CHAPTER 9

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN A WORLD OF FLOWS: RECAPTURING AMBIGUITY, HYBRIDITY, AND THE POLITICAL*

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How well does cultural sociology travel? Specifically, how well do our frameworks of politics and culture hold up "in most of the world," to use Partha Chatterjee's provocative phrase for the Global South (Chatterjee 2004)? It makes sense that cultural sociologists often avoid comparisons, or at least shy away from what Steinmetz (2008) has termed "experimentalist" sorts of comparisons that hold such a privileged place elsewhere in our discipline. The excesses of a prior generation prior whose efforts at defining national character, national values, or *the* culture of poverty have been doubly influential: once in defining an agenda for modernizationist social science, and again, in discouraging more recent scholarship from engaging in comparisons by making it seem that theoretical ambition and cross-national work are bound to end up in simplistic caricature. Current exercises in civilizational diatribe—attempts to define "the" Islamic character, for example—do not help the cause either. Whatever the cause, cultural sociology seems impoverished for it; despite some recent notable exceptions, cultural sociologists have often focused on

North America and, to a lesser extent, Europe. But more to the point, we have too seldom put our comparative imaginations to work, and not extended our horizons nearly enough.

This chapter is an effort at "provincializing" cultural sociology, and to be more precise, the cultural sociology of politics and civil society. The analytic exercise I engage in here is to call into question its purported universalism (Chakrabartty 2000; Burawoy 2007) and engage in theoretical stretching. It is not my intention to revive old corpses, and much less to call for comparative methods per se. Much of the richness and subtlety of what we do might be lost in tidy comparisons and the search for failed and successful cases, as comparative scholars sometimes do. It is also not my intent to evoke charges of "Eeurocentrism" for its own sake, and engage in a reverse Orientalist exercise that, in the end, simply states that "things are different" in other places. Instead, I propose here that cultural sociology might be enriched by a wider consideration of the horizon of the possible meanings that concepts might assume once our frame of reference is more global in scope. The contemporary scholarship has by now noted plural and hybrid forms of discourse in civil societies of the postcolonial world, and levied a host of critiques against attempts at using democratic theory originating in the Global North in the South (see, e.g., Mamdani 1996). More generally, it has become fashionable to criticize the concept and theory of civil society, especially when linked to its pervasive deployment in development prescriptions or democracy promotion.[1] By and large, the cultural sociology of politics and civil society has so far remained untouched by much of this discussion.

In this chapter, I develop a slightly different, but parallel, critique about the democratic theory that informs cultural sociology as a way to suggest that it might be useful for scholarship in and about the Global North to keep this broader frame of reference in mind. Loosening assumptions might lead to theoretical stretching, interesting engagement with colleagues elsewhere, and perhaps even unexpected insights into cultural processes in the changing United States.

This chapter moves in parts. After a brief sketch of the origins of what is distinctive about the cultural sociology of civil society, I then consider its three unspoken assumptions. While Alexander's recent *Civil Sphere* is the central text that serves as my reference for the discussion below, the assumptions I raise are widely used. First, I address the assumption of *minimal stateness* in the lives and worlds of social movements and civil society. Scholars have questioned the assumption of the separateness of state and civil society that informs liberal theory. But cultural sociologists have less often addressed what might be called the *stateness* of political culture itself, the ways that images of states can come to loom large in the practices and representations of civil society. Second, I look at the *nexus of civil and civilized*. I raise the issue that liberal democracy in the postcolonial world has as often been part of imperial statecraft as of the political rationality of projects of liberation, and that the very idea of civil society itself has often been part of a "civilizing mission" imposed from outside. This makes the idea of a civil sphere much more ambiguous, and the idea of movements as agents of social repair more contradictory. And third,

I consider that the *social location of the political* in nonliberal societies might be different than in established liberal societies. Acceptable domains of conflict, and what might actually be at stake in those conflicts, could be much wider in societies where the routinization of conflict and the institutionalization of civil society are seemingly so complete, as is the case in the United States.

As a demonstration of the usefulness of this exercise, I also consider ways in which loosening these assumptions might make cultural sociology travel "better." Throughout the chapter, I consider examples referring to civil society in places in the Global South before considering some implications of these arguments for looking at settings in the Global North. This essay escapes some of the traditional genres for similar essays—it is neither fully a literature review nor a theoretical intervention, nor is it a completely developed analytical exercise in which cases are fully developed. Rather, it is a response to the challenge laid by the editors of this volume for the authors to think out loud about what shapes our perspectives as cultural sociologists and in what ways we see the field moving forward. What I discuss below, as its assumptions, certainly does not apply to every cultural sociological study, and is written in the spirit of Tilly's (1994) *Pernicious Postulates*—part provocation and part call to reform—but nonetheless addressing real undercurrents of our scholarship. It is also, more specifically, a response to the implicit challenge of Alexander's *The Civil Sphere* to identify a specifically sociological terrain from which to engage pressing normative issues. While it argues for shifting the terrain, the argument here implies broad agreement with the project itself.

From Norms and Values to Practices and Meanings: Cultural Sociology Looks at Civil Society

Civil society is definitely back on the intellectual agenda of sociologists. The concept has experienced a revival in recent years, after a first revival in the late 1980s driven by the waves of democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Berezin 1997; Calhoun 1992; Somers 1995). Political scientists developed a whole framework of transition studies that examined democratization processes, first in Southern Europe (in the 1970s), then in Latin America in the 1980s, and then in East Asia and Eastern Europe (in the 1980s and 1990s). The most famous of these was the "Third Wave" thesis of Samuel Huntington's (Huntington 1986). Sociologists joined the conversation slightly later and with a greater emphasis on "society-side" factors. The translation of *The Public Sphere*, in 1989, was particularly influential (Calhoun 1992). With the resurgent interest in the "cluster of citizenship concepts" (Somers 1998), sociologists of culture once again have started to pay serious attention to questions of political culture, turning to cultural explanations for outcomes in terms of citizenship,

participation, and even economic development (Berezin 1997). Concepts like the "public sphere" and "citizenship" have been operationalized in ways that highlight that political practices are culturally specific to peoples, places, and issues.

