged to follow while pursuing their own individual, egotistical or altruistic drives (Ibid. 108ff.). An "association as enterprise" does pursue goals of its own and requires its members to contribute, and eventually to sacrifice themselves, to such common goals (Ibid. 114ff.). When saying that civil societies are hybrids of the two albeit with a bias forwards the "civil association", I should emphasize the point that their common goals are supposed to be kept within strict limits. There is no reason for the state corresponding to those societies to be a minimal one, but its goals and the scope of its operations should be maintained fairly close to those of providing a framework and some basis for individuals' endeavors in the pursuit of their own goals (or in Kant's words: to ensure "the greatest possible freedom of human individuals by framing the laws in such a way that the freedom of each can coexist with that of all the others" :quoted in Popper 1971, I, 247).

Arrangements coinciding quite closely with that description were in operation by the mid/late XVIIIth century in Great Britain and the old North American colonies and they still

exist today, with some significant changes but no basic alteration of their institutional core. Historical experience seems to corroborate the tentative speculations of the Scottish philosophers of the XVIIIth century to the effect that the proper functioning and persistence of those institutions require and rest on a combination of several strands of moral sentiment and dispositions (Smith 1982 [1752]; Ferguson 1980 [1767]). These include sentiments which are associated with the pursuit of individual interest or happiness however these can be defined according to every individual's scale of preference: the salvation of the soul, a sense of community, the search for truth, employment in active exertions or in sensual gratifications, beauty, the possession of wealth, power or status, or whatever. Nothing, however, in the nature of these moral decisions (made by individuals according to their individual preferences) predetermines their contents insofar as they can be either "egotistical" or "altruistic" or any combination of the two depending on how interest or happiness is defined. In fact, the self-interested moral sentiments that individuals belonging to a civil society are supposed to feel are hard to disentangle from (a) other sentiments associated with the welfare of the immediate circle of their family and their soul-mates, because it would be hard to understand their personal happiness disconnected from sexual love, friendship, intellectual conversation or family happiness, and because it would be unlikely for these individuals to feel the urge for personal wealth with no consideration for family inheritance; as well as from (b) sentiments of an altruistic character addressed to a much wider social circle, that of the nation, the defense of which, along with its cultural identity, welfare, prosperity and basic institutions requires sentiments of patriotism and civic virtue, since civil societies are supposed to be civil, civilized or polished *nations*; as well as from (c) sentiments of social benevolence of a milder nature which are implicit in respect for the law and the rules of reciprocity, and in the toleration of diversity in the extended orders.

Civil societies, therefore, have been and are historical experiments of, and institutional attempts at, an accommodation between the two ideal characters of "civil associations" and "associations as enterprises", and they have reflected the tensions between them (Oakeshott 1990, 326; see also Black 1984). At the same time, they have combined moral sentiments that may be loosely associated with both characters. On the one hand, the morals of the family and

of states/societies as enterprises are reminiscent of those appropriate to closed, tribe-like communities: they arise out of intense feelings of intra-solidarity and of a fair amount of animosity or potential hostility towards strangers and foreigners. On the other, the morals of economic markets, and of the quasi-markets of voluntary associations and conversational communities, with their implicit values of mutual toleration and respect for the procedural rules that regulate specific exchanges, belong in a world of abstract, open societies (Popper 1971, I, 174). This duality of morals would match the two sets of moralities that Hayek suggests we have inherited from the past (Hayek 1988, 17, 70; 1978, 61): on the one hand, some version of a set of moral sentiments corresponding to the experience of one million or more years in which mankind operated as a loose collection of tribes which owed their survival to the cultivation of the virtues of intragroup solidarity; on the other, a different set of moral traditions that have blurred the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group, that are of a more open and universal character, and that have tended to loosen the ties between individuals and their immediate communities and to reduce the constraints of these communities over their individual members. We have to live with this composite legacy by living in two moral worlds, standing on the edge and shifting from one to another, making ad hoc compromises between both, and trying to reach a precarious equilibrium between conflicting moral demands (and contrary dispositions: Oakeshott 1990, 326; Hayek 1988, 18).

Societies fairly similar to the ideal character just described have existed in the Western world for extended periods of time, and it seems that, taken as a whole, the institutional experiment of a civil society has survived its own distortions and its own pathological developments, particularly those of the XXth century, in relatively good shape. The distortions have been deep and durable, and have affected every political and social component of civil society. Limited, accountable governments under the rule of law have shown a tendency to expand the scope of their operations, to minimize the transparency of their actions, and to put themselves above the law. In engaging in these practices, such governments have struck fairly stable alliances with economic, social and political elites. Well-meant, sensible governmental attempts at policies to reduce suffering and social misery have regularly been put to the service of building up extraordinary concentrations of political and economic power which, in turn,

has distorted the functioning of the markets and abused governments´ regulatory and administrative powers under cover of pursuing (though in fact, at the expense of) the common welfare. The state and interest groups (business, the unions, the professions) have combined to create different variants of (old or neo)corporatist arrangements intended to reduce the scope of social pluralism and social spontaneity, and to recruit individuals into quasi-obligatory organizations. Similar understandings between states, churches, political parties and large media organizations have resulted in the manipulation of public opinion and the indoctrination of the public.

These institutional distortions developed gradually throughout the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century. They were furthered by different traditions belonging to the "right" and to the "left": to the conservative as well as to the socialist traditions. They were also furthered as a result of governments (and elites) making a connection between their domestic and their foreign policies when the later realized that popular support could be mustered for a foreign policy of nationalist selfassertion and imperialist expansion. This was fully consistent with a policy of nationalization of the masses (Mosse 1975), military conscription, universal literacy and the creation of a welfare state in which the unions and the socialist parties would eventually develop a strong stake (a trend that, incidentally, Max Weber was well aware of, and supported: Mommsen 1984). In this way the public could be incorporated into the national fabric less as a critically active and discriminating citizenry than as people tamed by the mass-parties they belonged to, and trained in obedience to their manipulative and charismatic leaders.

These distortions reinforced the ideal character of "association as enterprise" as well as the tribal morality associated with it. Thus, gradually, the original bias of civil societies in favor of the "civil association" was replaced by the contrary bias in favor of "association as enterprise", this evolution achieving momentary success in the First World War and its aftermath. The totalitarian experiments in fascism and communism that followed can be seen as pushing those distortions to the limits and beyond. Under these regimes the remnants of civil society as a civil association disappear altogether, and the state/ society is construed as an

(almost) all-encompassing "association as enterprise", with the corresponding paroxysm of tribal morality.

