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Michael W Foley
Bob Edwards, East Carolina University

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MICHAEL W. FOLEY and BOB EDWARDS
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Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and Social Capital in Comparative Perspective

Editors' Introduction

MICHAEL W. FOLEY
United States Institute of Peace

BOB EDWARDS
East Carolina University

This issue of American Behavioral Scientist is the second in a two-part series on civil society and the social capital debate. Although the first issue (Edwards & Foley, 1997) focused on the social capital debate in the United States, the present issue takes a decidedly comparative approach, with a primary focus on civil society and the character and significance of associational life for contemporary societies. In this article, we sketch the history of the notion of civil society, particularly as that term has become current in contemporary debates. The article also discusses how the notion of social capital became entangled with that of civil society and summarizes the debate surrounding social capital. Although the neo-Tocquevillean version of the civil society argument is probably most familiar to American readers—thanks in part to Robert Putnam’s promotion of the notion of the decline of social capital in recent U.S. experience—we attempt to show here some of the diversity of conceptions that characterize the revival of the civil society argument in hopes of moving the debate decisively “beyond Tocqueville.” In the final section of this article, we introduce the articles that follow in this context. In the concluding article, we attempt to assess what we have learned about civil society and social capital, drawing a distinction between the polemical and heuristic uses of these notions and their function as referents for empirical inquiry, in which latter respect we find both concepts decidedly wanting.

THE STRANGE HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The modern notion of civil society arose at the dawn of the liberal state in efforts to rethink the bases of social order against the claims of both absolutism and important versions of modernity to establish a direct relation between state
and citizenry, free of the multiple intermediaries of the late medieval, corporate order. Eclipsed in the 19th century by notions of class conflict, constitutional order, and the democratic state, it emerged anew in the 1970s in critiques of the totalitarian state in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, in Western Europe among critics of the welfare state (principally on the left), and in Latin America in the course of struggles against the military dictatorships of the day (Cohen & Arato, 1992). The term was identified with an emergent liberalism at the end of the 18th century; in its renewed versions, it is often associated with a revaluation of pluralism on the left. More recently, the term has complemented the antistatist agenda of the Western right, despite (or perhaps because of) its deep resonances for populist and left critics of contemporary states, and has been associated with the neoliberal resurgence in economics.

What makes the notion of civil society so attractive to such a diverse array of thinkers, as Adam Seligman (1992) notes,

is its assumed synthesis of private and public “good” and of individual and social desiderata. The idea of civil society thus embodies for many an ethical ideal of the social order, one that, if not overcomes, at least harmonizes the conflicting demands of individual interest and social good. (p. x)

But just because this harmonizing is assumed rather than proven, the notion of civil society is deeply ambiguous, meaning one thing to one group, another to another, and still another to others. The aim of this volume is to elucidate some of these differences and subject some of the claims associated with the notion of civil society to empirical scrutiny, drawing on historical and comparative studies as well as recent work on the United States.

The term civil society entered Western use in the Latin translation for Aristotle’s politike koinonia, with its assumption of a basic identity between governed and government, “society,” and “state.” However, its modern use grew out of the 18th-century effort to wrest a social space within which emerging and preexisting types of associations could pursue their own ends relatively free from the absolutizing pretensions of both monarchists and radical republicans (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Keane, 1988c). Against the modernizing absolutists and radical republicans alike, proponents of the notion of civil society sought to make room for forms of association intermediate between state and citizen. Against the medieval social order, the new thinkers insisted on freedom of association as the basis for any modern order. And against the radical republicans, they insisted that the state could not be the sole principle of order, however responsive to popular will. For the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, including Adam Smith, moral sentiment united individuals to act together “from affections of kindness and friendship” (quoted in Seligman, 1992, p. 27), which, under the right institutional arrangements, would provide the real basis for the public good.