But civil society was always a central preoccupation of sociologists, even if not always assuming the language. In sociology, under the guise of community studies, since the 1930s scholars have engaged in direct observation of neighborhood activists, political networks, and the day-to-day life of politics. Many of the most famous such studies, such as Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* studies (1929; 1937), Floyd Hunter's study of Atlanta (1953), or Viditch and Bensman's study of Candor, New York (1956), were studies very much concerned with what we might think of today as civil society: voluntary activities, local politics, democratic engagement.

Up until the 1960s, much of the work was at this point largely influenced by versions of Parsonian modernization theory and functionalism. As is well known, Parsons was centrally preoccupied with the role of civil society in preserving democracy. For instance, such themes are found in the work of scholars like Bansfeld (1956), who purported to have found in the culture of Southern Italy the "moral bases" of that "backward society" in the insistence on honor, the favor, and asymmetrical relationships. How could democracy ever flourish, Bansfeld wondered (1956, 8), in places where a peasant can "satisfy his aspirations by reaching out his hand to the nearest coconut?"

Civil society throughout this period was understood as the terrain of the construction of democratic or anti-democratic values. Much of the theoretical work went into defining schemes that that differentiated the ideal characteristics of traditional and modern societies, and these tended to inform the way that social scientists in general, and sociologists in particular, approached civil society. Modern societies were differentiated, democratic, universalistic, and meritocratic. Traditional societies were undifferentiated, authoritarian, particularistic, and based rewards on ascriptive characteristics. Studies asked about the conditions under which societies achieved these characteristics. Almond and Verba's 1963 study of political culture in five nations asked of the attitudes and beliefs of citizens of various nations as either impediments or preconditions to democratic development. Reinhard Bendix developed similar arguments in *Nation-Building and Citizenship* (1964). Lipset's work throughout the 1960s sought to understand the preconditions for democracy. In *The First New Nation* (1963), he offered a comparison of the history of the United States with that of European countries and argued that American history had fostered a set of values of achievement and equalitarianism that made for a stable democracy. He found remnants of elitism in both France and Germany, which made them, in this view, unstable democracies.

Enter Cultural Sociology

New sociologists of culture argued that an older generation of culture scholars had succumbed to a number of bad, modernist biases—subtextually linked to the conservatism of the 1950s—that now had to be transcended if the field was to

move forward. The worst of these was an alleged tendency toward "essentialism," which manifested itself in different ways: a marked preference for analysis of cultural wholes, whose boundaries were assumed to be coextensive with those of the nation-state; the view that the maintenance of social equilibria requires a high degree of value consensus, anchored in the integration of the social and cultural systems through processes of socialization and mechanisms of social control; and the assumption that—the Parsonian insistence on voluntarism not withstanding—cultural values and beliefs are, in those instances where other processes of social determination are not at play, largely determinative of social action. These tendencies were deemed essentialist because they all assumed that the culture of a society represented a more or less stable essence on the order of a Platonic form, whose consequences for social life could be assessed through the incorporation of straightforward readings of the cultural ethos into structural-functionalist models of the social system, with little attention paid to the nature of agency.[2]

Nonetheless, civil society reentered the conceptual vocabulary of sociologists in a significant way in the 1990s, when they turned to the symbols and meanings attached to political life, political practice, and in particular democracy and civic life. This move had been prefaced by a number of other studies dealing with politics in the 1980s that had increasingly cultural dimensions. Social movement scholars, for example, had become attentive to individual actors as well as meaning-making, especially under the guise of frames analysis (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Snow and Benford 1988). McAdam's study of Freedom Summer (1988), for example, explored the biographical roots of activism in depth, and relies in large part on the understanding of participants to make sense of events. Gamson's study (1992) of how "average working people" talk politics relies on the observation of "peer groups"—a variant of the focus group, in which a small group of peers talks in a nonbureaucratic setting and the facilitator plays a minor role in keeping the conversation going. Concerned with distorted views of the mass public that portray the average person as a passive consumer of media information, and well as with understanding the sort of political consciousness that can lead to collective action, Gamson presented his participants with topics and observed how talk naturally occurred, coding it for frames.

Another influential cultural strand in the study of democracy comes from the team of researchers headed by Robert Bellah that published *Habits of the Heart* in 1985. Bellah and his co-authors asked about the "state of democracy" in the United States, and concluded that an individually oriented culture was eroding the bases for collective life and civic engagement. Bellah et al.'s investigation of the nature of the relationship between public and private life in the contemporary United States is concerned with understanding action in the public sphere, and "the resources Americans have for making sense of their lives, how they think about themselves and their society, and how their ideas relate to action" (Bellah et al. 1985, ix).

But it was the 1989 English translation of Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that changed the tenor of the discussion. Its

attention to democratic deliberation as a potentially emancipatory activity gave sociologists greater leeway to examine political culture as something other than ideology or the expression of class interests. Another extremely influential work, related to the issues raised by Bellah et al. (1985), but also echoing the work of earlier scholars like Bansfeld (1956), was Robert Putnam's (1993) *Making Democracy Work*. It compared the South and North of Italy and concluded that the South lacks the proper cultural conditions for an active democratic life. Putnam's more recent *Bowling Alone* (2001) has argued that Americans are becoming more self-centered and community life has ceased to have the vitality it once did.

