City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Susen, S. (2021). Civil Society. In: Kivisto, P. (Ed.), The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory. Volume II: Contemporary Theories and Issues. (pp. 379-406). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/9781316677452.020

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/25508/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316677452.020

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@city.ac.uk

Civil Society

Simon Susen

The task of defining the concept of civil society is far from straightforward. Within the history of social and political thought, one is confronted with an abundance of conflicting and 'competing definitions' of this term. This lack of definitional clarity indicates that '[i]n the social sciences, there is no consensus as to the theoretical and empirical separation of political, economic and social relations' (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000: 48). It is far from obvious in which particular sphere, or set of spheres, civil society is located and on what grounds it can be distinguished from other domains of human reality. Yet, irrespective of its definitional ambiguity and referential elasticity, the concept of civil society has had – and, arguably, continues to have – a significant impact upon contemporary discourses, not only in the humanities and social sciences but also in both mainstream and alternative politics. In a general sense, civil society may be 'best understood as a confrontation with the very possibility of society itself' (Beyers, 2011: 3) – that is, as an intersubjectively constructed, discursively constituted, democratically organized, and publicly accessible participatory realm in which the normative parameters underpinning particular sets of social arrangements are at stake.

Influential Accounts of Civil Society

This section aims to provide an overview of influential accounts of civil society, drawing on analytical frameworks developed by major social and political philosophers. It is therefore important to consider their respective contributions to paradigmatic debates on the concept of civil society.

Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC)

In most studies concerned with the history of intellectual thought, there is widespread agreement that the first theoretically sophisticated and practically significant version of the concept of civil society appears in Aristotle 'under the heading of *politike koinonia*, political society/community' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 84). Commonly translated by the Latins as *societas civilis*, the use of the concept of *politike koinonia* paved the way for the systematic engagement with the idea of civil society in both classical and contemporary social and political theory. The intimate relationship between 'the social' (*koinonia*) and 'the political' (*politike*), which is

stressed in Aristotelian thought, suggests that, in both theoretical and practical terms, *community life* and *decision-making processes* are inextricably linked. The term *koinonia*, which is the transliterated expression for the Greek word κοινωνία, designates specific modes of communion, association, or joint participation. The term *polis* stands for particular types of political involvement and government experienced, and brought about, by human beings. Indeed, whereas the term *koinonia* refers to 'a plurality of forms of interaction, association, and group life' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 85), the term *polis* describes 'a system where the people governed the people' (Beyers, 2011: 2). In other words, 'the social' and 'the political' can be considered two inseparable preconditions for the possibility of human existence.

In an anthropological sense, the concept of *koinonia* draws attention to the intrinsically social constitution of human existence, just as the concept of *polis* implies that – as famously claimed by Aristotle – 'man is by nature a political animal', that is, a *zoon politikon*. The idea of 'a public ethical-political community of free and equal citizens', peacefully coexisting 'under a legally defined system of rule' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 84) is expressed in the concept of *politike koinonia*. On this account, *law* can be conceived of as a form of *ethos* that binds people together under the umbrella of a normative framework oriented towards the empirical realization of seemingly abstract principles – such as freedom, equality, and democracy. It is striking that in Aristotelian thought there is 'no distinction between state and society', just as there is 'no distinction between society and communion (*koinonia*)' (Beyers, 2011: 2). To put it bluntly, we are confronted with the equation *state ≈ (civil) society*, to the extent that 'the Aristotelian notion does not allow for our distinction between state and society', as well as with the equation *state ≈ community*, to the degree that we acknowledge 'the absence of a second distinction … that between society and community' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 84). In short, *civil society* can be understood as a *political society*, or indeed as a *political community*, in which 'the social' and 'the political' are so deeply intertwined that they constitute two ontological cornerstones of human reality.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

'The development toward absolutism represents the watershed between traditional and modern meanings of "civil society"' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 86). As both his critics and his followers recognize, Thomas Hobbes made major contributions to early modern conceptions of civil society. Arguably, 'the "society" of the Enlightenment, constituting a new form of public life, was the prototype of the early modern concept of civil society' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 86). Hobbes, unlike several other Enlightenment thinkers, is known for his pessimistic view of the human condition, which is illustrated in his atomistic account of *the state of nature*. According to Hobbes's thought experiment, within the state of nature – which is defined by the absence of government – life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. On his interpretation, it is 'the institution of civil society and the state that puts an end to the war of every man against every man' (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). According to this narrative, 'the institution of civil society is … equivalent to the

founding of the political state' (Macey, 2000: 62). Hobbes's theoretical framework, in this sense, is based on the equation *state ≈ civil society*.

With the rise of absolutism and, correspondingly, the consolidation of the authoritarian state, a *functional duality* began to unfold: on the one hand, political power was increasingly monopolized 'in the hands of the *ruler*', epitomized in the monarch representing the ultimate source of sovereign authority over the population living in a given territory; on the other hand, political power was gradually taken away from the hands of 'a depoliticized *society*', whose members had little, if any, influence on the decision-making processes, let alone on the institutional arrangements, by which their lives were directly or indirectly affected. This opposition is both theoretically and practically significant, insofar as it marks the starting point for the development of modern understandings of civil society. At the same time, Hobbes's account entails 'a return to the Ancient Greek concept of no division between state and society' (Beyers, 2011: 2).

In order to avoid a relapse into the state of nature, a strong government needs to ensure that its citizens follow a set of elementary rules, allowing for their peaceful coexistence and preventing them from resorting to physical violence to resolve conflicts that may arise between them. From a Hobbesian perspective, human beings are motivated by their passions, egotistic drives, and narrow self-interests. Hence, within the Hobbesian universe, it is not society that civilizes the state, but, on the contrary, the state that civilizes society. To the degree that individual behaviour is dictated by the permanent prevalence of short-sighted desires, appetites, and selfishness, it is – from a Hobbesian point of view – 'fundamentally impossible for human beings to achieve any measure of self-government' (Dalton, 2014: 44–45).

Even if social practices are shaped by a series of cultural, ethnic, or religious norms, human subjects are in need of a legitimate government, epitomized in the rule exercised by an absolute sovereign, whose power is legitimized on the basis of a *social contract*. Thus, in order to civilize society, 'the state needs to exercise absolute sovereign authority', that is, a form of centralized power that is legitimized by its capacity to guarantee peace as well as social, political, and economic stability. Within the Hobbesian tradition of thought, then, '[t]he absolutism and authoritarianism of Leviathan .. . is seen as essential to the necessary civilisation of society' (Dalton, 2014: 45). The alternative to absolutist or authoritarian rule would be, at best, chaos and anarchy or, at worst, violent conflict and war. On this view, '[t]he fusion of society is accomplished only by the power of the state', rather than by the power of civil society.

John Locke (1632–1704)

For John Locke, the social contract can be regarded as vital to protecting both individual and property rights. Indeed, from a Lockean point of view, it is precisely 'this contract that create[s] civil society in contrast to the "state of nature"'. On this account, the social contract can be conceived of as a means of bringing about civil society, enabling its members to liberate themselves from the disempowering aspects of the state of nature. Unlike their Hobbesian counterparts, however, Lockean

philosophers defend the idea of a 'slim' liberal-democratic, rather than an authoritarian or absolutist, state. In their eyes, '[l]iberal civil society requires limited government, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and rule by representative government' (Turner, 2006: 70). In brief, liberal civil society cannot dispense with liberal institutions.

While, according to Locke, '[m]en are born free, equal and independent' (Macey, 2000: 62) they are obliged to sacrifice some of their natural freedom when accepting 'the *bonds of civil society*' and agreeing to enter the socially, politically, and legally binding sphere of the Commonwealth, which is established 'for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another' (Locke, 1996 [1689]: 340). Paradoxically, the construction of civil society involves both a decrease and an increase in the amount of liberty that its participants are able to enjoy: on the one hand, they lose a significant degree of their natural liberty to behave as they wish, irrespective of their fellow human beings' concerns, interests, and intentions; on the other hand, they gain a significant degree of their social liberty to behave within the normative framework of rules and norms, defined by a social contract, whose validity and legitimacy they confirm by acting in accordance with its parameters.