With Hegel, the enormous difficulties of uniting both private interest and public benefits in civil society becomes a central theme.1 Civil society is, on one
hand, the expression of alienation, of the separation of individuals from one another into competing firms, religious sects, clubs, and institutions. On the other hand, it is where the mores and morals of a society are grounded, where the interests and views of individuals take shape and gain expression, and where, anticipating Tocqueville, individuals are socialized as citizens. Hegel proposes a complex scheme for the reconciliation of these conflicting characteristics. Legal framework, state action, corporative organization, state authority (the bureaucracy), the estate assembly or legislature, and public opinion all play a role. The legal framework—itself a product of both cultural processes and legislation—both enables civil society and constrains it. State action through the police, economic regulation, and public welfare constrains, shapes, and complements private action, and so on. The statist bent in Hegel’s account is clear, as is his failure—highlighted by Marx (1977)—to note that the “universal” pretensions of the modern bureaucratic state often mask the particularistic interests of its directors. Nevertheless, Hegel’s account stands out for its recognition of the conflictive character of civil society and the deep contradictions at the heart of the civil society argument. It is also important for pointing the way to the multiple forms in which government has been erected to confront those contradictions. Unfortunately, few of the more recent proponents of the notion of civil society have addressed these questions in the same depth.

The revival of the notion of civil society—after a lapse of more than 100 years in scholarly or, indeed, political use—came on multiple fronts but in all cases associated with attacks on the overbearing and, in some cases, overgrown states of the late 20th century. In Poland in the 1970s, Adam Michnik and others took up the notion of civil society as part of an effort to develop a third way between reform of the Communist system from above and revolt from below (both unlikely, given the Brezhnev Doctrine, which posited the right of the Soviet Union to intervene anywhere in Eastern Europe in defense of “socialism”). The emphasis was decidedly on society against the state, the Polish nation against the (imposed) Communist state. At the same time, Michnik and Jacek Kuron emphasized the self-organization of society and the self-limiting character of their “revolution”: It would not seize power but force structural reform. More generally, it would not take power, even as Solidarity succeeded in winning significant concessions, only to impose a new dictatorship on a newly demobilized society. In practice, the rhetoric of “solidarity” against the state led inevitably to demobilization and discouragement, as the factions of Solidarity and other proto-parties fought first over the character of the settlement with Communist authorities then over the shape and control of the new order (Pelczynski, 1988).

Similar disappointments accompanied the fall of military regimes in Latin America in the course of the 1980s as political divisions superseded the apparent unity with which civil society had mounted its most significant protests against regimes in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and elsewhere. Although “society”—that is, that part of society that most clearly and actively opposed the regimes—often
enjoyed a remarkable sense of unity in waves of protest, the jockeying of the political parties that eventually emerged to negotiate the transfer of power split antimilitary movements throughout the region. The "democratization of civil society" at the grassroots was often genuine but had little impact in many cases on the party builders and sometimes led to bitter disappointments at the degree to which democratic settlements failed to answer to popular aspirations (see Garreton, 1989; Schneider, 1995). Like the Polish activist intellectuals, the proponents of civil society in Latin America often translate "society against the state" into visions of a unitary society against the state and above the "dirtiness" of politics. And, like the Eastern Europeans who eschewed the party label in building their organizations, many Latin Americans nurture hopes for "nonparty parties" grounded in civil society (see, for example, Fals Borda, 1992).

Cohen and Arato (1992) note parallel developments of the notion of civil society in France and Germany in the 1970s, both growing out of critiques of the social democratic (or welfare) state from the left. Both the French "Second Left" and the German Greens insist on the need to reconstruct "political" society as well as civil society. Here, political society is conceived in terms of movements and organizations directly engaged in defending civil society, articulating conflict within society, and advancing alternative public options. As the evolution of the Greens attests, the question of the relations of such movements to parties and the traditional structures of representation remains a matter of debate in these lines of thinking. The critique of the welfare state articulated here bears a close resemblance to conservative (or neoliberal) characterizations. As Cohen and Arato summarize the position of one leading thinker, "the welfare state disorganizes above all social networks, associations, and solidarities, replacing these by state-administrative relations" (p. 40).

