The Birth of the Citizen in Civil Society

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Introduction

In the past twenty years, civil society has become a popular and much debated topic. The idea of civil society was popularised when communist or totalitarian states collapsed, in the nineteen eighties (Keane, 1988; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Walzer, 1992; Kumar, 1993). It became the subject of extensive debate when it appeared that scholars theorized civil society in different ways, according to different intellectual perspectives and moral commitments (Taylor, 1995; Hann and Dunn, 1996; Chambers and Kymlicka, 2002). Instead of arguing about the elements and boundaries of the social organization of civil society, discussions, in the nineteen nineties, focussed on the idea of civil society itself, as embedded in different currents of political philosophy (Heins, 2004). As a result, social scientists had too little grasp of ‘civil society’, and found it difficult to measure its key concepts that they believed to be ‘social capital’, ‘civility’ and ‘trust’ (O’Connell, 2000; Hearn, 2001; Lewis, 2004; Kubik, 2005). Furthermore, when several observers found that ‘civil society’ failed to grasp Asian and African societal experiences (Pye, 1999; Mbaye, 2006), some scholars discarded the concept of civil society as ‘overused, overrated, and analytically insubstantial’ (Fierlbeck, 1998: 172) and held that ‘debating civil society is like trying to swim in the Dead Sea; the viscosity of the element soon brings one to a halt’ (Benthall, 2000: 3).

In this paper, I seek to provide a conceptual framework of civil society. I conceptualize civil society as a distinctive type of social organization that has been described by classical sociologists. In classical sociology, there seems to be a widespread agreement about the elements and boundaries of civil society as a social organization. Though classical sociology does not offer one unified perspective of civil society, it is in agreement that the social organization of civil society is a category of individualized society that Ferdinand Tönnies typified as the Gesellschaft. Individualized society is composed of civil society, nation-state and market, which jointly open the possibility for emancipation from communities like the extended family, church and state, and for autonomy from hierarchy, enabling individual persons to choose their own principles by which they want to live. The distinctiveness of the elements and boundaries of civil society may be interpreted in different ways (Burawoy, 2005: 288). In this paper, three different civil society perspectives that dominate current discussions – mediating structures, social capitalism and Tocquevillianism – are outlined. My argument is that, if it is accepted that civil society is a social organization of the Gesellschaft, then it must be concluded that civil society supports individualism (Sardamov, 2005).
A theoretical conceptualization is a prerequisite for the critical evaluation of the normative uses of the concept ‘civil society’ in science and policy. A sociological conceptualization of civil society as a social organization that accommodates individualism reveals a problematic relationship between civil society and citizenship, an antagonistic relationship that had initially been identified by Rousseau, a forerunner of sociologists. Within the context of the Gesellschaft, civil society, as one of the pillars of individualized society, paves the way for emancipation from the public domain into private life – private life being a distinctively modern phenomenon that developed throughout sixteenth century Europe, during the Reformation (Habermas, 2001: 11). Recent discussions in both policy and science concentrate on how to approach, study and use civil society. Several attempts have been made to equate citizenship with civil society membership, to consider associations like NGOs as ‘civic initiatives’, to go ‘beyond the paradoxical conception of civil society without citizenship’ (Ku, 2002) and reconcile autonomy with civic devotion to the public interest (Dagger, 1997). However, the argument of this paper is that such reconciliations are not possible within the social organization of civil society as defined by classical sociology. What would be needed is a civic society organized for the sake of public interest, as propounded in the Tocquevillian perspective, not a civil society that is organized for the sake of the development of selfhood.

The social organization of civil society

For purposes of empirical analysis, many social scientists define the social organization of civil society in such a way that it can actually be observed. They define it as a collection of grassroots associations (GAs) (Smith and Shen, 2002) or as a third sector of non-profit organizations (NPOs) (Lewis, 2005), that is, as the entire complex of associations and organizations that are not part of the family, state or market. Such popular working definitions allow the construction of hypotheses and measurements, but fail to correspond to the idea of civil society rightly understood. As it happened, civil society was ‘commonly misperceived’ (O’Connell, 2000: 472) as the synonym of the voluntary, independent sector in opposition the market and the state in national societies. If grassroots association and non-profit sector are not distinctive features of civil society, how can it then be characterized and how is to be studied?