'When individuals agree to enter civil society, they adopt the principle of majority rule; they are at liberty to leave civil society but doing so means living in a state of nature that leaves them free but without any defence against others' (Locke as quoted in Macey, 2000: 62). In other words, mutual agreement and democracy constitute integral elements of civil society. Similar to Hobbes, Locke considers civil society and the state as mutually inclusive. Unlike Hobbes, however, Locke makes a case for a state based on the exercise of liberal-democratic, rather than authoritarian-absolutist, power. Thus, in both cases, the establishment of civil society is interpreted as a central evolutionary step away from 'natural society or the state of nature' towards 'civilized society or the state of civilization'. It is, on this account, the 'innate rationality in civil society' that can articulate 'the general good', thereby contributing to the consolidation of relatively peaceful, stable, and predictable life forms, in which humans cannot only flourish and realize their potential but can also reconcile the inevitable tension between individual and collective interests (Sassoon, 1991: 82).

Locke's conception of civilized existence presupposes 'the continuation of the identity of political and civil society' (Beyers, 2011: 2). Despite the intimate nexus between society and state, however, the two spheres *are* separate and, within the Lockean universe, have to be distinguished from one another. According to this – essentially liberal – world view, the most desirable form of modern government is 'constitutional democracy', which is, by definition, designed to protect its citizens' liberty, while guaranteeing the existence of social order and, hence, relative interactional predictability. Mediating organizations and institutions – such as unions, churches, associations, schools, and universities – are not only key elements of civil society but also a 'crucial counterweight to the power of government'. On this view, solidified socializing forces 'help keep society civil' (Dalton, 2014: 44). Put differently, there is no civil society without strong organizations and institutions capable of mediating between individuals and the state.

Just as civil society serves a *civilizing* function, facilitating the construction of social networks built on trust, reciprocity, and solidarity, it serves a *democratizing* function, allowing for the emergence of political structures derived from participation, engagement, and debate. Within a Lockean framework, the classical formula *societas civilis sive politicus sive respublica* continues to be valid, to the extent that the identity of 'political society' and 'civil society' is maintained, while both remain separate from 'state power'. In short, from a Lockean perspective, civil society constitutes a political (that is, both a politicized and a politicizing) sphere, whose existence is both fostered and protected by a constitutionally grounded polity, which is committed to guaranteeing its citizens' enjoyment of the civilizing functions of liberty and democracy.

Montesquieu (1689–1755)

Montesquieu's distinction between *public/political law* and *civil law* has had a profound impact upon the development of political and legal institutions in modern societies. *Public/political law* is concerned with 'regulating relations between those who govern and those who are governed'. *Civil law*, by contrast, focuses on 'regulating relations between members of society' (Beyers, 2011: 2). The former provides a *politico-legal* framework aimed at guaranteeing both the existence and the functioning of democratic structures and practices. The latter offers a *civil-legal* framework designed to ensure that citizens of a given society interact with one another in a morally justifiable, normatively sensitive, and practically viable fashion. This division between these two fundamental socio-legal areas reflects the systematic effort 'to empower society politically, setting it up as a system against absolute rule' (Beyers, 2011: 2). Hence, it may be described as an institutionalized form of 'anti-absolutism'. On this account, members of society can be regarded as 'autonomous individuals' able to make rationally motivated decisions, thereby claiming authorship for their actions and asserting their sovereignty as responsible and accountable subjects. The wider significance of Montesquieu's distinction between public/political law and civil law is illustrated in his corresponding distinction between government (*l'état politique*) and society (*l'état civile*), borrowed from the Italian writer Gravina (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 88). Both conceptual pairs indicate that from the perspective of Montesquieu state and civil society, although they are interdependent, represent two different spheres of large-scale modern life forms.

Montesquieu's (1989 [1748]) unambiguously anti-absolutist conception of society underpins his plea for the separation of state powers: executive, legislative, and judicial. These powers are both relatively interdependent and relatively independent: they are relatively interdependent, insofar as they can be efficiently exercised only in relation to one another; at the same time, they are relatively independent, insofar as each of them possesses an idiosyncratic logic of functioning and, more importantly, needs to be kept separate from the others, in order to guarantee a stable, equitable, and viable balance of power within a democratic political system. Civil society can prosper only to the degree that its protagonists

respect the division of public/political law and civil law, as well as the tripartite separation of executive, legislative, and judicial power.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Similar to other social contract theorists, Jean-Jacques Rousseau draws a distinction between natural society or the state of nature, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other. The former is characterized by 'equality amongst people unpolluted by luxury or notions of power and servitude'. The latter is marked by the omnipresence of 'motifs of domination and imitation', triggered by 'the introduction of private property and an increasingly competitive pursuit of commercial gain' (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 8). In other words, whereas the former represents the natural condition of 'the noble savage', the latter constitutes the artificial condition of 'civilized beings', alienated from their genuine dispositions, inclinations, and desires. In the state of nature, humans have three main preoccupations: food, sleep, and sex. In civil society, humans have become 'slaves to the conventions of social tastes and habits', imposed upon them by the behavioural, ideological, and institutional forces of their culturally codified environment (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 8). In civilized forms of life, then, humans are estranged from their true nature: 'the savage lives in himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others' (Rousseau, 1996 [1755]: 448). This leads to the 'loss of independent consciousness' (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 8) and, correspondingly, to the thriving of opportunism in the struggle for recognition, status, and prestige.

Hence, Hobbes's and Rousseau's respective accounts of the state of nature are diametrically opposed to one another: anthropological pessimism versus anthropological optimism. Rousseau's (1996 [1755]: 465) famous contention that '[m]an is born free, and everywhere he is in chains', summarizes his optimistic conception of the state of nature and his pessimistic conception of civil society. On this account, inequality between humans is, above all, socially constituted, rather than biologically determined. This view is forcefully expressed in the following passage:

> The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: 'Do not listen to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!' (Rousseau, 1996 [1755]: 431)

Put differently, in collective life forms whose economic organization is based on private property, inequality is due to social – rather than biological or physical – differences between people. Instead of conceiving of private property as a natural right and of social inequality as an inevitable given, Rousseau regarded both as historical products of bourgeois domination. As a result of the epochal transition from the state of nature to the consolidation of society, human beings have gradually distanced themselves from the roots of their existence and, consequently, alienated

themselves from their true species-constitutive essence, epitomized in the noble savage.

The state of nature is equivalent to a socio-historical condition characterized by the absence of law, morality, and social conventions. Civil society, on the other hand, is inseparably linked to the emergence of an ever greater division of labour, along with the consolidation of political and legal institutions designed to protect the right to private property. To be clear, Rousseau was sufficiently realistic to recognize that a return to the state of nature, although it might be regarded desirable in some respects, did not represent a viable historical possibility. Similar to other Enlightenment thinkers, however, he was persuaded that, by forming civil society and subscribing to a social contract, individuals would be able not only to preserve themselves as members of their communities in particular and of humanity in general, but also to contribute to their own political emancipation as citizens equipped with basic democratic rights – such as freedom of expression, freedom to form and join organizations, and freedom of assembly. This conviction is articulated in Rousseau's belief in the sociological centrality of citizens' pursuit of a 'general will' (*volonté générale*), based on normative ideals such as popular sovereignty, direct democracy, and fairness of opportunity. His work, then, stands firmly in 'the tradition of civic virtue' (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 8) understood as an empowering resource of politically conscientious, responsible, and self-determining actors.

Adam Smith (1723–1790)

Adam Smith stands in line with other Enlightenment thinkers, in the sense that the conceptual differentiation between the state of nature and civil society is central to his theoretical framework. On his account, the transition from the latter to the former is indicative of the 'innate rationality' of civil life, allowing for the emergence of a historical formation shaped by the pursuit of 'the general good' (Sassoon, 1991: 82). Within the Smithian universe of human existence, however, individuals contribute to the overall well-being of society without necessarily being aware of the fact that they are doing so when pursuing their own interests. In the Kantian kingdom of moral categorical imperatives, human entities should always be treated as ends in themselves, rather than being reduced to mere means for the pursuit of instrumental or strategic goals. In the Smithian world of wealth creation resulting from everyone's pursuit of their personal interests, by contrast, 'individuals treat one another as means to their private ends', which implies that social relations are sustained by both instrumental and strategic actions. On this interpretation, 'a just moral order is the by-product of that selfish pursuit' to the extent that the latter generates the normative parameters underlying the former (Calabrese, 2004: 318).