By contrast, the neoliberal and conservative embrace of the notion of civil society has come late, despite a shared distaste for statism in all its forms. One reason, perhaps, lies in the influence, in the United States at least, of public choice theory, with its trenchant critique of "rent seeking" among interest groups (Buchanan, Tollison, & Tullock, 1981). In one controversial but influential reading, both economic sluggishness and increasing problems of governability in the older industrial societies such as Britain and the United States is attributed to the thick growth of associational life, imposing evermore difficult dilemmas of allocation of resources among powerful interests and their vociferous competitors (Olson, 1982). Conservatives in the United States have likewise been at the forefront of attacks on the privileges and motivations of the nonprofit sector, which has often been caricatured as an arm of the liberal welfare state. Thus, when U.S. conservatives rediscovered civil society in the 1980s, it was a civil society largely shorn of interest groups, social movements, or other advocacy organizations (of the left) that occupied the new rhetoric of "a thousand points of light," taking up where the recently trimmed federal budget left off. Recent congressional questioning of the nonprofit tax exemption has taken an even more radical line, looking to churches rather than church agencies to shoulder the welfare- and community-rebuilding burdens, private for-profit educational
firms to take over U.S. schools, and consortia of local businesses to assume policing, street cleaning, and community development functions in the cities.

In some respects, the other side of the coin of the conservative version of the civil society argument has been the work of “third sector,” “voluntary sector,” or “nonprofit sector” researchers. This approach, largely originating in the United States, is often closely tied to major foundations and philanthropies and defends a vision of a third sector against state and market characterized primarily by private, nonprofit voluntary organizations (Hall, 1992; Van Til, 1988). Such researchers tend to be defenders of the “public-private partnership” that promoted nonprofit organization growth during the heyday of the welfare state (Salamon, 1995) and tend to celebrate the emergence of a vigorous third sector (represented primarily by professional nongovernmental organizations) in the developing world (Fisher, 1993; Salamon, 1994). Although the emphasis in this school of thinking is largely on nonprofit organizations as service providers, proponents have adopted versions of the argument that civil society organizations somehow strengthen democracy and provide an important complement to the market.

Theorists of the new pluralism, growing up principally on the left in the late 1970s in Western Europe, do not confine their attention to traditional nonprofits and professional service organizations. Indeed, these tend to play little role in their notion of civil society, and they strike a sharper pose with regard to the distinctive features of civil society. This approach emphasizes the importance of autonomous powers within society both as a counterbalance to the state and corporate power and as spheres in which important forms of social action can be carried out (Keane, 1988b; Mouffe, 1992). Civil society, as Michael Walzer (1992) interprets this understanding, becomes a realm of “concrete and authentic solidarities,” the “setting of settings” for working out the good life, where “all are included, none is preferred” (pp. 97-98). Thus, it grounds and encompasses other settings—democratic citizenship, class struggle, the market, the nation—in a way that permits their modulation and ultimate reconciliation.

In this respect, the new pluralists are not far from the neo-Toquevilles identified with Putnam’s work. Although they emphasize the irreducible plurality of civil society (Keane, 1988a; Mouffe, 1992), they often argue that social conflict can best be addressed at the level of neighborhood, workplace, or community and that public purposes in many cases can be better achieved by and through associations at these or higher levels than through the activities of the state. To their credit, and in contrast to the neo-Toquevilles, these theorists often puzzle over just how the sort of political framework most conducive to achieving the devolution of public power to society might best be achieved. Nevertheless, as Walzer (1992) himself notes, many enthusiasts of such devolution and decentralization fail to give proper attention to the ways in which the state continues to be crucial in framing social initiatives within civil society and market alike. As Walzer puts it, “civil society requires political agency. And the state is an indispensable agent—even if the associational networks also, always, resist the organizing impulses of state bureaucrats” (p. 104).
Special emphasis should be put among the theorists of the new pluralism on the work of Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (1995), who have paid close attention to the so-called mischief of faction. The problem hinges on how the self-interested nature of associations and the unbalanced character of the representation of societal interests among them might be reconciled with the demands of democracy for fair and representative weighing of the public interest. From this point of view, associational life may be as pernicious for the functioning of a democratic society as it is salutary in the neo-Tocquevillean reading. Critics of civil society on the right, chiefly represented by the "public choice" school, also express a similar concern. But in contrast to the solutions often offered on the right, the problem, according to Cohen and Rogers, will not be solved by marginalizing associations (which they consider impossible in modern societies and almost certainly undesirable) but by structuring associational participation in the polity in such a way as to bring about cooperation for the public good.

