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1998-06

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Schmidt, James. "Civility, Enlightenment, and Society: Conceptual Confusions and Kantian Remedies." *American Political Science Review* 92:2, pp. 419-27. (1998)

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/2410>

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Civility, Enlightenment, and Society: Conceptual Confusions and Kantian Remedies

JAMES SCHMIDT *Boston University*

Critics of what is called the "Enlightenment project" have argued that it has been responsible for a number of current social pathologies. At the same time, the term "civil society" has been used to designate those patterns of solidarity that the Enlightenment project allegedly disrupts. This article (1) argues that characterizations of the Enlightenment project tend to be elusive and historically questionable, (2) suggests that the concept of civil society is ambiguous in both its object and its intent, (3) explores how Kant provided a more rigorous account of the relationship between enlightenment and civil society, an account which rests on a contrast between civil and cosmopolitan society, and (4) considers some of the difficulties that plague attempts to define "civility" as a virtue.

Writing in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784, Immanuel Kant speculated that the "hidden plan of nature" was to bring about justice in civil society and peaceful relations between nations by means of the very antagonism that seemed to promise only civil unrest and international conflict. He assured his readers that "though folly and caprice creep in at all times, enlightenment gradually arises," and thus the "chiliastic expectations" of philosophy for the triumph of justice were something more than an illusion (Kant [1784] 1923, 27–8). As we close this millennium, Kant's "chiliastic expectations" regarding enlightenment and civil society do not appear to be generally shared.

Over the last several decades, a remarkably diverse group of philosophers and social critics have traced the origin of a number of social and cultural maladies to something they call the "Enlightenment project." Over the same period, an equally diverse group of political and social commentators have hailed the promise of, lamented the demise of, or sought ways to reinvigorate what they call "civil society." The concerns at stake in these discussions would appear to be related. As Kant's essay shows, the nature and promise of civil society were important concerns in the Enlightenment. Yet, with a few exceptions, current debates over the viability of the Enlightenment project and discussions of the prospects for civil society are conducted in different registers. On those rare occasions when the relationship between the two notions is broached, some commentators tend to see greater difficulties than Kant.

Consider, for example, the explanation that Berger and Neuhaus ([1976] 1996, 161) offer for the tendency of liberalism to underestimate the role played by "mediating structures" in public policy:

Liberalism's blindness to mediating structures can be traced to its Enlightenment roots. Enlightenment thought is abstract, universalistic, addicted to what Burke called "geometry" in social policy. The concrete particularities of mediating structures find an inhospitable soil in the liberal

garden. There the great concern is for the individual ("the rights of man") and for a just public order, but anything "in between" is viewed as irrelevant, or even an obstacle, to the rational ordering of society. What lies in between is dismissed, to the extent it can be, as superstition, bigotry, or (more recently) cultural lag.¹

This argument repeats a long-standing charge against the Enlightenment: While it proved effective in tearing down what tradition had wrought, it was unable to foster those mediating structures which sustain civil society. This was the common theme of such otherwise dissimilar works as Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ([1790] 1987) and Tocqueville's *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* ([1856] 1955). Such an argument also played a central role in Hegel's account of the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Terror in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1806] 1977). Something similar may be found in Nietzsche's suggestion that the Enlightenment's critique of religion was but the first step toward a critique of the idols of science, morality, and reason that carried with it the prospect of a collapse into nihilism.

This paper proposes that arguments of this sort rest on confusions about what the Enlightenment involved and what civil society implies. They invoke a characterization of the Enlightenment that is historically questionable and an understanding of civil society that is rarely clearly defined. To understand what is amiss, it will be necessary to (1) examine the radically different ways in which the Enlightenment is understood by social critics and by historians, (2) explore some of the ambiguities that plague the concept of civil society, (3) return to Kant, in order to consider an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between Enlightenment and civil society, and (4) consider some of the difficulties that plague accounts of the virtue of civility.

CRITICIZING THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

In recent decades the notion that there is something short-sighted, narrow, and deficient about the Enlight-

James Schmidt is Professor of Political Science, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215.

This article is drawn from a paper presented at a UNESCO Conference, "Future Ethics," held at the Institute of Cultural Pluralism, Candido Mendes University, Rio de Janeiro, July 2–4, 1997. I am indebted to Enrique Larreta, the executive director of the ICP, for inviting me to draw some connections.

¹ For a discussion of the significance of Berger and Neuhaus's notion of "mediating structures" for current discussions of civil society, see Dionne 1997.

enment has become so pervasive that many commentators, as Wilson (1987, 53) observed, find it impossible to resist the temptation to

take a punch at enlightenment thought. . . . It is difficult to get through an academic day without having to witness somebody jabbing away just to enjoy the pleasure of getting off on the demystification of the functioning of humanist ideals or slapping the Enlightenment around with the intention of knocking it out of its stupor and redeeming the hopes of mastery of nature by reason.