Adam Ferguson (1723–1816)

According to Adam Ferguson, civil society, insofar as it constitutes 'a state of civility', represents one of the most significant large-scale consequences of the rise of civilization. The idea of 'civility', on this view, can be employed as a political

concept by means of which it is possible, and indeed necessary, to contrast liberal democracies with authoritarian regimes. This conceptual opposition is reflected in the dichotomy of 'the West' and 'the Rest', which refers to the normative antinomy between 'occidental pluralism' and 'oriental despotism', liberal democracy and totalitarian authority, the rule of law and arbitrary power. It is imperative, on this account, to draw a distinction between 'civilization' and 'societies (the barbaric state) in which private property does not exist' (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000: 48). The 'history of civil society', therefore, cannot be divorced from the emergence of an ever-more-sophisticated, and universally empowering, civilization (Ferguson, 1995 [1767]).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

For Immanuel Kant, civil society stands for an empowering realm in which rational subjects can ensure that their actions are guided by universal moral principles. 'Kant's redefinition of civil society as based on universal human rights beyond all particularistic legal and political orders' emanates from the ambitious attempt to develop a framework of normativity that, by definition, surpasses the limited scope of claims to moral validity constrained by the situational boundaries of spatio-temporal specificity (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 90). For Kant, then, civil society provides 'an attractive frame for administering *universal* justice' in a theoretically defensible and practically viable fashion (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 11).

Given its universalistic outlook, civil society – as a reference point of both a collective imaginary and an everyday reality – offers 'people a way of thinking beyond states, communities and ranks' by reminding them of their common humanity, whose constitutive features transcend the contingency of culturally specific sets of moral standards that vary between communities. To be sure, it would be erroneous 'to project onto civil society a linear view of a growing awareness of cosmopolitan ethics and peace', emerging, in an evolutionary fashion, out of inevitable civilizational progress (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 11). Yet, from a Kantian standpoint, it is crucial to recognize the emancipatory potential inherent in civil society, notably in terms of its capacity to contribute to the construction of a global ethics whose ultimate objective is to contribute to the empowerment of all members of humanity.

G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)

From a Hegelian perspective, the term 'civil society' designates 'an intermediate institution between the family and the political relations of the state' (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000: 48) or, rather, 'a specific area of ethical life, which exists or mediates between the family and the state'. Interceding between the domestic demands of the household or *oikos* (ο κος), on the one hand, and the administrative and coercive imperatives of the state, on the other, civil society constitutes a collectively and publicly organized sphere for 'the enjoyment of rights' (Turner, 2006: 70). Thus, '[i]nterposed between the individual (or family) and the state' (Marshall, 1994: 55), civil society represents, above all, a 'market society', in

which actors engage in 'infinitely complex criss-cross movements of reciprocal production and exchange' based on legally binding contracts and the inalienable right to private property (Macey, 2000: 62). Owing to the proliferation of and competition between divergent forces, however, civil society is in danger of turning out to be 'an indiscriminate multitude of individuals with conflicting and irreconcilable interests' (Macey, 2000: 62).

In such a context, characterized by potential tensions and frictions, the role of the state is of paramount importance. One of the key functions of the state is to ensure that individual and collective actors with fundamentally different interests can live together not only in a stable and peaceful but also in a fruitful and mutually beneficial manner. The state, then, 'exists over and above civil society, and its agents or civil servants are defined as a universal class serving the interests of society as a whole'. Indeed, in the long run, civil society cannot prevail without 'its absorption into the rational state', thereby expressing the teleology of the world spirit (*Weltgeist*), which is built into the course of world history (*Weltgeschichte*) (Macey, 2000: 62).

In Hegel's work, in other words, the term 'civil society' no longer appears as 'a synonym for political society' (Mautner, 1997: 96); rather, given its intermediate position between family and state, civil society 'is best suited to balancing the diverse range of human needs and interests' within constantly evolving large-scale historical formations (Calabrese, 2004: 319). His conception of modernity is embedded in 'a theory of a differentiated and highly complex social order' (Beyers, 2011: 2) in which civil society has an empowering – and, ultimately, civilizing – influence on the human condition, fostering cohesion, solidarity, 'trust and reciprocity' (Dalton, 2014: 45). To the extent that the mission of civil society is to provide a 'set of institutions or organisations that are held to "mediate" between public and private life', it serves a stabilizing function in creating a social equilibrium (Dalton, 2014: 44).

Ultimately, 'the highest purpose of public life is to generate a rational universal identity' shared by all members of society and epitomized in the emergence of a polity that may be equated with 'the patriotic ethos of the state' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 113). Paradoxically, however, civil society takes on the function of both an extension of and an opposition to the state. Given the high level of analytical sophistication characterizing his approach, 'Hegel's *conception* of civil society' may be regarded as 'the first modern *theory* of civil society' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 91).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, within Hegel's fine-grained account of civil society, the distinction between morality and ethics is crucial: the former is founded on 'the self-reflection of the solitary moral subject'; the latter is based on the normative parameters, standards, and conventions established and negotiated by interacting members of culturally specific communities. Whereas the former concerns the level of autonomous and responsible actors capable of making reasonable decisions, the latter relates to the level of 'the normative content and logic of inherited institutions and traditions', by means of which a socially regulated, and hence culturally codified, life becomes possible in the first place (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 93). From a Hegelian perspective, there is no civil society (*bürgerliche*

Gesellschaft) without both morally motivated subjects and ethically regulated interactions.

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Within Marxist thought, civil society, far from being reducible to an 'arena of civilized co-operation', represents a realm shaped by 'economic self-interest and the struggle between social classes' (Turner, 2006: 71). Put differently, civil society is located in the economic 'base' or 'infrastructure', rather than in the ideological 'superstructure', of society. As such, it is synonymous with 'the ensemble of socio-economic relations and forces of production', governed by mechanisms of exploitation, competition, and class antagonism (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000: 48). To the extent that civil society constitutes 'an arena of particular needs, self-interest, and divisiveness, with a potential for self-destruction' (Sassoon, 1991: 82), it contributes to the fragmentation of modern life and the alienation of human entities from their species-constitutive essence (*Gattungswesen*).

Civil society, according to this account, is the 'site of crass materialism, of modern property relations, of the struggle of each against all, of egotism'. The transition from feudalism to capitalism manifests itself in the replacement of '[t]he old bonds of privilege', honour, and absolutist authority by the new networks of exchange, competition, and exploitation, driven by 'the selfish needs of atomistic individuals separated from each other and from the community' (Sassoon, 1991: 82–83).

The historical irony of civil society, however, consists in the fact that its advocates seek to conceal its particularist essence behind its universalist appearance. In practice, the bourgeois 'idealism of universal interests', expressed in 'the abstractness of the concept of a citizen', translates into the 'materialism of real, sensuous man in civil society', divided by class-specific allegiances and, hence, particular interests. Under the hegemonic influence of capitalism, 'the most universal, moral, social purposes as embodied in the ideal of the state' – and, correspondingly, in the promise of universal citizenship – turn out to be 'at the service of human beings in a partial, depraved state of individual egotistical desires, of economic necessity' (Sassoon, 1991: 83). In the context of modernity, there is no genuine human emancipation unless capitalism is replaced with socialism – that is, unless an exploitative system, sustained by mechanisms of class-based inequality, is superseded by a classless societal formation, founded on the principle 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (Marx, 2000 [1875]: 615). In a strict sense, this requires the abolishment of civil society, that is, the radical transformation of both the economic base and the ideological superstructure.

Thus, the Marxist account of civil society stands within the Hegelian tradition of intellectual thought, while, at the same time, going beyond it. Both for Hegel and for Marx, civil society constitutes a sphere separate from the state. Yet, their accounts differ in a fundamental way: for Hegel, civil society can successfully mediate between the individual (or family) and the state, thereby transcending group-specific interests; for Marx, by contrast, civil society is dominated by the agenda of the bourgeoisie, thereby reproducing group-specific interests. From a Marxist

perspective, one of the key functions of the state, operating in the age of capitalism, is to guarantee 'the property rights that promote and reproduce class divisions', while ensuring that the proletariat, as the oppressed class, exists at the margins of – if not, outside – civil society (Macey, 2000: 62–63).