There is nothing automatic in this view about the contribution of groups to the health of democracies. Everything depends on how that contribution is structured and on the repercussions of such structuring on the impulses and internal organization of groups themselves. Civil society demands representation in modern polities. Furthermore, healthy democracy demands representation in terms of competing group interests and interpretations of the public good, not just via the weak recourse of the individual vote for catchall parties—or, as is increasingly the case in the United States, "partless" personalities. Nevertheless, civil society's contribution to democracy can only be assured when its more divisive tendencies are tamed. "Associational democracy" thus proposes (indeed, sets out from) a view of civil society and associational life at loggerheads with the most Pollyannaish aspect of the neo-Tocquevillean approach, for which the reconciliation of conflicting interests in civil society is scarcely even a question (Cohen & Rogers, 1995; see also Hirst, 1994).

Particularly among advocates of civil society against the state, the celebration of civil society is often explicitly antipolitical and, whether the point of view is from the left or the right, selective as to what sorts of groups can properly be labeled civil society. In practice, some advocates of an oppositional version of civil society have actively eschewed party politics, as in Poland's Solidarity movement at the moment of transition. In other cases, they identify with efforts to build nonparty parties, like Venezuela's Causa-R or Brazil's PT (Fals Borda, 1992). Civil society is constituted of like-minded oppositional or reformist groups—the "popular sector" in Latin America but not business or upper-class groups unless by exception; the anticommunist opposition in Eastern Europe, but not the reform Communists or their allies in social organizations. In conservative versions, likewise, civil society is often depicted as an alternative to politics, "above" partisan struggle and political manipulation; but, in contrast to the politicized civil society of the Poles and the European left, civil society itself is decidedly depoliticized, more focused on substantive benefits to society than on struggles over state policy and direction. Those groups that fail to conform to these narrow expectations of behavior—social movements, advo-
cacy groups, even influential traditional nonprofits—are simply defined out of civil society.

Definitional questions, indeed, have plagued the civil society notion from its birth. In its earliest modern uses, it was one pole of a simple dichotomy: state/civil society. Even here, however, thinkers often distinguished civil society from the family (following Aristotle) and laid particular emphasis on such public entities as associations at the expense of groups that had no organizational representation. For Marx (1977), civil society is, essentially, the arena where the human being “acts as a private individual, regards other men as means, degrades himself into a mens and becomes a plaything of alien powers” (p. 46). For Gramsci, by contrast, it is both the realm of “hegemony,” or voluntary consent to the rule of the dominant class, and an arena for struggle over such hegemony. More concretely, it “is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’” versus that of “ ‘political society’ or ‘the State’ ” (quoted in Bobbio, 1988, p. 82).

The dichotomous breakdown gives way in most recent writers to a three- or even four-sector model. Most familiar is the state/market/civil society trilogy, although the exact location of such important entities as legislatures, business associations and unions, and even “nongovernmental organizations” can be a matter of some controversy and ambiguity. Some find a place alongside these three for a distinctive political society, consisting of all those individuals and institutions directly engaged in vying for state power (Stepan, 1989).

The definitional differences—and, indeed, as we shall argue in the concluding article, the impossibility of arriving at a single, clear concept of civil society—often lead to considerable confusion in the literature. Seymour Martin Lipset’s (1996) discussion in American Exceptionalism is just one of many possible examples. In the course of two pages, Lipset adopts or quotes, with seeming approval, definitions of civil society that portray it as the “moral context” of Americanism, an association of rational agents, a set of associations, a “process of engagement between the individual and associations,” and “an arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life” (pp. 276-277).3

Each of these approaches raises different expectations about the role of civil society in modern politics and different questions about how state and society interact. Such differences spring, at least in part, from the different actors on which each focuses, in part from the differing roles assigned to civil society. In the next section, we consider various roles ascribed to civil society and how associational life is thought to contribute to that role in each conception.