2. Current challenges to civil societies: the development of plural societies and an international civil society.

Only now, at the very end of the XXth century, are we free from the totalitarian nightmare which has haunted our civil societies for almost one century: it grew from the very roots of those civil societies, and had to be understood and confronted ideologically, economically and on the battlefield again and again. As a result we might now expect to be witness to most people feeling wiser, relieved at having left those totalitarian horrors and delusions behind, maybe ever in a state of mild euphoria. Instead, with no time for celebration, the same malaise and the same anxious faces already seem to exist. It may be that many people have been so well trained in the practice of relentless criticism that they feel embarrassed to enjoy themselves. It may also be that, in some nations, people whose hopes are still attached to certain residual, collectivist, near-totalitarian forms of nostalgia are confused and project that confusion onto others; and that, being disproportionately present in cultural networks, churches, the media and academia, their confusion permeates the more articulate expressions of national public opinion in some cases. This could be, however, a minor, local problem in the long run, since it may be just a matter of time for these strategically located individuals to get used to a post-totalitarian age, to see the point of it, to overcome their emotional routines and to find new objects for their moral indignation and new outlets for their trained capacities.

However, there is also reason to believe that the roots of the present malaise go beyond those residual confusions and provisional misadaptations. Civil societies of the Western type are facing new challenges that suggest we are entering an age of uncertainty. In fact, uncertainty may prove to be a better name than "the end of history", which proclaims the final triumph of Western civilization, its expansion and its reforms being just a matter of time and patience: such a proclamation sounds premature, and unnecessary. Uncertainty seems to express better the legacy of the XXth century as an ironical counterpoint to this century's long

standing love affair with the paired idols of absolute certainty and absolute politics. Maybe that is why this *fin-de-siècle* seems a good time for returning to the more discreet, more genuine, naive age of the Enlightenment, at least in the spirit of some of its best characters.

In a sense, in the aftermath of what looked like being the final victory, with the fall of the Berlin wall and the demise of communist rule in the Soviet Union, we seem to be back to the quasi-familiar territory of the XIXth century, or at least prior to the First World War, and we cannot avoid having a sense of *déjà vu* when we confront, once again, the usual proclivities of governments and economic, social and cultural elites to combine in order to challenge the limited and accountable character of the state, to reduce the scope of the markets, of social and cultural pluralism and of the public sphere, to abuse their powers and to manipulate the public, and to incline towards nationalism both in policy and in political sentiment. In view of that, we may feel we have to be on the watch for any new combination of old and new forms of absolute politics and dogmatism that may come along, usually with the help of significant segments of the intelligentsia: in short, to be alert to any new avatar of totalitarianism, since we have learnt from the experience of the XXth century to expect it to take root in any ground, including that of our civil societies of today.

The fact is that this new age looks like a new period of troubles where every civilized nation in the world is feeling the heat from a variety of sources: ethnic and national conflicts, migratory movements, environmental degradation, terrorism, AIDS, nuclear proliferation, fundamentalism, increasing economic competition, crisis of the welfare state and moral confusion. In the end, most of these problems can be reduced to two interrelated phenomena. First, civil societies which used to be quasi-homogeneous sociocultural nations are becoming plural societies, and this may or may not aggravate the potential for distortions of their basic institutions. Second, we are witness to what seems to be the birth pains of an international social configuration that may or may not become an international, cosmopolitan civil society. Arriving at orderly plural civil societies and an international civil society is far from certain. Just a few of these difficulties are listed below.

Today´s increasing global economic competition seems a leap forwards in a secular trend towards a relatively unified world-wide economy. It has created a variety of countertrends, however, since it requires continuous readjustments to national economies, a repositioning of social groupings, any number of organizational changes and drastic alterations in people's expectations almost from one day to the next. The discourse of social classes, territorial units or interest groups appears today to have fallen short of providing the necessary schema either for giving a semblance of order to what is going on, or for giving direction to efforts to reproduce the sentiments and social attachments which are apparently needed to maintain the national social fabrics threatened by the changes. Trying to find a meaningful national interest that softens the impact of those changes, keeps the different segments of society together and helps them make the necessary adjustments is an exceedingly complicated task, particularly in view of the fact that every nation seems to be caught in the same dilemma: either it tries to keep strong its links to the international community, and thus seems to lose control of its fate; or else it retreats into an even more dangerous pattern of protectionism and mercantilism.

Opening the national boundaries to international flows of capital and trade, migrants and tourists, media communication and cultural influences, and military and political alliances, has profound consequences on the character of the recipient nations. Granted that in the past they were more or less homogeneous sociocultural societies, they are now moving along a road at some point of which they will become plural societies, possibly with significant ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities different from those that formed the original community. People living in such composite societies may or may not develop a sense of belonging to a community. They may do so only when and if a new cultural basis for such a sense is formed around a few common values and institutions that allow for diversity and experimentation with different individual and social life-styles, and for toleration of unceasing competition between different cultural traditions: this includes competition between historical narratives regarding the character of that plural society (or new versions of the original nation). This is a process that should reinforce the character of "civil association" in civil societies, and the moral sentiments associated with that character, even if, in the process, a sense of community develops which has a character different from the one most nations were used to: a sense of

community of individuals and/or an array of micro- or meso-communities that want to stay together for reasons not easy to articulate in full: maybe out of shared hopes (Rorty 1991, 33), and of an increasingly shared liberal disposition (Macedo 1991). For a long time, the United States have been an eloquent illustration of a plural society; the European Union may or may not become another version of it; and even the European nations which are part of that Union (such as France, the United Kingdom or Germany) are already engaged in such a process. It is worth noticing, however, that the combination of being plural societies internally and of being increasingly exposed to, and interlinked with, the external world tends to challenge whatever identity these societies may have, or at least makes that identity look problematical, thus eroding the plausibility of domestic and foreign policies constructed around the notion of a national interest.

These processes, therefore, have generated an intensely emotional, defensive response within and without the Western world. Fundamentalism and (primordial) nationalism are powerful sociocultural and political movements on the rise that deeply challenge the links between particular nations and the international community. More to the point, they challenge the very notion that such an international community can ever be a real community. According to them, individuals' meaningful, deeply felt attachments can only be forged with primordial communities such as the family or family-like associations: communities of blood, or religious or near-religious faith, which have at their command magical or quasi-magical mechanisms by which individuals are induced to identify with them and by means of which the former are promised happiness or intense feelings (associated with martyrdom, sacred revenge, a sense of empowerment or similar experiences) that an international civil society seems unable to provide for. On the other hand, these emotional urges may (or may not) be tamed, and the evolution of various Christian churches from, say, the Middle Ages to the present shows that religious organizations which have been, at some point, fundamentalist to the core and quite inimical to values such as those built into markets, political liberties and cultural toleration, can end up finding ways to live with, and even to promote, civil society. This may perhaps give some clue about what could be expected from the religious fundamentalisms of today if they were allowed time to mature. In some cases this could take a few centuries (which should give

some hope to those inclined to take an unusually long term view of current events), but in others it can take just a few decades (as the evolution of the Spanish church during approximately the last sixty years illustrates: Pérez-Díaz 1993, 108-183).

