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Review: The Return to Civil Society

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Reviewed work(s):

Civil Society and Political Theory by Jean L. Cohen ; Andrew Arato

Source: *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (Nov., 1993), pp. 797-803

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2075952>

Accessed: 29/03/2009 23:44

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## Featured Essay

### The Return to Civil Society

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There is an intrinsic link between fundamental social conflicts—triggered by the emergence of new institutions, new groups, and new possibilities for oppression and liberation—and the languages of social theory and empirical social science. *Class*, as Raymond Williams so eloquently demonstrated, became prominent in lay and intellectual parlance during the early phases of the industrial revolution. The same kind of argument can be made for *nation*, *race*, *ethnicity*, and *gender*. Once again, history has produced a new concept for the social sciences. This time it is *civil society*, a richly evocative but undertheorized concept referring to the realm of interaction, institutions, and solidarity that sustains the public life of societies outside the worlds of economy and state.

It is the last decade of world-historical upheavals against authoritarian and totalitarian rule, the wave of democratic revolutions unprecedented in modern history, that has brought the idea of civil society back again. Certainly not the least of the contributions of Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato's important new book, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, is to focus attention on this historical fact. Drawing upon Arato's (e.g., 1981) empirical studies of Eastern European "transitions" that have appeared in various specialized journals over the last dozen years, the authors forcefully demonstrate how the principal actors in these new historical struggles were compelled to revive the concept from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political theory and to elaborate it in new ways. For Solidarity activists in Poland, rebuilding civil society, not overthrowing the Communist state, was the short-term goal of their proclaimed "self-limiting" revolution. After their experience with the radically anticapitalist utopias of Marxist-inspired revolutions, they and their confreres in Hungary and Czechoslovakia rejected the very notion of "totalizing" communist revolutions. In contrast to radical leveling and communal general

*Civil Society and Political Theory*, by **Jean L. Cohen** and **Andrew Arato**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. 771 pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-262-03177-9.

will, their revolutions aimed at constructing a less heroic and more mundane alternative: a society that was differentiated, pluralistic, politically democratic, and economically market driven.

Cohen and Arato demonstrate the worldwide scope of this theoretical and practical revolution when they show that intellectuals and social movements in Latin America and Western Europe developed strikingly similar practical and theoretical visions. Faced with the debacle of violent revolutionary efforts producing backlash authoritarian regimes, Latin American reformers, like anticommunist revolutionaries, learned to work "from within," making use of the associational networks and publicizing opportunities that remained in place in regimes that, while sometimes highly authoritarian, failed to eliminate the relative autonomy of their civil realms. European intellectuals, influenced by these antiauthoritarian and anticommunist social and intellectual movements, as well as by the repeated failure of revolutionary Marxism in Western Europe, took up the idea of civil society in turn. From John Keane's influential writings on civil society and political theory in England, to Offe's work on postwelfare state economies in Germany, to Touraine's discussions of social movements in postindustrial civil society in France, leading critical theorists in Europe have shifted their attention from demands for socialism and economic equality to reviving the public sphere, increasing organizational democracy, and expanding opportunities for individual expression. (Whereas Offe's and Touraine's writings are important sources for Cohen and Arato, Keane's decidedly are not. See Arato 1989.)

If Arato's political studies provide an

empirical framework for this work, Cohen's (1983) brilliant early confrontation with Marx provides its theoretical backbone. The authors deplore Marx's identification of civil society with the capitalist economic system, a reduction that left no theoretical space for the very anticapitalist and independent social movements that Marxism helped stimulate and allowed no political or moral space for formal democracy in the imagined utopia they aimed to create. Marx legitimated this reduction by misinterpreting Hegel, claiming that he, too, had identified civil society with the world of market and economic "needs." In one of their most original and compelling discussions, Cohen and Arato rescue Hegel from Marx, demonstrating that, despite Hegel's limitations, it was the earlier German theorist who developed a more realistic and complex understanding of the kind of institutional, legal, and cultural independence that civil societies can gain from economies and states. At the same time, however, they criticize Hegel for opening himself up to Marx's misreading, pointing out that Hegel's two-sphere, rather than three-sphere, model of society failed to separate "needs" from civil society and state in a systematic and analytically precise way.

