

INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICS

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Chapter 9

BRINGING DEMOCRACY BACK IN

Universalistic Solidarity and the Civil Sphere

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IN THE LAST 18 MONTHS, as one nation after another has embarked on the long and difficult road to a liberal and responsive social order, “democracy” has once again become a fashionable term. In sociology, this revival could lead to a disciplinary crisis, for about democracy contemporary sociology has precious little to say. When democracy was sociology’s concern, moreover, it was never successfully theorized.

In the days of the cold war, ironically perhaps, social scientists considered democracy to be something rather easily achieved, a heritage that the world deserved and would eventually receive. It was conceptualized as a necessary implication of the classical dichotomies that structured the field, of *Gesellschaft* as compared with *Gemeinschaft*, of modernity in contrast with traditionalism. We would become democratic by default, by virtue simply of our modernity. Systematic distinctions were rarely made within the concept of modernity itself. Nondemocratic societies were understood simply as not yet modern enough.

Two languages informed this postwar discourse. One stressed efficiency. Democracy was adaptive because it was flexible. Because it was flexible, it would survive. It was an evolutionary universal (Parsons 1963). The other vocabulary was taken from the voluntary rationality of the Enlightenment. In the postwar world, democracy was formally introduced into other nations by the Allies; constitutions were put into place, legal guidelines established. These normative expectations, it was believed, would be cherished and followed in due course (Parsons 1971).

We see now that these earlier efforts failed to understand the requisites of democracy. They were either technocratic and determinist (e.g., Lerner 1958, p. 40; Rostow 1960, p. 133) or hopelessly rationalist and optimistic (Lipset 1960, pp. 27-63). To continue such theorizing in the present day is not only anachronistic, it is also irresponsible.¹

THE TURN TOWARD "REALISM"

In the last two decades, we have learned that this is not, after all, the best of all possible worlds and that democracy does not come easily. This education has been a salutary one, but the shift in social scientific understanding that has accompanied it has not been equally so. Cynicism has replaced optimism, materialism and "realism" have replaced the concern with morality (Collins 1975). Instead of exploring politics, social scientists now explore society. They investigate the social origins of political arrangements (Moore 1966) and downplay the effects of constitutions and political norms (e.g., Rex 1961). Conflict theories (Dahrendorf 1959) have replaced theories about the possibility of social integration. Even when the specificity of politics is acknowledged, the independent state is conceived of in a purely instrumental way (Skocpol 1979). It is a power bloc of its own, one more environment within which egoistic interest can be pursued (Evans et al. 1985).¹

This does not mean that political ideals have disappeared from the sociological discourse about politics. It means that they are now pursued in a "tough-minded" way. Democracy is considered merely a formal arrangement. What is important is the distribution of power and force, the balance of material resources. Equality has become the central focus, class conflict and power structure the topics of elaborate analysis.² If there is unequal economic or political power, it is assumed, dominant groups will pursue their interests by any available means. It is means that count, not ends. It is concrete goals that matter, not the moral frameworks that can possibly frame them.³ Citizenship results from class struggle. Rights cannot be conceptualized in an independent way. Democracy can be explained only as the product of a truce between conflict groups that have achieved relative but temporary parity (Rex 1961), a political manifestation of capitalism that provides "the material bases of consent" (Przeworski 1985, pp. 133-70).⁴

Those who write about the political condition of contemporary societies express little confidence in the possibilities for democracy. When Marcuse (1963) attacked capitalist democracies as one-dimensional and totalitarian, he was considered a radical iconoclast. Thirty years later, Foucault has gained increasingly wide acceptance for a theory that, while more sophisticated and precise, emphasizes the same repressive qualities in Western societies while virtually ignoring the meaning of a democratic state (e.g., Foucault 1979, 1980).⁵ Citizens of Western societies are seen as monitored, as subject to surveillance (Giddens 1981). They are selfish and do not engage in public life (Sennett 1977; Habermas 1989). When democratic discourse does become the focus of analysis, it is conceived of as ideology, not as values, as simply another means to pursue strategic ends (Edelman 1964; Thompson

1984). Debunking rhetoric, of course, cuts pretentious authority down to size. It has always been a mainstay of democratic politics. Without more of a theoretical perspective on democratic and antiauthoritarian struggles, however, social scientific understanding cannot be gained. Social science thinking about democratic societies has become part of the practice of democratic politics. Under these conditions, the development of a realistic theory of democratic societies has become impossible.