It is *not* the case that, from a Marxist point of view, the main political achievements of the French Revolution – epitomized in 'the principles of *liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity* in the 1789 "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen"' – are historically insignificant, let alone irrelevant to the development of modern society (Calabrese, 2004: 319). It *is* the case, however, that, according to Marxist parameters, the bourgeois defence of these principles is essentially aimed at protecting the right to private property. It is no surprise, then, that 'Marx stressed the negative aspects of civil society, its atomistic and dehumanizing features', focusing on 'the social consequences of capitalist development', notably its detrimental impact on the life conditions of the oppressed classes (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 117). For Marx, genuine human emancipation requires overcoming the division between the 'abstract universal citizen in politics', on the one hand, and the concrete 'materialistic individual in civil society', on the other (Hall and Trentmann, 2005: 9).

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

According to Antonio Gramsci, civil society constitutes the sphere that lies 'between the coercive relations of the state and the economic sphere of production'. As such, it represents 'the realm of the private citizen and individual consent' (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000: 49). Compared to Marx's remarkably critical approach, Gramsci's account of civil society is marked by optimism, suggesting that its radical transformation by virtue of 'political education' may contribute to both individual and collective forms of human empowerment. Of course, the principal function of the state – understood as 'a mixture of force plus consent, or hegemony with coercion' – remains to defend the dominant position of the ruling class either by democratic or, if necessary, by authoritarian means (Turner, 2006: 71). One of the main functions of civil society, by contrast, is to realize 'the potential of rational self-regulation and freedom' inherent in modernity, by confronting the coercive power of the state on the basis of counter-hegemonic practices. On this view, civil society is 'not simply a sphere of individual needs', egotism, and self-interest, but, rather, a realm of constellations and organizations capable of undermining the status quo by generating processes of opinion- and will-formation (Sassoon, 1991: 83). This 'ensemble of organisms commonly called "private"' (Gramsci, 1971: 12) then, contains 'self-regulating attributes' (Sassoon, 1991: 83) owing to which non-state actors can pose a serious challenge to the hegemony of the state. Gramsci's narrative differs from orthodox Marxist accounts, therefore, in that it locates civil society in both the economic base and the ideological superstructure, instead of reducing it to one of these two spheres.

Granted, for Gramsci, as for Marx, 'the state's ultimate destiny is its destruction'; that is, eventually, it will wither away. At the same time, for Gramsci 'political society will finally be absorbed back into civil society' when a historical period

emerges in which the working class, with the help of its allies, succeeds not only in undermining the hegemony of dominant forces but also in establishing 'a free and self-governing society' (Macey, 2000: 63). What is striking when comparing Marx's and Gramsci's respective interpretations is that the latter is far more optimistic about the normative constitution of civil society than the former. Indeed, from a Gramscian perspective, civil society can be reconquered by the working class in a post-capitalist – that is, socialist or communist – era.

In this sense, civil society constitutes 'a site of struggle for the legitimate use of state power', that is, a realm shaped by the conflict between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces (Calabrese, 2004: 320). Arguably, it is one of Gramsci's most significant intellectual achievements to have 'reversed the reductionist trend of the Marxian analysis by concentrating on the dimension of *associations* and *cultural intermediations* and by discovering modern equivalents of Hegel's corporations and estates' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 117). Within a Gramscian theoretical framework, there is no place for 'the *economistic* reduction of civil society to the political economy' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 143). For, from a Gramscian perspective, the *raison d'être* of civil society consists in paving the way for the possibility of *self-government* (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 153), thereby converting itself not into the antinomy of political society, but, rather, into 'its normal continuation, its organic complement' – if not its precondition (Gramsci, 1971: 268). As a consequence, we are confronted with the contradiction between civil society 'as a consolidation or normalization of *domination*', sustained by hegemonic mechanisms of control and oppression, and civil society as a sphere of empowerment and *emancipation*, permeated by processes of debate and deliberation (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 157).

The Revival of Civil Society and the Power of Social Capital

'Phrases involving the *resurrection*, *reemergence*, *rebirth*, *reconstruction*, or *renaissance* of civil society' have become a common feature of contemporary social and political agendas (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 29). In the literature, it is widely recognized that the recent revival of the concept of civil society cannot be dissociated from the collapse of numerous military dictatorships across the world, especially in Latin America, and from the disintegration of state socialism, notably in Eastern and Central Europe, at the end of the twentieth century. To this one may add the Arab Spring upheavals in the Middle East. Modern liberal conceptions of civil society are inextricably linked to 'the protection and/or self-organization of social life in the face of the totalitarian or authoritarian state' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 31). This has led to a novel historical situation in which the political project of liberal democracy represents the normative foundation of most pluralistic societies. Ideologically, this tendency has been reinforced by the gradual consolidation of a capitalist world market. From a liberal point of view, the velvet revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe served as 'the wellspring of a democratic and emancipatory public sphere' (Calabrese, 2004: 321). To the

extent that '[t]he idea of civil society was popularized when communist or totalitarian states collapsed in the 1980s', it became increasingly associated with liberal conceptions of civilizational progress and the common good (Ossewaarde, 2006: 199).

In contemporary forms of social and political analysis, it has become prevalent to examine civil society in terms of the production, distribution, circulation, and exchange of social capital. In this respect, three theoretical strands are particularly important: rational choice, critical and neo-Marxist, and liberal.

Rational choice theories are based on the assumption that individuals are driven by self-interest and, hence, guided by instrumental reason, whose preponderance manifests itself in the pivotal role that strategic action plays in the unfolding of social life. On this account, human actors are both utility- and profit-maximizers, capable of making decisions informed by calculative considerations and mediated by instrumental rationality. According to this interpretation, *all* human actions are essentially economic actions, and human entities can be regarded as 'radically individualistic utility-maximizing reasoners'. Within this presuppositional framework, every person's pursuit of self-interest takes centre stage: the ambition to realize one's individual interests constitutes 'the fundamental and governing aspect of *all* human action' (Lewandowski and Streich, 2007: 589).

Critical and neo-Marxist theories draw attention to the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources in class-divided societies. In particular, Bourdieu's critical sociology suggests that human agents occupy vertically structured positions in different social fields and acquire asymmetrically allocated dispositions by virtue of their habitus. When navigating their way through the social universe, they draw upon multiple forms of capital: social capital, economic capital, cultural capital, political capital, educational capital, linguistic capital, and symbolic capital. Social capital is the most fundamental form of capital insofar as it underlies all forms of capital.

Liberal theories posit that social capital constitutes the ultimate source of social cohesion and stability, allowing for the emergence of networks between citizens based on trust, solidarity, and shared identity. On their account, there are no democratic, participatory, and associational practices and structures unless actors are embedded in, and can rely on, networks of sociality. This Tocquevillian stance – most famously represented by Putnam – insists on the socio-ontological centrality of people's capacity to relate to, count on, and collaborate with one another while engaging in the construction of meaningful lives. According to this approach, the 'habits of acting together in the affairs of daily life' are central to bringing about solidified forms of social interaction sustained by morally binding and intersubjectively recognized norms and conventions (Lewandowski and Streich, 2007: 589).

The concept of 'social capital', then, refers to 'networks, norms and trust ... that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam, 1995: 664–665). In fact, there are major *benefits* to the presence and cultivation of social capital: communities and societies with high levels of social capital tend to have 'lower mortality rates, lower crime and fear of crime, higher

educational results, better health and mental health, higher instances of volunteering and democratic voting'. In short, strong normative ties are vital to the empowerment of both individual and society.

Two types of social capital are particularly important. First, bonding (or exclusive) social capital is based on 'a dense layering of norms and trust that is found in homogenous groups and tends to reinforce exclusivity and homogeneity'. As such, it takes on the function of 'a "kind of sociological superglue"'. Access to bonding social capital is a precondition for getting by in life. Second, bridging (or inclusive) social capital is founded on 'linkages with groups different from themselves (i.e. heterogeneous relationships), thus creating new spaces' and potentially cross-sectional identities. As such, it serves the function of a 'sociological WD40', capable of contributing to the productivity, creativity, and diversity of individuals and groups, as well as to the communication, collaboration, and solidarity between them. Access to bonding social capital is a precondition for getting ahead in life (Putnam, 2000: 22–23).

