

**Civil Society in America:  
A Public Debate about Political Theory**

**by Christopher Beem**

The concept of civil society has been around a long time. Beginning with the Greeks, the term has been articulated with more or less frequency in every major historical epoch, and by almost every major political thinker in the western tradition. To be sure, modern political thought has, until fairly recently, had little use for the term. After Marx, especially, the lineage hit something of a dead end, and discussion about civil society was left mainly to intellectual historians. But this brief period of disrepute is now long gone. Civil society has become the new cause celebre in political thought. Marxists and Social Democrats, Neo-conservatives and Paleo-conservatives, Libertarians, Liberals and Communitarians all seek to incorporate the concept into their broad ideological position and thereby harness it to their political objectives. Equally significant, the term has also recently moved outside the confines of the Western tradition. Important and dynamic use of the term has recently been made by social scientists in Eastern Europe, Africa, East Asia and the Middle East. Here too, the term is adapted to a unique set of circumstances in service to a specific set of political objectives. Finally, the term is no longer confined to the academy. Politicians and public intellectuals who agree on little else extol the virtues of civil society and incorporate it within their otherwise divergent political agendas.

This legacy is at once ample and cacophonous. While the concept's longevity and widespread use speaks to its heuristic value, it also reveals its startling imprecision. Civil society can mean practically anything, and can be used to advance practically any political position. Academics seeking to employ the concept therefore inevitably begin their discussions by noting that the concept is mushy: it is useful, but imprecise. Let me begin, therefore, with the academic discussion. I will try to lay out what conceptual clarity there is, and identify the reasons behind the confusion. <sup>i</sup>

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### **Civil Society--the analytical and functional dimensions of the concept**

**“An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please and take them out again unobserved.”--Tocqueville**

There is general agreement that civil society, as an analytical concept, concerns that part of society not under the direct control of the state. *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* notes that while the term was originally “a generic term for society and state, synonymous with ‘political society,’” it has “more recently” come to mean those “social and economic arrangements, codes, institutions apart from the state....In general usage today civil society...refers to the non-political aspects of the contemporary social order....”<sup>1</sup> This modern definition sets some minimal parameters for the discussion, and ostensibly allows for broad comparative studies. Nevertheless, agreement apparently only comes with vacuity; this “general usage” of the term is so broad as to make it almost useless. In order to say anything substantive, discussants must inevitably invoke their own, more specific definition.<sup>1</sup> <sup>ii</sup>

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Where does this added specificity come from? Again, in its modern formulation, civil society is understood as a subset of the broader social order. Almost by definition, political theorists are motivated by their belief that the social order is to some degree deficient. They write books in order to improve or remedy that condition. Interest among political theorists in the concept of civil society therefore stems from the fact that they see it as a means for outlining and advancing their objectives for society itself. Thus, no matter how it is formulated, the modern understanding of civil society is fundamentally a functional and normative concept. Whatever else it is, civil society is a mechanism which at once produces, maintains and manifests some basic and essential social goods. Therefore, the way in which one adds further analytical specificity to the concept is of a piece with one's understanding of the function of civil society. What you think civil society is--your understanding of what the term means analytically; what institutions, groups, associations are included, and which are not, which epitomize the concept, and which are effectively ignored--is all largely determined by what you want civil society to do.

*Civil society in the Liberal-democratic tradition*

In the broadest terms, the goal of the liberal-democratic tradition has always been to achieve a high degree of individual freedom and autonomy while maintaining a viable, sustainable social order. And that means that within this tradition, the understanding of what civil society is and what it does is focused around this fundamental objective. Among liberal-democratic theorists, civil society commonly refers to a vast array of independent, groups, associations and institutions. These groups are voluntary--some are more structured than others, some are more effectively permanent than others--but they are all made up of unrelated individuals who come together to pursue a specific common interest. Examples of such groups can include neighborhood groups, churches and civic associations, labor unions, political parties, and the like. A vibrant liberal democratic society is inherently pluralistic, and continually generates opportunities for local or group interaction. Civil society is thus a collective noun, referring to the sum of these groups.

These associations are understood to be free and independent because they are not under the direct control or oversight of the state. As a result, these associations creates independent loci of political power (and often, competing political narratives) which temper the power and reach of the state. The everyday operation of the institutions of civil society is thus understood to preserve individual freedom. Yet civil society also helps produce and maintain the order and consensus which any society demands. For while these groups have their own identities and aims, their normal, everyday operation reflects and reinforces the norms of democratic society. Through group interaction, citizens come to recognize their commonalties and differences. They learn to exploit the former through concerted political action, and to resolve the latter through reasoned argument and compromise. So civil society is also where one learns the skills and habits of civility and good citizenship.

The modern conception of civil society fosters the common and rather deep-seated belief that these two goals is ultimately one and the same: a robust democratic society will possess a civil society that both secures pluralism and instills civic virtue. In a democracy, civic virtue includes traits like independence and self-reliance--virtues which certainly check the usurping power of the state. Likewise, the abundance of associations and groups serves to concretely reinforce the prevailing democratic ethos. Exposure through civil society to the very fact of pluralism instills within all citizens the necessity and legitimacy of virtues like tolerance and open-mindedness, moderation and compromise.

Yet while there is a natural affinity between these two goals, it is too much to conflate them completely. For at least when taken to extremes, the two objectives associated with the concept of civil society are not only distinct, they are contradictory. In the first instance, when civil society is operating as it should, it stands in healthy opposition to the state. To this end, pluralism--even sectarianism--is a good thing. In Madisonian terms, the more independent organizations there are, the freer the society, and the more stable the democracy. The second objective, however, requires a fairly strong sense of moral cohesion. Despite our inevitable and fundamental differences, civil society serves to inculcate a shared set of values, norms and beliefs. As a result, pluralism is legitimate only insofar as it operates within the parameters established by our common understanding of civic virtue: thus far, and no farther. Civil society, in this instance, is a force for building social cohesion. This tension, of course, is reflective of the fundamental liberal objective: a society that is free, yet ordered. It also explains the significant differences that remain within the liberal-democratic understanding of this concept.