THE TRADITION OF THRASYMACHUS

We are left with the tradition of Thrasymachus, for whom one of the first conflict theorists wrote an essay in praise (Dahrendorf 1968). Thrasymachus provided the foil for Plato. Against Socrates' vision of an ideal and transcendent justice, he insisted on base motives and the necessary cruelty of political life: "In all states alike, 'right' has the same meaning, namely what is for the interest of the party established in power, and that is the strongest" (Plato 1965, chap. 3, p. 18). This hardheaded caution about idealism is clearly important. It is reflected in the long tradition of normative political theory that has insisted that democracy depends on the separation of powers. The ever practical Aristotle (1963, *The Politics*, Book 4, sec. E, chap. 14) argued against Platonic idealism that well-ordered constitutions would have to be divided against themselves. Montesquieu (1977, *The Spirit of Laws*, Book II, chap. 6, p. 202) believed that, if independent institutions were not pitted against each other, tyranny, arbitrary control, and "all the violence of the oppressor" would be the result. In the *Federalist Papers*, Hamilton and Madison said much the same.

Classical social science writing about democracy has largely followed a similar path. Marx ([1848] 1962) economized Thrasymachus when he argued that democracy was a sham because classes had grossly unequal economic power, concluding that class power had to be separated from political governance. Weber ([1917] 1968) sociologized him when he argued that democracy depended on the creation of powerful counterweights to state bureaucracies, on the emergence of political demagogues and ruthless party organizations. Following upon Marx and Weber, Michels ([1911] 1962) argued that socialist parties and unions became oligarchical because their leaders could monopolize the organization's material resources. When Lipset, Coleman, and Trow wrote *Union Democracy* (1956)—the most important single sociological study of democracy in the postwar era—they followed in Michels's footsteps. Arguing that organizational democracy can be defined as the opportunity for effective competition between groups, they

demonstrated that such competition is possible only if the means of struggle are pluralized.

This line of thinking is certainly essential to any realistic thinking about democracy. The return to it is an important antidote to the ideological innocence and theoretical simplification of earlier postwar thought. The self-interested dimension of human action must be firmly respected, as must the significantly self-aggrandizing character of every social group. It is for this reason that sustained participatory democracy in any large organization (Mansbridge 1980, pp. 278-89) is impossible. Oligarchies form in every organization. If these elites are not given what they consider their due, they will seek to dominate society in turn. Every serious theory of democracy must cope with this fact. Democracies depend on social structures that allow egoism to be pursued but that make the aggregation of egoism impossible. No society can prevent the formation of elites; a society will be democratic, however, to the extent that the interests of these elites can be differentiated in a manner that makes them competitive rather than convergent (Etzioni-Halevy 1989; Alexander and Colomy 1989). If society cannot prevent elite formation, it can prevent the monopolization of power and resources by any single elite (Walzer 1983).

POLITICS AS A SYMBOLIC CODE

Elite conflict and structural differentiation cannot, however, form the exclusive point of our interest. The tradition of Thrasymachus is not adequate to understand politics, much less the phenomenon of political democracy. Within its narrow confine, we cannot understand the interior domain—the realm of feeling, moral sense, and perception—that makes living together possible. We cannot illuminate the mysterious process by which citizens agree to uphold rules whose utility they scarcely understand. The tradition of Thrasymachus explores only the “base” of politics. But power is a medium of communication, not simply a goal of interested action or a means of coercion. It has a symbolic code, not only a material base (Parsons 1969).

To understand this code, we must introduce a normative and cultural dimension into our theory of democratic society. This will mean returning to some earlier thinking about normative and cultural integration and trying to understand it in new ways. It will also mean connecting our discussion of politics to other important and contemporary intellectual themes (Alexander 1988a; Alexander and Seidman 1990).

Because politics has reference to a symbolic code, it can never be simply situational; it has a generalized dimension as well. This generalized reference

makes politics not only contingent and rational but stylized and prescribed. To understand it, we need anthropological concepts about rhetoric and ritual and structural theories about language and codes. The symbolic medium of politics is a language that political actors themselves do not fully understand. It is not only situationally motivated speech but a deep symbolic structure. What Lévi-Strauss (1963, p. 50) has said about the code of kinship, we can say about the language of politics: “It exists only in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation.”⁶

There is a tradition of contemporary political theory—often called “normative” in contrast with “empirical” or “behaviorist”—that similarly rejects the consideration of politics in utilitarian terms alone. Drawing inspiration from the ancient Greek Polis, thinkers like Arendt (1958), Wolin (1960), Unger (1975), and MacIntyre (1981) describe democracy as a participatory political community whose citizens have a commitment to the public interest that transcends private and egoistic concerns. They call for a “politics of vision” and criticize contemporary politics as instrumental from the perspective of this ideal, democratic norm. Their communitarian approach argues that democracy can be sustained only if a sense of altruistic civic virtue permeates political life.