To this distinction, one may wish to add a third type of social capital. Linking social capital 'addresses the power differentials within society and allows more marginal groups to link with the resources of powerful groups (i.e. capital, information, knowledge, secondments) as a way of reducing the inherent deficits of influence in civil society'. As such, it assumes the function of a sociological bridge, capable of cross-fertilizing the assets of multiple groups and, in particular, providing socially deprived actors with the opportunity to draw upon resources to which they would not have access otherwise (Baker and Miles-Watson, 2010: 26).

All three approaches have strengths and weaknesses. In terms of their explanatory limitations, the following dimensions are especially noteworthy. Rational choice theories tend to overemphasize the role of economic factors as well as to underemphasize the role of cultural, political, and ideological factors relevant to both reproducing and transforming social networks. Critical and neo-Marxist theories tend to overemphasize the extent to which actors' positions and dispositions are shaped – if not, determined – by access, or lack of access, to symbolic and material resources as well as to underemphasize the extent to which they have both the theoretical and the practical capacity to challenge the power of social structures. Liberal theories tend to overemphasize the empowering effects of democratic, participatory, and associational processes as well as to underemphasize the degree to which these are permeated by relations of power and domination and, hence, by the asymmetrical distribution of material and symbolic resources underlying both individual and collective forms of self-realization.

Outline of a Critical Theory of Civil Society

The task of this section is to propose an outline of a critical theory of civil society. To this end, the key dimensions of civil society shall be identified and examined in subsequent sections.

Civil Society as a Social Sphere

Civil society constitutes a social sphere. As such, it is composed of 'the places where individuals gather together', in order to develop a collective sense of belonging based on solidarity, trust, identity, and connectivity (Jacobs, 2006: 27). The sociality that is built into civil society is reflected in the fact that its very possibility depends on five central components of human coexistence: (1) relationality, (2) reciprocity, (3) reconstructability, (4) renormalizability, and (5) recognizability. First, civil society can come into existence only to the extent that its members relate to one another. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*with*-one-another (*Miteinandersein*). Second, civil society can come into existence only to the extent that its members reciprocate one another. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*through*-one-another (*Durcheinandersein*). Third, civil society can come into existence only to the extent that its members reconstruct one another. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*beyond*-one-another (*Jenseitsvoneinandersein* or *aufhebbares Sein*). Fourth, civil society can come into existence only to the extent that its members renormalize one another. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*about*-one-another (*Übereinandersein*). Finally, civil society can come into existence only to the extent that its members recognize one another. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*within*-one-another (*Ineinandersein*). In short, since civil society is brought into existence by relational, reciprocal, reconstructable, renormalizable, and recognizable selves, it is based on networks of sociality, mutuality, transformability, signifiability, and identity, which allow for the emergence of individual and collective forms of engagement oriented towards the construction of meaning-laden realities.

Civil Society as a Discursive Sphere

Civil society constitutes a discursive sphere. As such, it is reliant on subjects capable of engaging in symbolically mediated interactions. Civil society is inconceivable without the existence of 'the places where individuals gather together to have conversations' (Jacobs, 2006: 27). There is no civil society that can dispense with communicative action, that is, with human practices oriented towards mutual understanding. Communicative actors learn to reason by arguing with and against one another. Their reasoning capacity (*Verstand*) is embedded in their communicative capacity (*Verständigung*), by means of which they develop not only an interpretive capacity (*Verstehen*) but also a consensual capacity (*Einverständnis*). Civil society, then, can be regarded as a discursively organized realm created by reasoning, communicating, interpreting, and agreement-seeking subjects, whose ability to obtain socioculturally contingent understandings about the world is crucial to their species-distinctive condition. As a 'wise species' (*Homo sapiens*), humans have put themselves in the evolutionarily privileged position of being able to convert both practical knowledge *within* the world and theoretical knowledge *about* the world into the historico-cognitive driving force of their existence. Civil society provides the discursively structured domain in which the collective search for anthropologically valuable knowledge, derived from communicative action, takes place.

Civil Society as an Interest-Laden Sphere

Civil society constitutes an interest-laden sphere. As such, it is composed of 'the places where individuals ... pursue common interests' (Jacobs, 2006: 27). To be precise, within civil society, actors pursue individual, collective, and human interests. They pursue individual interests, insofar as they are driven by personal motives. They pursue collective interests, insofar as they are influenced by social forces, which may be defined in relational terms. They pursue human interests, insofar as they are conditioned by anthropological invariants, which – at least in principle – they share with all other human beings and which, in a broad sense, contribute to the survival of the species. In brief, the term 'civil society' designates a tension-laden realm in which individual, collective, and human interests are incessantly articulated and negotiated and defined and redefined, as well as reproduced and transformed.

Civil Society as a Value-Laden Sphere

Civil society constitutes a value-laden sphere. As such, it can be described as a profoundly normative and, ultimately, political domain of meaningful interactions between discursively equipped actors. It is no accident that, by mobilizing both the symbolic and the material resources available to them within civil society, actors 'try to influence public opinion or public policy' (Jacobs, 2006: 27). In other words, civil society cannot be reduced to an isolated domain centred mainly, or even exclusively, upon itself. Rather, it refers to 'an area of social consensus based on agreements about norms and values' that, potentially, affect the whole of society and, hence, the behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns by which it is sustained (Turner, 2006: 70). Civil society is a normative realm, which is characterized by 'a different way of existing in the world', 'a different rationality', a different *modus operandi*, according to which cultural and political values are negotiated in a constructive, respectful, and non-violent manner. Viewed in this light, civil society is tantamount to 'the ethical ideal of the social order where the interests of the individual are weighed up against what is best for the community and a balance is established between the two'. Members of civil society, then, are required not only to question the legitimacy of 'existing structures and activities', but also to explore the degree to which these are empowering or disempowering for individual and collective actors (Beyers, 2011: 4). One of the most essential values endorsed by the members of civil society, therefore, is the defence of value-ladenness itself.

Civil Society as a Public Sphere

Civil society constitutes a public sphere. As such, it is shaped by practices taking place in 'public life, rather than [by] private or household-based activities' (Marshall, 1994: 55). Its protagonists may be concerned with a number of public domains: opinion, policy, goods, services, or affairs – to mention only a few. Civil society represents an arena of public encounters. The public/private distinction, which may be regarded as 'a grand dichotomy', possesses a number of binary

meanings, three of which are particularly important: society vs. individual, visibility vs. concealment, and openness vs. closure. These three meanings stand for 'heterogeneous criteria', which have been interpreted in numerous ways. The normative boundaries of civil society are defined by public values – such as solidarity and mutuality, visibility and transparency, openness and accessibility. Yet, the 'constant tension between the private and the public sphere' lies at the core of civil society, for its constitution and development are determined by both individual and collective forms of agency (Beyers, 2011: 4).

Civil Society as a Participatory Sphere

Civil society constitutes a participatory sphere. As such, it is a social domain founded on intersubjectively mediated engagements. In a socio-philosophical sense, 'engagement' can be defined as a form of active, purposive, and meaning-laden involvement in the world. In the modern era, human engagements in and with the normative parameters underlying the construction of both small-scale and large-scale realities manifest themselves in 'the way[s] that people participate in civil society' (Jacobs, 2006: 29). The participatory nature of civil society is illustrated in the prevalence of the associational practices by which it is shaped. Indeed, involvement in voluntary organizations is fundamental to the grass-roots spirit permeating civil society. People's committed involvement in the material and symbolic construction of reality, based on the active participation in 'associations and social networks' (Pérez-Diaz, 2014: 812), is central to 'the potential success of civil society's engagement' with challenges faced by humanity (Fioramonti and Thümler, 2013: 213).

Civil Society as a Voluntary Sphere

Civil society constitutes a voluntary sphere. As such, it forms a social realm whose members participate in the meaningful establishment of normative arrangements, which they experience as an empowering process founded on freedom, choice, and emancipation. Participating in voluntary associations, organizations, and networks is a *sine qua non* of civil society. For its emergence as a domain of opinion- and will-formation, undertaken by politically autonomous individuals, is contingent upon its members' ability to make decisions independently of, and without interference from, exogenous forces driven by instrumental rationality.

