

American Civil Society Talk

Over the past few years, the United States has seen a striking revival of interest in civil society as the source of trust, the key to social integration, and the basis of strong democracy. It is instructive to compare this turn in American thought with an earlier revival in the 1950s. At that time, concerns about "civic culture" were driven by fears of American weakness in confronting a totalitarian state. Now it is dissatisfaction with the social and cultural effects of modernization that motivates civil society talk. Models of social integration, civic engagement, and associational life which were once taken for granted are being strained

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by new forms of social diversity, by institutional transformation, and by technical, economic, and cultural change. These strains have occurred, moreover, just when the need for an active civil society seems particularly great. Neither the centralized state nor the magic of the marketplace appears to offer effective, liberal, and democratic solutions to the problems of post-industrial societies in an era of globalization. And so, despite its troubles, "civil society" has become a slogan for the 1990s because it seems to represent an alternative center for political and economic initiatives.

Unfortunately, the idealized, one-dimensional version of the concept that is being revived is hardly up to the task. This version narrowly equates civil society with traditional forms of voluntary association, emphasizing informal modes of socialization that are said to foster civic virtue and the moral "habits of the heart" necessary to make democracy work. Such a concept is both theoretically impoverished and politically suspect; it blocks efforts even to articulate, much less resolve, the critical problems facing democratic polities in the coming century. We cannot assume, therefore, that American civil society talk necessarily presages a new era of civic renewal. It matters very much *which* concept of civil society we use and seek to foster.

Earlier Traditions

In nineteenth-century sources, "civil society" is a rich and multi-leveled idea. It is characterized by social interaction, of course, but also by individual self-development and ethical choice. It is pluralistic, offering space to groups with different worldviews and interests. It cultivates public discussion through its use of communications media (at that time, print). And all of these values embodied in civil society—individuality, plurality, publicity—are protected by a system of rights and the rule of law.

Twentieth-century European analysts of civil society, beginning with Antonio Gramsci, added three crucial components to this understanding. The first was an emphasis on the cultural and symbolic dimension of civil society—its role in the formation of values, action-orienting norms, meanings, and identifications. From this perspective, civil society does not only transmit or inculcate established practices or beliefs. It is also a site of social contestation, wherein collective identities, ethical values, and alliances are forged. In this conception, then, the discourses and culture of civil society are politically relevant and multiple.

The second major contribution of twentieth-century analysts was an emphasis on the most dynamic, creative side of civil society—informal networks, initiatives and social movements, as distinct from more formal voluntary associations and institutions and from class organizations (political parties, unions). Social movements articulate new social concerns and projects; they generate new values and collective identities. In struggles over democratization, they seek to reform not only the polity, but also the institutions of civil society itself.

The final key contribution in this century has been the communicative, deliberative conception of the "public sphere," developed primarily by Jurgen Habermas and his followers. The public sphere is where people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learn about facts, events, and the opinions, interests, and perspectives of others. Discourse on values, norms, laws, and policies generates politically relevant public opinion. These discussions can occur *within* various units of civil society (thus, we can speak of multiple "public spheres" or "civil publics"). But there is also a larger public sphere that mediates among the various mini-publics that emerge within

and across associations, movements, religious organizations, clubs, local organizations of concerned citizens, and informal social networks in the creation of public opinion.

Habermas also recognizes *institutionalized* civil and political publics, such as legislatures and constitutional courts. Public opinion is meant to influence the debates within these institutions, and to bring under informal control the actions and decisions of rulers and lawmakers. Openness of access and parity of participation (equal voice) is the ideal underlying every institutional arrangement claiming democratic legitimacy. All citizens affected by public policy and laws should have the right to articulate their views, and all participants should be able to do so on equal terms.

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conception of democracy. The political legitimacy of modern constitutional democracies rests on the principle that action-orienting norms, practices, policies, and claims to authority can be contested by citizens and must be affirmed or redeemed in public discourse. As Claus Offe has recently argued, unconstrained critical discourse in the public sphere (secured by rights) is the form of institutionalized "distrust" that is actually crucial to maintaining trust—belief in legitimacy—in constitutional democracies. I would defend an even stronger claim: the modern form of democracy can be *defined* as the deliberative genesis and justification of public policy in political and civil public spaces.

Without the concept of the public sphere, civil society talk becomes hopelessly one-sided and analytically useless. Relying, as we shall see, on notions of "trust" and "social capital," it cannot articulate the complex relation between social and political institutions.