The problem here is not with the emphasis on morality and internal commitments or with the injection into political theory of explicit normative criteria. The problem is with the manner in which these commitments and criteria are understood. The normative aspirations of this tradition are conflated with behavioral possibilities, the moral *ought* is confused with the empirical *is*. If political life is not fully participatory, this tradition judges it to be egotistical and instrumental, ruled by interests rather than values. If it is not virtuous in a liberal or progressive sense, it is judged to be without any reference to any conception of virtue at all. Similar problems detract from sociological reactions to political utilitarianism. When Bellah (Bellah et al., 1985) demands new “habits of the heart,” and Bell (1976) a new “public household,” they too draw upon this romantic conception of the possibility for a powerful and controlling civic virtue. While morally admirable and politically provocative, such thinking seems not only utopian but a bit sociologically naive.⁷

If there is to be a more value-oriented conception of democratic politics, it must start from a more realistic conception of the difficulties and challenges of complex societies. Self-interest and conflict will never give way to some all-embracing communal ideal. Indeed, the more democratic a society, the more it allows groups to define their own specific ways of life and legitimates the inevitable conflicts of interest that arise between them. Political consensus can never be brought to bear in a manner that neutralizes particular group

obligations and commitments. To think that it can be is to repeat the fallacy of Rousseau's belief in the General Will as distinct from the actual will of particular individuals and groups. A more differentiated conception of political culture is needed, one that will be more tolerant of individual differences and more compatible with the pluralization of interests.⁸

To arrive at such a conception, one must differentiate among various levels of political life (Parsons and Smelser 1957, chap. 7; Smelser 1959, 1963). The existence of broadly shared moral ties does not mean that individuals and groups pursue similar or even complementary goals and interests. At the same time, divergent and conflictual goals do not mean that shared understandings are not highly significant. Generalized commitments inform and influence goals even if they do not create them. While the concrete situation has its own exigencies, it does not create goals and interests out of a whole cloth. The articulation of this more specific level is always informed by the logic of more generalized patterns, by norms and by values, by deep symbolic structures that provide a common medium of communication for conflict groups despite their strategic and divisive aims. Without returning to an earlier innocence or idealistic naïveté, this cultural dimension must be studied if any plausible sociological theory of democracy is to emerge. If we do so, we will find that the tradition of Thrasymachus that has dominated social science in recent years is a cultural discourse rather than an empirical description of contemporary political life; and the language of community and integration, while no more empirical and no less culturally constructed, is a code that sustains democracy wherever it even fleetingly appears.

Hegel ([1807] 1977, para. 440) saw this when he criticized the theoretical illusion, so common to mechanistic theories, that individuals and institutions are entirely separated from some broader *Geist*. The reasons such actors offer for their actions, he insisted to the contrary, are in fact deeply embedded in moral conceptions of which they are often unaware. Simmel (1955) argued in the same way when he suggested that social conflicts are embedded in "concepts," in implicit, idealized, and highly generalized notions that define the rewards that conflict groups are fighting for and even their conceptions of others and themselves.⁹ More recently, Walzer (1970, pp. 3-23) has argued that the structure of political obligations is much the same. Justifications for political actions and opinions may be forcefully expressed in the language of free will and individual desire; yet the very fact that actors feel obligated to speak or act in these ways reveals that they do so as members of communities. The groups to which they belong impose these obligations in the name of their particular, higher ideals. Individuals must act at the level of situationally specific demands; in doing so, however, they typically invoke the more general understandings of their groups (Walzer 1970, pp. 3-5).

DEMOCRACY AND SYMBOLIC UNIVERSALS

The cultural reference of politics is a constant. In particular situations, there is always some reference to generalized codes. In thinking about political democracy, however, the differential capacity to make these references becomes particularly salient, for the specific content of the reference can be defined in variable ways. Democracy depends on the regulation of diverse particular actions by rules that are broadly accepted and hence inclusive. If the cultural reference of action does not have a far-reaching scope, it cannot be inclusive in effect; because it is narrowly defined, it will be exclusive. The more general the symbolic reference to which specific actions are subject, moreover, the more they can be subject to demands for justification. These demands are made in relationship to the general referents that are acknowledged by participants as guiding their specific actions. The more general the scope and inclusiveness of the cultural reference, therefore, the more action can be subject to criticism and reformulation.

Breadth of scope and inclusiveness of effect can be understood in terms of the contrast between universalism and particularism. I will spend some time discussing this contrast, both because I believe it to be so central to any conception of democratic politics and also because the contrast seems largely to have disappeared from the discussion that still remains of political culture itself.¹⁰

Aristotle (1963, p. 47) first defined this contrast in terms of the qualities of actual things.

Now of actual things some are universal, others particular. I call universal that which is by its nature predicated of a number of things and particular that which is not; "man," for instance, is a universal, Callias is a particular.