In any case, it seems that one of the clearest challenges of our time (for those attached to the institutions of civil society) consists of making the very powerful forces of nationalism compatible with the development of a variety of plural societies, and the emergence of a world-wide civil society. This is far from being an easy task since both the destructive and the constructive dimensions of nationalism have always been intimately intertwined: as Ferguson made clear a long time ago, patriotism is the result of love for one's community and hostility to aliens (Ferguson 1980, 21). The use of rational arguments can be of only limited help, and the current difficulties can easily obfuscate people's reasoning. History shows that conflicts concerning boundaries between "us" and "them" and the identification of those belonging to one side of those boundaries or the other are often insoluble by appeal to rational argument, and that it is usually impossible to agree on any definitive, morally binding and authoritative judgement concerning the definition of any collective identity, much less so of a nation: this is a matter for ad hoc compromises, considerable toleration of ambiguities, evolving moral sentiment and prudential judgement. All we can possibly do is to deflate the arguments, so to speak, and blunt the sharpest edges of nationalistic enthusiasm by means of a few institutional and cultural mechanisms.

First, we can try to promote institutions and understandings that facilitate a procedural agreement on ways for settling disputes which would be aimed at minimizing the use of physical coercion. Second, we can preach the virtues of a historical understanding of our recent and more remote past that insists on the looseness of the links between nations and states, which will demonstrate that, contrary to common opinion, nation-states are the exception not the rule in recorded history, thus suggesting various possibilities for safeguarding a national identity that may be compatible with different configurations of political power. Third, we can try to focus the attention of policy-makers and public opinion on the practical matter of establishing and guaranteeing the rights of national or ethnic minorities whatever political systems they find themselves in. Fourth, we can persuade at least those people who do not feel

the overwhelming urge to die for a cause, of the desirability of encouraging, or at the very least, tolerating institutional and cultural experimentation with dual and plural collective identities in the expectation that these experiments will become more and more common as plural societies as well as an international civil society develop. That these developments, particularly that of an international civil society, should proceed apace might, in turn, prove beneficial for the persuasiveness of the above arguments and the establishment and proper functioning of the institutional mechanisms. The fact is that, for all the present confusion, this is indeed the way things seem to be going. International politics is still dominated by states and state-dominated (and/or bureaucracy-dominated) international organizations, which act as if nations, and not individuals, were their ultimate concern (Popper 1971, I, 288), and as if they aimed at a kind of world government not in terms of a "civil association" but rather of that of world management (Oakeshott 1990, 313). However, international politics evolves within ever more dense networks of economic interdependence and communication, and is contingent on a growing (though probably still superficial) awareness that we are dealing increasingly with non-local problems (human rights, famines, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, the environment) which concern all nations and require concerted action. (Pérez-Díaz et al. 1992).

The growth of an international civil society implies the growth of its various components. Markets and social networks are crucial. But the development of such an international civil society also requires the existence of an international public authority able to establish and implement a minimal operating body of international legislation concerning critical issues such as human rights, possibly the environment, and control of weapons of mass destruction; furthermore, it requires an international public sphere where a continuous moral-political conversation can take place regarding those issues and regarding whatever rules or policies may come from such an international public authority to meet them: a conversation that would take place not only at the elite level, but also at that of an increasingly concerned, discriminating world citizenry.

Even allowing for the desirability of such an international civil society, and of the kind of soft, well-mannered, polished or civilized interaction it should bring with it, we have to reckon with the fact that the international social network is highly vulnerable, that the

international public debate is in its infancy, and that the aforementioned policy issues are extremely difficult to solve, while nothing on the record so far, proves they can be handled by the international civil society-in-the-making that we have today. Particularly when we consider a few facts from the historical record of those Western civil societies that presently form the core of this international civil society. Western nations have demonstrated their attachment to the fundamentals of a civil society, but also a remarkable ability to distort their own institutions, and to live with these distortions for a quite long time. In so doing they have exhibited predatory and selfdestructive capacities which should not be overlooked. Particularly in view of the fact that many states/ societies of today, including civil societies (both those which have a long liberal tradition behind them and those which do not), have acquired a frightening technical capacity to inflict immense harm on themselves, and possibly to destroy, or almost destroy, life on the planet. This is an irreversible development: a fact that our societies are doomed to live with for the rest of time and, so far, it is doubtful that we have acquired either the wisdom or the institutions to do so, and even more doubtful that, if having acquired them, they would be maintained.

Why then should we keep coming back to this conception of civil society? As a cue for understanding our disorderly and dangerous times? As an instrument to anchor any hope we may have (or as a magical device to make up for the hope we have lost) in the survival of a civilized way of life? As the answer to questions about our identity, troubled as we are with recent memories of the totalitarian period, and the current transformations of the societies we are part of? As a way of turning the clock back on the mixed heritage of the last two centuries, and retracing our steps to that hard, hopeful mid XVIIIth century in order to draw from it some inspiration to face our current challenges and assist an improbable international civil society in its birth-pangs? Whatever the reasons, if we are to return to that conception we will have to refine and develop it.