Voluntary Association and Democracy

In his extraordinarily influential book *Making Democracy Work*, Robert Putnam argues that democratic government is more responsive and effective when it faces a vigorous civil society. A civic culture of "generalized trust" and social solidarity, peopled by citizens willing and able to cooperate in joint ventures, is an important prerequisite of a vital democracy. Such a culture—which Putnam found in northern Italy—is best nourished by voluntary associations that cut

across social divisions, that are egalitarian rather than hierarchical, and that treat citizens as participants rather than clients. It is these associations that are most likely to foster wider social cooperation, to reinforce norms of reciprocity, and thus to "make democracy work."

The indicators of democratic health that Putnam cites are similar to those mentioned in the "civic culture" studies of the 1950s: the number of voluntary associations, the incidence of newspaper readership (a sign of informed interest in community affairs), electoral turnout, and a range of civic attitudes including law-abidingness, interpersonal trust, and general cooperativeness. These habits and normative orientations, as well as their transmission over time, are analyzed as forms of "social capital"—defined as the social stock of trust, norms, and networks that facilitate coordinated actions.

In Putnam's historical chapters—his rich descriptions of the emergence of civiness and what it needed to take root, at least in the north of Italy—he acknowledges other contributory factors to civic culture apart from the dense networks of associational life. For example, he mentions the importance of institutions and institutionalized norms, such as the professionalization of public administration and credible state impartiality in the enforcement of laws, for the maintenance of social trust. Strong and autonomous courts, reliable administrative state structures, and *confidence* that legislative processes and the administration of justice will be impartial, seem to be essential background conditions if networks of civic associations are to succeed in generating solidarity outside the bonds of kinship.

Thus, on the descriptive level, at least, Putnam's book can hardly be charged with reductionism. Yet the concluding theoretical chapter, "Social Capital and Institutional Success," is open to such a charge. This important chapter asks how "virtuous circles" generate, generalize, and transmit traditions of civic engagement through centuries of radical social, economic, and political change. Putnam dismisses the classic Hobbesian solution—that the state secures people's trust in everyone's willingness to cooperate equally by enforcing cooperation for the common good. The use of force is expensive, Putnam observes, and impartial enforcement is subject to the very dilemma it aims to solve: what power will ensure that the sovereign does not defect? Nor can institutional design ensure impartiality, since trust and generalized reciprocity would seem to be prerequisites for establishing impartial institutions in the first place.

Putnam accordingly turns away from state structures to "soft" sociocultural solutions. Dense networks of civic involvement are both a sign and a source of social capital. Participation in voluntary associations promotes cooperation and generates social trust, thus



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allowing dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. Dense networks of associations entail repeated exchanges of what he calls "short-term altruism" and "long-term self-interest"—I help you out now in the expectation that you will help me out in the future. These rational exchanges, and the direct experience of reliability, repeated over a period of time, encourage the development of a norm of generalized reciprocity. Apparently such experiences produce "moral resources" which can be transmitted over generations and whose supply increases through use.

That voluntary association is *evidence* of social cooperation and trust is both undeniable and almost tautological, but why is it construed as the only significant source of social capital? Why are democratic political institutions, the public sphere, and law absent from the theoretical analysis of how social trust is developed? The answer is obvious: once the state is defined and dismissed as a third-party enforcer, once law is turned into sanctions that provide for a certain level of social order but no more, once institutions are dismissed as irrelevant to social trust because their genesis already presupposes social trust, and once a vital civil society is reduced to the presence or absence of intermediate voluntary associations, no other source of social trust is conceivable.

Because it operates with an overly narrow conception of civil society, Putnam's theoretical analysis (unlike his descriptive history) screens out the role of law and political institutions in fostering civiness, as well as the reciprocal influence of civil publics on the state and on civil institutions. And this failure to include publics and networks of communication in the conceptualization of civil society is one of the main drawbacks of the theory as a theory of democracy.

Voice and Democratic Competence

We have seen that for Putnam, democracy relies on the social capital generated by egalitarian, participatory associations. Too little, though, is said about why *these* associations, rather than hierarchical ones, are critical to the creation of social capital. One explanation might be that norms of reciprocity are more likely to be respected between agents of equal status and power. These norms will obviously be central to an analysis that emphasizes the strategic benefits of cooperation and the cultivation of trust.

A better explanation, I think, would be that participation as equals in the exchange of opinions and in collective deliberations over associational affairs is what allows people to develop interactive abilities and democratic

competence. But this argument cannot be made without complicating Putnam's theoretical framework, since it calls attention to the voice people have in an association's internal public sphere. Hierarchical, authoritarian associations are not necessarily inferior to egalitarian ones when it comes to generating loyalty and skill in strategic action. But I suspect that only associations of equals, following the relevant norms of discourse and deliberation, can develop the communicative competence and interactive abilities important to democracy.