THE MANY VIRTUES OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society plays three broad roles in these various accounts. Foremost in recent debate is the neo-Tocquevillean emphasis on its socialization function: The associations of civil society are thought to play a major role, if not the major
role, in building citizenship skills and the attitudes crucial for motivating citizens to use their skills. Many proponents would add, however, that civil society itself carries out a wide variety of public and quasi-public functions. The associations of civil society aid efforts or directly act to heal the sick, counsel the afflicted, support the penniless, educate both young and old, foster and disseminate culture, and generally provide many of the necessities and adornments of a modern society. It does this best, some argue, when left to itself but, others insist, could not or would not do it as well or as extensively without the encouragement and support of government. Still, other writers stress civil society’s representative functions. Civil society gives identity and voice to the distinct interests and diverse points of view characteristic of a modern society; it stimulates public debate and presses government for action on a thousand and one matters of public interest. Because of the special circumstances in which the notion of civil society emerged for Eastern European and Latin American writers, many of these stress the oppositional character of this role, seeing in civil society a bulwark against the state wherever state purposes seem to threaten the plurality and autonomy that civil society is thought to enshrine.

Robert Putnam’s (1993) original formulation, in Making Democracy Work, identified a strong civil society with high levels of “civic engagement,” suggesting a correspondence between structural features of society—the density of face-to-face associations cutting across social cleavages more than anything else—and a certain kind of political or “civic” culture. This approach has been particularly attractive to writers in the civic republican tradition, who argue that the health of democracy depends crucially on certain moral commitments among the citizenry and that these have their roots in traditions of community mindedness and public spiritedness that are endangered in an individualist and consumerist culture. Still, there is a certain tension between the civic republican argument and that of Putnam, in that the latter leans much more heavily on the pure fact of associationism to explain higher levels of positive participation in politics.

In Putnam’s (1993) account, association tends to promote civic engagement through the social capital it produces. Drawing on James Coleman’s (1990) formulation of the concept, Putnam and his followers define social capital as any feature of social relations that contributes to the ability of a society to work together and accomplish its goals. Although acknowledging the problems with putting an exclusively positive normative spin on what for Coleman was a morally neutral sociological category, Putnam and those who have followed his lead remain convinced that associationism per se produces habits of cooperation and trust, social networks and norms that, at least in certain sorts of groups, ultimately issue in the social trust and civic engagement that healthy democracies need. Civic culture thus grows out of certain practices, not the reverse; and the practices produce their effects, on average, through the mere fact of association. This is the kernel of the neo-Tocquevillean argument, which we have labeled elsewhere Civil Society I (Foley & Edwards, 1996).
The "civic culture" argument increasingly associated with Putnam is a curious one. "Generalized social trust" (trust in people in general), trust in government and public officials, tolerance, and optimism are all seen, in many versions of the argument, as integral components of social capital directly linked to its beneficial impact on participation and civic engagement and democracy in general (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Muller & Seligson, 1994; Stolle & Rochon, 1998 [this issue]). This list of ingredients, however, along with a common preference for broadly "inclusive" groups, stems from the empirical democratic theory of the 1950s, whose explicit fear was that an effervescent and contentious civil society would undermine democracy in the face of the "threat of Communism." The theory of civic culture epitomized by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's (1963) five-nation comparative study of the same name argued that the participatory impulse had to be tempered by a large dose of what Almond and Verba called "subject orientation," that is, a willingness to be led and to abide by the decisions of the authorities. Bred of the Cold War and a profound mistrust of popular mobilization outside the most narrow channels of then conventional political behavior, the theory highlighted virtues such as generalized social trust and trust in government as key ingredients in "stable democracies," with the emphasis decidedly on stability. All the more curious that these same attitudes today should be featured as part of a theory purporting to track the wellsprings of a vigorous participatory spirit. Given the distinct possibility that a large dose of distrust in government might sometimes be essential to the defense of democracy, it is a wonder that such categories, and the theory behind them, should have survived the demise of the Cold War.

Those approaches that lay stress on the public and quasi-public functions that civil society plays often take for granted its ability to produce civic engagement and public spiritedness. Or, like many of the neo-Tocquevilleans, recognizing the conflictive and divisive tendencies of certain sorts of groups, they privilege only those groups thought to produce such virtuous attitudes and behavior. But, more important, and whether from the left or the right, they point to the ability of civil society to realize public ends autonomous from state power and direction. Whether the emphasis is on "the voluntary spirit" or "social autonomy," the idea is that private initiative and organization enjoys certain advantages over state action and can obviate some of the worst abuses and failures of state power. Nevertheless, there is considerable disagreement over the role of private enterprise in such activities, with the European left seeing civil society as every bit as much an antidote to corporate power as to the overreaching state of the 20th century, whereas the American right proposes to stimulate the private assumption of public functions and the active engagement of business within civil society. Others emphasize the continuing role of the state in stimulating, supporting, and funding private initiatives. 6