Classical sociologists have observed that civil society is a distinctive type of social organization in individualized societies, exclusively developed for the development of selfhood. Classical sociology involves the critical study of ‘the social’, which includes, among other things, ‘the civil’. Classical sociological studies do not inquire into ‘the social’ and ‘the civil’ in terms of individual or national dispositions, but as distinctive elements of social organization that are understood as causes of social action in society and of civil action in civil society (Turner, 2006: 137). In classical sociology, the distinctive feature of ‘the civil’ in particular, as contrasted with ‘the social’
in general, is the emancipation of members from the political community of citizens into the private domain. As Tocqueville (2000: 482-3) explains:

‘individualism is a recent expression arising from a new idea. Our fathers knew only selfishness (...) Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to himself (...) Selfishness withers the seed of all the virtues; individualism at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed in selfishness.’

As Tocqueville describes it, individualism means withdrawal from the public domain. This institutionalized retreat into private life and the creation of a little society for private use is what constitutes civil society. According to Tocqueville, citizenship comes prior to civil society and nation-state, because citizenship is natural, not social or civil. Civil society destroys citizenship, as a mastery of nature, because it enables citizens to emancipate themselves from the political community to live the life of an associate for private and social purposes. For Tocqueville, the associate is the very opposite of the citizen: he is the bourgeois who experiences public life as a burden and who organizes his associational life in accord with private ends (Ossewaarde, 2004). Classical sociology, starting with Tocqueville, indeed provides a profound criticism of bourgeois society (Turner, 2006: 137).

Like Tocqueville, Tönnies (1955) equates the civil with the bourgeois, as the antithesis of the civic. Civil society, for him, is a bürgerliche Gesellschaft, which, as an idealtype, is the opposite polar of the Gemeinschaft. In the latter idealtype, the political life of the virtuous citizen and the religious life of the virtuous Christian is socially organized. Tönnies makes the idealist analytical distinction between civil membership in the Gesellschaft and civic membership in the Gemeinschaft. Like Tocqueville, he holds that civil association in unions and clubs, and political association in parties, is not a substitute for citizenship, but rather its destruction. The Gesellschaft is not organized for the establishment of civic and political bonds or the exercise of the civic virtues, but for autonomy from hierarchy and emancipation from the political and religious community of State and Church into the contractual associations of civil society (including churches and political parties). In Tönnies’ descriptions, associates do not have fellow citizens, but partners, and, as Tocqueville stresses, their sisterhood and brotherhood does not extend beyond a small circle of family and friends. Civil and political associates have a wide variety of contacts and relationships, which constitutes a ‘network’, as a replacement for primary relations.

In the social organization of the Gemeinschaft, community members are defined by their political bonds as citizens because they share the same fatherland, the same traditions, habits and folkways – in other words, the same political destiny. In the Gesellschaft, the political bond that ties
citizens is broken, through civil war. Associates have emancipated themselves from their communities to enter civil and political associations in which they establish weak social ties as strangers with strangers from different backgrounds and bridge religious and political differences (Keane, 2003: 12). Strangers do not share the same traditions, habits or folkways, but they may share the same ideas, social values and interests. In classical sociology, associations are therefore understood as the collective representations of these: they are defined as fundamental social categories of the civil or individualized mind (Durkheim, 1992: 36). The social bond of the Gesellschaft is contractual: it is a temporary partnership between strangers. Weak, civil ties are established by associational obedience to contractual rules that are designed and enforced by the sovereign (Morison, 2000). The nation-state, in particular the constitutional state (Rechtsstaat), is a necessary condition of sovereignty for civil society (Shils, 1997) and a key institution of individualized society. This is one reason why the idea of civil society fails to organize Asian and African societal experiences: in these areas the nation-state, as a frame of reference for we-identity, is as blank an area on the mindset as citizenship is.

In their study of civil society, classical sociologists enquired into the particular mind-set, ‘character of mind’ (Tocqueville) or ‘collective representations’ (Durkheim), which is ultimately a distinctive element of a particular type of social organization. Civil society cannot exist in the social organization of aristocratic societies, feudalism, caste societies, agricultural villages or the Gemeinschaft (Habermas, 2001: 52), inasmuch as citizenship is impossible outside the Gemeinschaft or political community (Barber, 1984: 151; Heater, 1999: 52). The distinctive mind-set of the members of the Gesellschaft grasps societal experiences for realizing selfhood, not for engraving and cultivating the public interest in the mind of the citizen. It is therefore impossible to link the idea of civil society to citizenship and the state, as André Béteille (1999) and Agnes Ku (2002) propose, because the civil mind does not think in terms of the public interest. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to compare the civic and the civil way of thinking.

