Progress and disillusion: Civil repair and its discontents

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Abstract

Civil Sphere Theory (CST) provides a more dynamic, cultural, and democratically oriented model of contemporary society than either conflict or modernization theory. Civil spheres expand and contract in contradictory ways. Utopian periods of utopian repair trigger defensive efforts that primordialize and exclude. Late 20th century civil repair generated new relations of economic production and more multicultural modes of integration. Early 21rst century reactions have highlighted dangers, demanding more cultural homogeneity amidst rising concerns about inequality. There is increasing disillusionment about the possibility for democratic progress.

In 1968, as the arc of postwar progress reached its high point, Raymond Aron published *Progress and Disillusion*. An alternative to the naive huzzas about modernization emerging from the new world, the worldly-wise French thinker offered a complex cautionary tale of troubled prospects from the old (Aron, 1968). Events in the decade after proved him prescient.

A quarter century later, in the reflected sunshine of '1989', prospects for modernity once again looked bright, and not only in Europe. Fundamental conflicts between the economic systems of capitalism and communism, and the political systems of dictatorship and democracy, seemed on the way to resolution. The lasting triumph of civil

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society in both its economic and political forms was proclaimed. Left-wing dictatorships were dissolving, perhaps even in China, and right-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Africa were folding up. For the first time, democratic government penetrated beyond Western Europe and North America. Consumer capitalism was transforming intergroup relations, individual lifestyles, and mass culture, creating an object-saturated environment of mobility and aspiration. Class politics was on the decline. In the UK there was New Labour; in the US, New Democrats; on the Continent, market socialism. The politics of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality set the agenda, economic divisions appearing remarkably less salient. In the post-Holocaust era, anti-Semitism was withering, along with other religious stigmata. In a post-civil rights era, imperialism was being dismantled and racism was under fire. Difference defined a new mode of incorporation (Alexander, 2001). Homogeneity was out, multiculturalism in. Post-nationalism dominated the political imagination, with Europe rapidly expanding and increasingly integrating on the ground. Underpinned by the emergence of internet technology, globalization seemed certain to usher in a new era of cooperation, prosperity, and human rights. Talk of a new world order was in the air.

A quarter century later still, the roseate glow has faded to grey, and dark clouds mark the horizon. The world has turned. In the place of high hopes, there is a bitter taste of disappointment. Confidence that social strains can be repaired has weakened and, in many quarters, there is a growing sense of despair. In Europe, multiculturalism has become a term of denigration. A ferocious backlash against Muslim immigration builds (Alexander, 2013a) and public violence against Jews is on the rise. In the US and in the UK, anxieties about economic inequality have skyrocketed, with safety nets becoming threadbare. Civil society has been crushed in Russia and China, and in Hungary and Poland it is being sharply confined.

At the turn of the millennium, the Western *conscience collective* breathed a sigh of relief, saying 'good riddance' to the short 20th century: RIP 1914–1989. Bathed in war and genocide, it had been the bloodiest of modern times. Today it is less clear that the horrors of the previous century are behind us. Might contemporary societies fragment and polarize, with dictatorship, bigotry, and militarism following in their wake? Is pessimism justifiable, let alone resignation and despair?

The inadequacy of sociological theories

A new realism must be brought to bear. Lenin remarked that nothing is so practical as a good theory. To understand the centrifugal forces that threaten contemporary societies globally, regionally, and nationally, and the possibilities for countering them, we need an effective organizing framework, a macro-sociological theory that is systematic, but flexible and open to contingency; general, but responsive to the specificity of divergent social domains; historical, but not historicist, eschewing linear post-isms, such as post-Fordist, postmodern, post-industrial.

Contemporary social science is ill-equipped. Since the fall of Parsons, general thinking about society has been dismissed as pretentiously grand. Postfunctionalist theorizing split into micro and macro (Alexander, 1987). The former opened up worlds of negotiation, emotion, and interpretation, but the latter focused narrowly on conflict, materiality, and domination. The theorizing of such figures as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, and Ulrich Beck found fertile ground in the

breakdown of mid-century consensus, but it was unprepared for the reinvigoration of democracy and capitalism in the 1980s, much less for the outbreak of cooperation and reintegration that marked the post-1989 world. Impatient with idealism and cynical about reconstruction, such macro-theorizing could not conceptualize civil repair, how tears in the social fabric, which stroke fear and anxiety, can be sewn back up.

