

“*To Study and
Strengthen Civil
Society*”

— A STATEMENT FROM
OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The Institute’s mission is “to study and strengthen civil society.” The following essay, aimed at further explaining this organizational purpose, was approved by the Institute’s Board of Directors on September 30, 2011.

Propositions

OCTOBER 2011

MANY OBSERVERS OF AMERICA HAVE NOTED THE EXCEPTIONAL role and vitality of our civil society. Early on, Alexis de Tocqueville famously described the importance of “voluntary associations” in America. Other observers have used terms such as “intermediate associations,” “mediating structures,” “spheres of justice,” and “spheres of love” to denote the crucial functions of civil society in the guidance and governance of the nation.

So much depends on this issue. Whether American civil society weakens or thrives in the coming years is arguably the greatest question facing the nation today. Moreover, the relationship of American law to American civil society—the relationship between the modern state and those institutions which the modern state does not create but upon which it significantly depends—is likely to remain one of the nation’s most consequential and controversial public debates.

Finally, civil society has also become a global concept. Today, important debates on the meaning and potential of civil society are taking place around the world, including, for example, among the leaders of the Middle Eastern uprisings of 2011.

What Is It?

BUT IF CIVIL SOCIETY IS SUCH A BIG IDEA, WHAT EXACTLY DOES IT MEAN? Civil society is the web of relationships and associations that mediates between the person and the state. Civil society is not the isolated individual, and it is not the umbrella of government and law—it is all the thick, diverse social fabric in between, from families to chess clubs, from soup kitchens to the PTA,

“The first Society was between
Man and Wife, which gave beginning to
that between Parents and Children.”

—JOHN LOCKE, TWO TREATISES
ON GOVERNMENT, 1698

from labor unions to the shop around the corner to the business downtown, from Wednesday night prayer meetings to Saturday morning softball leagues. In short, civil society is the complex set of relationships and associations that occupy most of our time and energy and fill up most of our day-to-day lives.

The associations of civil society are largely, though not exclusively, voluntary. (For example, we do not choose our parents or our cousins, although as adults we usually do choose to stay in or leave certain family networks, and to join or create others.)

Civil society is a primary incubator of our philosophies of life and our cultural values. In civil society, we encounter that large, complex arena of our communal life in which we most directly acquire our understandings of what is right and wrong and how to live a good life, and through which we most directly pass on those values to the next generation.

Of course, these three orders—individual, civil society, and state—constantly interact and overlap. The individual person participates in, and influences, civil society. Law and government certainly influence and at times guide civil society—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill—just as civil society influences the state and can help to shape the law. But the essence of civil society is neither the individual nor the state. It is instead the (hugely important) stuff in between.

What makes civil society tick? What is its DNA? When we speak of the person, we are speaking mainly about individual rights and duties. And when we speak of the state, we are speaking mainly about the distribution and uses of power. But when we speak of civil society, we are speaking mainly about the quality of human relationships. The DNA of civil society, then, is not individual behavior and it's not the law. It is relationships, human bonds.

How Good Is It?

OUR MISSION AT THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN VALUES IS “TO STUDY and strengthen civil society.”

- We *study* it because we believe in the scholarly project and in the power of ideas.
- We seek to *strengthen* it because a thriving civil society is essential to the success of the American experiment.

We regard civil society as both a means and an end of a good society.

- *As a Means:* As the sector of our society that most directly nurtures values, creates trust, and builds human capital, civil society is a primary means through which a free society becomes possible and can be sustained over time.
- *As an End:* As the locus of probably our most intimate and meaningful day-to-day human relationships—a father showing his child how to tie her shoe, a teacher leading a class discussion, rescuers saving lives, a social movement making social change—civil society is also an end in itself, a primary source and expression of human thriving.

We recognize that civil society is not always a sphere of sweetness and virtue. There can be bad civil society as well as good, weak as well as strong. The degradation of civil society can occur in at least four ways:

- First, institutions of civil society can be degraded by corrupt or hostile values, such as racism, chauvinism, and hatred of the other.
- Second, civil society can be weakened by isomorphic social change, which occurs when one institutional order (such as civil society) is consistently pressured to conform to the normative structures and practices of a more dominant institutional order (such as government).
- Third, civil society can be weakened when one of its norms, valuable enough in its proper context, becomes absolutized. For example, familism, or high regard for the institution of the family, is widely understood to be a social good. But amoral familism—loyalty to family above all other values—becomes socially destructive.
- Finally, civil society can be weakened when certain of its norms, valuable enough in their rightful place, stray beyond their proper sphere. For example, such degradation clearly occurs when non-market institutions

“ After a good deal of talk it was decided to build a stone school house, and papers were circulated to see what those present would do toward helping to build the institution. Everbody promised to work; nearly everybody signed for six days—some included their teams [of horses]. In all there were 81 days’ work promised. Then a paper for cash subscriptions was circulated, and \$18 pledged. ”

—HOWARD RUEDE, A 24-YEAR-OLD HOME-STEADER IN KILL CREEK, KANSAS, IN A LETTER TO HIS FAMILY BACK EAST IN PENNSYLVANIA, FEBRUARY 27, 1878

of civil society, such as marriage and the family, become dominated and increasingly defined by the norms of the market place.

In recent decades, many key institutions of U.S. civil society appear to have been weakened, in some cases severely, by one or more of these trends. In particular, the emergence of expressive and consumerist individualism as regnant cultural values, combined with (and in part related to) the growing strength of government as an engine of isomorphic social change, seems clearly to have contributed to an overall shrinkage and weakening of civil society.