The twin influences of Habermas on one hand, and Bellah/Putnam on the other, have inspired a lively discussion on how to understand civic association in the United States (Perrin 2007; Wood 2002; Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 1996, 1999). These add to a resurgence in studies based in the Global South, especially among the Latin American urban poor, also largely inspired by concepts of civil society and in dialogue with some version of the Habermassian image of deliberation and association (Mische 2006; Arias, 2006; Baiocchi, 2005; Sawyer 2004; Auyero 2000; Edelman 1999; Gay 1995).

But one of the central and distinctly cultural analysis of civil society is that based on the work of Jeffrey Alexander. Alexander's *The Civil Sphere* (2006) is the most articulated version of the framework that synthesizes and extends earlier writings on culture and civil society by him and his students. The project of *The Civil Sphere* is to understand the question of solidarity and its underpinnings. The civil sphere is an independent sphere of "values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time" (4). In democratic societies, the civil sphere expresses its influence through its regulative institutions—the law, the mass media, voluntary associations—which project communicative judgments. Actually existing civil spheres are contradictory and exist in tension with other spheres, such as "the family, religious groups, scientific associations, economic institutions, and geographically bounded regional communities still produced different kinds of goods and organized their social relations according to different ideals and constraints" (Alexander 2006, 404). Civil repair is the project of extending the values and judgments of civil society outward, and it is the work of civil repair that occupies social movements and other reformers who want to project the utopian ideals of the civil sphere onto uncivil institutions and spheres.

Civil society is understood as a primarily cultural phenomenon. The utopian vision that drives members of civil society to extend solidarity is maintained and held in a set of practices and rituals. As in his earlier work (1985; see also Alexander and Smith 1993), a central role is afforded to the "independent causal importance of symbolic classification, and the pivotal role of the symbolic division between sacred and profane" (Alexander 1989, 57). In the United States, the ideal type of civil society, the "discourse of American civil society" provides a cultural grid that maps the motivations of actors, relationships, and institutions as democratic or counter-democratic. Actors motivated by these codes then draw on them to create categories of inclusion/exclusion: those who are worthy of rights (citizen) and those who are

not (enemy). The cultural work of civil repair is the symbolic struggle to liken characteristics of certain groups to the sacred elements.

Shifting the Frame

This "cultural turn" in the discussion of civil society certainly advances the discussion from its earlier guise of modernization-influenced theory. The move away from the idea of democratic values (as in Almond and Verba 1963) to the concept of democratic practices or democratic symbols makes the idea of the culture of democracy much more social as well as contingent. Democratic practices take place in contexts that make them possible, and the connection to democratic symbols is ultimately contingent on rituals, narratives, or the symbolic work of civil repair. Cultural sociology also provides an important corrective to the social-scientific lens that too often sees only objective interests, institutional logics, and rationality instead of meanings, practices, and contingencies. Having moved away from an earlier values approach of modernization theory, cultural sociology now promises to offer us accounts that give flesh to the idea of association in different contexts. It is also now possible to speak of cultural difference without necessarily attributing cultural deficiency. *The Civil Sphere*, for example, is a text that advances normative positions aware of their own historicity. A distinctly cultural, and distinctly sociological, intervention has become possible in the terrain normally reserved for political philosophy (Jason, 2007).

The move from norms and values to practices and meanings opened possibilities for understanding a new range of relationships to the culture of citizenship, a view of "a multiplicity of public spheres, communities and associations nested within one another" (Jacobs 1996, 1239). Though these are all "organized by a shared cultural environment" of the national culture of citizenship (Jacobs 2000, 138). Yet, when we engage in the effort of seriously considering civil society as a set of practices and symbols "in the rest of the world," there is something that doesn't quite travel. Specifically, there is an element of ambiguity and hybridity at the core of that culture in much of the world that cultural sociology is ill-equipped to understand.

For almost two decades now, there has been vibrant discussion in other disciplines about the assumptions behind the concepts of civil society and the limits of its application outside of Europe and the United States.

Three Extreme Examples

Let us consider three extreme examples of the way that the cultural codes of democracy have been taken up outside of Europe and North America.

First, let us consider one example of the way in which the meanings of democracy have been embraced. At one end of the spectrum might be the discourses and

practices of an organization like Al-Haq, a civil society organization in Palestine organized in the 1960s to "promote the rule of law" and "the respect of human rights and liberties" in Palestinian society. Like the actors of civil repair in Alexander's framework, the activists of Al-Haq exert communicative judgments to noncivil spheres—be they authoritarian elements within Palestinian society or the violation of the rights of Palestinians by Israeli institutions. The charter of Al-Haq reads like ideal typical examples of the values of civil society. It seeks to:

- Protect the rights and freedoms of the Palestinians in Palestinian society.
- Enhance human rights concepts in Palestinian society.
- Develop Palestinians' concepts and awareness of public rights and freedoms.
- Lay the foundation to, and epitomize, the international principles of human rights and freedoms throughout Palestinian society.

The values the charter promotes—rights, freedoms, and responsibility—are consistent with the code of liberty and with the democratic values described in *The Civil Sphere*. Implicit in the charter is a notion of an active public that takes responsibility for the awareness of its own rights, the notion of an active citizen. When it comes to the national question, Al-Haq's charter is unambiguous in its defense of the rule of law and its advocacy for legimate and lawful means of redress (Rabbani 1994). It pledges to:

> Strengthen governmental as well as nongovernmental international support for the Palestinian people's legitimate rights to self-determination and the creation of their independent state.
> Defend the rights of Palestinians through various legitimate means in accordance with national and international laws and treaties.[3]

The practices of Al-Haq—its reports of human rights violations, its legal cases on behalf of victims, its advocacy and public awareness campaigns—are premised on the vision, consistent with the cultural sociology of civil society, that even in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, it is by making appeals to dominant civil society (and global arenas) where "even the most dominated outgroup historically unprecedented levels of accessibility and respect" (Alexander, 2006, 416).