Wilson's quip highlights one of the more distinctive features of recent criticisms of the Enlightenment project: Today, punches are thrown from the Left as well as the Right, and the Enlightenment stands accused not only of undermining tradition but also of reinforcing patriarchy, fostering anti-Semitism, sustaining an ideology of white supremacy, embracing a vision that sees progress only in terms of the ever-increasing subjugation of nature, and—more generally—harboring a hostility toward “otherness” in any of its forms (Schmidt 1996, 1). As a way of sorting out the different charges that have been raised, it might be useful to outline, briefly, three different versions of the critique of the Enlightenment project.

The first and perhaps most familiar line of criticism argues that the indifference of Enlightenment rationality to traditional norms and practices destroys the ties that bind individuals together into societies, paving the way for complete anarchy or the rule of brute force. The locus classicus for this interpretation is Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Criticizing French “literary men and politicians” as having “no respect for the wisdom of others,” Burke argues that the fatal flaw of the Enlightenment lay in its habit of “exploding general prejudices” rather than seeking “to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them.” Because “prejudice, with its reason,” is capable of moving men to action in a way that “naked reason” cannot, it is wiser “to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice and leave nothing but the naked reason” (Burke [1790] 1987, 76–7). More recent versions of this line of criticism may be found in Oakeshott's ([1962] 1991) critique of political “rationalism” or Gadamer's ([1960] 1989) critique of the Enlightenment's “prejudice against prejudice.” We also find it in passing swipes at the Enlightenment by conservative and neoconservative commentators.

A second line of criticism originates in Hegel's discussion, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of the transformation of Enlightenment into Terror. While much of Hegel's imagery bears a striking resemblance to Burke, his argument differs in crucial ways. Where Burke sought to defend the reason of tradition against the abstractions of philosophers, Hegel argues that the central failing of the Enlightenment was that it was insufficiently enlightened about the limitations of its own conception of reason. The struggle between faith and Enlightenment turns out to be little more than shadow boxing, since all that Enlightenment can offer in place of religious faith is a faith of a different sort: a

belief in the primacy of the category of utility. Enlightenment proves to be “irresistible” in its struggle with faith, but its victory is a bitter one, as is amply demonstrated, in Hegel's view, by the collapse of the French Revolution into Terror. A politics guided by utility alone can produce nothing except “the coldest, shallowest of deaths, with no more significance than cleaving a cabbage head or swallowing a gulp of water” (Hegel [1806] 1977, 360, translation modified).² A more recent version of this line of criticism can be found in the account of the self-destruction of Enlightenment sketched by Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 1972).³

A third line of criticism originates in the work of Nietzsche, whose stance toward the Enlightenment reflects a profound ambivalence. In some of his discussions of the Enlightenment he calls for the rescue of what he characterizes as its original aristocratic ideals from the contaminating influences of democracy and egalitarianism that he associates with Rousseau and the French Revolution (Nietzsche [1878] 1986, 169, 367; [1882] 1974, 293; [1888] 1968b, 101–2). On other occasions, however, he suggests that the Enlightenment's critique of religion was but the first faltering step in the direction of a thoroughgoing critique of the idols of science, morality, and reason, and this carried within it both the danger of a collapse into nihilism and the promise of a new Enlightenment in which the idea of aesthetic self-fashioning would replace the search for universal values (Nietzsche [1882] 1974, 181; [1883–88] 1968a, 56). Nietzsche's present-day heirs are a motley lot, encompassing both those who, like Gray (1995), share his conviction that the Enlightenment paves the way to nihilism but who reject his aestheticization of ethics and those who, like Foucault, are more concerned with exploring the workings of power and knowledge than with meditating on the danger of nihilism (Schmidt and Wartenberg 1994).

Each of these lines of criticism has a different sense of what ought to be done in the face of the damage allegedly wrought by the Enlightenment. The solution of latter-day Burkeans is perhaps the most familiar: They counsel a defense of traditional norms where they still survive, a distrust for any social policy that smacks of rational “social engineering,” and support for measures that strengthen the damaged “mediating institutions” of civil society. Those who take Hegel's account as their point of departure, in contrast, are concerned to elaborate a conception of rationality that seeks to transcend the limits of instrumental reason (Habermas 1987). And Nietzsche's present-day disciples may, like Gray, embrace Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* as a means of avoiding the nihilism they see inherent in the Will to Power (Gray 1996, 182–3) or seek, as Foucault did in his last writings, to redefine Enlightenment as an open-ended project of self-creation (Foucault 1984,

² For a discussion of the peculiar images Hegel employs, see Schmidt 1998.

³ Horkheimer himself saw the work as an elaboration of Hegel's basic thesis. See his letter to Friedrich Pollock of May 7, 1943 (Horkheimer 1996, 446).