If one relates to Callias as a "man," one judges him according to criteria that are broad, general, and all embracing. This cultural reference creates a psychological or intellectual separation from the particular situation within which Callias is encountered, allowing one to compare Callias's actions with others' and to develop a critical perspective. If one relates to Callias simply under the rubric "Callias," by contrast, one employs categories of understanding that are peculiar to this particular situation alone. The culture reference reflects Callias's uniqueness. This particularism may encourage intimacy, but it does not allow the separation from situational immediacy that encourages critical judgment.

This contrast between universalism and particularism has been intrinsic to every significant effort to understand the culture of critical social action

and democratic and inclusive societies. In his *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel ([1807] 1977) described human development as involving the perception of ever more universalistic categories, each of which would include under a higher and more general rubric the particular antitheses of the preceding stage. Because Hegel believed the spirit of God to be even more general and inclusive than the reason of man, he described the end point of human development as the regulation of every particular interaction and social institution by a mutual reference to this powerful universal force. If such regulation, or interpenetration, were achieved, there would be the integration of the particular and universal, which Hegel called the "concrete universal."

When Parsons formulated his pattern-variable scheme (e.g., Parsons 1951), the same distinction was stated in a less metaphysical way. He argued that interactions are regulated by norms that specify the dimensions of universalism and particularism with great precision. Norms may allow more or less affect and more or less diffuseness in role obligations. They may define an interaction as oriented more to self or other concerns. To the degree that normative orientations are more neutral, less diffuse, and more other oriented, they are more universalistic. Parsons and others demonstrated that the tension between universalistic and particular patterns is central to a wide range of social situations, from parent-child and doctor-patient interactions (Parsons 1951; Barber 1980) to race relations (Williams 1960) and the structure of national communities (Lipset 1963, pp. 237-312).

The most important psychological studies of human development have focused on the transition from particularistic to universalistic capacities. While its direct implications for social life have never been precisely formulated or experimentally proved, Freud's theory that decathexis from objects of intense desire is essential for the development of ego rationality has had a pervasive effect on modern thought (see, e.g., Rieff 1959). Piaget's developmental psychology has had a more delimited effect, but it has been subject to much stricter experimental controls and its social implications are direct.

In his cognitive and moral theory, Piaget (1972) focuses on "generalization," which he defines as the ability to separate ideas from things. Children learn to separate their thoughts from their actions and the things encountered in their environments as the result of the "interiorization" of objects that were once "out there." The result is cognitive and moral objectification, the emergence of concepts and orientations that allow children to decenter themselves from the outside world and to manipulate it. With further development, the capacity for abstraction from particular details increases. From the ability to perform simple concrete operations, children learn universal, generalizable principles that allow formal operations. In this more adult stage, "knowledge transcends reality." Because of such generalization, uni-

versalistic moral standards become possible. Moral development depends on similar capacities for universalism and generalization. Younger children cannot participate in games because their understanding is so particularistic that they cannot even understand the concept of "rule." Children can play together spontaneously in organized games only if they can understand their own and others' actions as instances of more generalized frames. Only when they do is spontaneous and cooperative group interaction possible. Only with this kind of generalization, moreover, can critical orientations to actions, and even to rules themselves, be sustained.

More explicitly sociological treatments of socialization have argued in the same way. In Parsons's sociological translation of Freud and Piaget, he (1955) demonstrated that socialization involves the increasing capacity for generalizing beyond primary familial relations. To move beyond the Oedipal fixation on his particular father, Parsons argued, the male child needs to encounter other adult men outside the home. This transition from family in the worlds of school and play accentuates the tension between universalism and particularism, as the male child asks, "Is father a man, or are all men fathers?" The capacity to treat future authority figures in a critical and rational way depends on developing the capacity for invoking the more general category. Dreeben (1968) and others have demonstrated that this capacity is precisely what is learned in the increasingly impersonal and critical environment of primary and secondary schools.

Mead's (1964) theory of the "generalized other" points to the same phenomenon. In the play of early childhood, he suggests, children learn to take the role of the particular others with whom they interact. As they do so, a more universalized understanding emerges of what membership in this broader society requires. By referring to this more generalized element, older children can take the same attitude toward their own behavior as they do to others', which is precisely what following rules means. Such universalism allows there to be spontaneous play in organized games. The capacity for generalized reference also allows individual flexibility and critical, innovative behavior.