Hermeneutics and post-structuralism have transformed the human sciences over the last four decades, and there has been a profound cultural shift within sociology itself. But conflict theory has adamantly resisted the cultural turn and, with the exception of Alain Touraine's later writing (Touraine, 1997), has also steered clear of the extraordinary revival of normative democratic theory. Thinking about the return of civil society and its recent discontents has been confined to political science. Sociological theory has kept these critical issues at arm's length. But disillusionment is traumatic, and social reconstruction requires trust. New meanings must be created for moral responsibility to be taken and for solidarity to be expanded in democratic ways (Eyerman et al., 2011; Alexander, 2016).

Faced with the limitations of conflict theorizing, the idea of modernity, discredited in its functionalist form a generation ago, has been revived (e.g. Wagner, 2012). Yet, while post-'89 societies certainly have understood themselves as 'modernizing', the intellectual traction of modernization theory is decidedly limited. Disillusionment has occurred, not despite but because of the forces of economic, political, and cultural modernization. The idea of modernity as a delineated social process is too general; it fails to illuminate the concrete institutional and cultural motors of contemporary life, the divergences among national and regional pathways, the specifics of social strain, the propulsive backlash movements that challenge progressive change, and the divergent pathways of civil repair. A child of the enlightenment, modernization theory devotes itself to progress, not disillusion, conceptualizing the dark side of modernity in only residual ways.

Modernization theory sometimes speaks of values, but it has incorporated neither the spirit nor the letter of the cultural turn. That social processes are implanted in simplifying moral codes, that symbolic binaries project pollution and protect purity – such a sensibility is broadly absent from theories of the modern. Lip service is paid to culture, but the concepts and findings of cultural sociology are overlooked. Nations, regions, and quite possibly even civilizations are shaped and propelled by overarching social narratives. These stories must be hermeneutically reconstructed if the roads that lead to crisis and trauma, and the pathways leading out of them, are to be clearly understood. Contemporary societies are as traditional and primitive as they are modern and advanced. Social action is performative, not only practical.

To create an effective understanding of progress and disillusion, we need social theory that avoids the Scylla of endless conflict and the Charybdis of redeeming modernization; that is deeply rooted in democratic theory but avoids the institutionalism of political science; that makes the cultural turn but avoids the resistance to explanation and concept formation that has undermined postmodern thought.

Civil sphere theory

Civil sphere theory (CST) provides an alternative (Alexander, 2006). The civil sphere is at once aspirational and institutional, an idealized community imagined in every nation and civilization but instantiated, in 'real civil societies', in necessarily partial ways.

In the idealized civil sphere, individual autonomy and collective obligation are intertwined. Cultural codes sustain the democratic motives and relationships that allow civil spheres to be responsive and incorporative. Outside this solidary sphere are economy, state, religion, family, and ethnic life. While they have particularistic, *non*-civil values and interests, they are not necessarily *anti*-civil. They can provide facilitating inputs to the civil sphere and aid the project of civil repair. Inside the civil sphere are communicative and regulative institutions. Old journalism and new media interpret and criticize ongoing events and the actors who make them; and regulative institutions, such as law and voting, employ sanctions and rewards to concretize these interpretations, exercising control over state bureaucracies and the revenues that sustain them.

This inspiring picture resembles the world as projected *circa* 1989. Real civil spheres, however, can never sustain such a harmonious state (Alexander, 1998). CST conceptualizes a dynamic situation of punctuated equilibrium and de-civilizing breakdown, modeling a world filled with contingencies and strains that belies the normative idea of steady state. Plural spheres are difficult to align. Economic, religious, and ethnic pressures are often not just non-civil but anti-civil; they enter deeply into the civil sphere, distorting its utopian promises, creating destructive intrusions difficult to repair. Sometimes social movements are rallying efforts to expand the civil sphere and gain inclusion; just as frequently, however, they are backlash efforts to narrow solidarity and create exclusions. The discourse of civil society is binary. To recognize rationality, we need to understand irrationality; for honesty, deceit; for openness, secrecy; for autonomy, dependence; for freedom, slavery. The discourse of civil society stigmatizes some people and groups as evil, as threatening and anti-civil, even as it purifies others as democratic and good. When social strains intensify, the dark exclusionary side of the civil sphere becomes dangerously flammable (Alexander, 2013b). Primordial inwardness – religious, ethnic, racial – is evoked to justify a community's democratic institutions. Economic inequality is defended as preserving liberty. Authoritarian policies are represented as essential for protecting the boundaries of the civil sphere itself.