Yet, while Cohen and Arato redeem Hegel and, following Bobbio, pay homage to Gramsci's own highly original "civil society" for its Hegelian, antieconomic form, the key to their effort to reframe civil society theory lies in their critical, yet highly appreciative, reinterpretation of Parsons, which allows them to represent core elements of Habermas's communicative action theory in a quasi-Parsonian way. Emphasizing the notion of normative integration from Parsons's "Full Citizenship for the Negro American," the seminal distinction between "influence" and "power" from his writing on the symbolic media of exchange, and above all the theory of institutional, cultural, and systemic differentiation from his post-1950s writings on social change, Cohen and Arato present Parsons as Hegel's successor and the twentieth century's principal theorist of civil society. They understand, as no other critical theorists have, that Parsons's notion of the "societal community" is the key intellectual mediation between earlier philosophy and any contemporary effort to conceptualize civil society. For, with his notion of societal

community, Parsons began to explain how, in an economically stratified and politically bureaucratic society, a differentiated and relatively autonomous social sphere can emerge that is based on influence and persuasion rather than money and power and that allows inclusion on the basis of institutionalized values of universal rights.

Ingeniously tracking Parsons's later investigations into law, Cohen and Arato take up, against early critical theorists like Schmitt and even against the early Habermas himself, the notion of law as an institutionalized specification of the morality of civil society. From this perspective, law simultaneously informs and resists economic and merely political forces and justifications. Drawing upon Habermas's recent legal studies as well, they argue against Luhmann's notion of law as a purely self-referential organizing code, insisting that a continuing connection to public morality is essential for the norms of civil society to have something more than simply strategic or coercive force:

A society without action-orienting norms. . . would lack sufficient motivation to maintain, much less expand, existing rights, democratic institutions, social solidarity or justice. (P. xi)

In the long run the viability of a democratic political society may depend on the depth of its roots in independent, prepolitical associations and publics. (P. 80)

If the independence and vitality of civil society are to be preserved, rights must function not only as legal rules but also as a moral resource upon which critical social movements, and liberal reformers, can continuously draw. The availability of legal institutions that specify, adjudicate, and enforce "rights" means that the institutionalized values of civil society are not only morally suasive but also politically binding.

On the basis of this approach to civil society, the authors enter into a series of eye-opening, and in large part highly successful, polemics against the more reductionist alternative views that underlie technocratic and communitarian social theory on both the Right and the Left. In the name of freeing civil society, neoconservatives in the 1980s launched vigorous attacks on the democratic welfare state. On the one hand, they identi-

fied civil society with capitalist markets and accused big liberal states of squashing individual autonomy and initiative. On the other hand, neoconservatives like Bell and Nisbet identified civil society with primordiality, tradition, and the sacred and accused it of sterilizing and rationalizing private life. While Cohen and Arato acknowledge that these arguments are by no means entirely false, they insist that neoconservative thought fails because it conflates the universalistic sphere of civil morality either with *laissez-faire* markets or with sacred cultural authority.

Cohen and Arato convincingly argue that similar weaknesses, ironically enough, have marked the most influential left critiques of contemporary life. Arendt argued that the growing centrality of economic life eliminated the freedom of morally inspired political praxis by subordinating it to "the world of necessity," and on these grounds she pronounced the death of politics and the public sphere. While acknowledging the ever-present empirical possibility of what Habermas calls the economic "colonization of the life world," Cohen and Arato criticize Arendt's vision for analytically conflating state and economy with civil society and for disastrously underestimating the continued empirical vitality of social movements and the expressive and normative elements of the public sphere.

Using their civil society theory in a similar way, they argue that Foucault, while avoiding the quasi-Marxist economism of Arendt, wildly exaggerated the omnipresence of power and its monopoly on rational truth. Caricaturing state-generated rules and policies as surveillance, Foucault failed to recognize the important controls that a democratic "political society" exercises over power, even in bureaucratic states. This conception of a political (and economic) "society" is probably Cohen and Arato's single most innovative contribution. It delineates a mediating zone that can emerge between economic or state power, on the one side, and civil society, on the other. They argue that by means of such institutions as parliaments and parties, on one side, and trade unions and workers' councils, on the other, spheres that are driven primarily by power and money can be connected to the institutionalized morality of equality, solidarity, and liberty of civil life.