Many liberal theorists stress the preservation of political freedom--the institutions of civil society stand against the innate acquisitiveness of the state. Ernest Gellner, for example, argues that civil society both manifests and preserves the political, cultural and economic freedom that is the unique achievement of liberal-democratic society. But others, like Michael Sandel, see the problem precisely as too much freedom, or at least, too much of a certain conception of freedom. The rise of this conception, which celebrates individual choice, has compromised the health of the polity. Sandel therefore argues that civil society is the mechanism whereby a more substantive conception of freedom is developed and maintained. Alternatively, far from perceiving a necessary connection between civil society and capitalism, leftist thinkers like John Keane want to use civil society as Gramsci did-- as a means for jump-starting a socialist agenda, for extending democracy to the economic realm. Similarly, Social Democrats Arato and Cohen highlight civil society in their call for a more inclusive, vibrant and thus, inherently more progressive democratic dialogue. Finally, Putnam, Wolfe and other Neo-Tocquevillians see civil society as a necessary device for re-instilling the demands of democratic citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

These normative differences also lead to different analytical conceptions. Those theorists who focus on the task of preserving freedom believe that civil society refers to structured, formal and effectively permanent institutions, where people without any affective ties come together to pursue a common, and frankly political aim.

Organizations which are similarly structured and permanent, but which profess a shared interest that is not directly political (like the soccer clubs and choral groups that Robert Putnam saw in Italy, for example) are not the subject of much attention.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, those on the left are more likely to stress structural institutions, like unions, which can stand up to the monolithic (and ostensibly oppressive) power of the state, while those on the right may be more inclined to highlight those organizations which foster a common conception of civic virtue. These examples can be readily extended, the point is simply to show that the contemporary theoretical discussion within the liberal-democratic tradition shows significant disagreement about which institutions exemplify civil society and what civil society ought to do. <sup>iv</sup>

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Academic discussions are surely known for conceptual debates like these. In light of the long and variegated history associated with this concept, this lack of agreement is therefore perhaps to be expected, if not necessarily welcomed. But civil society has broken out of the confines of academics. For the first time, the term has also taken on a dynamic and significant role in public political discourse. Indeed, it is being hailed as the new miracle cure for the deepest discontents of American social life. Whatever the problem, from fragmenting families to declining voter turnout, social critics from across the political spectrum increasingly point to civil society as the solution.

The line of demarcation is, of course, rather fuzzy, but one of the first things that distinguishes the public political dimension of the civil society revival is precisely the lack of this theoretical contention. The social critics (coming from think tanks, periodicals, foundations, and politics) who take part in this public discussion start with the assumption that the theoretical issues outlined above are effectively settled, or, at least, they believe that settling such questions is not prerequisite for the meaningful application of the concept. Even among the many academicians who have joined the public debate, their writing is comparatively devoid of arcane language and conceptual argument. Rather, they, too, accept the broad outlines of the public conception, and quickly move on to the more substantive question of application.<sup>1</sup> The public debate is not centered on questions about what civil society is and how it does or should function; instead the operative question is: “how do we get it back so that it can once again do what it used to do?” This specific question is behind the dynamism and the distinctiveness of the public debate. For it reveals the depth of concern that drives it. v

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### **The Contemporary Crisis and the Public Concept of Civil Society**

**“There ought to be a system of manners which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.”--Edmund Burke**

I have mentioned that political theory is born of the need to improve the social condition of society--the desire to make society more just, more stable, more well-ordered. Just so, public interest in the concept of civil society is born of a desire to address some grave concerns about contemporary society. This impetus is particularly important in considering the public dimension of the ongoing renewal. For despite the many different voices taking part in this discussion, it also manifests a dramatic degree of cohesion. The public debate is premised and driven by the belief that our nation is in, or is approaching, a cultural crisis.

The primary impetus to this discussion is the widespread belief that our society is experiencing a breakdown in the social fabric. Americans are increasingly convinced that our society has lost much of the feeling of community that pervaded life in even a generation ago. People seem less connected, less invested in each other. There is less socialization between neighbors, and there is a pervasive sense that ‘there is less concern for others than there once was.’<sup>1</sup> This ebbing of contact and concern is likely related to any number of extant social pathologies, but it is most directly responsible for a decline in civility and trust. A recent national survey in U.S. News and World Report showed that 88% of Americans consider our nation’s incivility to be a serious problem.<sup>1</sup> Putnam reports that between 1960 and 1994, the percentage of Americans who agreed with the statement that “most people can be trusted most of the time” decreased by 64%.<sup>1 vi</sup>

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Civil society advocates routinely recount polling data like these as a prelude to their prescriptive account. They believe these figures are more than simply lamentable; they reveal nothing less than the rending of the social fabric, the breakdown of civic culture. Without a common commitment to elemental standards of civility and to a shared set of basic propositions, the common enterprise of democratic government becomes untenable. These advocates thus frankly question whether our society will be able to maintain the most basic prerequisites of a free and democratic society. This grave assessment of contemporary American culture is driving the surging public interest in civil society. For these advocates also believe that the revitalization of the institutions of civil society is an indispensable mechanism for combating this crisis.

From the time of its founding, the success of the United States has been tied to the vibrant and prolific character of our civil society. Joining associations was understood to be a uniquely American passion. In Tocqueville’s famous words,

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types--religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape in that way. Finally, if they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association.<sup>1</sup>

The first point is simply historical: the American proclivity to join associations was part of our culture, our identity as a nation. But Tocqueville also believed this proclivity was largely responsible for the success of American democracy. Tocqueville reflected the liberal-democratic belief that the institutions of civil society both preserve political freedom and inculcate the moral virtues and the civil dispositions that make democratic life possible.

Contemporary civil society advocates are uniquely indebted to Tocqueville's analysis. They fully accept his claim that the institutions of civil society develop and preserve a shared set of essential virtues and mores. Their assessment that American society is experiencing a cultural crisis centers on the belief that these virtues are no longer sufficiently manifested in American society. And that means that they have therefore also come to doubt the vibrancy of those institutions. In short, these critics are convinced of a serious decline in American society and culture, and, following Tocqueville, they contend that this condition results primarily from a decline in the institutions of civil society.<sup>1</sup> Because these institutions have declined or changed in a significant way, civil society has ceased to fulfill adequately its normative function, and a pathological social order is the result.<sup>viii</sup>

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Given this diagnosis, the proposed treatment plan is self-evident. If the sorry condition of civil society is the preeminent reason for our problems, then American renewal requires that we reinvigorate these institutions.<sup>1</sup> We must therefore determine what has happened to cause or precipitate their decline, and figure out what we as a nation need to do to stop that decline and facilitate their recovery. <sup>ix</sup>

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Of course, the public debate is properly characterized; it is, after all, a debate. Any public movement which extends to the farthest reaches of the American political spectrum is surely not going to manifest univocal affirmation. Nevertheless, this debate is also grounded in dramatic agreement. There is significant degree of unanimity regarding their assessment of the contemporary social order--how and why it is deficient--and of what they want to do about it. This goal produces a unique and unusually united understanding of what civil society is. With this basic framework in place, I can now identify many of the common features that lie within the public concept of civil society.

