

Disordered Civil Societies and Ethnic Hierarchies

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Civil society is best understood as a process rather than a ‘thing’. Its existence rests on institutions, especially non-governmental institutions. But it is not constituted by these institutions. The essence of civil society lies in the practices of its players, as they engage in the process of social change. Such practices are self-constitutive, and herein lies the creative power of civil societies.

The first two papers in this Issue offer new approaches to interpreting and understanding the development of civil societies, as a complex, disordered process.

Jenny Onyx and Melissa Edwards chart a research paradigm for civil societies that embraces their complexity as mobilising networks. The self-organising dynamics of community mobilisation direct attention to the complexities of ‘adaptive’ leadership within networks. Onyx and Edwards deploy this approach across three distinct sites and practices – community sustainability in a small town in Australia, eco-tourism in a Peruvian village, and cooperative ‘eldercare’ in a Swedish village.

Jonathan Marshall takes the analysis one step further, by suggesting that civil societies are at their best when they are disordered. If we accept that civil society is a creative social process, then it is necessarily disorderly. Such disorder is often discounted, and assessed to be a negative attribute, to be overcome by the more orderly, and more ordering effects of civil society institutionalisation. Marshall inverts this order-disorder nexus, exploring disordered civil society as a process necessary to democratic life.

The following three papers in this Issue focus on the relationship between civil societies and ethnic hierarchy. All, in various ways, insist on the fluidity of ethnic identification, and on the importance of how ethnic categories are defined and mobilised in civil societies.

Carol Reid addresses the Australian ethnic order through a discussion of educational initiatives in the aftermath of the 1995 Cronulla Beach riots. There has been much discussion of the origins of the riots, which saw a large number of people attempt to close a major Sydney beach to ‘non-Whites’. Reid focuses on the responses, discussing inter-cultural initiatives and ‘values education’ in local schools. Reid argues these tended to solidify ethnic blocs and obscure ethnic hierarchy. Instead she argues for an approach that uses recognition of diversity to question underlying causes of hierarchy and social injustice.

Walter Lalich echoes the theme of civil society as a process by focusing on the self-organised ‘voluntary collective actions’ of migrant communities in Sydney. Here, migrant communities constitute themselves, and their ethnic identities, by appropriating communal spaces to meet religious, educational, recreational and welfare needs. Lalich documents 386 such spaces, half in

the sphere of religion, and discusses the extent to which these spaces enable a sense of belonging for participants, and embody a recognition of cultural diversity.

Pooja Sawrikar and Ilan Katz conclude this Issue with a powerful argument against the racialisation of anti-racism. Rejecting cultural reductionism, they address racism as a phenomenon that is constituted in the process of exerting power and prejudice. They argue that our focus should be on how this nexus operates, rather than on one or other side of the equations. In doing so, they outline a ‘cultural competency’ approach to racism for social service providers, that embraces difference but at the same time de-centres ‘sameness’.

Overall, the Issue offers a range of new and reinvigorated approaches, both to understanding civil societies and addressing ethnic hierarchies, that injects a much-needed fluidity to our concepts and models, and to our practice.