If Foucault had no conception of political society, much less was he able to explain the continuing reformist challenges of social movements. Contrary to his depiction of them as mere discourses of resistance, Cohen and Arato point out, critical social movements are inspired by the central values of contemporary society itself.

Cohen and Arato also mount a vigorous attack against Habermas's early discussion of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public, which has been recently translated and is already being widely discussed (Calhoun 1992).<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, they rightly insist upon the continuing significance of the analytic definition of the public sphere that Habermas laid out, employing Habermasian notions (themselves derived largely from Hegel) of publicity, plurality, legality, privacy, and association to politicize Parsons's societal community. At the same time, against those who are reviving this early work, they insist that Habermas's lengthy effort to detail the "decline of the public" after the first blush of its emergence in bourgeois form—a decline that Habermas attributed to the growth of industrialism, advertising, party politics, and formal law—merely recapitulates the orthodox Marxist reduction of civil society to a reflection of class power. Cohen and Arato reveal how heavily influenced the early Habermas was by the pessimism of the 1920s Frankfurt school writings of Carl Schmitt on the fatal weakness of the liberal public sphere as well as by the utopianism of Arendt. Ultimately, they explain his unrelenting criticisms of the compromised "bourgeois public sphere" by exposing his latent hope for a de-differentiated, morally homogeneous, and continuously politicized society.

The criticisms Cohen and Arato make of the so-called communitarian turn in contemporary political philosophy is launched on similar grounds but is less convincing. While MacIntyre and Nisbet are certainly guilty of

<sup>1</sup> While many of the contributors to the Calhoun volume raise objections to Habermas's theory that are similar to those raised by Cohen and Arato—the essays by Schudson, Eley, Boyte, and Calhoun himself come to mind—they are unable to link these objections satisfactorily. Cohen and Arato are able to do so precisely because they allow themselves to build upon the Hegel-Parsons tradition, which has a more positive attitude toward social differentiation and normative regulation.

“de-differentiating” the civil realm by embracing an overarching and primordial notion of moral consensus, this criticism hardly applies to the writings of Michael Walzer, who, while defending the particularity of national communities, insists that the good society depends upon maintaining differentiation and autonomy among the “spheres of justice.” Perhaps it is less Walzer’s communitarianism than his insistence that civil societies have a cultural core that rankles. For, as we shall see below, Cohen and Arato’s conception of civil process as rational argumentation can hardly accommodate the linguistic turn that Walzer’s hermeneutical philosophy of justice represents.

In the course of their systematic theory building and critical hermeneutics, Cohen and Arato also turn their attention to Parsons’s theory of societal community, even as they put it to such good theoretical use. They suggest that Parsons’s equanimity about contemporary capitalist democracies, and particularly the American one, undermined the critical potential of his theory of societal community. For Parsons’s increasingly conservative inclination to present the interchanges, or relations, between economy and societal community, and polity and societal community, as equilibrated and reciprocal obscured the inherent tensions between these spheres and seemed to obviate the need for any future, far-reaching societal reforms. Parsons stressed the degree to which universalism had been institutionalized in the civil sphere, not the manner in which its “imminently utopian” promise creates continuous tensions and triggers social mobilization. Indeed, it is in their ingenious and highly stimulating effort to connect social movement theory (both resource mobilization and Tourainean) to civil society—an effort that produces a salutary focus on civil disobedience—that Cohen and Arato make their most important empirical emendations to the sociological model of civil society in its orthodox functional form.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most important criticism that Cohen and Arato make against Parsons’s theory of societal community is an implicit one, which they proffer through their own intellectual practice rather than through an explicit critique. It is, quite simply, that Parsons failed to link his empirical theorizing about societal community either to the long history of normative philosophy about civil society or to contemporary theories of justice. Because of the vast institutional distance between contemporary academic disciplines, and also because of his particular anxiety about scientific neutrality, Parsons failed to thematize the moral roots and political ambitions of his empirical theory. If he had acknowledged the connection between societal community and the tradition of theory about civil society, he would have been compelled to distinguish between the “is” and the “ought,” the salutary tension that Cohen and Arato forcefully reintroduce into societal community by their political-philosophical discourse with its Habermasian frame.