### **The Triumvirate: Family, Neighborhood and Church**

**Everything I know about history, every bit of experience and observation that has contributed to my thought, has confirmed me in the conviction that the real wisdom of human life is compounded out of the experiences of ordinary men. --Woodrow Wilson**

I have argued that the concept of civil society has both an analytical and a normative dimension: civil society is what civil society ought to do. The public debate reinforces this argument, for just as this debate manifests a startling consensus about the goals of a revival of civil society, so too does it present a dramatic similarity regarding the institutions which are understood to exemplify that concept. Senator Dan Coats presents “families, churches, neighborhoods, voluntary associations” as representative institutions of civil society. When these institutions are resilient, when civil society is strong, he argues, “it infuses a community with its warmth, trains its people to be good citizens, and transmits values between generation.”<sup>x</sup>

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“Civil Society,” he writes, “is the place where Americans make their homes, sustain their marriages, raise their families, visit with their friends, meet their neighbors, educate their children, worship their God....It is where opinions are expressed and refined, where views are exchanged and agreements made, where a sense of common purpose and consensus is forged.”<sup>1</sup>

These assessments are representative. The institutions of families, neighborhoods and churches are routinely touted by civil society advocates. This is what the public discussion means when it invokes the term “civil society.” These are the institutions which they believe require reinvigoration. I do not want to take issue with this idea, but I do want to point out that the institutions of family, neighborhood and church are not at all common to the broad history of the concept, nor even to the liberal-democratic conception. I propose, therefore, to look more closely at these three features, in order to help explain the unique understanding of the concept as it is presented in the contemporary public debate and to illustrate the equally unique role that this concept is playing in contemporary American politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Bradley, “America’s Challenge: Revitalizing our National Community,” *National Civil Review*, 84, 2 (Spring, 1995): 94.

*The Family*

In the academic arena, most theorists ignore the family as an institution of civil society.<sup>2</sup> Explanations for this absence are not forthcoming, of course, but they are not hard to postulate. While it is surely an social institution, the family is also understood to be primarily private. Indeed, it is often seen as a haven from the public world. While the family is an institution of structure and some permanence, the bonds that unite the participants are grounded not in interest but affection. And while the family is in some sense a locus independent power--political thinkers as far back as Plato have recognized that the family can be the enemy of the state--on its own, that power is judged insufficient to challenge the state's centralizing tendencies.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the merits of this speculative assessment, the contrast between the academic literature and the public discussion is striking. Among the former, there is almost a universal lack of interest; among public civil society advocates, the family is the first and most important institution of civil society. It is almost universally understood to be the primary (in both senses) mechanism for the inculcation of social virtues and civic norms.

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<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the fault line echoes the distinction I want to draw between the public and the theoretical debate. Elshtain, Wolfe, Putnam and Sandel all mention the family as a significant social institution. For Gellner, Arato and Cohen, Keane, Rosenblum, and Walzer, the family is simply not a relevant category.

<sup>3</sup> These points of distinction are not foreign to the civil society discussion. They are articulated by Hegel in his "Philosophy of Right." In light of Hegel's pivotal role in the modern concept of civil society, this connection is very significant.

Participants in the public debate routinely note the grave condition of the American family, recounting a litany of disturbing facts about absent fathers and the prevalence of divorce, births outside of marriage and the proliferation of non-parental child-care. These critics argue that the family is where Americans start to learn the basic social virtues; it is, indeed, the foremost ‘seedbed of virtue.’ Therefore, these phenomena amount to a cultural failure in child-rearing, the results of which can be seen in host of social problems. Ultimately, this failure jeopardizes democratic society itself. As Mary Ann Glendon writes, “impairment of the family’s capacity to develop in its members the qualities of self-restraint, respect for others, and sturdy independence of mind cannot help but impair the prospects for a regime of ordered liberty.”<sup>1</sup> Civil society advocates want to reinvigorate a more virtuous, more civically-engaged American culture, and with that objective in place, the family emerges as a vital area of inquiry and concern.

There is, in fact, a dramatic overlap between public intellectuals associated with the civil society movement and those who are involved in the public debate concerning marriage, fatherhood and the family. Don Eberly, David Blankenhorn, Mary Ann Glendon, David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain and William Galston are all significant figures in both movements. In political circles, Dan Coats, William Bennett, Bill Bradley and Bill Clinton have all outlined public policy initiatives which focus directly on the family in their effort to revive civil society. None of these thinkers would claim that the family is the only relevant institution, or that the decline in the family sufficiently accounts for our nation’s social problems. Nevertheless, I am hard pressed to name one public advocate who does not argue that the family is singularly representative of the social role of civil society, and thus singularly important to the revival of American culture.

*Neighborhoods and Communities*

The question of neighbors and neighborhoods also reflects a distinction between the academic and the public debates. But here the difference is more subtle. Liberal theoreticians typically list relations between neighbors in their accounts of civil society, but those relations are normally relevant only insofar as they take place between unrelated individuals within a structured organization--a PTA meeting, a neighborhood watch group, a community organization, and the like. The public discussion includes these more structured groups as well, but it also extends the idea of the relevant interaction to include, and often even highlight, adamantly informal meetings--gossiping with a neighbor over a fence, exchanging pleasantries about sports or the weather with the lady at the dry cleaners, inviting the neighbors over for coffee, cards or a barbecue. Bill Bradley asks, "How many of us know the names, much less the life stories, of all the neighbors in our section of town or even on several floors of our apartment building?" He acknowledges that "it may sound painfully small time, even corny, to focus on these things," but he adamantly avers that "upon these things lie the whole edifice of our national well-being."<sup>1</sup> The public debate sees civil society as a means for reinstituting social trust and a shared sense of civic virtue, and to this end, informal interactions and informal ties are very significant, and perhaps even determinative. <sup>xii</sup>

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This understanding highlights the use of the term “social capital” among the public advocates. The concept of social capital was originated by the late James Coleman, a sociologist at the University of Chicago. It describes that product of interaction between persons which, in turn, aids in the production of certain shared ends.

Social capital, like human capital and physical capital, enhances productivity, for it increases a group’s ability to achieve a given set of objectives. If, on the other hand, social capital is depleted, productivity declines, and exchanges, including the most basic features of ordinary social intercourse, become more difficult. The most salient example of this production is the idea that people meeting in groups come to trust each other. People who trust each other cooperate more easily and more frequently and can more readily achieve their objectives. Coleman’s concept is multidimensional and complex, but this description fairly establishes its use within the public discussion.

