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The Paradox of Civil Society

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Paradox of Civil Society

Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards (bio)

The “civil society argument,” as Michael Walzer calls it, is actually a complex set of arguments, not all of which are congruent.¹ In the rough pastiche that has become the commonly accepted version, a “dense

network of civil associations” is said to promote the stability and effectiveness of the democratic polity through both the effects of association on citizens’ “habits of the heart” and the ability of associations to mobilize citizens on behalf of public causes. Emergent civil societies in Latin America and Eastern Europe are credited with effective resistance to authoritarian regimes, democratizing society from below while pressuring authoritarians for change. Thus civil society, understood as the realm of private voluntary association, from neighborhood committees to interest groups to philanthropic enterprises of all sorts, has come to be seen as an essential ingredient in both democratization and the health of established democracies.

Thus summarized, the argument leaves many questions unanswered. Some of these are definitional, arising from the different ways in which civil society has been applied in various times and places. Does it, for instance, include business (“the market”) as well as voluntary organizations, or does the market constitute a separate, “private” sphere? If we exclude the market, should we nevertheless include economic associations—trade groups, professional organizations, labor unions, and the like? What about political organizations? Does it make sense, following Antonio Gramsci, to distinguish “civil” from “political” society? If so, **[End Page 38]** how are we to distinguish between political associations per se and the political activities of groups in civil society, from interest groups to religious bodies, which are intermittently mobilized in pursuit of political goals?² Just when does the “civil” become the “political”?

Beyond such definitional concerns, there is also the elusive character of the relationship between “civil society” and democratic governance. Just how is it that associations formed among individuals produce the large-scale political and social benefits postulated by the civil society argument? Is the cultivation of “habits of the heart” that encourage tolerance, cooperation, and civic engagement the key? If so, under which circumstances and forms of small-scale interaction are these effects likely to appear? If, as some hold, civil society’s chief virtue is its ability to

act as an organized counterweight to the state, to what extent can this happen without the help of political parties and expressly political movements? Finally, what prevents civil society from splitting into warring factions (a possibility that theorists since Hegel have worried about) or degenerating into a congeries of rent-seeking “special interests”? What is it about civil society, in other words, that produces the benevolent effects posited by the civil society argument?

In attempting to answer these questions, it might be useful to make a rough distinction between two broad versions of the “civil society argument.” The first version is crystallized in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, with important antecedents in the work of the eighteenth-century “Scottish moralists,” including Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Francis Hutcheson. This approach puts special emphasis on the ability of associational life in general and the habits of association in particular to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity. We shall call this family of arguments “Civil Society I.” The second version, articulated most forcefully by Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik, and their associates in formulating a strategy for resistance to Poland’s communist regime in the 1980s, is also evident in recent literature on processes of “redemocratization” in Latin America. This argument, which we call “Civil Society II,” lays special emphasis on civil society as a sphere of action that is independent of the state and that is capable—precisely for this reason—of energizing resistance to a tyrannical regime.

It might already be apparent that there is a degree of contradiction between “Civil Society I” and “Civil Society II,” for while the former postulates the positive effects of association for governance (albeit *democratic* governance), the latter emphasizes the importance of civil association as a counterweight to the state. There is no reason in principle why the “counterweight” of civil society should not...



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