32–50). But if the proposed antidotes for the damage done by the Enlightenment are remarkably diverse, the picture of the Enlightenment that emerges from these critics is strikingly consistent. Let us review its main features.

First, the Enlightenment is routinely characterized as embracing a conception of reason that is held to be insufficiently sensitive to its own limits. Sometimes it is criticized for underestimating the degree to which norms and values can be detached from traditions and conventions of everyday life, resulting—as MacIntyre (1981) has argued—in a situation in which moral discourse has lost all meaning. Other critics charge that it embraces a restricted understanding of reason, modeled on the natural sciences, which equates reason with the successful manipulation of nature, resulting in the rule of “instrumental reason” (Horkheimer 1947). Still others suggest that it naively underestimated the role played by passions and sentiments in human conduct and, as a result, leads to a wildly impractical politics, which Oakeshott ([1962] 1991, 27–31) characterized as a “politics of the book” or an “abridgement of a tradition.” Whatever the particular form of the criticism, the central charge remains the same: The Enlightenment represents an uncritical rationalism that is dangerously unaware of the complexity of reality.

Closely related is the charge that, because the Enlightenment loses itself in abstract universality, it has an ignorance of, or worse still, a contempt for the particular, the local, the specific. According to Oakeshott ([1962] 1991, 9), the “political rationalism” that is the bitter legacy of the Enlightenment combines a “politics of perfection” with a “politics of uniformity.” Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 1972, 6) provide an even more chilling image: Enlightenment, in their view, is inherently “totalitarian.” Critics from the Left have charged that its talk of universal rights remained oblivious to inequalities in gender, race, and class, while those on the Right argue that by reducing all social relations to a series of abstract and impersonal rights, it tears the fabric of society to pieces. In all these cases, the Enlightenment stands accused not simply of being uncritically rationalist but of being insufficiently concerned with particularity.

It is further argued that the abstract, uncritical conception of reason embraced by the Enlightenment culminates in an obsession with domination and control. Thus, in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1979), the prisoners who have been freed from the darkness of the dungeon are captured all the more securely in the light that floods through the Panopticon. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 1972), the ultimate project of the Enlightenment is the domination of nature and of other human beings. And for Gray (1996, 166, 180), the Enlightenment project is yet another manifestation of that “Will to Power” which lies at the heart of the “Western humanist hubris.”

Finally, the Enlightenment’s critics are united in the conviction that there *is* such a thing as *an* Enlightenment project—that it is possible to attribute a common set of intentions to a rather diverse group of thinkers,

scattered across a number of different nations. Critics may differ on how exactly this project is to be defined, just as there is considerable difference, from critic to critic, as to who counts as a representative of it. But central to all these criticisms is the conviction that it makes sense to speak of a single, coherent Enlightenment project. While such a possibility is taken as unproblematic by the critics, their confidence is hardly reflected in historical accounts of the period.

In a recent overview, Outram (1995) observed that as historians of the Enlightenment have moved from an examination of a limited canon of works by a few famous (and typically French) authors to a consideration of the Enlightenment as a social, political, and cultural transformation exhibiting a remarkable range of national and confessional variations, it has become more difficult to speak of the Enlightenment as “a unitary phenomenon.” “It might . . . seem that as our picture of the Enlightenment became more complex, as we have begun to study ideas not as autonomous, discrete objects, but as deeply embedded in society, so the term Enlightenment itself might have become increasingly obscure or even meaningless” (Outram 1995, 12).

To the extent that it is still possible to impute an identity to the Enlightenment, Outram (1995, 12) suggests that it must be viewed “as a *capsule* containing sets of debates, stresses and concerns, which however differently formulated or responded to, do appear to be characteristic of the way in which ideas, opinions and social and political structures interacted and changed in the eighteenth century.” This diversity is precisely what the critics tend to overlook when they speak as if there were a single, unitary Enlightenment project.

Gray’s *Enlightenment’s Wake* (1995) exemplifies how far afield a critic can go when trying to define the Enlightenment project. Turning first to MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), he argues that while Enlightenment thinkers may have held differing views on other topics, they were at one in calling for “an independent rational justification of morality” (Gray 1995, 147). Rather quickly, he extends the Enlightenment project to embrace the “refounding” of “society” as well as “morality” on “universal, tradition-independent rational principles,” a project to which “liberalism as a doctrine was, in all of its varieties, unreservedly committed” (pp. 149–50). A few pages later, the “Enlightenment project of human self-emancipation” is characterized as the “naturalistic form” of the “most fundamental Western commitment, the *humanist* conception of humankind as a privileged site of truth,” a commitment that had been expressed in both “Socratic inquiry and in Christian revelation” (p. 155). Having equated the Enlightenment project with liberalism and humanism, Gray next characterizes it as also embracing the “modernist world-view,” with its “conception of science as the supremely privileged form of knowledge,” a supremacy that is, in turn, defined in terms of a view of the natural world as “an object of human exploitation” (p. 158). Within a few more pages, a “commitment to rationalism” becomes one of the “defining elements of the modernist world-view of which the Enlightenment

project is the most powerful expression" (p. 160). Several paragraphs later, the Enlightenment is characterized as "foundationalist," "representationalist," and "logocentric" (p. 160).