The reason why civil society advocates are interested in this concept is clear. They employ the notion of social capital because it directly reflects their goals: social capital says that building community is an important and even an essential asset for any society. Without it, trust decays; at a certain point, this decay starts to manifest itself in serious social problems. The concept therefore buttresses their analysis of contemporary American culture. Social capital has, in Don Eberly’s words, been “drawn down.” An absence of trust, community and concern for others is behind both the plethora of social pathologies, and, more broadly, a widespread anomie. What’s more, the concept of social capital contends that building or rebuilding community and trust requires face-to-face encounters. Robert Putnam, who is probably the most important exponent of Coleman’s writings, thus distinguishes between social capital, which involves “our relations with one another” and political participation, which “refers to our relations with political institutions.”<sup>1xiii</sup>

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The concept of social capital confirms that the institutions of civil society are indispensable to our society's health and vibrancy. Finally, social capital is important because it gives informal, non-structural instances of civil society essentially the same standing as more permanent institutions. Again, most theoretical discussions are apt to ignore informal interactions, because they do not advance the ends in mind. But while social capital is advanced in permanent institutions also, it is not dependent upon them alone. Putnam notes that "bowling in a league or having coffee with a friend embodies and creates social capital."<sup>xiv</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

There is another essential point about neighbors which should be addressed here. The public discussion about civil society draws a connection between neighbors and neighborhoods on the one hand, and civic virtue on the other, primarily because of the essential support function neighborhoods provide for the family. Parents need to hear that their efforts are valued, and they need the concrete support of advice and experience and time from those around them. Most importantly, parents need others to reinforce the moral values they seek to implant in their children; in this regard, the neighborhood serves as an almost indispensable function. The idea that families and neighborhoods are mutually supportive, that they are, so to speak, morally on the same page, is fundamental to the public discussion of civil society. David Popenoe, who has written most directly to this issue, puts the matter this way:

For the moral development of children, no aspect of community support is more important than the community's ability to reinforce the social expectations of parents; that is, to express a consensus of shared values. Young people need to hear a consistent message about what is right and wrong from all the important adults in their lives; they need not only a social community but a moral community.<sup>1</sup>

For a variety of reasons, contemporary America possesses few neighborhoods which can fulfill this function. For civil society advocates, that fact helps to explain the sorry condition of America's families, and, in turn, America's youth. Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that "where neighborhoods are strong and families are intact, drug and alcohol abuse, crime and truancy diminish. But of course, families and neighborhoods in 1996 are far less likely to be strong and intact. As a result, all forms of socially destructive behavior are on the rise."<sup>1 xv</sup>

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Finally, it is important to consider the impact of this set of concerns for the American social order. At the end of his article, Popenoe argues for a new public policy initiative--a "new localism"--which would seek to reinvigorate neighborhood life. Along with fostering residential stability and increasing public space and facilities, Popenoe recommends the enforcement of "community moral standards," and the protection of "homogeneous neighborhoods." He maintains that without these policies, communities can never again become "moral communities," and without moral communities, there can be no social virtue.

Concepts like “community moral standards” and “homogeneous neighborhoods” are certainly not morally straightforward. Among many citizens they invoke painful memories, and indeed, reminders, of prejudice and discrimination. Popenoe notes, “I am not thinking here necessarily of racial and ethnic enclaves but of family-focused enclaves of people who share similar values and have a similar lifestyle.” But he also acknowledges that “[t]here are obvious concerns about racial and ethnic discrimination and about constitutionally guaranteed human rights.” This acknowledgment alone is not likely to assuage the misgivings of many marginalized persons. Clearly, if a dominant ethos has emerged which effectively discourages or even undermines localism, it was born of the civil rights movement of the 60’s, when a national demand for equal rights trumped the racist localism of the South. Popenoe’s final response is not to deny the truth of these misgivings, but to argue that Americans must address the need for moral communities despite these fears: “[t]here is no evidence that realistic social alternatives exist for the traditional “tribal” structure of family and community.”<sup>1</sup> xvi

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The concerns associated with Popenoe’s argument brings to mind a book that has received a great deal of attention among civil society advocates, Alan Ehrenhalt’s, *The Lost City*.<sup>1</sup> Ehrenhalt looks at three Chicago area neighborhoods, comparing life in the 1950’s with today. His study begins with the feeling of longing and loss that many Americans have for the social world they grew up in. But while Ehrenhalt celebrates the decency, the strong sense of community, even the quiet nobility that characterized the 50’s, he also conveys the serious (and in the current wave of nostalgia, often overlooked) moral issues associated with that era. Ehrenhalt is out to show that the feeling of community and solidarity which characterized the 50’s did not come without a cost. Real community cannot take place without a common moral authority, which, in turn, cannot happen without restricting individual freedom and choice. xvii

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The connection is interesting because while both writers affirm a kind of new localism, they highlight different dangers. Popenoe argues that social capital is indispensable to any healthy democratic society, and it is only built through local institutions and interactions: if you want a moral society, you have to start with autonomous and morally homogenous neighborhoods. But Popenoe suggests that the viability of these neighborhoods is to some degree dependent on the tribalistic instincts which are innate to human beings. And that leaves open the possibility that a community's moral order might foster discrimination against an outsider. As Michael Sandel has acknowledged, "To accord the political community a stake in the character of its citizens is to concede the possibility that bad communities may form bad characters."<sup>1</sup> Ehrenhalt, on the other hand, is concerned with the effect of localism on the insider--those who live within the community. While the 1950's surely exemplified a moral consensus, the authority that undergirded that consensus was necessarily stifling to some. Strong community limited the possibilities, the parameters, for acceptable individual expression.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Ehrenhalt suggests, as many have, that the authoritarianism and conformist ethos of the 50's is the root cause for the strong counter-culture movement of the 60's. In short, then, while localism is vitally important, it's rebirth is not morally straightforward. Morally cohesive communities can also either stifle freedom or lead to its abuse. <sup>xviii</sup>

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The idea of neighborhoods as moral communities thus raises anew the fundamental liberal dynamic. Public advocates for civil society do not claim that their proposals are without risk. But the contemporary proliferation of “identity politics” and “rights talk” rests on the notion that freedom is the only consideration; order will take care of itself. These advocates are adamant that this idea is far more dangerous. By abjuring any concern for the political counterweights to freedom and individuality, Americans undermine those very goals. Freedom is only possible if there is some minimal moral agreement, and some legitimate authority to enforce that agreement. Popenoe and Ehrenhalt combine to present a fair characterization of the public debate. There are trade-offs in any society, and despite the contemporary ethos, these trade-offs cannot be ignored. A healthy liberal society requires a balance between freedom and authority, pluralism and consensus. All public advocates affirm the civil rights tradition in American politics, but equally fundamental is the idea that this tradition is, on its own, inadequate to ground a well-ordered democratic society.