The social organization of the civil mind

As I have said above, citizenship and civil society membership require two different ways of thinking which are developed for different purposes. The civic mind is formed within the institutional order of the political community, through political role playing and the active exercise of the civic virtues in the public domain. This order is transmitted to (future) citizens through political teachings that are part of a wider intellectual tradition (MacIntyre, 1981). In the Gemeinschaft of Christendom, this intellectual tradition is dominated by scholasticism, though different moral and political alternatives – different rivalling orders – prevail. Political teachings of citizenship derive their authority from an Aristotelian testimony of political wisdom: Aristotle is the philosopher of citizenship (Heater, 1999). In the political community, citizens are taught to examine their own political actions in the light of the political knowledge that they receive from the Aristotelian tradition, carefully guarded by the
intellectual elite or the so-called ‘great books tradition’. The intellectual authority of Aristotle serves to protect citizens against the uses of arbitrary power, as no citizen ought to obey any political commandment that does not conform to political wisdom (Rommen, 1969: 116).

In the political community, citizens have the responsibility to consent to political wisdom, not because they are able to grasp the intellectual substance of Aristotelianism by their own autonomous reason, but because they believe in the legitimacy of the guardians. The guardians of Aristotelianism must know the mind of the citizens, and the things that have to be done to give each citizen his due in the political community, while the citizens must recognise, through the political teachings, the legitimacy of the intellectual hierarchy (Sennett, 1975; Beer, 1986). When the legitimacy of Aristotelianism, and the intellectual hierarchy that guards this political tradition, are questioned, the intellectual order of the political community differentiates and the cultivation of the civic mind becomes a partisan enterprise. The selection of authoritative sources of political wisdom becomes a matter of private choice, propelled by partisan associations, nationalist creed and ideologies. In Europe, when the legitimacy of Aristotelianism was publicly called into question, common sense became a more reliable guide to political action. John Locke was the new authority. He is the intellectual authority for the Gesellschaft (Bellah, e.a., 1992).

Locke is not a teacher of citizenship and political bonds, but of individualism and civil peace. He teaches that, in civil society that he explicitly defines as ‘a state of peace’ after civil war, associates do not need to obey any intellectual tradition, but are defined by their sceptical questioning of hierarchical authority and by the private choices they make in accord with their own inborn common sense. Locke teaches that, in civil society, the great books, and even revealed wisdom, are to be evaluated by common sense, without making any appeal to intellectual authority. In the Gesellschaft, the catholic unity of Aristotelianism is substituted by a plurality of ideas, interests and values, which should be carefully calculated and neutralised (or de-politicised), for the sake of civil peace in a context of looming civil war. According to Locke, only common sense proves powerful enough to stop the bloody horrors of the civil wars of the Reformation, in which political and religious ideas, values and interests conflict, and to generate a decent condition of peaceful living, in which diverse ideas, interests and values can be accommodated and tolerated.

Common sense organizes civil experiences of autonomy of hierarchy and emancipation from community (Sennett, 1981; Habermas, 2001: 56). Common sense generates legitimate thoughts as causes of civil action (common sense is lost in violence and civil war), in such a way that ruling intellectual authorities are not required: common sense does not need the rule of the wise and the holy hierarchy (Beer, 1986). With common sense, no associate will need to question the self-evident fact that two and two make four, that violence is harmful, or that everyone needs to work to make a living. As associates are able to organize such conclusive evidence all by themselves, they are capable of demonstrating their own arguments and show their reasons for actions. Common sense is what keeps associates autonomous and safe with unknown strangers in civil society. It enables them to foresee the
possible consequences of their own choices and activities, so that they can be held responsible for their own destiny in civil society. In other words, the preference for common sense, in opposition to intellectual tradition, has important consequences for the authority structure of social organization. Citizenship cannot exist without the hierarchy that cultivates the civic mind; civil society cannot exist without the common sense of its members.

The social organization of autonomy and emancipation

The social commitment to the actualisation of the autonomous and emancipated self in civil society and the political commitment to citizenship in the political community of the state must be understood as two conflicting public moralities – as two distinct views of the good life which cannot be reconciled but can be pacified in civil society. The civil project of the self is radically different from the civic project of the exercise of citizenship in the public domain, in accord with the public interest (Bell, 1976: 20-1; Habermas, 2001: 56). The development of the self through associational membership requires civil virtues that sustain autonomy from hierarchy and emancipation from the community into the constellation of civil society, the nation-state and the market. The development of citizenship requires civic virtues, or renunciation of the self, which make self-government in the political community possible (Heater, 1999). Self-realization demands autonomy to choose the life associates want to live (Dagger, 1997; Eisgruber, 2002). Citizenship needs subsidiary authorities to cultivate the civic virtues, for establishing or maintaining political bonds in the political community according to the constitutive principles that define the public interest of the particular state or supranational arrangement like the European Union (Donnelly, 1989; Carozza 2003: 42-3).