Civil Society as a Horizontal Sphere

Civil society constitutes a horizontal sphere. As such, it provides a forum in which actors – notwithstanding the sociological variables by which they are divided – relate to one another as individuals guided by normative principles, such as justice, fairness, and equality. To be sure, this is not to deny the fact that, in society in general and in civil society in particular, actors occupy different – vertically structured – positions and are equipped with different – asymmetrically distributed – dispositions. This is to acknowledge, however, that, in the modern era, civil society tends to be conceived of as a sphere

that gives actors the opportunity to relate to one another on the basis of associations, organizations, and networks capable of challenging the perpetuation of pecking orders and hierarchies by virtue of *inclusive* practices and a broadly egalitarian spirit.

Civil Society as a Transparent Sphere

Civil society constitutes a transparent sphere. It is a space of social interactions guided by the ideals of visibility, accessibility, accountability, liability, and responsibility. This plea for transparency is of paramount importance, notably in historical contexts characterized by major systemic transitions from authoritarian to non-authoritarian types of government. The former are associated with different modes of absolutism, despotism, and totalitarianism. The latter, at least in the modern era, are linked primarily to varieties of liberalism. Transparency is the ultimate currency in civil society, in the sense that its members are committed to challenging arbitrary sources of authority, by insisting that all legislative, executive, and judicial powers must be democratically controlled, and hence publicly accountable, in order to obtain viable degrees of legitimacy.

Civil Society as a Purposive Sphere

Civil society constitutes a purposive sphere. It stands for an arena whose actors seek to 'make a difference' by having a tangible impact upon the world. Regardless of whether they 'try to influence public opinion or public policy' in particular or public affairs in general, individual and collective actors in civil society have a normative purpose, in the sense that their *raison d'être* is to shape behavioural, ideological, and institutional arrangements in such a way that they contribute to the everyday empowerment of human subjects (Jacobs, 2006: 27).

Civil Society as a Consensual Sphere

Civil society constitutes a consensual sphere. As such, it refers to 'an area of social consensus based on agreements about norms and values' underlying behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns of functioning within a given societal formation (Turner, 2006: 70). Members of civil society are confronted with the challenge of reaching agreements about pressing normative issues. Arguably, one of the most fundamental presuppositional features underlying the daily construction of civil society is the premise that, if necessary, its participants – at least in principle – agree to disagree with one another. In other words, even if they do not share each other's opinions on specific matters, protagonists of civil society are expected to be willing to tolerate disagreements, to the extent that the hermeneutic stances in which they are embedded do not violate basic democratic rights and principles.

Civil Society as a Cooperative Sphere

Civil society constitutes a cooperative sphere. It is a social realm sustained by networks of coordination, collaboration, and mutual support. Thus, 'the potential

success of civil society's engagement depends on a sufficient level of problem-work, mobilization and cooperation, the willingness to learn much more about the nature of the problem and possible ways to tackle it' in a collaborative fashion (Fioramonti and Thümler, 2013: 231). The collective spirit pervading quotidian practices in civil society emanates from tireless individual and group efforts to contribute to citizens' well-being and, more generally, to the common good.

Civil Society as a Pluralistic Sphere

Civil society constitutes a pluralistic sphere. As such, it is based on both the recognition and the affirmation of behavioural, ideological, and institutional diversity, permitting the peaceful coexistence of different interests, convictions, and lifestyles amongst socially, culturally, and politically heterogeneous actors. It is reinforced by fundamental humanist principles indispensable to the functioning of highly differentiated societies, whose members, although they may be separated by numerous identity-defining variables, are confronted with the challenge of defining, and pursuing, their common interests when engaging in the daily construction of reality.

Civil Society as a Democratic Sphere

Civil society constitutes a democratic sphere. As such, it tends to be regarded as an integral component of both small-scale and large-scale variants of democracy. The idea of civil society, then, lies at the core of both participatory and representative democracy. In the most general sense, democracy may be defined as government by the people based on the rule of the majority. Thus, democracy requires a governmental system in which all citizens of a polity are directly or indirectly involved in decision-making processes, by means of which they coordinate their actions and shape the social arrangements underpinning their coexistence. Civil society can play a pivotal role in this endeavour in that 'associational membership can shape and inculcate the dispositions necessary to maintain a healthy liberal democracy' (Chambers and Kopstein, 2001: 853), founded on vital normative ingredients such as the following: solidarity; discourse; public life; participation; inclusion; consensus-building; opinion- and will-formation; transparency; pluralism; right to vote; eligibility for public office; fundamental freedoms – notably freedom of conscience, belief, opinion, and expression; freedom of speech; freedom of the press and other media of communication; freedom to form and join organizations; and freedom of assembly.

Civil Society as a Decisional Sphere

Civil society constitutes a decisional sphere. Its very existence is rooted in people's capacity to make decisions that impact their lives. Within civil society, 'decisions should be made locally and should not be controlled by the State and its bureaucracies' (Bell, 1989: 56). Decision-making processes in civil society, therefore, are

not colonized by the views and persuasions of hegemonic actors but shaped by a multiplicity of participants from different sectors of the population. Hence, within the dynamic boundaries of civil society, the agendas and objectives of influential groups are no more and no less represented than 'the diverse opinions of marginalized and excluded people' (Batista, 1994: 12). In civil society, actors are empowered to engage in decision-making processes by means of which they not only experience potentially enlightening dynamics of opinion- and will-formation but also gain control over their lives (Batista, 1994: 17). Thus, 'the potential of civil society to operate as a public arena for discussion, mediation, and deliberation' is fundamental to its capacity to equip its participants with decision-making powers by virtue of which they convert themselves into protagonists of their own destiny.

Civil Society as a Resourceful Sphere

Civil society constitutes a resourceful sphere. It stands for a relationally constructed field in which the main source of empowerment is social capital, which is defined by an actor's degree of access to social networks. Within these networks, human transactions are characterized by solidarity, reciprocity, trust, and cooperation. Actors relying upon the use, and contributing to the cultivation, of social capital generate knowledge, goods, and services not exclusively for themselves, but, more importantly, for a common good, the pursuit of which is central to their everyday practices. 'With their clustering and connectivity properties, polycentric forms of civic coordination can enhance the social capital of civic organizations' (Baldassarri and Diani, 2007: 772). Indeed, 'the relationship between associational life and social integration' is so central to civil society that its members cannot experience significant levels of social cohesion unless they coordinate their actions with a sense of shared purpose and common identity (Baldassarri and Diani, 2007: 736). When doing so, however, they draw upon multiple forms of capital: social capital, economic capital, cultural capital, political capital, educational capital, linguistic capital, and symbolic capital. Civil society is unthinkable without actors capable of mobilizing a whole variety of material and symbolic resources, by means of which they contribute to the multifaceted construction of human reality.

Civil Society as a Performative Sphere

Civil society constitutes a performative sphere. As such, it is tantamount to a social space whose constitution and evolution depend on the daily practices undertaken by human actors. The performative nature of civil society illustrates that, as an arena of real-world happenings, it cannot be reduced to a mental abstraction, let alone to an ideological imaginary; rather, it describes an empirically constituted realm whose tangible relevance manifests itself in its impact upon the unfolding of human history. Especially important in this regard is the pivotal role played by social movements, which are firmly situated in civil society and which, owing to their potentially transformative power derived from collective action, have shaped, and continue to shape, the development of modern societies in a fundamental manner.

Civil Society as a Non-Governmental Sphere

Civil society constitutes a non-governmental sphere. As 'a social formation intermediate between the family and the state', it intercedes between these two realms without being controlled by any of them (Mautner, 1997: 96). Civil society is located outside of the structures of the states. This is not to suggest that the former is necessarily opposed to the latter. Rather, this is to recognize that, within civil society, decisions tend to be taken locally, thereby escaping the control exercised by the state and large-scale forms of bureaucracy. '[T]he demand for a return to "civil society" is the demand for a return to a manageable scale of social life' (Bell, 1989: 56). It appears that, in the context of emerging postnational constellations, the state is too small for the big problems (such as global terrorism, climate change, migration crises, financial crises, etc.) and too big for the small problems (such as community life, local decision-making processes, neighbourhood and urban developments, etc.). Civil society, by contrast, provides a grass-roots-embedded space 'capable of preserving its autonomy and forms of solidarity in face of the modern economy as well as the state' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 30). It represents an intersubjectively constructed sphere whose normative contents are shaped predominantly by creative, inclusive, and democratic bottom-up dynamics, rather than by administrative, institutional, and managerial top-down mechanisms.