CST models both conflict and equilibrium; it portrays the tense intertwining of emancipation and repression, contradiction and resolution (Alexander, 2015). Civil sphere theory has informed investigations of nationalism (Wood and Debs, 2013) and ethnic and immigration conflicts in Europe (Trondman et al., 2012; Trondman, 2016; Lund, 2013); pushbacks against multicultural incorporation in the US (Jaworsky, 2013, 2017; Voyer, 2013); polarization and civil war in Latin America (Tognato, 2010, 2011); indigenous peoples and genocide in Canada (Woods 2016); apartheid and reconciliation in South Africa (Goodman, 2008); economy and state in East Asia (Lee, 2012); the surge and decline of the Arab Spring (Khosrokhavar, 2012, 2015; Alexander, 2011); war (Smith, 2005); race riots (Jacobs, 2000); terrorism (Alexander, 2004); economic inequality (Strand, 2017); and the racial underclass (Ostertag, 2017).

The pendulum swings toward liberty

The 1980s witnessed an extraordinary revivification of utopian hope for the civil sphere. The Polish Solidarity movement triggered nonviolent grass-roots movements that destroyed state communism as ideology and institution. Perestroika promised a civil

society inside the Soviet Union; soon after, the Soviet empire disbanded and the Russian Communist Party was severely regulated. In China, the rising spirit of democracy crystallized in the massive June 4th movement, which left the central power structure straitened and uncertain. In Britain and the US during the 1908s, a new right surged to political and ideological power, which put European social democracy and American liberalism on the run. Nonetheless, during this same decade non-governmental and grass-roots movements exploded; rights for minorities were increasingly institutionalized (Schudson, 1998: 240–93); demands for accountability and transparency mushroomed; lawsuits against governments were unleashed; whistleblowers emerged; and a new monitory journalism thrived (Schudson, 2015).

Such radical reconstructions of the boundary between civil sphere and state were inspired by the newly energized discourse of civil society – the fervent faith in individual autonomy, a renewed confidence that rational people could create social order on their own terms, without state intervention, via cooperation and trust. Notes chiming individual freedom rang loudly, the collectivist registers of civil society discourse were submerged.

New relations of production

The 'new philosophy', as the French called it, overflowed into the economic boundary of the civil sphere, deeply affecting society's relation to markets and not only to states. Libertarian dreams for economic actors, not just citizens, were energized. Private property and free markets would create not only great wealth but free individuals. In Poland, Leopold von Wiese was everywhere. In the US and the UK, Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand dominated the economic conversation; on the continent, market socialism replaced dreams of nationalization. Removing state shackles from capitalist economies – deregulation in policy, neoliberal in ideology – was the new order of the day.

In the *longue durée* of industrial capitalism from the mid-19th to the late middle of the 20th century, free markets had slowly but seemingly inexorably become construed as destructive intrusions into the solidarity that sustained Western civil spheres (Strand, 2017). In response, what T.H. Marshall (1950) called the social dimensions of citizenship were put into place, elements which constrained and regulated the free actions of capitalists and managers vis-à-vis land, labor, and indeed capital itself. In the 1980s, this secular movement of social protectionism was fundamentally challenged, ideologically and institutionally, by civil society movements that fervently demanded the roll-back of the state, not only from its regulation of political but also economic life. In that decade and the next, state regulation of economic life came to be broadly conceived as anti-civil, as stifling the individual autonomy, creativity, and critical rationality that are central elements of democratic life.

While the broad movement toward de-regulation was fueled by the revivification of civil society, it also affected the non-civil sphere of economic life, deeply transforming its internal structures. Relations of production were shifted: the legal and institutional integuments of the capitalist mode of production now facilitated the forces of capitalist production that had remained much less visible until that time. Marx believed that the contradiction between the expanding forces and constricting relations of capitalist production would destroy capitalism, with revolution and socialism the necessary results. The opposite actually occurred. In the 1980s and '90s, an unshackled free market

capitalism ushered in the revolution in the organic composition of capital – the ratio of intellectual to physical capital – that Marx had clearly foreseen (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 762–873). The costs of production plummeted, the possibilities for consumption soared, recreation replaced labor as existential focus, the manual working class shrank drastically, and the lifestyle of the new middle class became the focus of capitalist life.