### *Religion*

Religious organizations--churches, mosques, synagogues, and the like--offer a third analytical contrast between the academic and public debates. To be sure, while the theoretical debate often downplays the relevance of religion, it rarely discounts that relevance completely. Whatever one wants civil society to do, it is hard to deny that religious institutions exemplify the concept of an effectively permanent institution formed by the voluntary action of independent yet like-minded individuals.<sup>1</sup> What's more, it is equally hard to dispute that churches both inculcate and reinforce a set of social virtues and act as independent loci of political power. Indeed, theorists often even acknowledge a long historical legacy of religious institutions standing up (often alone) against the state's centralizing tendencies. But despite this affinity, there is still ample difference between the academic and the public discussion. The latter goes farther than simply to affirm the idea that religious institutions are part of civil society, or even to claim that religion is a bulwark of social morality. Rather, that discussion often maintains that religion's ability to foster a commitment to virtue is both unique and indispensable. The public debate about civil society therefore has a far more affirmative assessment of religion, and is far more open to raising questions about the standing of religious belief and religious institutions in American culture.

Public advocates note that, for whatever reason, church attendance and the public standing of religious belief have declined in America over the past generation. More importantly, they contend that this trend is in some sense behind America's cultural crisis.

Adam Meyerson, editor of *Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship* writes that "the root cause of crime is spiritual."<sup>1</sup> William Schambra approvingly quotes an op-ed piece by the economist Glenn Loury which echoes the belief that religious institutions are indispensable. Loury denounces the moral breakdown of the inner city and calls for new "agencies of moral and cultural development." Schambra quotes Loury at length.<sup>xx</sup>

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The family and the church are primary among these. These institutions have too often broken down in the inner city....Yet these are the natural sources of legitimate moral teaching--indeed, the only sources. If those institutions are not restored, the behavioral problems of the ghetto will not be overcome.<sup>1</sup> <sup>xxi</sup>

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To be sure, not all civil society advocates would make this point so strongly, nor would they all agree that religion and the family are the only salient sources for moral instruction. But there is practically universal agreement about the claim that cultural and moral decay--in the inner city and throughout American society--is associated with the decline of religion in American culture, as there is about the related claim that religion must play an essential role in any cultural recovery.

The specific relationship between religion and the social problems of the inner city Loury outlines is not unique. Indeed, the prevailing attitude about religion and religious organizations is most clearly apparent when civil society advocates talk about the failures of the welfare state. In large part, their argument is that the welfare has failed because the federal government is too big and too distant to address the specific problems of poor individuals. But there is more to it than that. President Clinton, who has repeatedly appealed to communitarian and civil society themes, made reference to this belief in a speech to high school students in suburban Virginia.

“Don’t you believe,” he asked, “that if every kid in every difficult neighborhood in America were in a religious institution on weekends--a synagogue on Saturday, a church on Sunday, a mosque on Friday--don’t you really believe that the drug rate, the crime rate, the violence rate, the sense of self-destruction would go way down and the quality and character of the country would go way up?”<sup>1xxii</sup>

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Clinton reflects a commonly expressed belief among civil society advocates that there is at least a significant connection between religious belief and individual virtue, and that vibrant and widespread religious belief is part of a well-ordered, civil society.

There are, of course, substantive points of contention here. Specific proposals about what role religion ought to play in a democratic society raise a host of potentially polarizing questions. But it is enough in this context simply to note that the public discussion advances a more positive cultural role for religious belief and religious institutions. That means they wish to reexplore the explicitly religious roots which have traditionally defined our nation’s moral consensus. It also means they are generally less concerned about the oppressive tendencies sometimes associated with “civil religion.” For civil society advocates, the fear of religion--the fear which literally gave birth to liberal democratic society--is not the whole story. Here again, civil society advocates do not deny the concern; rather, they appeal again to the metaphor of balance. The idea that religion is so dangerous that it must be walled off from the public realm, that any accommodation to religion is opening the door to either religious tyranny or religious wars, greatly overstates the danger. More importantly, it obviates the indispensable benefits that religion brings to a society. These advocates therefore conclude that our nation’s cultural and moral crisis requires that we reassess the dangers, and reconsider the role of religion in American society.

### **Civil Society as Populist Traditionalism**

**Man is, by nature, the member of a community; and when considered in this capacity, the individual appears to be no longer made for himself. He must forego his happiness and his freedom, where these interfere with the good of society....He is only part of a whole. --Adam Ferguson**

The public conception of civil society is by no means exhausted by these three institutions. Advocates routinely cite voluntary associations, political parties, unions-- indeed, all the more organized, effectively permanent, interest-oriented groups which are common to the academic discussion. Yet while these other institutions are not ignored, the triumvirate of family, neighborhood and church clearly constitutes the focus of the public discussion of civil society. These institutions are universally judged most essential if American society is to achieve the goals of renewed civic virtue and cultural renewal. Having shown that the concept of civil society afoot in contemporary public discourse is distinct from the dominant academic discussion, I want in this last section to summarize the features of this movement. I also want to show that the introduction of this concept in public discourse represents something new on the American political scene.

*A Populist Movement*

The movement's focus on family, neighborhoods and churches highlights its distinctive brand of populism. To be sure, the basic idea that individuals ought to possess a degree of personal and group autonomy is endemic to the liberal-democratic discussion of civil society. Invariably, civil society manifests and enables that autonomy.

It is understood to be what happens between 'regular folks' doing 'regular folks' kinds of things--union and PTA meetings, the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, etc. The public discussion simply expands that concept to include, and indeed highlight, more informal interactions like church picnics, chats with neighbors and family dinners. Regardless of which institutions are highlighted, however, the concept of civil society reflects the pluralism that liberals see as basic to the human condition and to the good society.

Insofar as this interaction works the way advocates hope, civil society is where respect for the wisdom of the people is validated. No one assumes that these interactions achieve the highest standards of theoretical discourses. But this is where democracy, and the virtues which are essential for democratic society, are taught and practiced. Elshtain frequently recalls the words of her parents and grandparents in order to explain herself. She does so not solely for the sake of filial piety, but to reinforce the idea that the basics of democratic life are wholly accessible, and often quite successfully articulated, by and through the everyday strivings of ordinary Americans. This respect is also expressed in the frequent claim that individuals families and neighborhoods are best able to determine their own interests.