In Gray's account, the definition has so many differing characteristics that it is uncertain whether it makes sense to speak of a single, all-encompassing project. The attempt to provide "an independent rational justification of morality" (the characterization of the Enlightenment project that Gray takes from MacIntyre) does not require or even imply a view of the natural world as "an object of human exploitation" (a characterization Gray takes from Heidegger and from Horkheimer and Adorno). While the primacy accorded to the natural sciences merges rather easily into the project of the domination of nature, it is not entirely obvious that an "independent rational justification of morality" must ultimately be grounded in the natural sciences: For a thinker such as Kant, it obviously was not. It is also less than clear that "liberalism" is necessarily part of the Enlightenment project: Not all advocates of Enlightenment embraced liberalism, and there were eloquent defenders of liberalism who were also vigorous critics of the Enlightenment.⁴ It is easy enough to make the "foundationalist," "representationalist," and "logocentric" characterization (after all, is not *everything* since the pre-Socratics "representationalist" and "logocentric"?), but the price is to obscure a good deal of difference between a foundationalist procedure which, following Descartes, seeks to find a ground for reason and Kant's attempt to provide what O'Neill (1989, 3–27) has described as a "constructivist" vindication of reason.⁵

Accounts of the failure of the Enlightenment project such as Gray's typically tend to rest on criticisms of a number of separate and detachable claims. Thus, when critics take aim at the project's "rationalism," they are raising questions about the ability of reason to provide a grounding for law or morality. When they criticize its "scientism," they are questioning the adequacy of a criterion of rationality that is measured in terms of instrumental efficacy. When they point to its naive commitment to "progress," they are questioning the possibility of evaluating all societies and cultures in terms of a single measure of "development." Cobbling distinguishable claims such as these into something called the Enlightenment project misses an essential point: Criticisms of these very same claims were advanced by thinkers typically associated with the Enlightenment. Hume, for example, had doubts about the prospect of constructing a moral philosophy grounded on reason alone, Kant's entire critical philosophy can be viewed as an attempt to define reason in something other than instrumentalist terms, and both Voltaire and Diderot offered extensive criticisms of the idea of progress. What is bravely called the Enlightenment

project thus turns out to be a pastiche of arguments, each of which—when viewed separately—would find critics within the Enlightenment itself.

Thus, current discussions of the Enlightenment are marked by a paradox. Those who speak most confidently of it as a single, coherent project have little confidence in the alleged project's viability. Those who speak with most competence about the historical reality of the Enlightenment have little confidence in offering a general characterization of what the Enlightenment was attempting to achieve. Thus, the Enlightenment project is coherent only for those who are in the process of rejecting it, while those who examine it more closely find the object of their concern dissolving into a host of particulars.

INVOKING CIVIL SOCIETY

In the writings of scholars, social critics, and political activists, the invocation of civil society is even more pervasive than criticisms of the Enlightenment project. During the 1970s and 1980s, critics of authoritarian regimes in both Eastern Europe and Latin America used the notion as a rallying point (Arato and Cohen 1992, 29–36, 48–69). Since then, it has played a major role in discussions of the prospects for democratization (Gellner 1996, 1–12). Over the last decade, social scientists have looked for signs of its emergence in societies where conventional wisdom assumed it did not exist (Hann and Dunn 1996; Schwedler 1995) and have sought to explain its apparent demise in the United States (Putnam 1995). Over the last few years its "renewal" has been the object both of foundation support and of proposed legislation—witness the Project for American Renewal drafted by Senator Dan Coats (R-Indiana), which consists of a series of measures designed to halt "the decline of civil society" by providing support for "families, churches, neighborhoods, voluntary associations" (Coats 1996).

Like the Enlightenment project, the meaning of "civil society" tends to be rather elusive. Shils's (1992, 3) often-quoted definition reads like a sketchy set of directions: "Civil society lies beyond the boundaries of the family and clan and beyond the locality; it lies short of the state." There is, however, a good deal to be found beyond the family but short of the state: markets, voluntary associations, churches, interest groups, labor unions, nongovernmental organizations, and Robert Putnam's (1995) steadily dwindling bowling leagues. It remains an open question whether much is gained by gathering these different forms of association together under a single label (Kumar 1993). Furthermore, rival sets of directions explain where civil society may be found: Arato and Cohen (1992, ix) differ from Shils by placing civil society "between economy and state" and arguing that it is "composed above all by the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of association (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication." The possibilities for dispute about just what—and where—civil society is would appear to be endless.

