

# H-Net Reviews

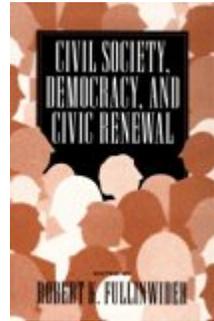
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert K. Fullinwider, ed. *Civil Society, Democracy, and Civic Renewal*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. vii + 433pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-9356-6.

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## Fact or Phenomenon: What is Civil Society?

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Most of the essays contained in the book were written in connection with the 1997 National Commission on Civic Renewal and many of the authors represented here were members of the Commission's Working Group on Civil Society. Not surprisingly, it is the nature of the Working Group, not the Commission, that characterizes the essays. For this reason the title is somewhat misleading; civil society is the focus of the book, with democracy and civic renewal fitted-in to considerations of the main theme. But to identify civil society as a theme is not to identify the meaning of civil society. Indeed, it is both the strength and the weakness of this book that its authors do not arrive at a consensus on the meaning of civil society. They do agree, however, that it is a good thing, whatever it may happen to be.

A book containing seventeen separate essays on a vague concept—essays that range from political theory to empirical political research—is impossible to review as a whole. Yet it would also be a disservice on the part of this reviewer to merely summarize each essay. To approach a mean I shall organize the chapters into groups, although not those of the editor, and I shall touch upon certain themes. First the themes.

There is a preoccupation among the vast majority of essayists in this book with refuting the libertarian argument that civil society is identical with a market economy. I consider this a curious preoccupation because that argument is not represented in the book and, from the ev-

idence of the notes, is rather obscure (with one exception to which I return below). At some points the essays go to great lengths to attack these straw men. For instance, arguing against the notion that there is any moral or civil decline in the country whatsoever, and that such talk is merely a stalking horse used by conservatives, Jean L. Cohen concludes that all the problems facing America's civic culture are due to the "special interests (greed and power)" of the political-economic elite currently running the country (p. 79).

The one essay to refrain from this curious attack on libertarians is that of William A. Schambra, "Is There Civic Life beyond the Great National Community?" While I shall return to his essay below, let me note at this moment that Schambra reveals a tragic sensibility that is lacking in the other essays. Perhaps it is his study of the Founding Period that tempers his excitement about democracy with a resolve that it not destroy itself. Too many of the other essayists assume not only that market forces are the only evil, but that democracy is itself unproblematic. They insist that more democracy can solve the problems of democracy, which is another curious feature of a book in which Tocqueville is quoted so often and so admiringly. They seem to have forgotten—or not to have absorbed—his warning that democratic peoples love equality over liberty, and that they will prefer an equality under slavery to inequality in freedom. Indeed, the notion that an undemocratic institution may be the only safeguard of democracy seems foreign to them.

The last theme I wish to mention is Robert D. Putnam, himself now a theme in political science. (Full disclosure demands that I reveal having worked as a research assistant for his book *Bowling Alone*, although I suspect few of my generation have not worked for the General Motors of academic enterprises.) References to Putnam appear throughout and his analysis of social capital with his conclusions about a decline in civil society are, for the most part, accepted with qualifications. The problem no one addresses in this book, yet the problem that plagues it, is whether or not civil society is a fact or a phenomenon. That is to ask, is civil society a pre-existent and even omnipresent social fact, or is it a rare phenomenon that requires cultivation and the right conditions? Many of the essays require that both be true.

Now for the essays themselves.

Essays that I would consider necessary background to any discussion of civil society include those by Schambra and Cohen, but also the essays of Loren E. Lomasky and Robert Wuthnow. Schambra argues that the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists sought to encourage civil society by promoting commerce, on the one hand, and localism, on the other. The successful, albeit unintended, result was to play the tension between these two extremes and make civil society possible. He argues further that Progressive reforms did the most damage to civil society by weakening the local pole in a vain attempt to create a national community.