These complexities mean that, as we aim “to study and strengthen civil society,” we are doing more than simply cheer-leading. Our discipline is a much more rigorous and potentially consequential one.

Current Priorities

WITHIN THE FOCUS ON CIVIL SOCIETY, THE INSTITUTE’S THREE current priorities are marriage, thrift, and public conversation. Together, these three are primary determinants of the health of civil society.

MARRIAGE

The family is the seedbed institution of civil society, and marriage is the basis of the family. Across the globe, marriage is the main human institution governing the link between the voluntary spousal association and the biological parent-child association. Marriage is therefore society’s most pro-child institution. In fact, it’s the *only* institution that brings together the three main domains of parenthood—biological, social, and legal—into one association.

THRIFT

Thrift—the word comes from “thrive”—is the moral discipline of wisest use. Thrift says: Use all that you have (including your money) in the wisest way, to promote thriving. If marriage is civil society’s core idea when it comes to *reproduction*, or successfully bearing and rearing the next generation, thrift is civil society’s core idea when it comes to *production*, or wisely using money and other resources.

Importantly, thrift qualifies and guides the free market by providing it with a moral framework. Thrift is therefore a morally robust alternative to both *laissez-faire* (anything goes, provided that it’s legal) and consumerism (the more stuff I have, the better). Thrift as a value is closely linked to the concepts of generosity and stewardship.

THE NEST AND THE NEST-EGG

In formal terms, the words “marriage” and “thrift” are not perfectly symmetrical. Marriage is an institution guided by certain values, whereas thrift is a value that can orient both individuals and institutions.

But as core ideas of civil society, the two go hand in glove, and they stand best when they stand together. Forming stable marriages and building economic independence over time—marriage and thrift, the nest and the nest-egg—are the indispensable and interconnected pathways to the American mainstream and the linked prerequisites for a thriving civil society.

- If the topic is sex and children in a free society, first and foremost think *marriage*.
- If the topic is work and money in a free society, first and foremost think *thrift*.

PUBLIC CONVERSATION

- And if the topic is policy- and decision-making in a free society, first and foremost think *public conversation*.

Unlike marriage, which is an institution, and unlike thrift, which is a value, public conversation is fundamentally a *process*. That process is nothing less than the life blood of democratic civil society.

Like civil society itself, that life blood can be thick or thin, vital or degenerate. The symptoms of degeneracy in public conversation include shrillness, treating opponents

“ The power of the people is much stronger than the people in power. ”

— WAEL GHONIM, A LEADER OF THE
EGYPTIAN UPRISING, MARCH 7, 2011

as enemies, and assuming bad faith. The symptoms of vitality include civility, openness to other views, and reasonable argument in the service of truth. Vigorous public conversation depends decisively upon the shared and hard-won ideas that our access to truth is imperfect and that we and those with whom we disagree possess equal dignity and are therefore more alike than different.

GLOBAL PUBLIC CONVERSATION

In our engagement with scholars from the Arab and Muslim world and in other ways, we aim also for a global public conversation both through and about civil society:

- *About* civil society: A focus on the status and possibility of civil society internationally.
- *Through* civil society: Citizen-sponsored (not state-led) conversations on level playing fields in environments of mutual respect, openness to differences, and intellectual freedom.

We seek this global engagement because we know that core issues of human flourishing transcend national boundaries and that the finest of what we sometimes too casually call “American values” are in fact the shared inheritance of humankind.

To Be Civil Society

THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN VALUES IS A VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION.

This fact puts us in an interesting position: We are a clear example of the very thing we seek “to study and strengthen.” Or to borrow from Mohandas Gandhi, we are therefore called upon every day in our work to “be the change we seek.”

We embrace that challenge, starting with our commitment to the core organizational values of stewardship, scholarship, and collaboration.

Stewardship: We recognize that our resources are not our own; they are gifts from others which we hold in trust. What we produce, we seek to share generously with others.

Scholarship: Our lodestars are scholarly excellence and intellectual freedom and integrity.

Collaboration: We typically work in groups, through which we pursue collaborative research and interdisciplinary conversation over time. Our signature intellectual product is the jointly authored public statement. Almost all of our work involves partnerships with other civil society organizations.

Conclusion

OUR MISSION IS TO STUDY AND STRENGTHEN CIVIL SOCIETY, OF WHICH our organization itself is a part. Civil society is the thick web of human relationships and associations that mediates between the person and the state. That sphere of society has been vital to the shaping of the American experiment and is an essential feature of free societies everywhere.

Civil society can be weak or strong, and can work for good or for ill. Three primary characteristics of a thriving civil society are successful marriages, thrifty stewardship of resources, and vigorous public conversation both at home and abroad. Such a civil society is both an end in itself and the best means of sustaining democratic self-government and promoting human flourishing. □

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PUBLICATIONS *from the* INSTITUTE



A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths

A Report to the Nation from the Council on Civil Society. (Broadway Publications 1998)

This report makes the case that America's civic institutions are declining because the moral ideas that fueled and formed them are losing their power—too many Americans view morality as a threat to freedom, rather than its essential guarantor.



Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities

A Report to the Nation from the Commission on Children at Risk. (Broadway Publications 2003) \$7.00

In this pioneering report, children's doctors, neuroscientists, research scholars, and youth service professionals draw upon a large body of research showing that children are biologically primed ("hardwired") for enduring connections to others and for moral and spiritual meaning.