Invocations of civil society resemble criticisms of the

⁴ For one example, see Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "Something Lessing Said" (Schmidt 1996, 191–211).

⁵ "Post-modernist" critics almost habitually equate Descartes and Kant. See, for example, Cornel West's comments on what he calls the "Cartesian-Kantian picture" (West 1979, 68).

Enlightenment project in a second respect: They come from across the ideological spectrum (Walzer 1991). Opponents of authoritarian regimes employ the term to denote something like the rights and liberties long associated with liberal democracies. Radical democrats use it to denote the ideal of an engaged, active citizenry, directly involved in public deliberation. For libertarians, it designates a market society, free from political coercion. For communitarians, it evokes the network of voluntary associations and the civic virtues they engender. If the Enlightenment project serves as a catch-all category that designates whatever particular aspect of the modern world aggravates the critic who marshals it, so “civil society” appears to be an equally elastic category, designating whatever the social critic finds central to the particular vision of society that is being articulated.

The looseness of the term may be attributed partly to the fact that, unlike “the Enlightenment,” “civil society” has generally served as a theoretical concept used to designate a certain form of association rather than as a way of denoting a particular period.⁶ Theorists are thus at liberty to propose new definitions, often with only the slightest familiarity with earlier formulations. The term first entered the world as a way of translating *koinonia politikē*, coined by Aristotle to describe the form of association more commonly termed a *polis* (Schmidt 1986). Until the close of the eighteenth century, “civil society” was employed, following the paradigm laid down by Aristotle, to designate that form of political association conventionally referred to as a “state” or *civitas*. This pattern of usage was taken over without alteration by natural law theorists. But by the early nineteenth century, it had been called into question (Schmidt 1995). Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* made use of a distinction between state and civil society that was unconventional enough to confuse his first reviewers (Schmidt 1982), and Tocqueville’s drafts for *Democracy in America* proposed a tripartite division into “religious,” “civil,” and “political” societies (Schleifer 1980, 7). To speak, then, of civil society (following Hegel) as something distinct from both the family and the state, or (as in Tocqueville’s initial drafts) from both religious and political forms of association is to suggest that there are patterns of association not adequately grasped by eighteenth-century political and legal theory. This altered use of “civil society” set the stage for the emergence of the various social sciences that went on to explore the domain carved out by the term.

There was also considerable ambiguity as to just what the proper focus of the newly emerging social sciences might be. Recasting Hegel’s distinction be-

tween family, civil society, and the state into a dichotomy between state and society, Stein ([1850] 1964, 50) saw sciences of society—as opposed to sciences of the state—as including the “sciences of economics, of labor, of householding economy and of national economy, of the family and of law.” Tocqueville, in contrast, turned from the consideration of the legal structure of the new American democracy to probe the patterns of association, the customs, manners, and mores, the “habits of the heart” that defined its mode of existence. And Marx ([1859] 1970, 20), interpreting civil society as the “sum total” of the “material conditions of life,” argued that the “anatomy” of civil society was to be found in political economy. The nineteenth century’s uncertainty about the boundaries of civil society continues to be played out today in disputes over whether to include the intimate sphere of the family, whether civil society is reducible ultimately to the market, and whether it is opposed to or requires the existence of the state.

The term “civil society” is unclear in one final respect. It can function either as a normative ideal used to designate the attributes that a political community ought to possess or as an analytic category that is used, within an empirical analysis, to designate a set of “ostensibly ‘private’ yet potentially autonomous public arenas distinct from the state” that prevent society from “degenerating into a shapeless mass” (Eisenstadt 1992, ix). Locke used the term in the first of these senses when he argued that absolute monarchies are not “civil” societies, since their rulers are not restrained by the terms of the social contract. Social scientists use the term in the latter sense when, for example, they explore the informal networks of association that provide the basis on which political structures arise. Thus, when the term “civil society” is invoked, it is not only often unclear what exactly it encompasses—markets? informal organizations? the domestic sphere?—but also sometimes less than clear whether the author is offering an empirical analysis of an existing social order or postulating a vision of what a good society would look like (Seligman 1992, 201–6).

As a result of the considerable elasticity of both the idea of civil society and the notion of an Enlightenment project, accounts of how the latter affected the former will diverge markedly, depending on the particular choices of the commentator. For example, while Berger and Neuhaus (who see mediating structures as rooted in particular, local circumstances) regard the Enlightenment project as undermining mediating structures (Berger and Neuhaus [1976] 1996, 161–2), Habermas (who understands civil society in terms of a public sphere of citizens engaged in free and open discussions) sees the development of civil society as a fulfillment of the incipient promise of the Enlightenment project (Habermas 1996, 329–87). Hence, any attempt to address the relationship between the Enlightenment project and civil society must first answer: Whose Enlightenment? Which civil society?