But while the public conception echoes the concept's inherent populism, there is something unique here, as well. The institutions of civil society are valued because they ostensibly foster the democratic virtues of mutual respect and tolerance. But the public debate highlights informal interactions over institutions, interactions between neighbors or family members over Robert's Rules of Order. And while these interactions might well inculcate feelings of tolerance and respect, they are also likely to foster more intimate and primary feelings--camaraderie, warmth and even sacrifice. David Brooks has made the same point, "[t]he civil society movement...looks to local communities to provide moral renewal, not to elites...*But most important, the content of its morality is populist. It revolves around the day-to-day virtues involved in neighborliness, self-restraint, and childrearing.*"<sup>1</sup> These 'day-to-day virtues' are not in conflict with, but are surely different from the civic virtues commonly associated with the concept of civil society. To say the least, they expand and enrich the definition of what citizenship entails. The advocates ultimate goal is a renewed sense of the common good; these virtues, and the institutions through which they are most fully inculcated, are understood to be essential means to that end. Because these virtues are even more intimately associated with the everyday life of citizens, the public civil society debate is thus even more ardently populist in its basic orientation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

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#### *A Traditionalist Movement*

However it is articulated, civil society within the liberal-democratic tradition concerns a set of social institutions that are understood to be essential to democratic life. Almost always, theorists believe these institutions need to be either preserved or restored, rather than introduced. This concern for the preservation of essential social institutions thus reveals an inherent and almost ubiquitous conservatism. But here again, there is something unique about the public debate.

The ardent call for a community and consensus which incorporates, transcends, and thus reigns in the individual; the belief that freedom is more a matter of shared governance and responsibility than unbounded individual expression; the belief that the prerequisites for a well-ordered society require a sense of commitment that extends beyond self-interest; the fear that changes in traditional social institutions will unintentionally endanger society's essential foundations--these are the objectives associated with the public debate about civil society, and they reflect a conservative heritage and disposition that ultimately goes back to 18th and 19th century Europe. It is more consistent with a society steeped in the social systems of the aristocracy and the feudal order, and with social critics who decry the impact of democracy and market economy on those institutions. The concern for, even embrace of, tradition is a fairly common cultural dynamic, and Civic Republicans and Communitarians have expressed these and similar beliefs in the academy. But this heritage represents something new in modern American politics.

American experience is singularly oriented by the future, the next frontier. Modern American conservatism whole-heartedly affirmed this forward-looking ethos. It was epitomized by Ronald Reagan's campaign theme, "It's morning in America." To be sure, Reagan's new federalism, and Bush's celebrated "thousand points of light" articulated a distrust of government, and the belief that a people liberated of government domination would be more productive and perhaps even more moral. Nevertheless, these themes were cut to the cloth of a modernist faith in progress, dynamic capitalism and the Cold War. Again in David Brooks' words, Notice how civil-society theory differs from the conservative ideology of the 1980s. In the Reagan years, the virtues of the entrepreneur were celebrated--audacity, high ambition, self-sufficiency. And since it was the climax of the Cold War, conservatives celebrated the virtues of the combatant courage, steadfastness, might and pride...It was a worldview in which competition was thought to bring out the best in people.<sup>1xxiv</sup>

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The ardent call for a community and consensus which incorporates, transcends, and thus reigns in the individual; the belief that freedom is more a matter of shared governance and responsibility than unbounded individual expression; the belief that the prerequisites for a well-ordered society require a sense of commitment that extends beyond self-interest; the fear that changes in traditional social institutions will unintentionally endanger society's essential foundations--these are the objectives associated with the public debate about civil society, and they reflect a conservative heritage and disposition that ultimately goes back to 18th and 19th century Europe. It is more consistent with a society steeped in the social systems of the aristocracy and the feudal order, and with social critics who decry the impact of democracy and market economy on those institutions. The concern for, even embrace of, tradition is a fairly common cultural dynamic, and Civic Republicans and Communitarians have expressed these and similar beliefs in the academy. But this heritage represents something new in modern American politics.

American experience is singularly oriented by the future, the next frontier. Modern American conservatism whole-heartedly affirmed this forward-looking ethos. It was epitomized by Ronald Reagan's campaign theme, "It's morning in America." To be sure, Reagan's new federalism, and Bush's celebrated "thousand points of light" articulated a distrust of government, and the belief that a people liberated of government domination would be more productive and perhaps even more moral. Nevertheless, these themes were cut to the cloth of a modernist faith in progress, dynamic capitalism and the Cold War. Again in David Brooks' words,

Notice how civil-society theory differs from the conservative ideology of the 1980s. In the Reagan years, the virtues of the entrepreneur were celebrated--audacity, high ambition, self-sufficiency. And since it was the climax of the Cold War, conservatives celebrated the virtues of the combatant courage, steadfastness, might and pride...It was a worldview in which competition was thought to bring out the best in people.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of community and mutual accountability which is so basic to civil society advocates is more indebted to Burke than it is to Reagan; its focus on the prerequisites for a free and democratic social order resonates not with neo-conservatism, but with classic European traditionalism. In very different ways, both Democrats and Republicans reflect the overriding American concern for, and faith in, freedom as end in itself. Both parties, therefore, are struggling to incorporate this way of thinking into their policies and platforms; it is easily reconciled with neither identity politics and welfare-state liberalism, nor with the legacies of Reagan's revolution. The civil society movement brings an understanding of conservatism, and indeed, an understanding of society and the individual, which is new to the contemporary American political scene.

*Two essential terms*

The key terms of traditionalism and populism identify the uniqueness of the public discussion of civil society in America. But the very combination of these terms further testifies to that uniqueness. For even if the traditionalist element is properly characterized as European, these ideas have been altered significantly in the translation. The idea that these goals can be achieved through the mundane, even middling world of ordinary people is uniquely American. The European model of conservatism is normally professed as part of the *noblesse oblige*. The “little platoons” that Burke celebrated, and to which civil society advocates repeatedly refer, were under the tutelage of the aristocrat who exercised dominion over his or her little corner of English society. There is, to be sure, an element of populism which one can find in Burke and other representatives of European conservatism. Nevertheless, there is also a strong paternalistic element--a notion that this movement to preserve community must begin at the top of society. This paternalism is antithetical to the American experience.

Similarly, the European model does not profess the ardent distrust of the state which is also seemingly innate to American souls. The sense of community that these Europeans see as both factual and essential is further manifested and facilitated by the state: the state is the head of the national community. Americans will have none of this. If there is to be some kind of renewed sense of civic community, not only will that sense not come from the state, it will have to come from institutions that are largely distinct from the state. Indeed, the resolute populism associated with the civil society movement means that this sense will ultimately have to come from the people themselves.