3. Limited fit, historical indeterminism, traditions.

The classical liberal theorists of the XVIIIth century developed an analytically broad and historically specific definition of civil society which encompassed some peculiar societal arrangements and an apparatus of government close to present day practice in a given set of nations at the time. As they distilled an ongoing, uninterrupted experience with limited governments, political liberties, free markets and voluntary associations in the North-Atlantic countries for a relatively long period of time, the theorists of this tradition were inclined to take the view that these elements reinforced each other and that there was a fairly good fit, or degree of congruence, between the political and the societal components of the system: sufficiently good to keep the system moving within a variety of states without breaking down, even though tensions, difficulties, and an unending sequence of challenges to, and adjustments and restructuring of the system were to be expected. Thus, the Scottish philosophers were well aware of the tensions existing between the market and the political system (and this is particularly obvious in Ferguson: Ferguson 1980; see also Pocock 1975, 499ff.; Kettler 1965; Forbes 1966; Keane 1988, 39-45). Nevertheless, they argued that there could be no markets without the rule of law, the enforcement of contracts and private property guaranteed by the public authority; and that, in turn, the government could not be expected to be limited unless free markets and private property (as well as free associations) were able to circumscribe the government's capacity to intervene in the reserved domain of its citizens. Therefore, the so-called private sphere seemed to be a precondition for the citizen to perform his/her public role. From this viewpoint there might, of course, be tradeoffs between the energy or resources the citizen would put into his public and private capacities; but there was no fundamental, insoluble contradiction between the two. The modern citizen was to be both homo oeconomicus and homo politicus, and, what is more, he was to be the one only because he was the other. This left many problems unanswered such as that of the political capacity of a dispossessed class; yet they were not problems of a theoretical aporia, but practical ones to be solved through practical reforms (the generalization of ownership, the openness of the markets, the diffusion of intangible property like skills and information by means of education and others).

This said, however, from the understanding of civil society as a secondary or composite ideal character it does not follow that real-life societies could be more than approximations, and, as already indicated (see supra), eventually distortions of that character. These distortions, far from being exceptional, have been periodic lapses, discontinuous yet relatively frequent occurrences in the history of the civil societies which have actually existed. By implication this means that the fit between the different elements of the system must be considered a limited one. The Scottish theorists knew very well that the commercial states of their time were problematical approximations to a civilized society, since even the governments of their time which were limited and operated, very broadly speaking, under the rule of law, were in the hands of oligarchical groups and courts inclined to make use of patronage and corruption as ways of dealing with problems of policy and the distribution of power, and because the defense of the country was entrusted to mercenary armies: which was possibly a prudent arrangement in view of the circumstances of the time, but hardly an invitation to civic virtue (Pocock 1985). They also knew that a specialization of function and an emphasis on material prosperity could weaken the public´s interest and ability to participate in political life. They saw, moreover, that private economic interests, possibly in conjunction with the public authorities, could easily conspire to defraud or abuse the public; yet there would still be markets, and respect for private property. The multitude could be inclined to follow the lead of popular demagogues (of any persuasion) and support tyranny, and in this way the public sphere could easily be corrupted; yet there would still be room for free speech. All the components of civil society could be maintained, maybe in a mitigated but still recognizable way; and yet they would be parts in a different, distorted configuration.

One of the implications of a theory of the limited fit between the different components of civil society is that the maintenance of the system is far from guaranteed, and this applies even more so to the genesis of the system in the first place. Civil society is a contingent, indeterminate historical formation, and the search for some explanation of the historical sequence leading to it is not to be equated with a search for so-called historical laws. In fact, the Scottish philosophers' use of conjectural history was done more as an exercise of the imagination and as an intellectual game, than with the pomposity and in the *esprit de serieux*

of a philosophy of history. The Scottish theorists viewed historical sequences as the result of an interplay of human actions and institutional inertias, and of the unintended consequences of both (Ferguson 1980, 122; Hayek 1978, 5). The implication of these views is that those historical processes may be (partly) corrected, channeled and understood by people. People's focus as it is applied to these experiences can be sharp or blurred, and they may or may not learn from them, since for people to learn from their mistakes they first have to recognize them, and there are plenty of ways for them to avoid doing so. As we know, men are driven by contrary passions, have a limited intelligence, and are not too persevering, if for no other reason than that they are going to die: a fact that makes their ability to carry on the same tasks one generation after another quite problematic.

In these circumstances, trying to find some rational argument at work in the succession of ages, civilizations and periods of history makes sense only if by "a rational argument at work" we mean a metaphor for a convenient game men play when trying to understand their own identity, their time and the tasks they choose to carry out in that time. We can perhaps understand people's activities and the situation they respond to when we can focus on them at relatively close range: activities and situations corresponding to our time or going back for two or three generations within a narrow cultural range. The rest we have to try to reconstruct applying professional assertiveness (even bravado) to inner uncertainties that (we know) can be handled but will never be conclusively decided. There are two reasons for this. First, most of the local knowledge needed for a satisfactory account of the phenomena to be explained beyond that range will have been irrevocably lost. Second, we engage in this effort at a sensible reconstruction of the (recent or relatively remote) past by anchoring ourselves in particular points in time and making distinct choices regarding the tradition we decide to follow.

In this respect, we should understand the Scottish philosophers as if their historical understanding was connected with the fact that they had made a particular existential and intellectual choice of tradition. In their time, Scotland was able to be either a significant or peripheral part of British civil society, or to go her own way. Most of the philosophers chose (for themselves and for their own country) to play a central part in the emerging British

domination of the world (Kettler 1965, 16ff.; MacIntyre 1988, 219ff.; Pocock 1985, 130). This local choice was connected with, and influenced by, a wider understanding of their times. Before their eyes stood the results of a broad historical experiment which had taken place over the previous two centuries: the contrast between two different path developments. On the one hand, the path followed by the kind of historical configuration of which the Netherlands and Great Britain could be considered examples leading to limited government checked by political representation, a substantial degree of religious toleration, and an ever expanding market economy. On the other hand, the historical path of a polity and society marked by absolutism, religious uniformity, and an economy that was closely regulated, supervised and interfered with by the discretionary acts of the state and by traditional practices: of which Spain provided a clear example. (Possibly France could be seen as an intermediate case between the two opposing sociopolitical types.)

By the middle of the XVIIIth century the experiment had run full course, and the results were plain for all to see. Spain, the most important nation of the XVIth century, had become a second-rate world power, her cultural creativity exhausted, and her economy stagnant: a peripheral player on the world-historical scene, and the antithesis of the enlightened commercial state (Pagden 1990, 9). In turn, England was successfully challenging France both in continental Europe and overseas: she showed a superior capacity for economic growth, scientific and philosophical innovation, increasing social complexity and a lively public sphere, setting standards that France could only hope to compete with by learning from, and imitating to a large degree, the Anglosaxon and Dutch experience.