But consider another extreme example, in which the language and rhetoric of democracy and rights in the postcolonial world are used completely instrumentally. Robert Mugabe, rated the "worst dictator in the world" for 2009,[4] gave a speech at the United Nations in 2007 that displayed another relationship to the discourse of rights and democracy than Al-Haq's embrace. In power in Zimbabwe since 1980, Mugabe has run a blatant "kleptocracy" in which family and allies live lives of luxury funded by public coffers, while inflation and food shortages have caused human catastrophe for regular citizens, and political opponents have been beaten and killed by the scores. In 2006 and 2007, there were calls for sanctions against his government, to which he responded at the UN by criticizing the "hypocrisy" of Western nations and suggesting adherence to even *higher*

standards of human rights, which he argues Western countries themselves have
undermined in Africa:

> Zimbabwe won its independence on 18th April, 1980, after a protracted war
> against British colonial imperialism which denied us human rights and democ-
> racy. That colonial system which suppressed and oppressed us enjoyed the
> support of many countries of the West who were signatories to the UN Universal
> Declaration of Human Rights.
>
> …For the West, vested economic interests, racial and ethnocentric
> considerations proved stronger than their adherence to principles of the
> Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The West still negates our sover-
> eignties by way of control of our resources, in the process making us mere
> chattels in our own lands, mere minders of its transnational interests.
>
> …I am termed dictator because I have rejected this supremacist view
> and frustrated the neo-colonialists.
>
> Let Mr. Bush read history correctly. Let him realise that both personally
> and in his representative capacity as the current President of the United
> States, he stands for this "civilisation" which occupied, which colonised,
> which incarcerated, which killed. He has much to atone for and very little to
> lecture us on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.…We say No to
> him and encourage him to get out of Iraq. Indeed he should mend his ways
> before he clambers up the pulpit to deliver pieties of democracy.
>
> In conclusion, let me stress once more that the strength of the United
> Nations lies in its universality and impartiality as it implements its mandate
> to promote peace and security, economic and social development, human
> rights and international law as outlined in the Charter. Zimbabwe stands
> ready to play its part in all efforts and programmes aimed at achieving these
> noble goals.[5]

This speech of Mugabe's is consistent with his other domestic pronouncements on
the subject.[6] That is, in response to criticisms about human rights and the lack of
democracy in his country, Mugabe often counters with calls for the protection of the
sovereignty of Zimbabwe. He accuses Western powers of neocolonialism and pater-
nalism when international human rights standards are applied to Zimbabwe. But
what his speeches reveal, more than individual pathology or dishonesty, or even, the
power of nationalist discourses, is a completely cynical use of the language of
democracy to justify the use of arbitrary power and violence. And one could find
similar examples throughout the world. That is, the language of democratic codes is
known, but not embraced. It is understood, but something about its historic asso-
ciation with the powerful makes this kind of rhetoric possible to the extent that it is
almost a trope by dictators to proclaim the hyprocrisy of Western powers when
human rights are under discussion.

But consider a third, less extreme example. Rather than the embrace of liberal
codes by Al-Haq, and quite different than the blatant cynical appropriation of such
by Mugabe, there is the possibility of what might be called a critical distancing, or
partial embrace of the language games of democracy. This is well exemplified by the
discourses and attitudes of community activists I interviewed in the city of Salvador,

in the northeast of Brazil.[7] There, these activists from the city's poorer neighborhoods found themselves caught between the blatant corruption of politicians linked to the powerful family that (at that time) essentially ran the whole state, and the universalism of social movement reformers, whom they found unconvincing. For them, the world of the community was experienced as virtuous and the worlds of the government and of political parties were experienced as opaque and dishonest, and inaccessible.

For them, engaging in clientelist exchanges with politicians was a sacrifice or exchange that must be made if the neighborhood wanted something from the government. By doing this, neighborhoods increased their chances of being acknowledged by governmental entities while city-council members and candidates pursued opportunities to increase their electoral base. Though the activists disliked such an approach, and disliked the feelings of dependency fostered as a result, they engaged in it. One neighborhood-based organizer described this process as "selling himself" to politicians by saying:

> Look, [we don't have a relationship with a party or politician] the neighborhood association president usually sells, sells himself to politicians. Whoever gives more to help my neighborhood, I'll support.

Salvador was not a city without social movements, or social movement reformers who would engage in the process of civil repair. But many community activists were skeptical of social movements and the issues they promoted, such as human rights. There was recurrent suspicion of the motives of movement activists and their alleged connections with politicians. A neighborhood organizer claimed that, despite the rhetoric of inclusion, movements reproduced the same patterns that she saw among the city's political elites:

> [Movement leaders] are the small-time powerful people. You see this pyramid inside the social movement, inside the political movement that attempts to create social inclusion, that says you are equal, that you have all the rights, that you can do anything. [But what you have] is the powerful way up high on top and the people down here at the bottom.

The respondent's comment demonstrates suspicion of social and political organizing in general, and much suspicion regarding any group that organizes and achieves some type of official influence. These groups are seen as too close to politicians who cannot be trusted in a system in which "whoever gives more" gets what is needed.

In as much as it is possible to make blanket statements about the "Global South," it can be said that these three very different relationships to democratic codes— the embrace, instrumental use, and critical skepticism—exist with frequency in the postcolonial world, often at the same time and in competition and clashing with one another. The embrace of democratic codes and practices by organizations like Al-Haq or by pro-democracy reformers in authoritarian contexts poses no problem for cultural sociology. The project of civil repair by such actors may be a difficult one, but it is one we understand without difficulty: Actors that identify with democratic codes work to extend it to other, nondemocratic spheres, though the overall

context may be inauspicious. Scholarship by Ku, Lo, Baiocchi, Edles, among others, discusses the way that democratic cultural codes come up against other traditions in particular "democratizing" contexts.