Public interest is defined, maintained and developed through the social organization of the civic virtues of self-governing citizens, in particular by the organization of prudence, justice, moderation and courage. These are the virtues that enable citizens to politically participate in the purposes of their political community – these purposes are the public interest. Through the cooperative efforts of the subsidiary authorities and the self-governing citizens, the public interest is guarded and the political liberty of the citizen is preserved (Dagger, 1997: 15). The very idea of political community is based on a shared vision of a political way of living, a fatherland, in which citizens are united by their political bonds, despite their differences in identity and competing values and interests (Barber, 1984: 117-8; Lasch, 1991: 174-5). Without the political bonds that bind citizens in a political destiny, there can be no public interest. When citizens fail to establish political bonds – as is the case in civil war – they cannot govern themselves in the public domain and retire to the private sphere. As a result, the public domain becomes monopolized by the government, who rules, through public policy, in accord with the common welfare of its politically and geographically demarcated population (Marquand, 2004).
In the social organization of the *Gesellschaft*, the state is no longer defined by the political bonds of citizens, but as a sovereign power that enforces civil peace and grants civil, political and social rights, but may turn parasitical on its own population. Associates do not establish political bonds, but defend their own ideas, values and interests in their own associations, as a way of expressing themselves. To be able to actualize their selves, they need the civil virtues of benevolence, decency, punctuality, hygiene, conscientiousness, philanthropy and promise keeping, by which they are able to establish contractual ties. Responsible, decent, rule-abiding associates, who have learnt in their bourgeois families, schools, neighbourhoods and churches how to recognise their own ideas, values and interests and those of others, maintain and develop civil society in accord with the civil project of the self-realisation, while maintaining civil peace with strangers.

Civil morality is grounded on the premise that each associate is a moral agent, fully capable of understanding, by common sense, the moral postulates on which contracts and partnerships rest, namely, that no harm should be inflicted upon the interests of others. Associates are not socialised to be responsible for others, but to make their own autonomous choices responsibly, in cooperation or partnership with others. The capacity to choose offered requires a critical awareness of the choices available for the development of selfhood, of alternatives among which can be chosen (Dagger, 1997: 38). Michael Walzer (1992) rightly stresses that, in civil society, social subjects also have the choice to acquire and exercise the civic virtues and transform themselves into citizens. In his view, associates are free to become citizens, but they may also choose to refuse, and do some sports, voluntary work or remain passive instead. Civil society does not exterminate the civic virtues, but reduces them to one of the many moralities that are open for associates. Citizenship is a role that associates may play in civil society – one among many other roles. Civil society leaves citizenship to the autonomous choice of its members.

In civil society, citizenship becomes a *republican value* that can be represented in civil society through associations like republican parties, republican think tanks, republican charities or republican media groups. Such contractual associations compete with others for members and donors. Such a competition not only involves a political struggle with political and moral alternatives (e.g., liberal or communitarian associations), but also with other types of associations, such as sport clubs, alumni associations, and business networks. Time can only be spent once. In other words, the fulltime citizen role in civil society is difficult to fulfil, because citizens who find themselves in civil society are forced to play a plurality of roles, in a variety of circumstances. They accordingly develop multiple identities (Barber, 1984: 208-9). Civil society enables its members to define themselves, according to the multiple identities they develop through participation in their multiple memberships (Wolfe, 1989: 49). Respect for the autonomy of other associates in their making of the self is the core of civil morality. But as all morality is guarded by some authority, respect for autonomy requires from associates a loyalty to a specific type of ruling authority, namely, to civil authority.
The social organization of civil authority

The authority model of the Gemeinschaft is the family, while the authority model of the Gesellschaft is the nation-state, in particular the constitutional state (Rechtsstaat) (Locke, 1963; Habermas, 2001: 53). In the Gemeinschaft, the political bonds between citizens are family bonds. The locus of the political bond is the fatherland. The leaders are identified as the fathers of the communities, and the founders of the communities are the founding fathers. The image of the father is at the centre of all communities (Sennett, 1981, Wildavsky, 1984). In civil society, the family is not invested with authority. Partnerships between associates are not based on kinship ties, but are contractual. What makes civil society possible is the social contract that relates all Gesellschaft members to the nation-state. The sovereign government is identified as the representatives of ‘the people’ who, in the Gesellschaft, is politically and geographically organized in a national population (Anderson, 1991: 22).