For the generation of Scottish philosophers these results could be read as proof of the superiority of the "British" model over the "Spanish" one. However, it could not be proven to be the result of any concerted action engaged in by successive generations of Britons with anything resembling a common purpose or a historical project in mind. Not even at that time, could the persistence of the British style of society be shown to be due to such concerted, deliberate action. It was rather the result of a happy combination of institutions which had proven successful in the long run, and certain cultural dispositions which had spread throughout strategically located segments of the public, of which the following two were the

most important: that of reasoning according to logic, and that of respect for facts and for proper moral sentiments. These sentiments had played a crucial role in the functioning of the civil societies of premodern times, in the Greek cities and in Rome, and were expected to play a similar role in those of the modern period: moral sentiments both of selflove and benevolence (of friendship as well as civic engagement). Though some communitarian writers draw a sharp contrast between a liberal-individualistic and a communitarian tradition (Macedo 1991, 15ff.), the truth is that most of the Scottish philosophers can be seen as belonging to both of them, as they preached the virtues of energetic, self-assertive individuals acting out their own convictions and looking after their own interests, while at the same time they were well aware of those individuals' embeddedness in their communities, and praised their civic commitments. The Scots were in search of a full-fledged community of free individuals in which a moral and emotional equilibrium would be reached through a conciliation of private and public pursuits.

Therefore, for these theorists, success in keeping the historical experiment going and civil society in good shape could not be trusted to any automatism or historical determinism: it depended on many contingencies and, among other factors, on the maintenance of moral traditions. Thus, their recourse to speculation about the different stages of mankind and their essays in conjectural history were ingenious meta-narratives which may or may not have prepared the ground for a better (more scientific, so to speak) account of past events, but whose main point was to illustrate their search for the institutional and cultural/ moral conditions that enhanced the probability of a civil society. In this respect the Scots exhibited a guarded, qualified optimism regarding the real, though limited, capacity of the men of their time to reason and to stick to a balanced moral tradition of selflove and social benevolence.

This sense of limits was missing in Hegel, and in most of the other authors belonging to the statist/ revolutionary tradition of the theories on civil society. In this tradition those limits are supposedly transcended by collective subjects which combine extraordinary theoretical and practical capacities: of reasoning, articulation and will-power. These subjects may be the bearers of tasks imposed upon them by some impersonal historical process following some inner logic. Such speculations can apparently be rendered plausible by some particular historical experiences. The cult of the state in France corresponded to the long-standing

tradition of a fairly powerful state apparatus, over several centuries and under various guises: monarchical, revolutionary, Bonapartist and republican. Also, Hegel's theories were the distillation of human practice embedded in a society of a kind quite different from the one the Scottish philosophers were part of. Hegel's main frame of reference was the state-dominated Prussian society of the first quarter of the XIXth century (recovering from the shock of its defeat to Napoleon); and the circles closest to his mind (and heart) were those of the academic intelligentsia and civil servants. Hegel's theory showed a strong elective affinity with the dispositions of those circles as they had been shaped by their own peculiar history of one and a half centuries (encompassing three or four generations), in which a few energetic princes had used a relatively cohesive bureaucratic-military machine and an opportunistic *Realpolitik* to seize a large territory at the expense of their immediate neighbors, to regiment and extract as many resources as possible from their subjects in order to support that machine, and in this way to become a respected continental European power. Hence their conviction that a well ordered, civilized society was state-centered and consisted of a teleocratic order under strong political and bureaucratic leadership (Carsten 1954; Rosenberg 1966). Hegel chose to embrace the Prussian historical and cultural tradition, and to make his own contribution to it.

This is why, though it may be argued that Hegel somehow attempted to combine what we know of as liberal individualism and civic republicanism, in the end the attempt was thwarted by his fundamental choice, and what emerged was the quite different conception of the state as a moral actor on the world-historical scenario (Pérez-Díaz 1993, 66ff.). Hegel tried to offer a reconciliation of "subjective freedom" and "objective freedom", of individual liberties and socioeconomic and political institutions, the institutions being understood as providing the basis for such subjective freedom. However, it is quite significant that Hegel referred to objective freedom by the name of "the state", and not of "civil society" any more. (Hegel 1967). Hegel's civil society (*sensu lato*) was still a combination of markets and so called corporations, together with a public authority responsible for the tasks of "policing" and "justice". But it is clear that, in Hegel's mind, such a construction belonged to the past, and was to be superseded, or had already been so, by a more modern and more rational sociopolitical configuration: one which retained some segments of the previous one (markets and corporations) to be referred under

the same name of "civil society" (*sensu stricto*), but above all one in which the public authority had become a much more complex and developed apparatus (the "political state") with the bureaucracy playing the key role in that apparatus. (Hegel 1967, para. 163, 267, 273, 276. See Pérez-Díaz 1978, 6-24; and 1993, 70-73).

The change of meaning of the term "civil society" from Ferguson to Hegel came about from an altogether different understanding of historical explanation. Instead of engaging in conjectural history, Hegel pretended to develop a so-called philosophy of history. According to this, historical development was synonymous with the process of self-understanding of some supra-historical, absolute subject whose very identity was constructed through and *pari passu* with that process. In modern times, the key for the advance of mankind towards increasing "freedom" and participation in that absolute subject lay in the activities of collective subjects and/or institutions of social coordination organized around a central agency: they would be the bearers of some universal principle destined to be fulfilled, as they had access to the true knowledge needed for such fulfillment.

The modern state was just such a collective subject and coordinating agency, with the bureaucratic group at its center. Inferior forms of decentralized social coordination such as markets were allowed (though partly tamed by the existence of corporations), but only if both markets and corporations were under bureaucratic supervision (Hegel 1967, para. 252, addition to para. 255, and para. 288). Hegel moved well beyond the Scottish philosophers' guarded optimism. He attributed to such collective subject and central coordinating agencies the most extraordinary cognitive and moral capacities. The state was "God on earth", and the bureaucrats were a "universal class" devoted to the public good, fully competent to envision and able to implement such public good; the obvious implication being that civil society lacked precisely these capacities, since their members only had access to tentative, local and disperse knowledge which could never be fully articulated, and since they were driven fundamentally by private concerns.

So with Hegel we were tracing our steps back to the point the Scots thought they had left behind. They had discovered, or so they thought, that a new society was emerging in a variety

of places, in which kings, courtiers, civil servants and political factions would play a useful but rather limited role, because most of such a society's potential for cultural and material growth, and for social order, would lie in the initiative and the spontaneous self-coordination of the individuals that made it up: individuals able to contribute to the growth of knowledge and moved by moral sentiments of selflove and benevolence that balanced and reinforced each other. Those views were dismissed by Hegel and the statist/ revolutionary tradition that followed (Pérez-Díaz 1993, 69-75). In this tradition the macro-historical subject received several names: the working classes, the revolutionary party, the socialist state, social movements (in the left-wing tradition); or nations with a world-historical destiny or providential mission to fulfill (in the right-wing tradition). These could not be more different and yet they were all collective subjects and central coordinating agencies which demanded absolute loyalty, and which periodically tested their followers' resolve in wars, in revolutions and counter-revolutions, and eventually in acts of terror and other death-games. This tradition allowed for both mild and extreme forms. Totalitarianism (both left and right) has been just one of the most recent avatars of that tradition in its most extreme form, indeed pushed to paroxysm: where society was required to put all its trust in those central coordinating agencies, and where individuals became either instruments to be used, or obstacles to be removed, by them.