But the cultural contexts that underpin the resolute cynicism of a dictator like Mugabe are less easy to grasp, as are contexts that make strategies, such as those of community activists. These are cultural contexts in which the invocation of democracy is, for many people, an empty and meaningless gesture. These are contexts in which symbols and practices of democracy might be divorced from their meaning. Wickramsighe has with some irony charged that:

> so ubiquitous is the phrase "civil society," however, that it is easy to believe that it has always been an existing entity, in the same way as the state or the market, in an ephemeral but nevertheless secure manner. This is because so many voices speak about it, name it, give it a shape and an aura of certainty, almost like Hannah Arendt's stray dog, whose chances of remaining alive increase once named. (Wickramasinghe 2005)

The central problem that critics identify is this: The theory of civil society idealizes the historical experiences of the West. In looking at actually existing practices of civil society and NGOs, scholars have charged that this idealized experience stands as a sort of "anti-politics." It is also argued that, as part of a new rationality of government that calls forward an entrepreneurial citizen, civil society emphasizes some of the most important characteristics of that citizen: self-regulation, responsibility for his or her own problems, and a nonconflictive partnerships with the state (Li 2005; Ong 2006). Finally, there is the problem that an idealized, Western notion of civil society misses a range of practices that fall outside of liberal notions of citizenship and democracy.

In practice, and with specific reference to cultural sociology, this means addressing three assumptions of the scholarship: its unproblematic relationship with "the civil," its assumption of a minimal state, and its bracketing of the political.

Problematizing the Civil and the Uncivil

A first assumption of the cultural sociology of politics is that it has an unproblematic relationship with "the civil." That is, for many cultural sociologists, the "civil" in civil society represents an unmediated notion of democraticness, voluntarism, and general virtue. As the argument goes, civil society exerts its civilizing pressure on the state, and on noncivil structures such as hierarchy, discrimination, and authoritarianism.

There are two problems with this. First, by not having a critical distance from the normative ideal of civil society, we are unable to have a critical distance from its power. Alexander, for example, is fully aware that the discourse of civil society always calls forth an *other*. "Because meaning is relative and relational," he writes, "the civility of the self always articulates itself in the language of the incivility of the other" (2006, 50). But he sees *in civil society itself* the utopian possibility of civil repair, even in conditions of internal colonialism, as "conditions for emancipation are sometimes

fostered within the structure of domination itself" (2006, 416). The deployment of the regulative power of civil society is understood as normatively good, and undesirable only insofar as it is incomplete.

Cultural sociologists are generally not concerned with the double connotation of civility as both the rules by which the society of citizens in public space interacts, but also, the opposite of "the barbarity of those who have not been civilized" (Chartier 1999, 78; cited in Ikegami 2006, 22). That is, in the myriad studies of citizenship in which citizenship's others are summoned (whether it be the image of the apathetic, disengaged, or corrupt citizen), there is little reflection about the operation of power that constructs that other as undesirable, barbaric, or uncivilized. It is generally assumed that those undesirable characteristics ought to indeed be banished. Cultural sociologists do not, in other words, link the *civil* in civil society with the process of *civilizing* with its connotations of power, hierarchy, or conformity that has worried critics like Elias, Freud, or Foucault.[8]

Once we move our frame of reference, however, the meanings of civil society become potentially more ambiguous and it is difficult to avoid the association with civilization. One need not share Foucault's or Freud's pessimism to consider the issue: What if civil codes were to be *understood* as an imposition from the outside by more powerful countries? In reflecting about the possibility of a Fascist resurgence in Germany, Parsons wrote that

> in Germany on the other hand the political symbols of a liberal democratic regime could be treated as having been ruthlessly imposed on a defeated and humiliated Germany by the Alien enemy." (Parsons 1947, 145)

Scholars have noted the close connection between liberal thought and imperial ambitions in Africa and Asia (Mehta 1999; Metcalf 1997; Dirks 2006). Imperial ambition found justification in liberal thought, and liberal thought found a *project* in the deficiencies of colonized peoples:

> The rule of law was to replace arbitrary despotism; political institutions would be modeled on the political life of the metropole…; the extirpation of native practices which scandalized the morality and sensibility of Europeans, and indeed provided the clearest justification for intervention and reform. (Bhuta 2008)

Thus, when we turn to democracy and the civil sphere as a cultural project—layered with meanings and interpretations—the rejection of the civil because of its association with the powerful is something that needs to be taken into consideration when we contemplate less powerful nations. This was true even in Europe. In the 1930s, for example, Berezin (1997) argues that Fascist culture in Italy was a self-conscious and nationalist rejection of liberal culture. In Brazil, during the Vargas years (1930–1945), the "revolution against liberalism," as its leaders represented it, was a period in which regime leaders railed "against liberal fictions of formal legalities and free-birth, of equality and liberty" and the other liberal errors (Gomes 1982, 127). Whether there are truths in these claims or not, it is important to recognize that the association of democracy, or democratic codes, with powerful outsiders is central to the way that the cultural meanings of democracy are shaped in much of the Global South.

