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CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Alexis de Tocqueville, on his visit to the United States in 1831, was struck by this country's rich and variegated stratum of civil associations—a stratum that Europeans might fail to appreciate, he noted, "because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind." Cooperative associations seemed to define the very essence of American life. "Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England," observed Tocqueville, "in the United States you will be sure to find an association."

Social historians in our own day have explored the conditions under which civil associations flourished in the early years of the republic. Theda Skocpol, looking back to the period of Tocqueville's journey, notes that religious as well as political movements helped spur the growth of associational activity. So did the creation of public institutions and government services—Skocpol's favorite example is the U.S. Post Office. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, new civil associations were formed by people engaged in "pressing national debates about the morality of social life—about slavery, and then, after the Civil War, about the coming of industrialization and what that meant for citizens in local communities."

It is generally agreed that a nation benefits from having an extensive and active *civil society*. Benjamin Barber captures the present-day scope of this concept when he writes of all "those domains Americans

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly newsletter. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Institute or its sponsors.

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*Volunteer reading coach and student at John Hope Elementary School
Photograph by Simon Kornblit/Hands On Atlanta*

occupy when they are engaged neither in government (voting, serving on juries, paying taxes) nor in commerce (working, producing shopping, consuming)." Thus understood, civil society extends from churches to soccer leagues to reading circles to social movements. It encompasses highly organized national federations as well as informal neighborhood crime watches; it includes associations as large as the AARP and as small as the family. Its activities produce an amazing array of goods—from community safety to companionship to medical care to spiritual guidance. And in producing these goods, it generates such valuable byproducts as social trust, political competence, and civic spirit.

This last point is central to a number of recent studies of civil society. Robert Putnam's famous essay "Bowling Alone" argues that "the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions ... are powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement." Political activity, social and economic cooperation, and neighborhood comity are all promoted, on this view, by the interactions of individuals in their clubs, leagues, organizations, and families.

But contemporary accounts of civil society's importance are marked by anxiety as much as celebration. "Bowling Alone," as its title suggests, portrays a significant decline in our associational habits. Citing surveys that track levels of political participation, group membership, and even informal socializing over the past quarter century, Putnam argues that "Americans who came of age during the Depression and World War II have been far more deeply engaged in the lives of their communities than the generations that have followed them." His diagnosis of civic decline has become a subject of vigorous debate, not all of which is accessible or comprehensible to non-sociologists. But if Putnam's diagnosis is sound, we must be concerned about depleting our stock of "social capital," defined

as the "norms, networks, and social trust" essential to a flourishing democracy.

Discussion of civil society is not limited to empirical debates over trends and countertrends in associational life. It is also about the optimal relation between civil society and the state, or between civil society and the marketplace. It is about the value of localism as opposed to the claims of national identity. It is about the best ways of cultivating certain democratic skills and civic virtues, and about the lost authority of institutions and communities that formerly established and enforced social norms.

Last year, in connection with the deliberations of the National Commission on Civic Renewal, the Institute assembled a scholars' working group to address these and other issues bearing on civil society. The six essays that follow have been adapted from a series of papers by participants from a variety of disciplines—history, sociology, political science, and moral philosophy. (The working group's research will be more fully represented in a book-length collection to be published next year.) The Institute gratefully acknowledges the support of the Public Policy Program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, which has funded the Commission and its associated activities.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

Sources: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Book II (1840); Theda Skocpol, "National Community and Civil Society," *Newsletter of the National Commission on Civic Renewal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997); Benjamin R. Barber, "The Search for Civil Society: Can We Restore the Middle Ground Between Government and Markets?" *The New Democrat*, no. 7 (March/April 1995); Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995).