4. Civil society as a relatively unified field, and the search for the institutional and cultural basis of precarious hopes.

I have used a broad concept of civil society as an ideal character that covers political components (limited government) as well as social components (markets, associations, public sphere), but other concepts are possible. A narrower, stricter sense of the concept would refer only to the social components, in which case we would be interested in emphasizing the autonomy of society, and its differences from the state and the political class for the purpose of explaining some specific developments (Pérez-Díaz 1993, 55ff). Some authors reduce the contents of the concept ever more and refer only to some particular social component or some

combination of two of them. For some, it is the equivalent of a "bourgeois society", the core of which is a market economy, in which market-like relations prevail among agents moved by self-interest. For others, it refers to a segment of society populated by voluntary associations (intermediary bodies, social movements, interest groups, political parties, ideological groupings) which pursue both their own particular interests (including the assertion of their identities) and their own version of the general interest, and which are, therefore, engaged in permanent debate. In this respect civil society becomes nearly synonymous with a public sphere (Habermas 1989 and 1992; Cohen, Arato 1992 and 1993).

However, there are good reasons for holding to the broad, original conception to which I have referred, at least for some general purposes, particularly in view of the new challenges of building up civil societies in the context of plural societies and an emerging international community. By doing so we facilitate the task of tracing our present position back to the sources of the classical liberal tradition, while emphasizing three points: the critical importance of the connections, and mutual dependence, between the different components of civil society, and particularly between the social and political ones, as opposed to stressing the boundaries between them; the centrality of the agents in each and every one of these components as they perform their (interconnected) roles as citizens, producers/ consumers/ taxpayers (or in another economic capacity), members of associations and participants in the public debate; and the character of these components not as reified systems but as sets of activities carried out by, and interactions among, largely autonomous agents the end-result of which is open and indeterminate. Also, by doing so we may be able to leave behind, or at least place within the limits of reason, some "dangerous" nostalgias: nostalgia for a basic foundation for, or some faith in groups or institutions which would be considered the bearer of, a sequence of reforms equal to a historical project of human emancipation, the so-called project of the Enlightenment, as well as nostalgia for building up a central, coordinating agency able to insure the successful realization of that sequence of enlightened reforms, or, in default of this, nostalgia for a final moral/ political consensus among the participants in a conversation regarding the nature of those reforms. This may lead us to argue with those who, like Habermas and others, tend to reduce the concept of civil society to the public sphere, who make the complementary move

of constructing the state and the economy as an integrated field or system which would stand opposed to civil society, and who suggest a reified, machine-like character of the state and the economy (and by so doing, underlining, and eventually overstressing, the "thickness" of political and economic institutions at the expense of human agents' capacity to play around with, alter and subvert those institutions).

Those nostalgias, and the theories associated with them, appear plausible due to the fact that they are part of a remarkable tradition of the last century and a half: that of the radical, critical intelligentsia. This tradition is rooted, at least in the West, in particular experiences which have developed in close (though ambivalent) connection with those of broad circles of civil servants, politicians and party (and union) officials, enlightened businessmen and journalists. A large part of that intelligentsia has allowed itself to become dependent not so much on a market of readers (that might have ensured them a modicum of independence provided individual consumers bought their products) as on a new avatar of the system of patronage of kings, popes, merchants and other patrons of the past: the one that has been established by the apparatus of the welfare state, by parties (socialdemocratic, communist, conservative, christian-democratic or others), unions and associated newspapers, foundations and similar organizations that might reward them with influence, power, money and reputation (media coverage, prizes, advisory positions, research contracts, salaries, etc.). Another alternative for the critical intelligentsia has been to find a niche in the academic communities, thus becoming (at least in continental Europe) civil servants of a rather peculiar kind, and dependent on the state's largesse for a living. The point is that these particular institutional practices have placed the Western intelligentsia in an apparently benign and protected environment. This has reinforced its disposition to keep alive and develop arguments in the statist/ revolutionary tradition mentioned above (see *supra*) not just as a matter of theoretical argument for debate, but as a life-form to be experienced and understood, the core of which is supposed to be positively evaluated and defended, even if its peripheral parts can be continuously improved upon, and its so-called pathological deviations condemned. The tradition of a fundamental ideological rejection of the market economy has been maintained at minimal cost and risk, exercised so to speak from a safe haven, and requiring only a tangential

familiarity with the subject while there has been ample room for exploring ways to anchor that fundamental dissent in different variants of the Marxist tradition.

In turn, the Marxist intellectual tradition has gone through several metamorphoses which have been connected with the avatars of the practices and institutions of the various branches of Marxist parties, unions, newspapers, cultural circles, social movements and, last but not least, Marxist governments, either of a communist or a socialdemocratic variety. But the experience of trying to build bridges between the intelligentsia´s protected life in the benign environment it found in the West, and the practice of the Marxist parties actually in existence once they got control of the state (both in the East and in the West) has been very disconcerting. It is important to realize that living in the West, in the context of liberal-democratic polities, a capitalist economy and plural societies, the various Marxist parties, unions and related associations have developed adaptive mechanisms, which have, in turn, facilitated an ambivalent disposition on the part of Marxist intellectuals (and by implication of the Marxist theoretical tradition they were responsible for) towards Western societies: a sort of reluctant appreciation of their liberal institutions and values. The key to this appreciation lies in the fact that these intellectuals (artists and the like) could conduct their personal lives and follow their intellectual calling relatively free from coercion in these societies, while at the same time they could not avoid becoming gradually aware of the fact that, on the contrary, they would not have been able to do so (and would barely have been able to survive) in the actual socialist societies of the East.