But even more complicated, from our perspective, is that civility stands in for the standards of the powerful in a society. For the powerless, perhaps, for whom the formal political system is closed and the standards of civility inaccessible, there are legitimate claims that might escape civility. Chatterjee invites us to consider the possibility of situations

> in which the imaginative power of a traditional structure of community, including its fuzziness and capacity to invent relations of kinship, has been wedded to the modern emancipatory rhetoric of autonomy and equal rights. These strategies, I am suggesting, are not available within the liberal space of the associations of civil society transacting business with a constitutional state. For the majority of people in post-colonial societies, the normative status of the virtuous citizen will remain infinitely deferred until such time as they can be provided with the basic material and cultural prerequisites of membership of civil society. (Chatterjee 1998, 282)

Sociological work belies many such possibilities. Macfarlane (2008), in the context of India, has argued that slum populations remain "populations outside the sphere of citizenship," and that "citizen associations" work hard to displace the poor from city spaces. Smilde, in his work on Venezuela, mentions the distance between *la sociedad civil*, which criticizes political parties and promotes solidarity and social reform, though "largely formed among the middle and upper-middle classes," and the poor, urban sectors more concerned with survival (2007, 26). Auyero's investigation of "political clientelism" among the urban poor in Villa Paraíso, a shantytown on the outskirts of Buenos Aires is exemplary. Clientelism has long been understood as citizenship's other in the context of Latin America and has been a powerful symbol of the deficiency of the democracies in the region. But by observing it closely and unpacking its meanings for poor participants, something else emerges—"agency and improvisation of the poor," strategies of survival, and problem solving.

Fundamentally, then, cultural sociology needs to recapture a sense of ambiguity of the meaning of civil society. It needs to consider the possibility, that as a cultural project, civil society, "correctly" or not, has often been associated with powerful countries and with the powerful within societies.

The Minimal State and Other Liberal Fictions

In addition to recapturing a sense of ambiguity, cultural sociology also needs to more carefully consider the possibility of nonliberal political cultures and other hybrids. There are two interlocking assumptions about the political culture that animates civil society: first, that it is based on the notion of the freestanding individual, and second, that states play a very limited role in shaping it. These assumptions stand in contrast to the contemporary scholarship that has noted plural and hybrid forms of discourse in civil societies of the postcolonial world (Mamdani 1996).

The cultural notion of a freestanding, rights-bearing individual, born of liberal tradition is assumed to be the only possible framework for civil society. Habermas, for instance, intimates that the public sphere "can only emerge in the context of a liberal political culture and corresponding patterns of socialization." Other scholars have also generally assumed that the long tradition of civic virtue in North Atlantic nations is a precondition to democracy (Barber 1998; Crook and Manor 1994; Dahl 1989; Tocqueville 1945). Cultural sociologists today, while not as determinist as those of a generation ago, still emphasize the importance of a culture of individual rights. Alexander's attention to the "the symbolic dimension" of the civil sphere emphasizes the "independent causal importance of symbolic classification," which provides a cultural grid that maps the motivations of actors, relationships, and institutions as democratic or counterdemocratic. The centerpiece of that grid is the rights-bearing freestanding individual. Cultural sociologists often assume that such nonindividualist codes, by definition, imply the *absence* of civil society and the impossibility of democratic action in the public sphere, a position shared by theorists like Seligman, Habermas, and Gellner, who insist on the necessity of liberal values as a precondition for democratic engagement (Seligman 1992; Gellner 1997; Habermas 1989).

Also consider, for a moment, the kind of state and society that Alexander describes in *The Civil Sphere*, a "society of individuals before the state." The regulative institutions of the civil sphere—the media, the law and the courts, and civil society organizations—exert communicative judgments outward to other spheres, sometimes backed by the necessary force of the state. The state—either as holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, or as representative and shaper of the common interest—for Alexander exists only in its minimal form. Missing from the framework are all of the state agencies that also regulate the social, like welfare agencies.

In this way, much cultural sociology also assumes a minimal state and a separateness of state and civil society. Alexander argues for the necessity of "the independence of the communicative institutions of civil society from consequential control by state power. Standing firmly inside the civil rather than the state sphere, communicative institutions become free to broadcast interpretations that are not only independent of the state, but can challenge its commands" (108). Cultural sociologists have neglected interstitial spaces between the state and civil society as potential sites for public sphere activities (Eliasoph 1998). Most studies of existing civil society have been squarely located within settings of voluntary associations: Sociologists have studied social movement and church settings, neighborhood associations, Internet discussion boards, volunteer meetings, among other similar settings.

On the other hand, scholarly accounts have challenged the assumptions of the minimal state and the individualist political culture. Scholars have documented the way that diverse sorts of nonindividualist political cultures serve as a basis for civic engagement. An earlier generation of scholars, such as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), Bansfeld (1956), and Dumont (1992), have highlighted the way that collectivist political cultures both stymied and enabled civic engagement. In the contemporary world, there are a number of important accounts of civil society

where the state looms large, and where the language of individualism co-exists with other political cultural influences. Whether in Brazil (Banck, 1998), Turkey (White 1996), Syria and Jordan (Rabo 1996), Argentina (Auyero 2000), Mexico (Guttman 2002), or even Italy (Kertzer 1980), ethnographic accounts have clearly demonstrated that collectivist political cultural codes can serve as basis for activism and discourse in the public sphere, even if such collectivist codes have contradictory influences. Collectivist may exist in deep tension with individualist legal bases of citizenship (or even aborted or incomplete liberal political projects) in each of these societies, where the formation of the "as-yet-to-be-constituted private subject" threatens these collectivist cultural bases (Seligman 1992,155).

It is also possible to imagine political cultures where nonindividualist cultural grammars exist in deep tension with individualist legal bases of citizenship. I have described at length public discussions in Brazil during its transition to democracy (Baiocchi 2005), and similar examples exist for Hong Kong (Ku 2000) and Spain (Edles 1997), among others. In Turkey, for example, political culture is more "statist," and a combination of secular and Islamic cultural and political forces was at work. Symbols of both the secular and Islamist regimes have become a part of everyday life for people living in Turkey, are central to the nature of how the civil sphere functions in that country (Navarro-Yasheen 2002).