Civil Society as a Non-Profit Sphere

Civil society constitutes a non-profit sphere. As such, it is a social arena whose actors are driven primarily by value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), rather than by instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). To the extent that, within civil society, actions are not motivated by profit, income, or revenue, what takes centre stage is the moral, political, and cultural value of human practices. Irrespective of whether one considers 'new' social movements or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the key players of civil society aim to bypass the functionalist logic permeating not only large-scale bureaucracies but also capitalist economies. The systemic logic underlying the functioning of both state and economy manifests itself in mechanisms of bureaucratization and commodification, acting in the same way that a colonizing power imposes utility-driven imperatives on communicatively mediated processes of human socialization. In this sense, civil society may be conceived of as an extended lifeworld that resists colonization.

Civil Society as a Civil Sphere

Civil society constitutes a civil sphere. It promotes, and is in turn maintained by, civic values. In this respect, five core tenets are particularly important: (a) self-control, (b) compassion, (c) tolerance, (d) justice, and (e) recognition of the other.

Self-control is crucial to processes of civilization, whereby 'individuals gradually channel, control and moderate their emotions, affects and desires'. On this account, civilization is inconceivable without 'the domestication of the essentially rude nature of

human beings'. 'Civility', which forms part and parcel of modern educational programmes and curricula, can be regarded as the result of this sociologically complex process oriented towards increasing individual and collective self-control and discipline. There is no civil society without compassion, for 'the capacity of humans to feel empathy and compassion with other humans' is central to their ability to develop a sense of civility that they share with fellow members of society. This cognitive faculty concerns not only people's ability to experience and to express 'fellow-feelings with the sorrow of others', but also, in a more fundamental sense, their willingness to put themselves in someone else's shoes, thereby converting social life into an intersubjectively constructed arena based on the moral exercise of perspective-taking (Rucht, 2011: 394). Relatedly, the presence of tolerance is particularly important 'when sameness is absent' and different members of society are required to cope with the challenges arising from cultural, political, and moral plurality, which manifest themselves in ideological, behavioural, and institutional heterogeneity (Rucht, 2011: 395).

The pursuit of justice can be considered a basic 'principle for social interaction and the organization of society'. In spite of the interpretive elasticity of normative standards, the normative constitution of modern civil society is founded on one key principle: '[e]ach person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all'. The question concerning the extent to which social inequalities can, or cannot, be justified represents a contentious issue, which divides actors endorsing different ideological positions. Yet, the ideal of 'a fair system of co-operation between free and equal persons' underlies all civil societies, irrespective of their spatio-temporal specificity (Rucht, 2011: 395).

There is no civil society without recognition of the other, with three modes of recognition being especially significant: love, right, and esteem (Rucht, 2011: 396). Insofar as these fundamental forms of recognition are provided by an individual's social environment, they substantially contribute to his or her capacity to develop healthy degrees of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. If, by contrast, an individual is deprived of access to these fundamental forms of recognition, he or she may suffer from serious pathological symptoms.

In short, civil society constitutes a social realm sustained by self-control, compassion, tolerance, justice, and recognition of the other. Hence, it is founded on networks of discipline, empathy, respect, fairness, and identity, which allow for the construction of relatively stable, potentially empowering, and socially sustainable realities.

The Limitations of Civil Society

This final section identifies three broad limitations of civil society. First, we must recognize the negative dimensions of civil society. Far from constituting a universally empowering sphere of pristine intersubjectivity, civil society is characterized by numerous problematic aspects – notably those associated with mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, inequality, corruption, favouritism,

elitism, and symbolic violence. In many cases, bonding – rather than bridging or linking – forms of social capital predominate, implying that the self-referential reinforcement of preconceptions and prejudices against specific social groups may contribute to the reproduction of closed communities. Second, we must acknowledge the negative contributions of civil society. Not only does it tend to reproduce already existing mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, inequality, corruption, favouritism, elitism, and symbolic violence; but, furthermore, it produces them, exporting them to other realms of society. Third, we must take into account the limited influence of civil society. In several respects, it is far from clear whether or not civil society can make a substantial difference, even if and where its members make informed, serious, and laudable efforts to do so. Civil society may have too much asked of it, if it is understood exclusively as a sphere of individual and collective empowerment.

The following connects these basic problems to the outline of a critical theory of civil society laid out in the preceding section. Civil society constitutes a social sphere, but it is necessary to explore the extent to which civil society may also represent an asocial or even antisocial sphere, dominated by private and personal, rather than public and collective, concerns and interests. Likewise, though civil society constitutes a discursive sphere, it is crucial to recognize that, within the boundaries of civil society, actors often fail to come to a viable consensus and, hence, frequently do not succeed in taking decisions that all, or at least a majority of, participants may be willing to endorse.

Civil society constitutes an interest-laden sphere. A comprehensive account of civil society needs to draw attention to the fact that it is far from obvious which of these interests – which may, or may not, contradict one another – prevail in a particular situation. Put differently, civil society is a conglomerate of diverse – and, to a large degree, hidden – interests, which cannot always be reconciled. Civil society also constitutes a value-laden sphere. It is vital to concede that civil societies can be marked by both progressive and regressive, emancipatory and reactionary, counter-hegemonic and hegemonic values.

As a public sphere, civil society depends on the daily unfolding of human practices that are situated in the public domain. It would be naïve, however, to underestimate the degree to which the constitution of civil society is contingent upon activities taking place in the private domain. Put simply, civil society is composed of both public and private subjects. Relatedly, civil society is a participatory sphere. The challenging question concerns the extent to which people's – circumstantially or structurally defined – non-participation in collective processes of opinion- and will-formation may convert the critical spirit of civil society into a privilege enjoyed by those equipped with the material and symbolic resources required to contribute to the production, reproduction, and transformation of normative orders. Furthermore, civil society entails a voluntary sphere. Yet, while voluntary associations, organizations, and networks play a pivotal role in the construction of civil society, it is important to account for the fact that exogenous forces that are driven by instrumental rationality have the power to colonize communicative action and, therefore, grass-roots sources of normativity.

Civil society constitutes a horizontal sphere. However, the power of social stratification can be challenged and subverted, but not circumvented, let alone effaced, by civil society. Civil society also represents a transparent sphere. It would be erroneous, however, to lose sight of the fact that, within civil society, actors may not only weaken but also strengthen arbitrary sources of authority, by reinforcing their legitimacy on the basis of corruption and lack of accountability. Transparency is, at best, a laudable ideal affirmed and, at worst, a rhetorical tool employed by both ideologically and strategically driven actors within civil society aiming to play a substantial part in the tension-laden construction of reality.

Civil society is a purposive sphere. But it must be recognized that shaping behavioural, ideological, and institutional arrangements in such a way that they contribute to the empowerment of human subjects is an extremely complex endeavour. Indeed, praiseworthy goals do not always translate into desirable realities, just as counter-hegemonic intentions do not necessarily succeed in subverting the status quo in practice. Civil society similarly is a consensual sphere. We need to admit, however, that the consensus-oriented constitution of civil society is by no means a guarantee of the normative validity of the agreements reached by its members. Consensus-formation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the construction of emancipatory life forms. Civil society likewise constitutes a cooperative sphere. Just as it would be fatalistic to reduce civil society to a domain of merely instrumental and strategic interactions driven primarily by calculation and self-interest, it would be idealistic to portray civil society as a province of predominantly communicative and cooperative interactions motivated mainly by mutual understanding and collaboration. A realistic conception of civil society acknowledges the tension-laden coexistence of its cooperative and competitive, communicative and strategic, substantive and instrumental aspects.

Civil society constitutes a pluralistic sphere. In other words, the normative integrity of civil society depends on its members' capacity to promote behavioural, ideological, and institutional diversity. It would be reductive, however, to fail to face up to the civilizational challenges arising from elevated levels of social, cultural, and political fragmentation in large-scale interactional formations. Within highly differentiated societies, 'pluralized actors' may find it remarkably difficult to draw upon a horizon of common reference points, enabling them to develop a genuine sense of belonging, cohesion, and solidarity (Susen, 2015: 111–112).