The civil society movement is inherently conservative, focused on restoring the cultural prerequisites for a free and ordered society. But while the concern for order predominates, the combination of populism and traditionalism illustrates that both sides of that tension are operative. Populist traditionalism is the uneasy combination of democratic and aristocratic ways of thinking. Despite its aristocratic disposition and lineage, this combination reveals that the public debate about civil society is firmly rooted in the liberal tradition. It is yet another representation of the liberal project--the effort to combine freedom and order, rights and responsibilities, pluralism and consensus. This effort also fairly characterizes the liberal-democratic project known as the American experiment. The fact that the civil society movement is driven by a feeling of impending crisis illustrates that despite its 200 year history, that experiment cannot be regarded as successfully completed.

Scrap:

Let me give an example of what I mean. Ernest Gellner's book on civil society is called *Conditions of Liberty*. This title reveals, in no uncertain terms, that he understands civil society to both manifest and preserve the political and cultural freedom that is the unique, and to Gellner's mind, rather astonishing achievement of liberal-democratic society. Thus, a civil society *is* the kind of society that has achieved political freedom and that freedom is manifested and maintained by voluntary organizations; just so, the *function* of these organizations is to maintain an independent locus of political power which helps preserve political freedom. In short, the analytical and functional dimension of civil society are inseparable.

This understanding of the purpose of civil society determines the specifics of his analytical conception as well. Gellner maintains that the success of civil society rests on the ability of human beings to move beyond organic ties to "highly specific, unsanctified, instrumental, revocable links or bonds..."<sup>1</sup> His conception of civil society is thus constituted by permanent, structured institutions, formed by individuals with a common interest. Other possible examples of civil society, like families and informal interactions between neighbors, are effectively if not explicitly excluded. For examples like these do not fall within the parameters of Gellner's functional conception. I am not out to take issue with that conception; my objective is rather to illustrate a universal point. Since the commonly accepted analytical dimensions of the concept are insufficient, any analytical refinement is going to depend on the theorist's understanding of what function civil society plays in society, what social goods it produces. In a word, then, civil society is what civil society does, or, to speak more normatively, what you want civil society to do. <sup>xxv</sup>

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Gellner's use of the term is in some ways unique; his use of the term strongly recalls the ancient understanding of civil society as meaning a society which is civil.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, his use of the concept also resonates with the common understanding.

Robert Putnam's now famous piece, "Bowling Alone," for example, recounts dramatic declines in participation in a host of civic institutions, including volunteer groups (e.g., the Red Cross), social organizations (The Boy Scouts or Elks Club), unions, churches, political parties and neighborhood groups, and ties this decline to a less trusting, less neighborly society.<sup>6</sup>

Recall the basic syllogism behind the public concept of civil society: 1. Our society is either in or is approaching a state of crisis which is fundamentally moral in character. 2. For a democracy, a moral consensus is inculcated through face-to-face interactions, which are in turn enabled by a set of interconnecting, mutually reinforcing institutions. 3. Therefore, these institutions are themselves essential to addressing the problems in contemporary democratic society. This core proposition is behind the features of what is, and what is not, included in civil society. Together, they combine to produce a very specific and distinct conception of human beings and human society.

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<sup>5</sup> This difference, which as I noted, is not uncommon among British theorists, may reflect the ongoing influence of Adam Ferguson within the Anglo tradition of political thought.

<sup>6</sup> "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Robert D. Putnam, *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 1 (January 1995). The importance of Putnam's piece is represented by the voluminous criticism it has generated. Many have challenged the basic thesis that American civic engagement has indeed declined. I simply want to point out that the importance of Putnam's piece can be traced to its ability to provide empirical support for the intuitive unease outlined above. Putnam's piece is a place for these people to hang their hat, so to speak; it likewise provides a ready-made public agenda.

Within such an understanding, human beings are not conceived of simply as disconnected individuals seeking to maximize utility. Instead, human beings are understood to be innately social--they don't just need society, they want it, and feel incomplete without it. Indeed, their sense of self, much of their life's meaning and purpose, is tied up with their social existence. Similarly, society is not merely a contract, nor is it simply a series of procedural mechanisms designed to adjudicate competing interests. For these advocates, a society is defined and identified by a certain set of reigning ideas, and those ideas must inevitably include a shared conception of the public good. Therefore, the democratic society is properly understood as a shared enterprise, a political community--the beliefs and values that people share are reflected in the institutions of the state and the culture. Citizens identify with those institutions in ways that are not simply, or even primarily, rational. And, through that identification, citizens also come to identify with their fellow citizens.

and is captured in a number of very evocative metaphors. Elshtain speaks of the "web" of social institutions, "a thickly interwoven social fabric." She also describes the family as "nested in a wider network of social institutions."<sup>xxvii</sup> Perhaps the most common metaphor to refer to this idea is "social ecology." As Alan Wolfe makes clear, the idea that there is a rough similarity between natural and social environments provides civil society advocates with yet another powerful conceptual tool.

When something goes wrong in a natural ecology, the result can be a vicious cycle; one species, losing its usual source of food, turns to a different prey, which then adversely affects another natural balance, and so on. The same kind of vicious cycle can be the result of the complex interdependence in social life. As families weaken we ask the schools to carry out tasks once thought as properly familial.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Wolfe, "Social and Natural Ecologies: Similarities and Differences," in Glendon and Blankenhorn, eds, *Seedbeds of Virtue*, p. 166.

Elshtain's language, and the concept of social ecology more broadly construed, evinces an unwillingness to consider social institutions in isolation. The problems that plague American society are fundamentally cultural problems; they manifest the inadequate transmission of a common set of social norms and virtues. This condition may well center on the family, but to focus on the family--or indeed any social institution--in isolation, is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of those problems. Just so, diagnosis and treatment for this cultural condition must stress this interrelated dimension.

and which presents something new to the American political landscape. I want to close by offering a quick caricature of this. As this concept has ingratiated itself within the political debate,

This unique concept also presents something But because this public debate has achieved such a can be fairly characterized as a political movement, it is fair to ask what this unique understanding of civil society says about . (wait. does talking about the goal lead you to the analytical side, which in turn leads you to, what? the concept as a whole? Is there an adjective which describes this side? What else could you call it? Now I am thinking the best thing to do is to cut it out. We are just talking about how it differs. But not entirely, the discussion about conservatism says that this is something new on the scene in American politics as well.)

Michael Joyce gleefully tauts the election of 1994 as the rejection of elite (read, 'liberal') forces, and equates the new citizenship movement with a resurgent conservatism.

Americans are eager to seize control of their daily lives again--to make critical life choices for themselves, based on their own common sense and folk wisdom--to assume once again the status of proud, independent, self-governing citizens intended for them by the Founders.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Finally, the concept of civil society is populist because it affirms a smaller scale of human meaning. Behind the animadversions against government bureaucrats and an amorphous elite is the feeling that the individual gets lost, and loses any feeling of significance, if he or she is but one of millions. In the smaller settings of a family, neighborhood or voluntary association, the ability of the individual to find meaning and purpose is dramatically enhanced. By affirming the importance of face to face interactions, these advocates thus also affirm the importance of the people doing the interacting.