By referring to these studies in psychological development, I do not mean to suggest a causal relationship between socialization and democratic culture. It is evident that most individuals in most societies develop the capacities for universalistic action and judgment, whereas only a few societies have democratic political systems. I do want to suggest, however, that there is a significant homology between these seminal studies and the more general thinking that must be done about political culture and democratic society. Because these psychological theorists were concerned with cooperation and rationality, they had to focus on the tension between universalism and particularism. This contrast between general and inclusive orientations, and

situationally specific and exclusive ones, illuminates a central distinction in human behavior. When actors are engaged in practical politics at the expense of general principles, when they exercise personalistic judgments without reference to office obligations, when they are guided by prejudice rather than mutual respect, when they act for self-interest alone without reference to higher laws, when they accept capricious authority without demanding justification or when authorities refuse to recognize the legitimacy of demands for justification when they are made—in all these situations actors are behaving in particularistic rather than universalistic ways. While these actors no doubt possess the psychological capacity for generalization, it has not informed their practice as members of the political community.

UNIVERSALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The concept of universalism is applied to such political communities in the discourse about civility, civil society, and citizenship. It is unfortunate that, in the recent and very promising theoretical discussion about civil society that has emerged from within post-Marxist political theory (e.g., Keane 1988a, 1988b), the close connection between civil society and cultural universalism has not been made. For universalistic attitudes and codes are concretized in political communities by the construction of an independent civil sphere, with the civility and citizenship that this implies. Civility implies respect for others and control of oneself and also the adherence to a social code of behavior. Freud ([1930] 1961) argued that civilization depends on the substitution of ego-ideals and sublimated modes of participation for the direct emotional gratification of interaction; only in this way could supra-familial ties be established and the sphere of cooperation enlarged. Elias ([1939] 1978) traced the emergence of such control and refinement in a more historical way, showing how important it was to the construction of the first early nation-states and how it allowed broad social classes to be established and political bureaucracies to emerge.

In his earlier response to the rationalism and individualism of contract theory, Adam Ferguson ([1767] 1966) argued that an increase in self-control and “subtlety,” and a decrease in brute impulse, were crucial to the “history of civil society.” He described the latter as the social bond that defined a nation, the fellow feeling among members of a community that guaranteed respect for law, protection of property, and democratic regulation of authority. Hirschman (1977) has shown that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there emerged a powerful backlash against the passionate glory seeking and hero worship of the late middle ages. Only by softening and

polishing the manners of men, by creating psychological and hence social calm, would the arbitrariness of rulers be curbed by social rules and stable political order be achieved. Hirschman has shown that, for thinkers like Montesquieu, democratic constitutions and the separation of powers would be one result.

It is not often recognized that similar themes—civility, civil society, universalism, and citizenship—have also been central to certain traditions of social science. Weber ([1917] 1968, pp. 1212-372) argued that modern legal-rational societies depended upon the increasing “fraternization” that occurred for the first time in the city-states of the late middle ages. Christianity defined all men as brothers in the abstract community of Christ, rejecting ethnic or even national ties as valid criteria for community membership. Only because of the universalism of this cultural reference, Weber believed, were Western cities able to define urban dwellers as citizens, in principle extending that status to every male inhabitant of the city. In Eastern or ancient cities, by contrast, membership was defined irrevocably by family, ethnic, or class ties.

Marshall (1965) took the increasing density and power of these enlarged group ties as the dynamic factor in the expansion of citizenship. In the eighteenth century, citizenship was a crucial innovation in social organization, yet it entitled members of a national society simply to the protection of their legal rights. In the nineteenth century, with the emergence of nationalism and demands for recognition by lower classes, cross-group solidarity was strengthened, and citizenship was extended to the political right to vote of all community members. In the twentieth century, with its great solidarizing experiences like World Wars I and II, citizenship came to guarantee social and not just legal and political rights. Members of the newly developed “welfare states” had the ability to make legitimate demands for a wide range of educational and social services (see Bendix 1964).

What Parsons (1967, 1971, pp. 86-121) did was to reformulate Marshall’s theory in a manner that tied it directly to the expansion of social solidarity. Increased market relationships, political participation, and religious activism are not only significant in themselves but contribute to the construction of an independent solidary sphere of society, which Parsons defined as the societal community. More specifically integrative processes are also involved, such as geographical and social mobility, intermarriage, migration, education, and the emergence of new forms of mass communication. For all of these reasons, the intensity and frequency of interaction increases; members of national societies see themselves as more like one another; cross-group ties become closer; and the societal community expands. Modernizing social change must be defined, therefore, not only as shifting the economic,

political, or value spheres but as increasing inclusion via the societal community.¹¹

In earlier and more simple societies, membership in the community was defined by the particularism of kinship and blood. For most members of feudal societies, it did not extend past the limits of immediate consanguinity (Banfield 1958). With the construction of a civil society, these particularistic definitions of membership are broken through; they are replaced by abstract criteria that emphasize simple humanity and participation in the nation-state. Citizenship, then, can be understood as a form of social organization that is anchored in universalistic bonds of community that define every member as equally worthy of respect. These are highly generalized ties and abstract and differentiated rules that regulate the political game. Members of a civil society can refer to these universalistic values to gain distance from their immediate relationships, in order to change them or criticize them.