Although the conservative embrace of civil society tends to exclude those sorts of organizations and activities associated with advocacy and political action, both the oppositionist conception of civil society developed in Eastern
Europe and Latin America and the European-inspired conceptions we have labeled the new pluralism put particular stress on the representative or political function of civil society. Civil society organizes itself not just to perform vital public functions autonomous of the state (and corporate power) but to defend social autonomy and promote policy change and, in the extreme, regime change. Whether a politicized civil society is considered a substitute for the party system or a complement to it, it is charged with giving expression to societal identities and representing societies’ interests and points of view. Again, there is considerable difference between those conceptions that imagine civil society united against the state and those that stress the irreducible pluralism of modern civil societies; but both approaches endorse a politically activated, even combative, civil society. Political activity, moreover, is here conceived of as group action more than individual-level civic engagement, and there is consequently no necessary bias against socially homogenous groups based in class, occupational, ethnic, religious, or other social distinctions as there is in the neo-Tocquevillean and conservative versions.

Given the diversity of perspectives and conceptions associated with the notion of civil society, it would be difficult to claim that we are confronted with a distinctive “paradigm” for social scientific inquiry here. The polemical and normative turn of many of these conceptions, moreover, mean that often we are dealing more with what Seligman (1992) calls an “ethically obtainable ideal” (p. 26) of civil society than with an analytical concept capable of guiding empirical inquiry by grounding a coherent body of testable hypotheses. The best known version of these conceptions in the U.S. setting, that of the neo-Tocquevilleans (and the one most apparent in the articles that follow) is notably silent on some of the key attributes of civil society under other conceptions. Nevertheless, it is important to situate that understanding in the larger tradition, if only to provoke consideration of alternative conceptualizations more capable of addressing the evident lacunae in contemporary American accounts. The articles that follow take up various of the claims of the civil society notion, particularly those tied to the concept of social capital. Below, we sketch how each addresses these claims and with what results.

OUTLINE OF THE ISSUE

The conflicting understandings of the character of the relationship of civil society and the polity sketched here underline the difficulty of advancing a theory at this level of generality. To take just the neo-Tocquevillean case, as Stolle and Rochon (1998 [this issue]), Eastis (1998 [this issue]), and Booth and Richard (1998 [this issue]) show, the degree to which participation in associations promotes attitudes relevant to civic engagement and even commitment to democracy (the central claim of the neo-Tocquevillean version) differs sharply among kinds of organizations. Although it is easy to deride certain of Putnam’s
favored examples (bowling leagues, birding societies, choirs), it is rather more
difficult to ferret out just how different groups might contribute to the sort of
civic engagement that neo-Tocquevilleans—and not just they—find so attrac-
tive. For there is no doubt that associational life does generate mutual trust,
habits of cooperation and participation, progress in achieving related norms and
values, and important social networks. The question is which kinds of associa-
tions do so, under what circumstances, and with what effects for the polity?
Answers will depend, at the very least, on the sort of comparative approach
introduced with the cross-national and case studies presented here.

The articles collected here add historical and comparative depth to those
presented in the first issue devoted to this theme. In the opening article, Keith
E. Whittington (1998) reconsiders Tocqueville’s analysis in the context of the
American scene that inspired his work. Whittington notes both the importance
of civil associations for developing vital citizenship skills and the problems
inherent in civil society, particularly an exclusionary tendency in voluntary
associations and the conflictiveness of civil society. As Whittington notes,

Antebellum Americans suffered not from a lack of civic association but from a
conflict of goals among social and political groups. Sometimes those conflicts
arose from the direct self-interest of various factions within society. At other times,
however, political conflict arose not from competing interests but from competing
visions of the public good derived from and reinforced by unrelated voluntary
associations. (p. 26)

In some cases, those conflicts were violent, as in the struggle over slavery in the
Kansas territory. Such conflicts, Whittington concludes, “could not be resolved
without effective political institutions” (p. 30). Thus, “a well-functioning dem-
cracy depends not only on social relations but also on political institutions
and on a constitutional order that structures the relationship between them”
(p. 22).