⁶ There are notable exceptions. The German term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* can also be employed as a way of designating a particular historical form of social life, “bourgeois society.” Marx made the most of the ambiguity in *The German Ideology* ([1845] 1975, 89): “Civil society as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure, has, however, always been designated by the same name.”

KANT ON ENLIGHTENMENT AND CIVILITY

Those who have sought to revive the concept of civil society have generally taken their departure from either Hegel or Tocqueville. They have thus tended to overlook the contribution of a thinker who framed the relationship among civility, enlightenment, and society in a particularly suggestive fashion: Immanuel Kant. Late in 1784, Kant published two essays in successive issues of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*: "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" and "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'" On first glance, they seem to be pursuing rather different concerns. The "Universal History" essay, Kant explained, was written in response to a note published in the *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitung*, which mentioned a conversation in which Kant had outlined his ideas on the philosophy of history to a passing scholar. The second essay was prompted by an earlier article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, which had noted that the term "enlightenment" was frequently invoked in the journal but rarely explained and had asked for a definition.⁷ Yet, notwithstanding their diverging subject matter and almost casual character, when read together the two essays provide a remedy for at least some of the confusions that plague current discussions of the Enlightenment and civil society. They (1) offer a definition of the Enlightenment that rests on a novel conception of the "public use of reason," (2) employ the distinction between public and private uses of reason to distinguish civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] from cosmopolitan society [*weltbürgerliche Gesellschaft*], and (3) use the perspective of a hypothetical cosmopolitan society as a critical vantage point from which to scrutinize civil society.

Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" is by now so familiar that it is easy to overlook how novel it was and how theoretically fecund it remains. He defined enlightenment not in terms of what it achieves but by what it escapes: "Enlightenment," the famous opening line proclaims, is "mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity" (Kant [1784] 1923, 35). While Moses Mendelssohn's response, published a few months earlier but not seen by Kant, had defined enlightenment as one of the "modifications of social life" that bring a people "into harmony with the destiny of man," Kant measured the advance of enlightenment in terms of the elimination of constraints on the "public use of reason."⁸

In a number of important essays, O'Neill has stressed the significance of Kant's approach. It takes practical reasoning as fundamental and invokes neither perfectionist presuppositions about the proper ends of human action nor metaphysical presuppositions about the validity of human reasoning (O'Neill 1989, 28–50; 1990; 1996). The grounding for practical reasoning must be constructed rather than discovered: Reason, as

Kant ([1781] 1929, 593) insisted in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens." O'Neill argues that the much-criticized tendency toward universalization and abstraction in Kantian ethics follows from Kant's requirement that practical reasoning must be "followable by those for whom it is to count as reasoning" (O'Neill 1996, 51–59).

Nothing will count as a principle of reason if it demands submission to some unvindicated authority; anything that does count as a principle of reason must be one that all can follow. The principles of reason are those that can secure the possibility of intersubjectivity. Kant does not ground reason in actual consensus, or in the agreement and standards of any historical community; he grounds it in the repudiation of principles that preclude the possibility of open-ended interaction and communication (O'Neill 1990, 194).

Thus, what "communitarian" critics see as the central vice of the Enlightenment—its abstraction from particular, local norms and circumstances—is, for O'Neill, its central virtue. Insufficiently generalized explanations of practical reasoning, which require the acceptance of specific presuppositions or disputable ends, will be less likely to win intersubjective agreement than more abstract accounts of practical reasoning. "There are no general reasons for thinking," O'Neill argues, "that thick act descriptions are more comprehensible than thin ones" (O'Neill 1996, 68n).

Kant's distinction between private and public uses of reason plays an important role in his account of civil society. In "What Is Enlightenment?" he argues that when individuals are engaged in a "private" use of reason—a use constrained by the demands of the positions they hold and the associated duties and responsibilities—they function as "passive" parts of the "machine" of civil society. But individuals are never simply members of civil society. At every moment they are also (if only potentially) members of a "cosmopolitan society," and as members of this community they enjoy a right to the free and unrestricted public use of their reason. As participants in this cosmopolitan society of writers and readers, individuals retain the right to criticize the demands made upon them as members of the civil society in which they reside.

Private uses of reason are limited by presuppositions that must simply be accepted as a condition for occupying a particular post. Kant ([1784] 1923, 38) argues, for example, that a clergyman assigned the task of instructing students in the central beliefs of the faith does not have the right to instruct students in his own diverging interpretation of the church doctrine. Simply because private uses of reason are embedded in ongoing practices and institutions, they will often be more difficult for outsiders to follow than public uses. The latter, simply because they take less as given, will of necessity be framed in a more abstract and universal voice. As a result, civil society confronts its members with a host of local rules and restrictions that simply must be accepted as given. Only when these same individuals conceive of themselves as citizens of a cosmopolitan society will they be in a position to

⁷ For a discussion of the background to Kant's essay, see Schmidt 1989.