For most of the next two decades, capitalist economies soared: GNP tripled, stock markets grew exponentially, China industrialized. Industrial capitalism gave way to the information age. Computerization, digitalization, Silicon Valley, global cities and global finance took flight. Alongside the new language of start-ups, venture capital, and virtual reality, there was a bevy of new billionaires.

New modes of integration

The revivified civil sphere also reconfigured its mode of integration, not only its boundaries with economy and state. Here, too, themes of individual liberation prevailed against more collectively binding ties. Civil spheres in early democratic nations had been sharply exclusive; only white, wealthy, and Christian males composed the core groups that dominated civil life. As notions of radical exclusion gradually gave way to the idea of incorporation, individual members of economic, ethnic, racial, and gender out-groups were allowed entrance to the social center. However, they were required to leave their polluted qualities at the door. This was the homogenizing logic of assimilation: individuals could be incorporated, but not their qualities. Publicly, the styles, values, and modes of expression of the core group must be adopted as one's own.

In the last third of the 20th century, however, a new mode of incorporation emerged. With the coming of multiculturalism, the restrictive, assimilative mode of democratic incorporation gave way. Democratic discourse became less primordially defined. Differences from core groups became not just tolerated, but often revered. Civil discourse became less religious, less colored and gendered, and eventually less hetero-normative. In the age of the omnivore, the very distinction between core and out-group styles became occluded. Diversity being the new black, there were more shades of grey.

Demands to restrict lifestyle and self-expression to the norms of the dominant group lifted. The balance between individual autonomy and collective obligation changed. Coming out of the closet would make people both more civil and more free (Seidman, 2002).

The pendulum swings back to obligation

To the degree that the civil sphere expands in some directions, to that same degree it generates imminent criticisms of its one-sidedness; new movements emerge, some reactionary and others progressive, to control and even reverse the earlier change.

Critiques of economic inequality

By the early 2000s, the free flight of capitalist transformation began to create friction. Civil sphere and economy were rubbing against each other, and under the banner of solidarity, resistance to the new capitalism began heating up. Tellingly, the complaint was less about poverty than distribution. What was begrudged was that the stupendous increases in post-

industrial wealth were not being widely enough experienced. In an ideal civil community, costs and benefits must be shared, fairly if not equally. 'Justice as fairness', in Rawls' phrase: if we are equally humane and civil, then we have obligations to the collective and not only to ourselves. So, we must imagine ourselves in the position of others less fortunate for principles of distribution to be rightly established. But in the new economy, the incomes of the middle classes had become stuck. In the new gilded age of economic individualism, efforts by the privileged to imagine themselves back into Rawls' 'original position' fell away (Rawls, 1985).

Yet, rather than giving in, the ideals and institutions of the civil sphere fought back. Liberal economists documented the static real income of the middle class and the growing share of total wealth of the new capitalist elite. Intellectuals, columnists, religious figures, and trade union activists warned that this growing inequality threatened democracy, even if it produced spectacular economic effects. The growing chorus of criticism became turbocharged in response to the 2008 financial meltdown and the Great Recession in the years that followed. Attacks on greed and selfishness coursed through elite institutions and popular culture alike, with novels, films, and television narrating inhumane, diabolical, even vampire-like qualities in capitalist life. Occupy Wall Street translated this growing revulsion into the rhetoric of a populist new movement.

For the first time in decades, institutions were constructed to rein in Wall Street and regulate capital markets. Now, it was not the state regulations of the economy that were considered anti-civil, but free and unhampered markets themselves. The collective side of the discourse of civil society was reasserting itself. Presidents and Prime Ministers worried about, and railed against, the 'one percent', and offered policy plans for the civil repair of economic life. In 2015, even Republican presidential candidates were careful to campaign against the new inequality. The 'social question' was back on the agenda.