Apart from the bromide at the end of the essay, Jean Cohen's "American Civil Society Talk" is an excellent analysis of research on social capital and civil society. The question whether social capital built between specific individuals can be transferred to others and to the community at large, even to the nation, is not asked often enough (p. 64). For example, even if Jack and Jill have developed social capital through joint effort and misfortune, what leads us to expect that Jack can use his capital with Larry, Joe, or even Bob, for that matter? Robert Wuthnow's "The Role of Trust in Civic Renewal" addresses from an empirical perspective these same issues. Not only does he examine quantitative data on levels of trust, he also reveals the findings of qualitative, in-depth interviews on the topic. >From the quantitative studies we learn that reports of trust rise along with personal opportunities, especially economic opportunities (p. 212-213,) but that it declines in the face of diversity (p. 214). The qualitative studies reveal that those who do not trust others tend not to trust themselves, even at greater rates (p. 216). This may mean, suggests Wuthnow, that dis-

trust is developed not by one's experience of others, but by one's experience of oneself. Finally, his studies also reveal that people do not identify the civic groups they belong to as sources of their trusting nature (p. 218). Cohen and Wuthnow would provide interesting counter-voices in a course on social capital.

The last essay in the group I am characterizing as background essays is Loren Lomasky's "Civil Enough: Toward a Liberal Theory of Vice (and Virtue)." While not explicitly on the topics of civil society, democracy, or civic renewal, his exploration of virtue and vice should serve as an introduction to any discussion of civil society within a liberal democracy. His concluding section on manners as a means of domesticating vice in a society where tolerance is the first virtue should provide a rich source of debate.

Three essays identify the possibilities of civil society, Benjamin Barber's "Clansmen, Consumers, and Citizens: Three Takes on Civil Society," William A. Sullivan's "Making Civil Society Work: Democracy as a Problem of Civic Cooperation," and David A. Crocker's "Civil Society and Transitional Justice." Barber sees government as a facilitator of civil society, and even recommends certain policies that would be useful in achieving this end. Those familiar with Barber's work, however, will find little new as most of the essay is devoted to critiques of liberalism and communitarianism in an effort to make room for his strong democracy. Sullivan provides a good history of the term "civil society" from the 1970s to today. In the end, however, he pleads the case for some sort of revival of the Protestant notion of "the calling," stripped of its religious language or source. Without this source, the Who or What doing the calling seems woefully obscure. Crocker looks at the problem of developing civil society in states where it has not existed. Or perhaps it is the problem of reinforcing civil society in states where it has been retarded. Crocker's otherwise precise analysis suffers from this same ambiguity that I mentioned above. It is especially unfortunate to find the ambiguity here where civil society may do the most good, that is, where it may actually save lives.

Nancy Rosenblum's "The Moral Uses of Pluralism," Judith Lichtenberg's "Beyond the Public Journalism Controversy," and Xiaorong Li's "Democracy and Uncivil Societies: A Critique of Civil Society Determinism" all explore problems with or limitations to the idea of civil society as it relates to democracy or civic renewal. According to Rosenblum, the advantages of civil society are not to be found in deep involvement in any one group. To the

contrary, a plurality of associational experiences can do much more for moral development. In other words, the experience of pluralism offered by civil society, not civil society itself, is the benefit of civil society (p. 270). In her essay on the topic of public journalism, Lichtenberg suggests that public journalists and their critics agree on more than they disagree. The problem, according to her, is more fundamental. The problem is determining what, in fact, is good for the polity. If journalists knew this they would all be public. I place Lichtenberg's essay in this group because I believe her teasing out of the debate over public journalism provides an excellent case study on the difficulty of arriving at any uncontested notion of civil society. Li, for her part, addresses the problem of civil society promotion as foreign policy, noting that civil society is identified as non-threatening economic development when promoted in powerful countries like China and Indonesia, but is promoted in small countries like Cuba and Burma by economic sanctions aimed to weaken the central power in an effort to mobilize another conception of civil society, that is, the angry masses (p. 406). While we might here have the justification for all those attacks on libertarian market interpretations of civil society in the rest of the book, it is unfortunate that we should only find it addressed in the last essay, and even then obliquely.