Civil society constitutes a democratic sphere. Arguably, civil society is essential to both indirect/representative and direct/deliberative forms of democracy. Yet, to the degree that it is sustained by vibrant participatory practices, it plays a more pivotal role in the latter than in the former. It is no less important, however, to recognize that, paradoxically, civil society may flourish temporarily under non-democratic regimes, precisely if and when its members aim to subvert, and to transform, them. Indeed, transitions from autocracy to democracy are possible because of, rather than despite, the political pressure exercised by civil society. This fact is connected to the idea that civil society is also a decisional sphere. As critical sociologists, we need to do justice to the empirical complexity of decision-making processes. Decisions take place at different levels: mico-, meso, and macro. Decisions can be classified in terms of

different types – such as rational vs. emotional, spontaneous vs. planned, behavioural vs. ideological, intuitive vs. reflexive, categorical vs. circumstantial, communicative vs. strategic, proactive vs. reactive, inclusive vs. exclusive, short-term vs. long-term. A critical theory of civil society needs to account for the fact that decision-making processes are not intrinsically but only potentially empowering.

Civil society constitutes a resourceful sphere. There is no civil society without the production, distribution, circulation, and exchange of social capital, which is the most fundamental type of capital, upon which all other types of capital are dependent. Yet, it is crucial to take into consideration not only the interconvertibility between, but also the relative autonomy and forcefulness of, different types of capital. Civil society is shaped by actors who compete over access to resources and whose wider influence, which is reflected in their capacity to set normative agendas, rests on their ability to maximize both the material and the symbolic profits they can gain from their positionally and dispositionally defined access to different forms of capital. This asymmetrical power structure makes civil society strikingly similar to, rather than radically different from, other domains of society.

Civil society is a performative sphere. The global significance of civil society manifests itself in its substantial impact upon the unfolding of human history. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the pivotal role played by social movements. To the extent that 'new' social movements tend to place a stronger emphasis on grass-roots participatory practices than 'old' social movements, the former take on a more central role in the construction of contemporary civil societies than the latter. This is not to deny that most – if not, all – social movements, irrespective of their typological specificity, contribute to setting the agenda in civil society. This is to acknowledge, however, that, in the current era, the following paradigmatic shifts have redefined the role of collective performativity in general and of social movements in particular: (a) from society-as-a-project to projects-in-society; (b) from metanarratives to micronarratives; (c) from relatively homogeneous and monolithic to increasingly heterogeneous and hybrid social bases; (d) from an orientation towards the state to an orientation towards civil society; (e) from formal, bureaucratic, and vertical to loose, flexible, and horizontal forms of organization; (f) from power-affirmative to power-sceptical; (g) from industrial to post-industrial relations and thus, arguably, from a modern to a postmodern context (Susen, 2015: 189).

Civil society constitutes a non-governmental sphere. In terms of its normative outlook, civil society is supposed to be shaped primarily by creative, inclusive, and democratic bottom-up dynamics, rather than by administrative, institutional, or managerial top-down mechanisms. Yet, it would be erroneous to overlook the fact that, in practice, civil society is no less affected by governmental forms of power than other interactional domains and that, more significantly, some key players within civil society – such as lobbyists – seek to influence state actors and others – such as political party delegates and government representatives – are themselves state actors.

Civil society represents a non-profit sphere. Within civil society, actors are expected to be driven primarily by value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), rather than

by instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). Consequently, the worth of their actions and interactions is measured in terms of their moral, political, and cultural value, rather than in terms of their economic value. Yet, it would be inaccurate to disregard the fact that, in practice, civil society is no less affected by economic forms of power than other interactional domains and that, more significantly, some key players within civil society – such as lobbyists – seek to influence economic actors and others – such as businessmen, businesswomen, and entrepreneurs – are themselves economic actors.

Finally, civil society constitutes a civil sphere. As such, it is characterized by five core features: (a) self-control, (b) compassion, (c) tolerance, (d) justice, and (e) recognition of the other. Hence, civil society is founded on networks of discipline, empathy, respect, fairness, and identity. It would be one-sided, however, to focus exclusively on its civil dimensions and, consequently, pay no heed to its non-civil aspects. Within civil society, actors often behave (a) impulsively and irresponsibly, rather than conscientiously and maturely, (b) inconsiderately and egoistically, rather than caringly and altruistically, (c) single-mindedly and chauvinistically, rather than broad-mindedly and benevolently, (d) unjustly and unethically, rather than properly and legitimately, or (e) on the basis of hatred and animosity, disentitlement and disenfranchisement, insult and dishonour, rather than on the basis of love and harmony, right and enfranchisement, esteem and approval. Far from being reducible to a secluded and privileged sphere of mere solidarity and immaculate intersubjectivity, civil society constitutes a field of social struggle that is as shot through with tensions, contradictions, and antagonisms as most other domains of human reality.

References

Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. 2000. 'Civil Society.' In Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, 4th ed. (pp. 48–49). London: Penguin.

Baker, Chris, and Jonathan Miles-Watson. 2010. 'Faith and Traditional Capitals: Defining the Public Scope of Spiritual and Religious Capital: A Literature Review.' *Implicit Religion* 13(1): 17–69.

Baldassarri, Delia, and Mario Diani. 2007. 'The Integrative Power of Civic Networks.' *American Journal of Sociology* 113(3): 735–780.

Batista, Israel. 1994. 'Civil Society: A Paradigm or a New Slogan?' *The Ecumenical Review* 46(1): 12–20.

Bell, Daniel. 1989. '"American Exceptionalism" Revisited: The Role of Civil Society.' *The Public Interest* 95: 38–56.

Beyers, Jaco. 2011. 'Religion, Civil Society, and Conflict: What Is It That Religion Does for and to Society?' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(3): Art. #949, 8 pages. DOI:10.4102/hts.v67i3.949.

Calabrese, Andrew. 2004. 'The Promise of Civil Society: A Global Movement for Communication Rights.' *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 18(3): 317–329.

Chambers, Simone, and Jeffrey Kopstein. 2001. 'Bad Civil Society.' *Political Theory* 29(6): 837–865.

Cohen, Jean L. and Andrew Arato. 1992. *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dalton, Bronwen. 2014. 'Civil Society: Overlapping Frames.' *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6(2): 40–68.

Ferguson, Adam. 1995 [1767]. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Edited by Fania Oz-Salzberger. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fioramonti, Lorenzo, and Ekkehard Thümler. 2013. 'Civil Society, Crisis, and Change: Towards a Theoretical Framework.' *Journal of Civil Society* 9(2): 225–232.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.

Hall, John A., and Frank Trentmann. 2005. 'Contests Over Civil Society: Introductory Perspectives.' In John A. Hall and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Civil Society: A Reader in History, Theory, and Global Politics* (pp. 1–25). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jacobs, Ronald. 2006. 'Civil Society.' In John Scott (ed.), *Sociology: Key Concepts* (pp. 27–29). London: Routledge.

Lewandowski, Joseph, and Gregory Streich. 2007. 'Democratizing Social Capital: In Pursuit of Liberal Egalitarianism.' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38(4): 588–604.

Locke, John. 1996 [1689]. 'Second Treatise on Government.' In David Wootton (ed.), *Modern Political Thought: From Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (pp. 310–386). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Macey, David. 2000. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin.

Marshall, Gordon (ed.). 1994. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Marx, Karl. 2000 [1875]. 'Critique of the Gotha Program.' In David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd ed. (pp. 610–616). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Mautner, Thomas. 1997. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, new edition. London: Penguin.

Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède. 1989 [1748]. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Translated and edited by Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ossewaarde, M. R. R. 2006. 'Citizenship in Civil Society.' *Journal of Civil Society* 2(3): 199–215.

Pérez-Díaz, Victor. 2014. 'Civil Society: A Multi-Layered Concept.' *Current Sociology* 62 (6): 812–830.

Putnam, Robert D. 1995. 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America.' *Political Science and Politics* 28: 664–683.

2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1996 [1755]. 'Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men.' In David Wootton (ed.), *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (pp. 404–463). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Rucht, Dieter. 2011. 'Civil Society and Civility in Twentieth-Century Theorising.' *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 18(3): 387–407.

Sassoon, Anne Showstack. 1991. 'Civil Society.' In Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 2nd ed. (pp. 82–84). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Reference.

Susen, Simon. 2015. *The 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Turner, Bryan S. 2006. 'Civil Society.' In Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (pp. 70–71). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.