Although Marxist intellectuals of the West have been reluctant to face up to that "recalcitrant experience" (White 1981; Pérez Díaz 1984, 110-119), and have therefore tried to transcend the circumstance of being able to live in the capitalist societies they could not justify and being unable to live in the socialist societies they felt morally close to, this circumstance, this "small fact of life", has finally eroded the persuasive force and the substance of their arguments. They have tried to present their arguments as if they were in the process of deepening and radicalizing their basic proposals when in fact they have gradually been abandoning their original position, *pari passu* with the ever sharper and clearer contrast between the plausibility of Western societies (as proved by the fact that they could live with

them) and the loss of plausibility of the socialist societies (as proved by the fact that they could not live in them). Another disturbing element of the equation is that, in reaching this conclusion, the critical intelligentsia could only give limited credit to the Western socialist/ socialdemocratic (originally Marxist) organizations. Since the intelligentsia believed that the capitalist core of the West was inimical to the project of human progress with which it identified itself, it could only contemplate the contribution of those organizations in supporting or even saving capitalism with the utmost reserve. Conversely, neither did the part that socialdemocratic organizations had played in nurturing the gentler side of those societies, the welfare system and a liberal polity, provide grounds for unequivocal, enthusiastic support. Because, either the welfare state and the liberal polity were evaluated negatively, as part of a grand strategy legitimating a system which was fundamentally defined as exploitative and manipulative: as a device to consolidate the alliance of state and capital by coopting new elements to be part of it -- which was nothing to be grateful for. Or they were evaluated positively, but it was then doubtful that thanks for their existence should be given principally to the Marxist tradition: responsibility for the welfare system rested on conservative and liberal governments at least as much (if not more) than on socialdemocratic ones; and the socialist parties and unions' responsibility for a liberal polity could be considered at best derivative and second to that of the liberal tradition.

Therefore, living in a capitalist polity has become an increasingly troubling, disquieting experience for the critical intelligentsia: it has had serious problems anchoring its dissent on the Marxist tradition (East or West) while lacking the disposition to accept the basic tenets of civil society (in the broad sense in which we use the term). Hence, its need to find a language for articulating this complex world of ambiguities and ambivalences; to locate this experience in a niche near to, but not within, the soft Marxist tradition of the socialdemocratic parties of the West; to make a point of understanding but not supporting the communist experiences of the East; and to live off the wealth and opportunities of capitalism without enjoying the experience (like virtuous, joyless souls keen on using the "system" for its reproductive utility not for the immediate gratification it may procure). This is where Habermas' discourse placing the "economic-political system" in opposition to the "life-world" comes in, together with a

defensive, minimalist strategy (of brakes and shackles: Offe 1992, 69; see also Habermas 1992, 442) that renounces control of the "system" provided that the space of the "life world" is protected. In this long march of the Western Marxist intellectuals back to a "bourgeois" society, in this strategic retreat into honorable defeat, the case of Habermas is emblematic in that it shows the limits but also the residual "rational kernel" of the Marxist tradition, as he points to challenges and questions that will not easily go away.

Without going into every aspect of Habermas' exceedingly complex (and changing) discourse, just a few notes on some of Habermas' relatively recent writings may help in furthering our discussion (Habermas 1984, 1991, 1992). His thinking seems to evolve around a basic tension between an economic and political system, and the "life world" (of which civil society in a very narrow sense would be a part). He thinks of "the system" in terms of the state apparatus and the economy as systemically integrated action fields, having a bureaucratic and capitalist life of their own, and he further assumes that they can no longer be transformed (democratically) from within (Habermas 1992, 444). Though Habermas explicitly states that the evolution of his thinking has pushed him beyond the "paradigm of subjectivity", we may infer, from both the contents of his statements and the rhetorical and practical context these statements are part of, that his assessment of the "system" is not that different from the semiconspiratorial understanding of organized or monopoly capitalism that formed the background of his early work. This "system" sounds like the institutional core (with a life of its own in the best tradition of the philosophy of the praxis and the theories of alienation or reification) of what is known in common parlance as "the establishment", or some modern version of a combination of Court and Country, which would be the bearer of (and impelled by) objective, impersonal interests, and whose influence would be overwhelming.

In turn, civil society in the Habermasian sense corresponds to the institutions of sociability and discourse of the "life world", and reappears in Habermas' writings as a sort of new impersonation of the public sphere that he analyzed at the beginning of his career. (Habermas 1989; 1992, 452ff.; Cohen, Arato 1992, 132). This version of civil society refers to voluntary associations outside the realm of the state and the economy: churches, cultural associations, academia, independent media, sport and leisure clubs, debating societies, groups of concerned

citizens and grass-roots petitioning drives right through to (in Habermas' words) occupational associations (that is, business and professional organizations), political parties, labor unions and *alternative institutions* (Habermas' italics: Habermas 1992, 453-4). Habermas places unions and even parties (with some reluctance: Ibid. 454) and, above all, social movements in the "life-world", hoping that they will be the bulwarks against its colonization by the "system". Given that the "system" cannot be transformed, the moral-political goal (of Habermas and the tradition he belongs to) shifts from transformation to containment. Having came to the conclusion that the Eastern socialist societies were beyond repair, having lost faith in a socialdemocratic strategy for the West, and having sensed the limits of what the social movements could achieve, Habermas' goal now is "to erect a democratic dam against the colonializing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the life-world" (Ibid. 444). It may very well be, however, that Habermas is mistaken on both counts: neither the "system" is what he believes it to be, its "logic" being more defective and its power less than he thinks; nor are the bearers of the "life world" to be trusted in the way that he does to provide a firm basis for such a minimalist defense against the "system".

Habermas' "system" refers to an integrated set of political and economic activities. In other words, he postulates a stable combination of economic and political institutions and organizations. It may be said, in passing, that it is highly unlikely that such a combination would be stable, and that Habermas overstates his case for the probability of a concerted strategy and/ or institutional fit between two systems of activities which, first, can easily be shown to "follow different logics", and, second, neither of which follows such logic that closely, though they may certainly be affected by different institutional inertias. Habermas seems to imply that both the economic and the political systems (or subsystems) are "reified" structures, apparently meaning that they function according to machine-like logic out of human control, much in the way Marx' capital and Weber's bureaucratic machinery are supposed to do. This means taking both Marx and Weber much too seriously. From all we know, the economic system is an extremely complex and open one, contingent on millions (or billions for that matter) of unpredictable, ever changing decisions made by large numbers of autonomous units. We could attribute a moderate degree of rationality to the functioning of the

system in that we would be able to forecast tentatively the short term evolution of some of its pattern variables (but not the future state of the system with any degree of precision) only if the other variables could be held stable for a period of time (a very unlikely eventuality); and in that we could possibly explain some actual developments after the fact only if we were able to reconstruct all the relevant local knowledge (which is hardly possible).