I am not suggesting here that a national community should be understood simply as a civil society, any more than it should be understood as a capitalist society, a nation-state, or a cultural community. Civil society must be understood analytically, not concretely. It is not a sphere that one can touch or see, any more than is the sphere of political power, economic production, or cultural life. It is a dimension that is organized by the fact that it subjects those who are its members to distinctive kinds of obligations and acts, which can be distinguished from, and are often in conflict with, those of economic, political, and cultural ideology. The analytic nature of this sphere means that civil society can be understood as interpenetrating with, or permeating, these other spheres, just as the pressures of the latter are often interjected into public life.

Citizens appear to be acting in terms of situational interest; in fact, they are part of a densely structured cultural world. They are acting within a public realm that is the product of a centuries-long civilizing process. They are disciplined by this world even when they feel themselves free; indeed, it is the discipline of their universalistic community that makes them free. Tocqueville emphasized the voluntariness of American political society, the constant formation and reformation of local political groups, the rich and thick existence of a society beneath and outside the state. He understood, however, that these democratic Americans were not, in fact, individualistic. They were held together by the invisible threads of what Tocqueville (1945, pp. 310-13) called America's "voluntary religion."¹² It was universalistic evangelical religion, not the influence of law in and of itself, that for Tocqueville ensured democracy in America.¹³

Civil society does not mean "civilized" in the sense of well-mannered behavior. It should not be equated with trust in an actual government, although it is a necessary condition for that. To trust faithfully in the good of

any actual government, indeed, would be to abandon universalism for the particularism of a party or state. Civil society implies something quite different. It means trust in the universalistic values that abstract from any particular society and that provide critical leverage against particular historical actors. It guarantees the existence of a public, not public consensus or consent. Because of their trust in a higher universal order, citizens continually make demands for authorities to justify their actions. The higher order embodies ideal justice; because earthly authorities must inevitably violate this ideal norm, moral outrage is a continual result. In strong civil societies, then, distrust of authoritative action and political conflict are omnipresent. Yet it is this very separation from the endorsement of particular arrangements that makes democracy possible.¹⁴ Because the ultimate loyalty of citizens is to overarching rules rather than to the outcome of any particular game, policies and officeholders can be changed, though the process may be difficult and subject to continual contestation (see Alexander 1988c; Barber 1983).

Constitutions are phenomena that have been almost completely neglected in political sociology, not only in its most recent but in its earlier phase.¹⁵ Yet it is constitutions that codify these universalistic rules, in a legal form that authorizes democratic succession and political dissent. With the exception of legal proceedings, however, when citizens evoke their constitution, it is not to its detailed codifications that they refer; it is to the broad and general cultural standards in relation to which constitutions are signs. In a democratic society, these standards are the codes of the political language. If citizens evoke the constitution, it is because their political speech has become difficult. The constitution is a primer; by referring to it, they are trying to teach recalcitrant citizens how to speak.

THE PROMISE OF A MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEORY

In their reaction against the naïveté of early postwar theorizing about democracy and social integration, contemporary social scientific students of politics have placed conflict at the center of their analysis and have developed instrumental and materialist understandings of political behavior. Society is depicted as dominated by overwhelming power blocs, and democracy is typically portrayed as merely a formal rationalization for different types of domination. The positive side of this intellectual development is that it has brought back into focus the factors of realpolitik with which every serious theory of democracy must content. No matter how multidimensional the

theory, no matter how central a role in it that cultural codes play, it is important to recognize that oligarchies always will form and that elites inevitably will seek to spread their dominion. Democracy will survive only if elite domains can be separated into different spheres. Insofar as this occurs, then, the very efforts that elites and masses make to maintain control over a given sphere of life will involve an effort to maintain the differentiation of each institutional domain. Because elite differentiation prevents monopoly, moreover, the struggles for justice in the distribution of different kinds of institutional resources will have a better chance to succeed.¹⁶

Political realism, however, can be maintained outside the narrow confines of materialism and conflict theory. It is possible to understand the requisites of democracy in more multidimensional terms. Power is more than its material base; it is also a medium of communication. Every political action has a generalized reference, a relation to meaning that goes beyond the exigencies of its specific situation. For there to be a democracy, this cultural framework for power must be articulated in distinctively universalistic terms. Individuals cannot be seen narrowly, in terms of their particular economic, ethnic, religious, or regional groups alone. Political actors must also be seen in much broader terms, as members of a universal community in which every participant has the same legal, political, and moral status. This universalistic community is a civil society, and the egalitarian status is citizenship. Civil society and citizenship allow public life.