⁸ Compare Mendelssohn, "On the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in Schmidt 1996, 53 with Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'" in Schmidt 1996, 59–60.

examine the rationality of the practices in which they are engaged in their role as members of civil society. The opposition between civil and cosmopolitan viewpoints is thus central to Kant's understanding of the nature of enlightenment.

The opposition of civil and cosmopolitan society had already been deployed, for different purposes, in Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," which appeared one month before "What Is Enlightenment?" In the earlier essay, Kant argued that "the greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels it to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally" (Kant [1784] 1923, 22). The solution, however, turns out to be "subordinate to the problem of a law-governed external relationship with other states" (p. 24). Justice within civil society cannot be achieved as long as states are engaged in constant preparations for conflict with one another, but—in the famous paradox on which the essay turns—it is precisely the considerable costs of war and the preparations for war that provide the external impetus for states to reform their own constitutions in the direction of republican forms of rule. The driving mechanism behind the entire process is the equally paradoxical notion of "unsocial sociability": the tension, endemic to the human race, of desiring both to live in society with others and to live as an individual (pp. 20–1). Civil society appears in this essay as a domain racked with antagonisms and tensions that provide the impetus for creating a cosmopolitan order, which in turn provides the background conditions needed for attainment of a just civil order. Once again, Kant provides an account of civil society which refuses to downplay the particularity and individuality that rules in civil society, but he also refuses to grant it the last word.

It is difficult to square much in Kant's account of civil society with recent discussions. The imagery he employs in the description of civil society in "What Is Enlightenment?" is hardly appealing: He likens it to a machine, and individuals are but passive cogs in its gearwork. The "Universal History" account of "unsocial sociability" is far removed from the cozy assurance that when "civil society is strong, it infuses a community with its warmth" (Coats 1996, 25). Both accounts also depart from recent discussions by remaining true to the conventions of natural law theory and using state and civil society as equivalent terms.⁹ While those who have taken Hegel, Marx, or Tocqueville as their model have sought to explain changes in political society by

⁹ See Kant's equation of "civil condition (*status civilis*)" with the "state (*civitas*)" in *Rechtslehre* §43 (Kant [1797] 1907, 311) and his contrast of "juridical-civil society [*rechtliche bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]" to "ethical-civil society [*ethische bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]" in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Kant [1793] 1960, 86–8, 90–1, 93). Seligman (1992, 43), nevertheless, argues that Kant does not view the state as "coterminous" with civil society, since "the publicness of rational debate and critique is seen (and indeed emphasized) as the province of civil society in its distinction from the State." This is difficult to square with Kant's own writings, which consistently equate state and civil society and which see public debate and discussion as evolving within a "cosmopolitan" (*weltbürgerlich*), rather than a "civil" (*bürgerlich*) society.

examining the economic and social forces that operate within the domain they designate as "civil society," it is the opposition between civil and cosmopolitan society that is central to Kant's argument. The impetus for changes in the nature of public life comes from individuals learning to think of themselves as members of a society which transcends the individual state, not from individuals framing their actions in response to forces that originate somewhere beyond the family yet short of the state.

The weaknesses of Kant's argument should not be minimized. His example of a military officer criticizing in scholarly journals the policies that he executes on the battlefield (Kant [1784] 1923, 37–8) seems terribly naive after the outrages of the last two centuries. And while he grants (in his discussion of the clergyman whose criticisms of his faith leave him unable to carry out in good conscience the duties demanded by the "private use" of his reason) that individuals may come to a point at which their "public" misgivings necessitate their resignation from their "private" position (p. 38), it is not at all clear how this can be applied to the case of the taxpayer who disagrees with the policies of the government that her taxes support. Must she remain content with letters to newspapers and articles in journals? Does her public use of reason have no means of expression other than the written page? Could it not also take the form of a refusal to pay taxes as an act of civil disobedience in concert with others dissenting from such policies?

But neither should the abiding strengths of Kant's position be underestimated. Nowhere do they become more apparent than in the difficulties faced by theorists who have attempted to derive ethical and legal norms from current conceptions of civil society.

CIVILITY AS A VIRTUE?

For Kant, civil society denotes that form of association proper to a state or *civitas*, a society ruled by laws that pass a universalization test, which requires them to respect the attributes of "lawful freedom," "civil equality," and "civil independence" that citizens possess as hypothetical contractants who agree to subject themselves to civil order (Kant [1797] 1907, 311–6).¹⁰ As such, Kant views civil society as a norm against which states are to be evaluated. By transforming the term into a set of institutions located somewhere between the individual and the state, those thinkers who have sought to define norms of "civility" have typically rejected the sorts of universalization tests to which Kant appealed. A brief consideration of Shils's attempt to describe the virtue of "substantive civility" suggests some of the difficulties encountered by such approaches.