This is not to say that the state should *require* civil associations to be organized democratically. I agree with Nancy Rosenblum's argument, elsewhere in this issue, that the plurality and multiplicity of civil associations have "moral effects" that help foster and maintain a liberal, tolerant civil society. But I am also convinced that democratic competence *cannot* be learned in hierarchical settings. Moreover, I suspect that the presence of democratically structured associations is what renders benign the effects of membership in hierarchical, authoritarian groups on the larger society. If *all* the myriad associations of civil society were structured hierarchically, I doubt that either democratic competence or even liberal tolerance among citizens would be widespread. But without the normative concept of the deliberative public sphere understood as a core principle of civil society, such arguments cannot be made, much less tested, and the advantage of egalitarian over hierarchical associations remains unclear.

The Metaphor of Social Capital

A second difficulty follows from Putnam's emphasis on voluntary association and his use of the concept of social capital. His analysis fails to explain how the trust produced within voluntary associations becomes generalized; that is, how intergroup trust becomes trust of strangers or institutions outside the group. Instead, Putnam asks us simply to accept that willingness to act together for mutual benefit in a small group translates into willingness to act for the common good. In other words, his analysis offers no mechanism for explaining the emergence of those goods to which the term "social trust" presumably refers.

At fault here, I believe, is the use Putnam makes of the concept of social capital. This metaphor allows the theorist to finesse the issue of generalization and to blur the distinctions between at least five very different things: individual trust, general norms of reciprocity, belief in the legitimacy of institutionalized norms, confidence that these will motivate the action of institutional actors and ordinary citizens, and the transmission of cultural traditions, patterns, and values. It does so by suggesting a false analogy between

direct interpersonal social relations and economic exchanges on the market.

Capital accumulated in one context can of course be invested in another place: it can easily be saved, inherited, and exchanged, regardless of its particular form, because there is a universal equivalent for it—money—and an institutional framework for the exchange—the market economy. Interpersonal trust, on the other hand, is by definition specific and contextual—one trusts *particular* people because of repeated interactions with them in specific contexts in which reciprocity is directly experienced. Interpersonal trust generated in face-to-face relationships is not an instance of a more general impersonal phenomenon. Nor can it simply be transferred to others or to other contexts. Indeed, it is entirely possible that without other mechanisms for the generalization of trust, participation in associations and membership in social networks could foster particularism, localism, intolerance, exclusion, and generalized mistrust of outsiders, of the law, and of government.

Interpersonal trust involves not only the experience of reliability of the other but also the moral obligation of the trusted person to honor the trust bestowed upon her and the mutual expectation that each understands this principle and will be motivated to act accordingly.

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The principle of reciprocity must be institutionalized, on the one side, and the aspiration/motivation to be trustworthy must have become part of one's identity, as it were, on the other. But in order to see what role institutions might play in this process, one must, again, understand law and the state as something more than a third-party enforcer. At the very least, the two-sidedness of law—law as sanction *and* law as institutionalized cultural values, norms, rules and rights—would have to be explored. Only then would it be possible to reflect on the role of law and rights in establishing universalistic norms as functional equivalents for personalized trust, and in substituting confidence in abstract institutions (backed up by sanctions) and belief in their legitimacy, purpose, and particular norms, for direct interpersonal ties.

For example, legal norms of procedural fairness, impartiality, and justice that give structure to state and some civil institutions, limit favoritism and arbitrariness, and protect merit are the prerequisites for society-wide "general trust," at least in a modern society. So is the expectation that institutional actors will live up to

and enforce the norms of the institutional setting in which they interact. Rights, on the other hand, ensure that trust is warranted insofar as they provide individuals the opportunity to demand that violations of legitimate reciprocal expectations be sanctioned.

It makes little sense to use the category of generalized trust to describe one's attitude toward law or government. One can only trust *people*, because only people can fulfill obligations. But institutions (legal and other) can provide functional equivalents for interpersonal trust in impersonal settings involving interactions with strangers, because they establish action-orienting norms and the expectation that these will be honored. What Durkheim once called "professional ethics" would seem to be especially critical here. If one knows one can expect impartiality from a judge, care and concern from a doctor, protection from police, objectivity and veracity from a journalist, concern for the common good from legislators, and so on, then one can develop confidence (instead of cynicism) that shared institutionalized norms and cultural values will orient the action of powerful others. But confidence of this sort also presupposes public spaces in which the validity of such norms and the fairness of procedures can be challenged, revised, redeemed or reinforced through critique.