Relocating the Political

A third broad issue with the cultural sociology of civil society is its assumption of the separateness of political domains from civil society. As Mohan writes, by positing this separation, scholars inadvertently "focus only on the 'good' elements of civil society" (Mohan 2001). In terms of cultural sociology, the assumption is that there exists a differentiated sphere—the civil sphere, where "civil power rather than social or political power" reigns. Thus, it also then assumed that civil power is free from the instrumentality of political power. If shifting our frame of reference to a more global scale, as I have suggested, means we recapture the ambiguity of civil society (considering its association with civilizing projects of the powerful), as well as its potential hybridity (founded on the cultural bases of nonindividualist and statist cultures), then we have to also consider the possibility of its overlap with political realms.

The idea of the separation of the "civil" from the "political" that runs through much of cultural sociology has its roots in liberal political theory as well. The civil and the political represent distinct activities, motivations, and modes of association. This separation is clearest in the work of Putnam in his description of civic engagement in *Bowling Alone*, but is also present in *The Civil Sphere*, and runs through as an implicit assumption for many cultural sociologists. "Political" activities and "civic" ones are different.

First, there is ample empirical evidence that the spheres may not be so sharply delineated in many contexts outside the United States. Contexts of endemic inequality may render disinterested civic participation nonsensical or impossible;

or perhaps less functional differentiation may make these realms not separate. In the context of Brazil's transition to democracy, Mische (2006) discusses at length the ways that civic and partisan activities co-created each other in the context of Brazil's transition to democracy. Not only is partisanship unavoidable in democracy, it can "in some circumstances, be a creative, motivating, and institutionally generative source of civic involvement and reform" (23). At the heart of the argument is the productive tension between partisan and public motivations and styles of discourse, which rather than as portrayed in liberal democratic theory as always opposed, here find themselves to be mutually constitutive in unexpected ways. In a similar fashion, Smilde (2007), for example, argues that evangelicals in Venezuela participate in religion in ways that are far from the disinterested and moral, but rather, are both pragmatic and political.

The related dimension is that there is a possibility in the Global South or postcolonial societies that what is up for debate through the communicative pronouncements of the civil sphere might be broader than the imagined, such as the very cultural grammar of civil society itself. In these less-established civil societies, periods of crisis may not result in a ritual reassertion of a nation's values as Alexander imagines for the United States, but rather in the establishment of another set of codes altogether (Baiocchi 2006).

More generally, thinking about civil society in the Global South invites us to a kind of democratic theory that does not hope to "bracket" the effects of power in civil society, and does not disengage from the "the political," broadly speaking, that inescapable realm of human conflict, which in highly unequal societies means that issues of access to material resources and issues of partisan conflict are bound up with questions of the civil sphere itself.

Coda: The Civil Sphere in the United States Is More Ambiguous, More Hybrid, and More Political than You Think

So far I have discussed a kind of "Global South exceptionalism"—a fairly common trope in critical theory and one that fuels the analytics of many of the works cited throughout in this review. But the claim can be greater. As the Comaroffs have challenged us, "Until we address such historical and cultural specificities, until we leave behind stereotypic, idealized Euro-concepts, we foreclose the possibility of looking at *either* African or Western civil society" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 23). The three issues in question—hybridity, ambiguity, and the political—can be useful lenses for an expanded cultural sociology of the civil sphere in the United States.

First is the possibility of hybridity. On one hand, in the United States, what I've referred to as the stateness of political culture might be more salient than presumed. Scholars like Skocpol and Fiorina have examined the ways "in which the institutions and activities of the US government have influenced the identities, organizational forms, and strategies of voluntary organizations." Throughout U.S. history, social welfare agencies have been notable targets of social movements and have themselves, for better or worse, exerted civil pressures on other spheres, like the family

(Skocpol 2003). And once we leave the United States for European, or Canadian, examples, the importance of the welfare state in shaping civic life is even more apparent. Scandinavian societies might be hard to understand without the web of state institutions that infiltrate and shape voluntary realms at every turn (Svedsen and Svedsen 2006). And in settings like France, the state's self-conscious civilizing project, imparting *laïcité* (secular societal values) to immigrants and working people alike, is central to understanding the nature of solidarity in that country (Akan 2009). And in Canada, there is direct support for multicultural organizations, in which the Canadian government provides direct support to ethnic organizations, promotes interethnic dialogue, and facilitates immigrant participation in Canadian society (Bloemraad 2006).

This also brings attention to the issue of nonindividualist elements in U.S. political culture. As is well known, there were periods in U.S. history when some of the origins of American political culture behind the code of liberty, such as *Herrenvolk* democracy and Jacksonian free labor ideology, were self-consciously advocated by actors in opposition to ideas from the slaveholding South (Roediger 1994; Almaguer 1994). Rabinovitch (2001) argues that, in addition to the code of liberty, a code of nurturing was also in operation in the debate on womanhood in the nineteenth-century United States. Similarly, Schudson (1999) has argued that trust and deference were actually more important than the "rational citizen" until the progressive era, while Fischer (1989) has argued that there was a great deal of regional political variation and contestation in the period of establishment of U.S. democracy.

And at the very least, we have to recognize the possibility that immigrant political cultures are shaping emergent civil discourses around combinations of symbols and practices from the United States and home countries. Fox (2005) has argued that, for example, Mexican "hometown associations"—migrant organizations that are engaged simultaneously in the United States and Mexico,

> have created a public sphere that is clearly Mexican, not only because of its participants' national origin, but also because of its culture, organizational style, symbolic references and principal counterparts. (2005, 10)

And hometown associations are not an anomaly. Mexican organizations, according to some studies, mobilize between 250,000 and 500,000 in California alone. And they are a common phenomenon for immigrants from other Latin American countries as well, present wherever there are concentrations of immigrants (Villacres 2010). And if we consider the range of publications (the so called ethnic media) and associations for all immigrant groups in the United States, we would find a range of combinations of symbols and practices undergirding these civic cultures (Zhou and Cai 2002).