Substantive civility is the virtue of civil society. It is the readiness to moderate particular, individual or parochial interests and to give precedence to the common good. . . . Whenever two antagonistic advocates arrive at a compromise through recognition of a common interest,

¹⁰ This is Kant's reformulation of the idea of the social contract.

they redefine themselves as members of a collectivity, the good of which has precedence over their particular objectives. The good which is accorded precedence by that decision might be no more than the continued existence of the collectivity in which they both participate. The common good is acknowledged wherever a more inclusive collectivity is acknowledged.

Every action in which thinking of and attempting to reduce the prospective loss inflicted on one section of a society when another section would benefit from a particular event of policy is an act of substantive civility. It is always possible to consider the consequences of any particular action in the light of its effect on the wider circle within which a decision is made. Every action which bears in mind the well-being of a more inclusive collectivity is an action on behalf of the common good (Shils 1992, 16–7).

There are three immediate problems with Shils's formulation. First, the blanket assertion of the primacy of the good of the "more inclusive collectivity" over "particular, individual, or parochial interests" is fraught with difficulties. Is Shils seriously proposing that any assertion of individual rights against the greater good of the collectivity is an affront to the virtue of civil society? Does the good of a "more inclusive collectivity" always trump the rights of individuals? Second, what sort of metric are agents supposed to apply when they reflect on whether the consequences of their actions will advance the good of the collectivity? What degree of uncertainty about the complex chain of causes that link actions to consequences is tolerable? Finally, Shils's statement that it is "always possible to consider the consequences of any particular action in the light of its effect on the wider circle" raises an obvious question: What falls within "the wider circle"? Should the effect on future generations be considered part of our "common good"? And what of present and future members of other societies?

When contrasted with Shils's attempt to articulate a set of virtues specific to civil society, many of the conventional criticisms of Kant's views on enlightenment and civil society lose their force. Complaints about the Enlightenment's "excessive" concern with individual rights pale in comparison to a concept of civic virtue which, in its embrace of "communitarian" goods, would open the way to state intervention in domains that it long ago vacated, so long as we have assurances that the "public good" is being served. It may be the case, for example, that the enforcement of religious conformity would advance the "common good" of societies with a fair measure of religious homogeneity. But this hardly is a compelling reason for rejecting well-established principles of religious liberty. Likewise, it is by no means clear that an attempt to assess the consequences of actions on a less than clearly defined community gives us any greater guidance than Kant's attempt to construct an account which, by focusing on the intelligibility of practical reasoning, frees us from the necessity of calculating elusive chains of causal connections. Finally, whereas Shils can provide no reason for limiting the scope of ethical concern to a particular civil society, Kant explicitly recognizes that any account of the moral improvement of individual states must of necessity con-

sider the relationship between actions within state borders and those involving the international community.

There are thus good reasons for being suspicious of the well-worn arguments against Enlightenment universalism and the new-found enthusiasm for the virtue of civil society. The Enlightenment project remains too ill-defined a notion to serve as an object either of allegiance or condemnation. What is needed instead is a careful weighing of the variety of different commitments and intentions—not all of them reconcilable—carelessly lumped together under that label. But as has been suggested above, to undertake a critical examination of these different claims is to take up a task which, with less violence to history than other accounts, might well be characterized as the Enlightenment project.

With regard to the current enthusiasm for the virtues of civility, vigilance of a different sort is required. In so far as "civil society" is a category of analysis in the social sciences, the question is whether this new use of an historical term advances our knowledge of the social factors that promote the emergence of democratic institutions. The answer will be decided by the quality of empirical research that the concept fosters.¹¹ With regard to the normative use of the concept, even greater skepticism may be justified. A rich tradition within political philosophy has sought to define civil society—understood as the most general term available for designating that form of association in which public life transpires—in terms of the norms of liberty, equality, and justice. Until we see a more compelling reason for giving preference to the alleged virtues of civility over the stricter demands of justice, we may be forced to second the advice that the Evangelist gives to the Pilgrim in John Bunyan's great allegory: "Mr. Legality is a cheat; and as for his son Civility, notwithstanding his simpering looks, he is but a hypocrite and cannot help thee." And just as the Evangelist advises that "there is nothing in all this noise, that thou hast heard of sottish men, but a design to beguile thee of thy salvation," so, too, we may do well to ask whether all this noise about civility is anything more than a design to turn us away from that concern with justice which lies at the heart of any "Enlightenment project" worth defending.

¹¹ For dissenting views on the analytic usefulness of the category, see Kumar 1993 and Seligman 1992.

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