The next three articles address the question of what sorts of associations best
foster attitudes and behaviors conducive to healthy democracy. John Booth and
Patricia Richard (1998), however, explicitly raise the question of how the
political setting affects people’s responses. Drawing on a five-nation survey of
the attitudes and behaviors of Central Americans at the close of 15 years of civic
strife, the authors show that, in the aftermath of authoritarian regimes, people
remain wary of political engagement, even when they participate actively in
associations. They find that national political context, whether open or repres-
sive, affects both the development of civil society and the kinds of groups and
activities in which people tend to participate. Furthermore, they find that civil
society has a greater influence on what they call “political capital” than on social
capital as conceptualized by Robert Putnam, suggesting that its effect on regime
performance follows a direct path through more conventional forms of political
participation than the indirect, more cultural route posited by the neo-
Tocquevilleans.
Dietlind Stolle and Thomas R. Rochon (1998), working with data from a survey of members in a wide range of associations in the United States, Germany, and Sweden, assume a common democratic framework for associational life and ask about the relationship between associational membership and what they call "public social capital"—social capital, that is, that fosters "a cooperative spirit, norms of reciprocity, and collective thinking beyond the boundaries of the group itself" (p. 49). They show that, although associational membership in general is associated with higher levels of public social capital, including participation in community and political affairs, different types of associations are associated with different sorts of social capital. Social diversity within associations is likewise associated with higher levels of generalized social trust and reciprocity with neighbors. In general, they conclude "that a generalized enthusiasm for the effects of associational membership on social capital must be tempered by a specification of what types of groups we are talking about and what aspects of social capital are being considered" (p. 57).

Although these results tend to support the contention that association in general promotes the sort of social capital that Putnam and others find beneficial for democratic societies, Carla M. Eastis's (1998) work, in the next article, demonstrates that even within one category of groups, the effects of associational life may be quite different. Comparing two choral groups in New Haven, Connecticut, Eastis finds the quality of participation and the sorts of human capital skills, community orientation, and social capital generated depends very much on internal structural characteristics of the groups in question. Eastis's work thus calls into question any quick judgment about the relationship between organizational membership and citizenship. As she puts it,

General statements about the consequences for American democracy that are gleaned from examining membership rates of broad categories of voluntary associations are at best simplistic. At worst, they distract us from the basis of the debate: What is social capital, anyway? (p. 76)

These articles represent varied responses to the challenge of empirically grounding neo-Tocquevillean claims about the indirect impact of associational membership on democratic societies. Mark R. Warren's article (1998 [this issue]) might be better situated within an understanding of civil society that emphasizes the conflictive and combative contributions of a mobilized civil society to the effective democratization of modern states. In this article, Warren investigates the "relational organizing" strategy used by the Industrial Areas Foundation in San Antonio. In this independent, nonpartisan strategy, new forms of cooperation capable of uniting diverse communities divided as they are in the United States by profound inequalities of class, race, and gender are reached in part only through conflict. Warren critiques the communitarian strategy, implicit in much of the recent social capital debate, for avoiding conflict and thereby limiting "the boundaries of community and cooperation to those already in or to those who can come to forge unity through discussion alone" (p. 90).
Jackie Smith (1998 [this issue]) develops the idea that a "global civil society" may be developing around efforts to influence the deliberations of international governmental organizations. Here, too, the vision of civil society employed is decidedly more sympathetic to social movements and political advocacy than the standard neo-Tocquevillean approach. Drawing on original survey research as well as published data, Smith demonstrates a tremendous expansion in organizations that can be characterized as part of a "transnational social movement sector." As she notes, moreover, such organizations, "working for environmental protection, human rights, and disarmament have been essential to effective monitoring and implementation of international treaties" (p. 95). Beyond these important effects of mobilization, Smith documents the impact of these organizations in generating such features of social capital as the formation of important links among organizations and activists across political boundaries and the creation of "cultural reserves and mobilizing frames relevant to global political debate" (p. 105).