This opens up the issue of the nature of reception of civic virtue and citizenship by subaltern communities. That is, we have to recognize the ambiguity of the meaning of democracy for its less entitled citizens throught U.S. history, for whom the civilizing mission of the state may have been more salient than the emancipatory potential of civil society. For those who felt themselves "victims of Americanism,"

rather than "a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver," as Malcom X once described African Americans ("the twenty two million victims of democracy") (X and Breitman 1990, 26). And certainly, we have to recognize that violations of dignity done in the name of well-meaning citizenship, from "last arrow ceremonies" for Native Americans to become U.S. citizens (Bizzarro 2004), to forced public health campaigns to bathe arrivals from Mexico in the 1910s (Stern 1999). Some historians have come to argue for the centrality of the "imagined fraternity of White men" as the historic bases of U.S. citizenship (Nelson 1998). And in a related vein, how often challenges to that power by the excluded have animated the spaces where citizens have developed "group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue" (Evans and Boyte, 1992, 17).

Civil Society and Cultural Sociology in a World of Flows

> It has now become something of a truism that we are functioning in a world fundamentally characterised by objects in motion. These objects include ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques. This is a world of flows.
>
> —Appadurai 2000, 5

There is no doubt that civil society is a "millennial idea" and that cultural sociologists have been adding to the debate in interesting and useful ways. Having rejoined the fray, cultural sociology provides us with an important corrective to the social-scientific lens that too often sees only objective interests, institutional logics, and rationality instead of meanings, practices, and contingencies. Having moved away from an earlier values approach of modernization theory, cultural sociology promises to offer us accounts that give flesh to the idea of association in different contexts. However, despite notable exceptions, much of cultural sociology continues to be bound by the historical experiences of the "West," and seems to be informed by assumptions of liberal theory that idealizes the experiences of the "West." In this chapter, I've brought to light three different assumptions—born of the experience of the United States—that prevent cultural sociology from traveling better: its assumptions about the minimal state, the nature of the civilizing process, and the place of the political. The more cultural sociology can consider these caveats, the more global can our conversations become.

Part of the challenge is that democracy has always been a traveling culture, and much more so in recent years. And more than ever, it has been a "moving target, not a static structure. Democracy is a juxtaposition of institutions and practices with quite different histories" (Markoff 1999, 689). But democratic ideas travel

in conjunction with ideas about the market, modernity, and other "allegedly cultural-neutral forms (science and technology, industrialization, secularization, bureaucratization, and so on)" (Gaonkar 2002, 5) in the context of an unequal world. The history of association of democracy (and notions of the civil sphere and individual rights) with colonial histories, and later, with powerful nations and local elites needs to be considered centrally in any cultural framework looking at the Global South, as does the way that local civil societies draw on different cultural vocabularies and operate in vastly different realms than we normally imagine.

To engage in such a project implies looking at the "criss-crossing family resemblances" that make up democratic discourses around the globe, where liberal-democratic values are only one possible set of shared beliefs among the "manifold of practices and pragmatic moves aiming at persuading people to broaden the range of their commitments to others" (Mouffe 2000, 66). Remembering that these are "inseparable from specific forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953, 201) suggests that we pay careful attention to the situated and specific publics where such communication takes place. But engaging in such a project also means being attentive to history and the "genetic and political sociology of the formation, selection, and imposition of systems of classification" that make up distinct political cultures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 14).

And in the current moment, where flows of people, ideas, resources, and institutions are more intense than at any other point in history, there is greater uncertainty and flux about what the boundaries of the civil sphere, as well as new contradictions between territory and forms of authority (Held 1999). As we map these flows and become attentive to "global effects, notoriously unintended and unanticipated" (Bauman 2001), questions of boundaries of the civil sphere become even more relevant: what groups of persons it extends to and what parts of the common good ought to extend to them, resulting in uncertainty in the structuring of *political spaces,* the political "inside" and "outside" (Mouffe 1993). Discourses that aim to extend or shorten the reach of citizenship cause the intense competition over ambiguous and unstable "frontier effects" over the boundary of this political space, and constant articulation with the *res publica* (Mouffe 1992, 134). On one hand, once we consider this, that solidarity exists at all is surprising. But on the other hand, this suggests greater attention to novel transnational publics and new utopian possiblities that imagine "a new way of combining the local, the national and the transnational" (Olesen, 2005, 420).

NOTES

1. There is a very extensive discussion that I do not cite in this paper for the sake of brevity. For some exemplars, see Harriss 2005; Chandoke 2003; Encarnación 2003; Li 2007; Cornwall 2003; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Giles 2002; Leal 2007; Alvarez 2006; and Cooke and Kothari 2001. This selective list includes different sorts of critiques anchored in different intellectual traditions and having slightly different objects. But this abbreviated

list gives a sense of the suspicion the idea of civil society has come to evoke in some quarters.

2. See a critique of Parson's "weak" value theory of culture (Alexander 1998).

3. Al-Haq's Bylaws. Edited English version.doc26/12/2006.

4. A yearly ranking published by *Parade Magazine*, based on reports by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and Amnesty International. The 2009 rankings are available at http://www.parade.com/dictators/2009/the-worlds-10-worst-dictators.html.

5. Statement by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe Comrade R. G. Mugabe on the occasion of the 62nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 26 September, 2007. Available at http://www.nathanielturner.com/robertmugabesunspeech.htm.

6. See any number of pronouncements in the *Zimbabwe Herald*: http://www1.herald.co.zw.

7. The results of this research project are partially reported in Baiocchi and Corrado (2010).

8. After Freud's visit to the United States, he wrote:

> that most menacing where the social forces of cohesion consist predominantly of identifications of the individuals in the group with one another.…The state of civilization in America at the present day offers a good opportunity for studying this injurious effect of civilization which we have reason to dread.

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