There are four historical studies of civil society in America appearing as studies of voluntary organizations: Steven Rathgeb Smith's "Civic Infrastructure in America: The Interrelationship between Government and the Voluntary Sector," Kathryn Kish Sklar's "A Historical Model of Women's Voluntarism and the State, 1890-1920," Kathleen D. McCarthy's "Religion, Philanthropy, and Political Culture," and Robert Wachbroit's "The Changing Role of Experience in Public Deliberation." Smith's study of non-profit organizations seeks to establish that they rose in number in response to new needs on the part of their constituencies and in response to decreases in funding from various levels of government. His conclusion, which should be familiar by now, is that "absent a vital public sector, voluntarism will not flourish" (p. 147). Sklar agrees, but also wants to add something else. She contends that women's voluntary associations were aided by state policies *and* that they were strong because volunteering was a part of the American political culture (p. 201). There is no contradiction here, but it seems the first contention must be used to weigh against the second to allow her to conclude that the expansion of the state did not reduce volunteering (p. 202). Again we find evidence of the book's preoccupation with defending state inter-

vention when it seems to require little defense. McCarthy explores the role of religious-based women's voluntary organizations through the nineteenth century. As with the other essays, she seems determined to prove that the extreme libertarian position that charities can handle all social needs is historically unfounded.

Wachbroit does not have this agendum. Instead, he explores the historical development of two types of voluntary organizations, one run by experts, the American Lung Association, and the other run by citizens attempting to mediate with experts, the largely amorphous "AIDS movement." When the ALA was first formed to fight tuberculosis it sought to present a unified front to the public, encouraging all of its members to hide any dissension or disagreement away from those who were not doctors. By contrast, the AIDS movement publicly challenged the procedures of doctors in an attempt to bring new medicines to their members and constituencies faster than the experts would allow. Wachbroit concludes that the AIDS movement model is becoming the more common as both sides have discovered that it more effectively builds trust.

Finally, Mark Sagoff's "The View from Quincy Library: Civic Engagement in Environmental Problem Solving," David Wasserman's "Self-Help Groups, Community, and Civil Society," and Fredrick C. Harris' "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? The Erosion and Transformation of African-American Civic Life" present alternative practices that are developing in civil society. Sagoff examines what has become known as the Quincy Library Group, a community group of environmentalists, loggers, and citizens in Northern California that found themselves facing a common enemy: the destruction of their forests. This immediate threat forced them together and forced them to reach an agreement. The irony is that their agreement, suitable to themselves, was not initially acceptable to national logging interests, environmentalists, or the government. Sagoff takes this to be a good example of the way community can be built, but also points out that the community existed prior to the emergency. These people were already friends and neighbors (p. 166). As an alternative practice it may work, but it depends on a prior commitment.

Wasserman looks at the rise of self-help groups, a new phenomenon on the scene of voluntary associations and the subject of dispute as regards their role in developing social capital and civil society. He argues that they meet a specific need of individuals that is not met by the traditional political associations based on geography, i.e.,

cities and states. This seems to me to be a good point, although it might also suggest that one look at cities and states as self-help groups. In other words, if the new self-help groups have legitimate political goals in promoting the interests of their members, one cannot argue that traditional politics should eschew self-interest. For of all motives self-interest, rightly understood of course, is a powerful motive to common action, as Tocqueville understood. Harris provides one of the most challenging pieces, challenging because it is hard to see where he comes down on the civil society debate. He suggests that a distrust of government institutions does not always lead to political apathy or exit. He points to the civil rights movement as evidence of a general distrust of institutions that led directly to greater political activity and citizen involvement. He thus challenges the notion that movement protests are not the seedbeds of political engagement that traditional voluntary associations are held to be (p. 322). I suggest that Harris is difficult to place in the debate because, on the one hand, he favors the federal actions that ended many of the civil rights abuses while, on the other hand, he looks to the distrust of government institutions for political motivation that is most often identified as federalist, that is, Anti-Federalist.

Were it not for the political legacies of the civil right era, one might imagine Harris torn between the Federalist institutions and the Anti-Federalist localism, although a localism of race or identity might be more appropriate in this case.

While I have pointed out many of the shortcomings I noticed in this book, I am convinced that most of them are the fault of the topic itself and the necessary awkwardness of an edited volume. Each essay would have benefited greatly from being rewritten in light of the other essays or, more ambitiously, from their authors meeting more than twice. My initial thought when looking over the book was that it would serve as a useful text for an advanced undergraduate seminar on civil society. Yet as I read it and struggled with each essay I wondered what undergraduates would make of all this confusion. I am left after reading it more informed on many parts of the study of civil society but still wondering what civil society is. I keep asking myself, is it a fact or is it a phenomenon? Fullinwider has collected a number of interesting essays on an important topic. I only wish more direction had been given to the authors and that the editor had taken a stronger hand.

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