Garth Nowland-Foreman (1998 [this issue]) analyzes recent changes in the political context of civil society in New Zealand associated with a restructuring of the relationship between nonprofit organizations in New Zealand and the government. He reviews the many roles in civil society that nonprofits in New Zealand have played in the past. These include the promotion of civic participation among citizens, making citizens more attuned to local realities and needs as a result of their participation in the governance of local nonprofits, the provision of human capital that enables volunteers to be more effective in their efforts to address local problems, and as a training ground in which homemakers currently outside the labor force have gained skills that facilitate their successful subsequent entry into full-time employment. He finds that the shift to the recently implemented contract-for-services relationship with the government has across the board undermined the capacity of nonprofits in New Zealand to play effectively their traditional roles in civil society. In a way reminiscent of Charles Heying's (1997) analysis of the detrimental impact of economic restructuring on civil society in Atlanta and Booth and Richard's (1998) analysis of political repression in Central America, Nowland-Foreman's analysis reiterates the argument that the capacity of civil society to produce social capital is shaped in important ways by the sociopolitical and economic context.

In the final article, we attempt to assess what we have learned in the course of the debate. We conclude that both civil society and social capital have proven useful heuristics for drawing attention to neglected relationships and aspects of social reality, but both break down, although in different ways, when treated as the basis for elaborating testable hypotheses and further theory. In the case of civil society, theorists willing to move beyond a mainly polemical or normative use to develop analytical tools for conceptualizing modern polities quickly become embroiled in unresolvable boundary disputes over just what constitutes civil society (or state or market or political society) at the expense of concrete investigation of the ways in which specific elements of society are shaped by,
and shape in turn, the economic and political setting in which they move and 
breathe. The notion of social capital, on the other hand, has tended to be 
transformed into just another label for the norms and values associated with the 
empirical democratic theory of the 1950s. The richness of James Coleman’s 
conception has been lost in the process. We propose, roughly following the work 
of Pierre Bourdieu (1972), a fourfold distinction between financial, human, 
social, and cultural capital (with the latter encompassing norms and values) and 
a more careful attempt to think through the sorts of social and cultural resources 
on which a vibrant political and economic system might depend.

NOTES

1. The following is based on the discussion in Cohen and Arato (1992, pp. 91-116).

2. Norman Uphoff (1993), for example, argues that the nongovernmental organizations of the 
developing world, despite their often formal nonprofit status, are better seen as part of the market, 
because of the centrality of competition for funding and clients for their existence. For Uphoff, as 
for many involved in so-called third sector (or independent sector) research, the distinguishing mark 
of civil society is the voluntary character of participation underlying associational life as opposed to 
the profit motive (the market) or coercion (the state).


4. Although Coleman’s (1990) formulation is the most well known, the term can be traced back 
to Jacobs (1961) in the United States. Indeed, in an exchange over the SOCNET list, Robert Putnam 
(1997) notes that L. J. Hanifan used the term in much the sense currently popular in a 1920 book 
titled The Community Center (pp. 78-79). In European social thought, Pierre Bourdieu first used 
“social capital” in 1972, eventually developing the triad, physical capital, cultural capital, and social 

5. Putnam’s (1993) argument is, in fact, decidedly ambiguous on the key relationship, namely, 
that between the trust, norms, and networks created in groups and their extension to the individual’s 
relations to the larger polity in “generalized social trust” and “civic engagement.” The central 
argument hinges on the experience of participation in a group per se, but Putnam is aware that certain 
types of groups do not produce generalized social trust and civic engagement. In Making Democracy 
Work, he argues that such groups are characterized by “vertical” rather than “horizontal” ties. Those 
groups that are likely to produce the sort of social capital Putnam is looking for are also said to be 
broadly inclusive, cutting across class, ethnic, religious, and other social distinctions. This argument, 
culled from the notion of “cross-cutting cleavages” in the American pluralist tradition, suggests that 
we must look beyond the pure experience of association for the sources of the more “positive” sorts 
of social capital.

6. Lester Salamon (1995) has convincingly demonstrated the positive effects of the United 
States’ distinctive “public-private partnership” for the growth of the nonprofit sector in this country. 
He tends to side with those, accordingly, who stress the continuing importance of government in 
stimulating and supporting private initiative, although much of his recent scholarly effort has been 
to distinguish sharply the “independent sector” from both market and state (Salamon & Anheier, 
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