The open, indeterminate character of the market is rooted in the open, indeterminate character of the decisions made by its basic units: producers and consumers. Some, or many, of these units can be hierarchical organizations. But one of the problems in Habermas' oversystemic view of politics and the economy consists of his subscribing all too easily to Weber's understanding of modern bureaucracies as impersonal, machine-like systems. As an ideal type this theory has its uses. It is not useful, however, if it implies a characterization of real modern bureaucracies, because most of them are not, and do not work in that way. The modern organization as a well-oiled machine working in accordance to a carefully thought-out plan for a sustained period of time may be the desideratum (or utopia) of an executive chief of a corporation, a government agency or an organizational designer; but it does not correspond to the bulk of actual, everyday experience in most real-life organizations. Organizational decisions are a very complicated, messy business. They are based on so-called scientific predictions and technical reports, which are commissioned, selected, read, accepted in their entirety, in part or disregarded in frequently baroque decision-making processes, which are intersected by power conflicts between organizational cliques and in-fighting between changing coalitions, and where memories, personalities and all sorts of exogenous factors play an important part. Then, once the decisions have been made, comes the very risky and open-ended sequence of their implementation. In fact, most decisions are rarely implemented, and have merely a symbolic value. Once made and if implemented, they quite often have to coexist alongside institutional routines (parading as rational procedures) with which they may or may not fit in. Of course, there are both internal and external constraints that provide organizations with some continuity, giving them the appearance of strategic units whose trajectory would respond to goals or objectives. And it may be that organizations go through those strategic moments periodically; but they do not last for long and new institutional inertias soon take

over. This is why restructuring (reengineering, redesigning, etc.) is an endemic, everyday feature of our so-called modern, rational, predictable organizations (*pace* Weber). These considerations apply to capitalist firms and even more so to parties and to state bureaucracies. Far from being machine-like, state bureaucracies are unpredictable animals, though they do of course have some mechanical, routine-like dimensions too.

The point of these remarks is that economic and political systems persist and change as the result of a myriad of agents' decisions which are embedded in social forms and cultural frameworks. The "system" does not determine the preferences of producers and consumers, politicians, bureaucrats or citizens. Choices are made by them all, and these choices are undetermined by economic and political conditions. They are contingent, among other factors, on normative considerations (implicit or explicit). If "life-world" is supposed to mean that part of human experience in which social forms and cultural dispositions combine to give a breathing space to moral communities of some kind, then we must recognize that "life-world" spaces may be discovered everywhere, including at the very heart of the political and economic system. And this is so, because the very structure of such a system is contingent on choices made by those producers, consumers, politicians, bureaucrats and citizens, and because those choices are connected to, and rooted in, moral traditions.

We can move on from an analytical to a normative theory of "life worlds" and decide to give a special value to moral communities of a particular kind: for instance, those organized around a morality of "discourse ethics" (Habermas 1991), composed of free individuals who engage in a reasonable and honest conversation, and who respect and care for each other (and hopefully make some decent decisions too). But then we have to recognize that the kind of institutions and associations of the historical, or existing "life worlds" that Habermas considers, may not contribute to creating that particular kind of moral community. In fact, they may also have within them oligarchical components, routines and "reified" structures, violence (moral or otherwise) and deception in doses strong enough to cast more than a reasonable doubt on the promise they hold for human improvement. The stereotyped language, or *langage de bois* of revolutionary rhetoric of a party, a union, or a social movement may be similar in nature to that of the language of the government decrees that appear in the state's official publications,

or the list of commodity prices on the stock market that we read in the financial pages of a newspaper: and this is so because it reflects similar power games, ritual performances and institutional inertias. Social movements, for one, are just organizations of a fuzzy nature in which there is a fairly large diffusion of power and relatively open boundaries. But they may have a hard core of well coordinated militants who lead the movement, or who take control of it at critical moments, make crucial choices, establish precedents that decide the future course of events, create exemplars and myths and narratives that dominate the discourse of the place, and who therefore shape memories and language, and marginalise anyone they dislike, making them feel that they do not belong. The apparent looseness of the organization of a social movement makes for a sense of frailty or vulnerability vis à vis the outside world, and this may generate, in turn, a search for compensatory mechanisms, one of them being the intensity of the militants' belief in the legitimacy of their moral authority, and another the emotional vehemence of their discourse. Such vehemence may be a convenient device in the task of building up stores of potential aggressiveness, that in due time can be directed against internal dissenters and external adversaries under cover of moral indignation.

The truth of the matter is that there are no ultimate foundations anywhere from which to build those moral communities, while at the same time work on them can start any or everywhere in the different spaces of civil society (in the broad sense in which I have used the term: in the polity, economy, social life or the public sphere) with varying chances of success. In this respect, looking for the right institutional and cultural mechanisms needed to help those moral communities develop is an endless affair in which we may be well advised to engage, in the spirit of Diogene's search for the right man, with a lamp and looking all around. On the other hand, our search is given some direction by the accumulated experience of civil societes over several centuries and in a number of nations. That should give us confidence in a basic institutional core, even if we know these institutions need nurturing and developing, and can be easily distorted. Hence, we need ever-renewed commitments to those institutions to avoid their distortion. The historical indeterminism of the past, the limited fit of the present, the *fourmillement* of agents' decisions that underlie the operations of organizations and institutions, all give an open precarious character to the state of the system of our civil societies at any

given time. This is not to be taken as a minus, but as part of the normal, healthy uncertainties of human life.

If we observe world-history and life in some of the relatively free, and civilized fragments of today's Western societies we see precarious groupings of people who spend the few decades of their lives, doing what they consider to be decent and sensible things often enough to produce a modicum of social trust in their social encounters; they evolve in a world that they are barely able to understand, they cling to some crucial institutions, they come to reject some dangerous delusions, and they communicate with others, sometimes in the spirit of conversation, sometimes preaching, but on the whole with sufficient respect and curiosity to keep the conversation going. All these people revere a few sacred texts, and take courage from the memories they rearrange periodically in the hope they will leave some traces to the people they expect to follow them. Thus, they develop loyalties to each other and to the people who came before them and will come after them, and in so doing they cling to several traditions: a variety of particular traditions (national and local, religious and of political sentiment, and many others) that support them in their search for their own identities, and a liberal tradition that keeps them loosely connected to each other while allowing for all those different identities to coexist, compete with each other, and thrive. This is something that people belonging in the liberal tradition, by birth, by adoption, or by hard won acquisition, do from within an institutional and cultural context at least partially permeated by liberal principles and values. We may as well call such an institutional and cultural context, as did some of the founders of our liberal tradition, the Scottish philosophers, a civil society. If this is the case, then civil society may be at the same time the ground for our choice of tradition, and one of the names for it.

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