Yet it is precisely in the particulars of their effort to bridge the gap between normative and empirical theorizing about civil society that the problems in Cohen and Arato’s model emerge. For they not only emulate Habermas’s bridging ambition but take up his substantive theoretical ideas as well. Following Habermas, Cohen and Arato present a highly idealized and rationalistic understanding of the good (i.e., civil) society, and from this vision they ascribe empirical characteristics to actually existing societies that often are exaggerated and extreme. Following Habermas and German idealism more generally, they regard the worlds of markets and power

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such Eurocentrism that leads them to focus exclusively on Luhmann among contemporary post-Parsonian sociology. For, while Luhmann has certainly created an imposing theoretical oeuvre, one which has served as both foil and inspiration for Habermas’s post-Marxism, his radicalized differentiation theory recapitulates some of orthodox functionalism’s worst mistakes (Colomy 1990). It can be contrasted, in this regard, with the considerably more progressive neofunctionalism that has emerged on the American and British side, which has much more directly addressed itself to democratic and normative issues, theorized the role of strains and social movements, and developed a dialogue with Habermasian critical theory and with the idea of civil society itself (e.g., the most recent contributions of Sciulli 1992, Mayhew 1992, and Turner 1992).

<sup>2</sup> I insist on “orthodox” to highlight the failure of Cohen and Arato to address, much less to incorporate, the decades of critical discussion that led first to the revision and more recently to the fundamental reconstruction of orthodox Parsonian thought. This lack of familiarity with secondary debate and theoretical reconstructions stands in marked contrast to their treatment of the various strands of European theory. It can only be

merely as necessary evils, insisting that their materiality prevents them from gaining access to such higher values as freedom, solidarity, or enlightenment. These experiences, they insist, are reserved for the civil, or integrative, sphere. Only the latter allows interactions to form around nonstrategic norms and values, and permits mediations between political and economic "societies."

This Habermasian approach (Alexander 1985) fails in two principal respects. First, it confuses analytic with empirical differentiation. Certainly, in a capitalist society, economic rewards and sanctions are oriented toward profit, money, and efficiency, and it is the specific accomplishment of capitalist market economies to sustain specialization of just this type. Yet the economy as an empirical subsystem is itself filled with norms and values, structured by extended solidarities and connected to norms of justice and even, in the minds of economic actors themselves, to transcendent concerns, as the writings of people like Campbell, Zelizer, Friedland, and Granovetter demonstrate. The same interpenetration of functional specialization with meaning and solidarity characterizes the political and organizational spheres, as the work of the neo-institutionalists like Myers, DiMaggio, and Powell plainly shows. These economic and political involvements with meaning and solidarity, moreover, do not necessarily refer to communicative or civil concerns, but to orientations that are specifically economic and political.

The second failure is more important, however, for it concerns Cohen and Arato's understanding of the structure and processes that constitute the civil sphere, the sphere of normative integration, or "voluntary action" that in their analysis provides the alternative to the necessary evils of political and economic life. Not only do they insist that civil society is a world of rationality and consensus, but because of their indebtedness to Habermas, they also fail to argue for this claim sociologically. On purely philosophical grounds, they assert that linguistic interaction has an immanent tendency toward agreement, a "speech community." On Piagetian grounds, they argue that human beings increasingly develop capacities to engage in rational, impersonal, and altruistic moral judgments. Finally, on general evolutionary grounds, they argue that these qualities of rationality

and universal morality increasingly inform the distinctive character of the modern "life-world." It is Cohen and Arato's claim, indeed, that when Habermas writes about the latter, he is actually thinking of civil society and the public realm, and of Parsons's societal community as well. Whether or not this is so, their rather tendentious chapter on "discourse ethics" makes perfectly clear that Cohen and Arato regard Habermas's idealized theory of communication as empirically descriptive of the civil realm. Because they do so, they gloss the mundane institutions and processes that structure discourses and solidarities in real, rather than idealized, social life.