Once the concept of a universalistic civil society has been introduced, it is possible to see how the realistic and idealistic approaches to democracy can be brought together. Civil society can be understood not just as a realm of solidarity and cultural universalism but also as an institutionalized and differentiated social sphere. Most critically, of course, it is differentiated from the state. In a democracy, leaders of the state cannot legally control the activities of civil society, although they often seek informally to do so. Leaders are forced, rather, to participate in public life as citizens. Although they typically bring to this participation unusual resources, like personal authority and prestige, they must contend in this civil arena with elites who possess strategic resources of other kinds. For civil society is also differentiated from other, nonpolitical domains, such as the economic and the religious. These elites too will bring special resources to bear in their efforts to persuade fellow citizens, efforts that take the form of organizing political groups, lobbying power holders, mounting mass educational efforts, and waging election campaigns. Finally, civil society is not without its own elites or without its particular institutional resources. Insofar as they are relatively differentiated, the media of mass communication speak for the societal community, revealing its "public opinion."¹⁷ The legal apparatus articulates the specific demands of civil society, demands that are backed up by force

and that, so long as the democratic constitution is maintained, cannot be denied.

These are the social requisites of democracy, in an ideal-typical sense. Any sober look at real societies reveals, of course, that these are never fully achieved. The point of this discussion has been to suggest where to look for the reasons they are not achieved. The more complex and the more differentiated societies become, the more they depend upon centralized and bureaucratic power to provide information and coordination. Bureaucratic power, moreover, is always nonbureaucratic at the top. At the head of every government bureaucracy there stands a personal leader who will develop personal authority in a particularistic way. In times of social crisis, these tendencies for personal domination exacerbate the movements to anticivil social polarization. When rapid social change wrenches the social fabric, the societal community becomes polarized into different camps, left and right, modern and traditional, secular and sacred. As particularistic ideologies become stronger and power blocs threaten the autonomy of different institutional domains, crises emerge that threaten to tear society apart. The struggle to maintain democracy is the struggle to sustain the cohesion and autonomy of civil society. Democracy is preserved only if common ground is sustained, if it proves possible to ensure the generalized, universalistic bonds that allow critical reflection to be sustained without sacrificing social solidarity.

NOTES

1. Despite its elegance and systematic power, Luhmann's approach to democracy exhibits just this kind of anachronistic complacency. In his "Politics as a Social System" (1982, p. 149), he writes, for example: "A political system's ability to absorb social conflicts has to increase when society becomes more complex and conflict-ridden. The political system then changes these conflicts from being cases of outright opposition to being cases of regulated, articulate struggles to influence the decision-making centers."

2. In the outpouring of studies devoted to "power structure research"—which involves arguments about such topics as class versus elite formations in cities and nations and manager versus property control in corporations—there is scarcely any indication that in many capitalist societies these structural issues, and the conflicts they produce, are nested within a democratic political order.

Although the kind of criticism I am making here has typically been the staple of conservative critiques of Marxist work, more recently it has become a perspective for a growing number of post-Marxist critics of "critical theory." Jean Cohen (1982) forcefully argues that the exclusive Marxist focus on class relations is fundamentally mistaken because it misconstrues civil society as a realm without independent normative mediation either in a legal-constitutional or in a more broadly cultural sense. Claude Lefort (1988, pp. 9-11) has put the argument in even more polemical terms, wondering why "there is as yet little enthusiasm" for the analysis of political freedom and democracy among social and political scientists.

3. Collins (1981) argues that the very concept of norms should be expunged from sociological theory.

4. Certainly social democratic theorists like Rex and Przeworski analyze democracy, and theorize about it, in a decidedly more appreciative manner than do orthodox critics of its merely formal character. They conceive of it, however, primarily as an economic adaptation to the growing power of the proletariat, a power whose possibility, they acknowledge, Marx himself did not sufficiently recognize. Thus, for Przeworski (e.g., 1985, p. 140), democracy has succeeded because it allows class conflict to proceed without the destabilizing intervention of physical force. The problem with this approach is that it recapitulates the necessitarian logic of earlier modernization theory. The particularity of democracy is never recognized, its independent history ignored, and its specific structural and historical requisites assumed. "What is most fateful in the continuity between Marx and neo-Marxists," Cohen (1982, p. 5) writes, "is their dislike of the institutions of modern civil society and their reduction of these institutions to mere bourgeois culture and capitalist relations."