Coleman wanted to bridge the gap between the individualistic rationality of economics, and the deterministic social forces often associated with sociology. Both insights were valid, he argued, although both were independently insufficient. The idea of social capital, therefore, sought to bridge the gap--“to import the economists’ principle of rational action for use in the analysis of social systems proper...without discarding social organization in the process.”<sup>8</sup>

Civil society is a concept that has been around for centuries, even millennia. But certainly during the last two hundred years, there has been little agreement between discussants. Suddenly, in a period of less than a decade, the concept not only breaks through the confines of academia to enter public debate, but also develops a unique conceptual clarity and an unified expression that is quite amazing.

<sup>i.</sup> The literature is voluminous and ever-increasing. See for example Eba Rana Bellin, *Civil Society Emergent: State and Social Classes in Tunisia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); John W. Harbeson, Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, eds., *Civil Society and the State in Africa*, (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994); Zbigniew Rau, ed., *The Reemergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Yang Mayfair Mei-hui, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994)

<sup>ii.</sup> Arato and Cohen, for example, complain that “[p]resent-day political models that use the concept of civil society not only contradict one another but are also relatively poor in categories.” Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, *Civil Society and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 83. Nancy Rosenblum similarly acknowledges that “[t]here is no single, systematic theory of the relation between liberal government an civil society....” Nancy L. Rosenblum, “Civil Societies: Liberalism and the

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<sup>8</sup> James Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 Supplement (1988), S97.

Moral Uses of Pluralism,” *Social Research*, 61, 3 (Fall, 1994): 539.

iii. David Miller, general editor, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 77.

iv. Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Penguin Books, 1994); Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of A Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); John Keane, ed., *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London: Verso, 1988); Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, *Civil Society and Democratic Theory* and Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

v. Putnam describes the importance of these organizations in, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

vi. I have in mind the usual suspects: Michael Sandel, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Robert Putnam. Others who might qualify include Michael Walzer, Benjamin Barber, and Alan Wolfe.

vii. Robert Putnam cites polling data which shows that “the proportion of Americans who socialize with their neighbors has slowly but steadily declined over the last two decades, from 61 percent in 1974 to 47 percent in 1994.” See his, “Bowling Alone, Revisited” *The Responsive Community*, 5, 2 (Spring, 1995): 28. Polling data about the decline in concern is quoted in Bill Bradley, “America’s Challenge: Revitalizing our National Community,” *National Civil Review*, 84, 2 (Spring, 1995): 94

viii. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by George Lawrence, ed. by J.P. Mayer (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p 513.

ix. The social and political impact of this feeling of crisis is, of course, hardly limited to the reemergence of civil society as a concept. It is also at the bottom of some fundamental political shifts in this country, including the rise of religious conservatism, the wide-spread cynicism expressed in and toward politics, and, similarly, the decline in party identification. Whatever else might account for these conditions, they surely can be understood as reactions to an deep and pervasive uneasiness about the condition of American society and American culture, and the apparent inability of politics to significantly alter this condition.

x. My objectives for this paper are primarily descriptive. But I have argued elsewhere that restoring the institutions of civil society is necessary but insufficient; a well-ordered democratic polity also requires a rough agreement on a basic set of moral propositions. See my “Civil is not Good Enough,” *The Responsive Community*, 6, 2 (July 1996).

xi. Dan Coats, “Re-funding Our ‘Little-Platoons,’” in *Policy Review: A Journal of American Citizenship*, 75 (January/February, 1996): 25.

xii. Mary Ann Glendon, “Forgotten Questions,” in Mary Ann Glendon and David Blankenhorn, eds, *Seedbeds of Virtue: Sources of Competence, Character and Citizenship in American Society* (New York: Madison Books, 1995), p. 2.

xiii. Bill Bradley, “America’s Challenge: Revitalizing our National Community,” p.96.

xiv. Robert Putnam, “Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28, 4 (December, 1995): 665.

xv. David Popenoe, “The Roots of Declining Social Virtue: Family, Community, and the Need for a “Natural Communities Policy,” in Glendon and Blankenhorn, eds, *Seedbeds of Virtue*, p. 73.

xvi. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Marriage and Civil Society,” *Family Affairs*, Vol. 6, 1 (Spring, 1996): 4.

xvii. David Popenoe, “The Roots of Declining Social Virtue,” pp. 97, 94, 98. It is interesting and perhaps significant that Popenoe’s concern is made most forcefully by one of the patron saints of the civil society movement, Adam Ferguson. As part of the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment, Ferguson argued that the virtues of community and union are ultimately inseparable from animosity and separation. “[O]ur attachment to one division, or to one sect, seems often to derive much of its force from an animosity conceived to an opposite one: and this animosity in its turn, as often arises from a zeal in behalf of the side we espouse...” *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, edited by Fania Oz-Salzberger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 21.

- <sup>xviii.</sup> Alan Erhenhalt, *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s*, New York: Basic Books, 1995.
- <sup>xix.</sup> Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of A Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), p. 321.
- <sup>xx.</sup> James Luther Adams rightly qualifies the claim that church membership is "voluntary." Within the Christian tradition, this notion includes significant theological presuppositions which are more commensurate with a Protestant understanding of church. See his "Mediating Structures and the Separation of Powers," in Michael Novak (ed.), *Democracy and Mediating Structures: A Theological Inquiry* (Washington D.C.: A.E.I. Press, 1980), pp. 2-3.
- <sup>xxi.</sup> Adam Meyerson, "Letter to Our Readers," *Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship* 75 (January/February, 1996): 5.
- <sup>xxii.</sup> William Schambra, "By the People: the Old Values of the New Citizenship." *National Civic Review*, 84, 2 (Spring, 1995): 109. It is important to note that Loury's comments reinforce the idea that institutions of civil society serve to support the moral and cultural inculcation that takes place within the family.
- <sup>xxiii.</sup> Quoted in Dan Coats, "Project for American Renewal," p. 23.
- <sup>xxiv.</sup> David Brooks, "'Civil Society' And Its Discontents," *The Weekly Standard*, February 5, 1996, p. 20. Italics added.
- <sup>xxv.</sup> David Brooks, "'Civil Society' And Its Discontents," p. 18.
- <sup>xxvi.</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 100.
- <sup>xxvii.</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>xxviii.</sup> Speech to Heritage Foundation, December, 1992. Quoted in William Schambra, "By the People: the Old Values of the New Citizenship." *National Civic Review*, 84, 2 (Spring, 1995): 101.