The first mundanity concerns discourse. Perhaps because Cohen and Arato identify "the discourse of civil society" with "conscious" argument and association, they understand it in a highly limiting way. If we draw from the Saussurian approach to language rather than exclusively from the Peircean, however, we are forced to recognize the unconscious and nonrational elements in discourse, the symbolic in the semiotic sense. Emphasizing the "arbitrary" and the "binary" in language, such an approach allows the distorted, malevolent, and divisive elements of the public conversations that structure civil societies to be placed within the meaning-making processes of civil discourse itself rather than forcing them into residual categories that are projected onto the noninterpretive domains outside it. This approach (e.g., Alexander 1992; Alexander and Smith 1993) also allows one to see that such qualities are not products of "backward," evolutionarily retarded capacities that modernity can molt like an old skin. They should be seen, rather, as categories of symbolic pollution that are endemically connected with the very positive classifications that allow full membership in the civil sphere. In other words, every definition of the "good" and "rational" citizen, qualities that allow citizens to be legitimately included in civil society, suggests antithetical qualities of the "bad" and "irrational" citizen which justify the exclusion of others from it. Bad and irrational are not, from this perspective, the results merely of outside political and economic manipulation, but categories internal to the discourse of civil society itself (see Sherwood, Smith, and Alexander 1993).

The second mundanity concerns Cohen and

Arato's failure to theorize solidarity realistically. While universalism and inclusion certainly are institutionalized commitments in democratic (and many nondemocratic) societies, primordiality and exclusion are fundamental parts of these societies as well. Yes, one can see universalistic commitments emerging with modernity, from long-term processes like urbanization, literacy, and bureaucracy, and from historically specific social and cultural movements like democracy, socialism, and Puritanism. Yet primordial qualities also are society forming and modernizing. It is a particular group, after all, that "founds" each national society, typically through conquest. Its "solidaristic qualities" like language, geography, blood, and religion become hegemonic criteria not only for inclusion in but also for exclusion from state and nation building. National solidarities become democratic to the degree that these primordialities, and the groups that represent them, are mediated by universalistic culture, differentiated institutions, cosmopolitan interest groups, and civil interactions. One might say, indeed, that it is the tension between the forces of civil and uncivil solidarity that creates the dynamics of social life.

The dangers to contemporary societies, then, can hardly be viewed as emerging exclusively, or even primarily, from "colonization" of the civil by the economic and political spheres, as Cohen and Arato contend in their Habermasian way. Opportunities for liberation and domination are created across the entire multidimensional social space. Insofar as they are particularistic, in fact, the discourses and interactions that create solidarity themselves dangerously impinge upon political authority and economic exchange, layering them with the kind of demonic symbolization of group loyalties that demarcates spaces of exclusion and strategies of violence. In historical terms, it has often been market exchange and political bureaucracy that have promoted universal solidarity rather than the other way around.

Despite their vigorous effort to consider the negative along with the positive in contemporary democratic societies, then, there is an important sense in which Cohen and Arato truncate the dangers that modernity confronts. If economic and political pressures were the only dangers to an inclusive and democratic civil society, there would be much less

dangerous conflict in the world today. The emergence of an independent solidary sphere is not only the solution but also the problem, for there are internal contradictions within civil society itself.

It would be an injustice to *Civil Society and Political Theory*, however, to conclude this review essay on such a negative note. Indeed, it is a tribute to the importance of their subject that theorizing within the emerging field of "civil society studies" has already generated such broad disputes. Cohen and Arato have written an extremely substantial piece of political and sociological theory. They have criticized the blind alleys, and they have revised and synthesized the most promising lines of earlier thought. Their work marks a major theoretical advance. It presents an opportunity and a challenge to all who are interested in civil society, which represents not only one of the most distinctive achievements of democratic modernity but also a new concept in social thought.

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