Critiques of multiculturalism

For the economy/civil sphere boundary, the revival of collective obligation was left leaning and 'progressive'. Vis-à-vis transformations in the mode of incorporation, by contrast, efforts to restore the collective dimensions of the civil sphere took more right-wing and reactionary forms (Alexander, 2013a; Jaworsky, 2017). Multiculturalism offered liberation and emancipation – from core group restrictions in race, religion, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. These new liberties eventually came to be seen as inherently civil qualities, as essential to the practice of democracy itself. When immigrants from Muslim regions became significant minorities in Europe, they were stigmatized as uncivil because of their opposition to Western forms of liberation. Civil emancipation became primordialized, conceptualized as qualities inherent to Western culture and therefore unavailable to Islamic groups. If immigrant groups were anti-feminist or anti-queer, they could not be civil in the modern European way. Europeans began rejecting multiculturalism, demanding assimilation to the contemporary manners and mores of the post-'60s core groups. This was the 'new primordiality'. Exclusion in defense of liberty is no vice.

Economic without political society

On the new frontiers of global modernity in China and Russia, the push back against the earlier revival of civil society focused on the boundary between civil sphere and state.

The totalitarian controls of communist times had been dramatically restricted, and citizens in both nations could exercise much more control over their own individual fates. They could live, work, and pray mostly wherever they wanted. Mobility was the individual's affair; a fairer relationship between effort and reward prevailed throughout most of post-communist social life. Private life was relatively free. Consumption and lifestyle became all concerning. Access to iconic market-produced objects defined the new middle classes; the dark side of the socialist workers paradise faded from the scene.

Even as such material-expressive possibilities expanded, however, critical reactions to the free market capitalism that facilitated them intensified. Inequality vastly increased, safety nets shredded, the natural environment degraded. Criticism mounted against the new oligarchs, the elite, the billionaires, the princelings, the new old boys – in the name of the universalist ideals of an imminent, if relatively invisible, civil sphere. The trouble was that the civil sphere could not exercise power against the state. Consumption and recreation and sex and gender were everywhere visible as forms of public expression. But public life in the civil sphere was shredded. The democratic discourse of civil society flowed through public opinion; it could anonymously crystallize on social media, but it could not be crystallized in institutional forms. The communicative and regulative institutions of civil society were strategically controlled.

Netizens expressed personal opinions, but moving from speech to association was prevented. In China, activist threads and memes quickly were disappeared (King et al., 2013), and grass-roots mobilizations were immediately shut down by party teams (Lee, 2013). Not only were communicative associations crippled, but opinion polls about controversial social issues were never revealed. Collective opinion could not be crystallized in public. Journalistic interpretations on television, radio, online and in print were carefully edited and controlled. Law was strengthened as a means of achieving control and regulation, as positive law, not as critical and rights-bearing. Elections – which in ideal terms create representatives of civil sphere opinion and place them in control of the state – were either shuttered or distorted. The institution of office was massively corrupted, and efforts to clean it up were designed to empower hand-picked party officials, not the members of the civil sphere themselves.

Is there a vital center?

Social change involves pendulum swings. Civil spheres became more powerful and intrusive, leave institutional and cultural deposits, but also weaken and contract. Boundaries between civil and non-civil spheres are battlegrounds. What institutional logic will gain more influence? Which standard of worth will prevail? How will civil worthiness be defined in the historical context of the present day?

What prevents the pendulum from swinging wildly in one direction, or can offer the hope of rebalancing it once again, is the possibility of a vital center (Schlesinger, 1949). Is there a common vision of the good society that can take the measure of social change and the frictions it causes in a democratic way? Can left and right, even as they struggle over power and interpretation, recognize that the other has civil qualities, at the very least in their followers' eyes? There are mosques in Berlin that open themselves up to the wider German public and engage in such contemporary constructions of civil behavior as

environmental and gender balance (Becker, 2015). There are ghetto schools in Sweden where principals excite civil aspirations in immigrant children, whose academic achievements expand in response (Trondman et al., 2012). There are municipalities in America that have doubled the minimum wage and CEOs who, after reading Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* have enlarged the economic lives of their employees.

In Paris, after the Charlie Hebdo murders, the civil sphere publicly manifested itself in energized rituals of democratic affirmation. In Russia, such demonstrations are greatly restricted and the cost is much higher. In China, they cannot exist at all. In the United States, Donald Trump tries to primordialize the American civil sphere. The civil sphere is a project, never fully realized. The vital center exists as much in the collective imagination as in institutions and the streets.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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