Although I have said that Putnam's narrow theoretical framework prevents him from articulating these complex interrelations, *Making Democracy Work* is open to a more sophisticated interpretation. After all, the book traces the effects of institutional reform in Italy: the devolution of important powers from a centralized state to newly created regional political public spaces, closer to the populace and open to their influence. Moreover, many of the vital elements of a richer society-centered analysis are at least mentioned in the text. In claiming that dense networks of civic engagement generate greater trust, participation, and stronger democracy, Putnam implicitly relies on the concept of the public sphere. Indeed, Putnam's own research suggests that well-designed political institutions are crucial to fostering civic spirit because they provide enabling conditions—a political opportunity structure—that can become an incentive for the emergence of civil actors and a target of influence for them once they do.

New Elements of Civil Society

I conclude by examining one other feature of American civil society talk: the distinction made between local, "secondary" associations like the Elks Club—which are said to be in decline—and the new "tertiary," mass-membership organizations, from the National Organization for Women to the American Association of Retired Persons. Putnam and others have argued that whereas the traditional groups offered opportunities for face-to-face interactions,

these new associations rely on abstract impersonal ties of people to common symbols, texts, leaders, and ideals. According to the theory of social capital, associational membership should increase social trust. But apparently membership in tertiary groups does not yield the kind of social connectedness that generates social capital. Here, then, is one source for the rhetoric of civic and moral decline.

Other evidence, however, does not support this conclusion. For example, a recent study by Sidney Verba and his colleagues indicates that the falloff in voter turnout is not part of a general erosion in voluntary

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activity or political participation. They report *increases* in certain forms of civic activism, such as membership in community problem-solving organizations. Meanwhile, some older types of associational membership and activities have been expanding, both numerically and qualitatively. And different loci and sorts of social activity are serving purposes similar to those of traditional forms of secondary association.

The political engagement of contemporary citizens is episodic and increasingly issue-oriented. Membership in political parties, labor unions, and traditional voluntary associations may have declined, but the willingness of Americans to mobilize periodically on local and national levels around concerns that affect them cannot be deduced from this fact. The allegedly uncivic generations of the 1960s and 1970s created the first consumers' movement since the 1930s, the first environmental movement since the turn of the century, public health movements, grassroots activism and community organizing, the most important feminist movement since the prewar period, the civil rights movement, and innumerable transnational organizations and civic movements, all of which have led to unprecedented advances in rights and social justice.

This highly civic activism is not the product of disassociated individuals mobilized by direct mailings or glib leaders. It draws instead on myriad small-scale groups different in kind from Putnam's preferred intermediary organizations but most certainly involving face-to-face interpersonal interaction and oppositional public spheres, as well as more generalized forms of communication. In other words, the forms of association out of which mass mobilizations emerge nowadays might not involve organizations with official membership lists, but they can and often do involve discussion groups, consciousness-raising

groups, self-help groups, and the like—surely signs of the ability to connect and act in concert.

The real question for analysts of civil society is *why* certain forms of civic activity appear when they do. Surely the “political opportunity structure” afforded by the state and political culture, legal developments, and the organization of economic life, along with the nature of other dimensions of civil society, would have to be analyzed in order to arrive at an answer. Such an analysis may well conclude that institutional redesign of various aspects of the political (and economic) system is necessary to strengthen new sorts of civil sociality.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that a narrow conception of civil society obscures and miscasts important problems, not that these problems do not exist. There is no question that established modes of civic engagement, political participation, and social integration are all in crisis today. But the dichotomous thinking that opposes civil society to the state, duties to rights, custom to code, informal to formal socialization (as the source of trust), and status to contract leads to an over-hasty conclusion (that social capital has disappeared) and a set of false policy choices.

Such considerations do not replace a society-centered analysis with a state-oriented one. Rather, if we had a rich conception of civil society that included the civil public sphere, we could fruitfully consider the reciprocal lines of influence between it, the state, and the economy. This perspective could point us to an important range of questions begging for serious research. For example, what is an optimal relation (or division of labor) among the state, civil society and the market under contemporary conditions? What institutional reforms or redesigns are necessary to accomplish the material goals of the welfare state without destroying incentives for individual and group initiative or responsibility? What type of federalism can encourage democratic participation and citizen initiative without feeding into parochialism and local intolerance? What legal paradigm could guarantee the basic rights of civil society without sacrificing public to private autonomy? What conception of constitutionalism could protect the plurality of forms of life within civil society from intolerant majorities without reifying “difference”? How can the media of communication, which are crucial to the generalization of norms of reciprocity, be more receptive to civil input without allowing the power of money to control the agenda of debate and to silence others? And what effect does the ever more prominent role of money in politics have on the vitality of civil and political institutions?

Civic renewal requires us to ask how the state, law, and the professions might pre-structure the terrain so

that the autonomy of civil society, the vitality of civil publics, and civiness may be strengthened. In particular, it requires us to ask how the state can be made more receptive to organizational initiatives and public expression from within civil society. The rhetoric of civic and moral decline does not address such questions. But they should be at the heart of democratic theory.

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