5. It is quite extraordinary that Foucault's radically relativistic work on the omnipresence of debilitating discipline throughout modern society seems to have become so widely accepted precisely among those contemporary intellectuals who are themselves committed to the expansion of individual autonomy and social progress. In this regard, it is worth quoting from Charles Taylor's radically humanistic response to Foucault: "Free participatory institutions require some commonly accepted self-disciplines. The free citizen has the vertu to give willingly the contribution which otherwise the despot would coerce from him, perhaps in some other form. Without this, free institutions cannot exist. There is a tremendous difference between societies which find their cohesion through such common disciplines grounded on a public identity, and which thus permit of and call for the participatory action of equals, on the one hand, and the multiplicity of kinds of society which require chains of command based on unquestionable authority on the other" (Taylor 1986, p. 82; see Walzer 1988, pp. 191-209).

6. Invoking the arbitrary character of signs, Saussure ([1976] 1964; see Sahlins 1976) argued that the meaning of a linguistic symbol can be understood only relativistically—in terms of its difference from, or relation to, a paired sign—rather than by its versimilitude. For a discussion of the impact of this position on contemporary conceptions of culture, see Alexander (1990).

7. Whereas these theorists presuppose the capacity for a quasi-organic political community based on mutual self-regard, Rawls (1971, pp. 105 ff.) believes that fraternity emerges from his "difference principle," a postulate he can defend only by positing either a "natural interest" in association or an innate rationality that perceives the principle's functional benefits. Both defenses ignore the functional tendency toward oligarchy and the arbitrary element of symbolic codes.

8. In light of the distinctive incapacities of the orthodox Marxist tradition I have noted above, it is ironic but highly significant that just this kind of more complex thinking about democracy is beginning to emerge in the recent "post-Marxist" discussions of civil society. These discussions have been stimulated by Marxist reflections that have been based on an explosion of new, nonclass social movements in Western European and North American societies. On civil society, in addition to Cohen (1982), see particularly the essays collected in Keane (1988b) and Keane's own contributions in Keane (1988a). Held's (1987) recent discussion of democracy can be seen as an effort to weld Marxian class analysis with the liberal commitment to pluralism and rights.

9. The convergence in this critical respect between Parsonian and Simmelian thinking about the critical interrelation between conflict and integration has been thoroughly obscured by the association in the 1960s of Simmel with "conflict sociology" and Parsons with "order sociology." For an insightful discussion of the modes of complementarity between Simmel and Parsons, see Levine (1989).

10. This disappearance is one of the principal drawbacks of the semiotic emphasis on the arbitrary that I praised above. Because semiotics largely ignores the key issue of the relation between symbolic code and social structure, the question of the possible tension between these two levels—whether culture is conservative and particularistic, critical and universalist—never arises.

11. Behind this emphasis of Parsons, of course, there also lies Durkheim's insistence on solidarity as the key variable in modernizing society. Shils's work on primordiality, civility, and social integration provides a crucial link between the original Durkheimian tradition and more contemporary sociological concerns (see, e.g., Shils 1975a, 1975b). Geertz (1973) related the perspectives of Parsons and Shils to the contemporary modernization of Third World nations, and Eisenstadt (1987) has reformulated their perspectives into a framework for the comparative analysis of historical civilizations.

In contrast to the explicitly socialist framework of Marshall, the evolutionary and generally optimistic cast of the Parsonian theory of inclusion has made its own critical implications for a theory of expanded civil society more difficult to discern. Still, the social democratic implications of this dimension of Parsons's work are too explicit to ignore (in this regard, see Turner 1986). I have developed a revised, "neofunctionalist" model of inclusion and exclusion, one that places these processes in a more realistic framework of cultural power and social contention, in Alexander (1988b).

12. For a discussion of how a similar kind of "spontaneous conformity" is essential to English democracy, see Lowe (1937).

13. For a compelling analysis of Puritanism as the source for some of the earliest thinking about individual activism with a public community, see Mayhew (1984).

14. It is in this sense that Lefort speaks about rights as a "generative principle" of democracy. He argues that rights "cannot be disassociated from the awareness of rights" and that "the symbolic dimension of right is manifested . . . in the irreducibility of the awareness of right to all legal objectification" (pp. 259-60). In other words, the symbolic character of right—its cultural differentiation and universalist form—means that it is always in tension with the so-called objective structures of society.

15. For important exceptions, see Friedrich (1964) and Prager (1986).

16. Walzer (1983) has dealt with these processes in a powerful and eloquent manner in *Spheres of Justice*. While a work of political theory, this book is vital to any sociological considerations of democracy, social differentiation, and civil society.

17. This perspective on the media of mass communication is elaborated in Alexander (1988b). Public opinion polls can be seen as another, related institutional manifestation of civil society. The fact that they sharply and independently articulate public beliefs about a contested issue that forcefully impinges on the actions of political actors is demonstrated in Lang and Lang (1983).

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