Civil society not only requires a nation-state with a constitutional state, but it also demands a particular family structure: the civil family that is itself based on the principles of autonomy, has the civil responsibility of inculcating its children with the same values. Civil society cannot thrive on vulnerable and dependent adults who are not able to associate. In the Gemeinschaft, the family is undifferentiated, meaning that political, religious and economic lives are integrated within the family structure. The father is a political, religious and economic authority: he brings up his children for the defence of State and Church and supplies the family with provisions. Hence, the pater familias wields total nursing authority: his word is law. Paternal authority declines when fathers are no longer able to carry their political, religious and economic responsibilities, when families are no longer able to protect themselves, but have to be protected by the sovereign (policy and army). Christopher Lasch explains that the extended family of the Gemeinschaft differentiates into the civil family when parents no longer possess the authority to determine the marriages of their children, who possess the autonomy to decide themselves; when parents no longer supply the housing, but children, when matured, live elsewhere (Lasch, 1979: 4-7).

In the Gesellschaft the family becomes a contractual association. In the family association, children are brought up with the belief that they have enough common sense at a certain age to think for themselves and act responsibly within associations and businesses so that they can realize their selves. From the moment that children are able to think autonomously and guard their own interests, parents relinquish authority over their sons and daughters and may become subjects of criticism (Locke, 1963). In the Gesellschaft, parenthood and old age are no longer objects of status, so that obedience to parental rule can no longer be commanded when children, including girls, have enough common sense. Children have the right to maintenance and education at the expense of their family’s capital, while the parents have the duty to civilise their children in accord with the Rule of Law (or what Weber typified as legal-rational authority), so that their children may own themselves, independent from the family or any other institution (Parsons, 1955).
In civil society, contracts, rules, compacts, codes and procedures provide associates with explicit guidelines of how to behave. In the *Gesellschaft*, the nation-state grants autonomy to associates, as legal rights holders, on the condition that they promise to obey the established rules of civility and respect the status of contracts and legal rights, which alone enables them to think, feel and act as associates. Association operates through the autonomous self-enactment of contractual rules designed to discipline the free will, to ensure peace and decency. Civil society can exist only when its members are able to discipline by themselves, through a social process of inner compulsion that Norbert Elias called *Selbstzwang*, those ideas and passions that may lead to violence and upset civil peace. Associates may feel hatred and contempt for another in civil society, but they know that they ought not to translate such brutal feelings into illegality. According to Elias, *Selbstzwang* is the most important element of the social organization of civil society and a precondition for common sense and civil peace.

*Selbstzwang* is a necessary condition for a peaceful civil society, but, in its control of political passions, including the passion for freedom, it destroys citizenship. In civil society, associates must hold themselves in check, discipline their passions, not to violate the established rules of civility. Citizenship, on the other hand, does not demand control, but cultivation or the civic ordering of the passions – the political education of the passions in conformity with the pursuit of the public interest – which is an emotional ordering that is primarily accomplished through the cultivation of patriotism (MacIntyre, 1981). This is the reason why Montesquieu (1995: 36) equates citizenship with political virtue that he defines as patriotism or ‘a continuous preference of the public interest to one’s own.’ Thus understood, citizenship is always patriotic, because it requires the renunciation of the self, the deliberate attempt to order one’s preferences within and not outside the political family of the fatherland (in the republican state) or the kingdom (in the monarchical state).

In brief, the key elements of the social organization of civil society are contractual social bonds, common sense, the social or civil values of autonomy and emancipation, and the authority model of the sovereign nation-state. According to classical sociology, these are the defining elements in the study of civil society. However, there are different perspectives of civil society with respect to these elements. By showing *how* the defining elements of civil society are actually perceived in contemporary scholarship, and by uncovering the different moral commitments that go hand in hand with these perspectives, are the *different* proposed aims of civil society exposed.

**The perspective of civil society as a mediating structure**

The perspective of civil society as a complex of mediating structures is committed to the civil project of self-realisation through social participation in civil society and, individual responsibility through associational membership. Its key concept is the mediating structure or intermediary institution that mediates between the interests and values of the private domain and those of the public domain. In this
perspective, the main goal of civil society is to improve public policy in such a way that social subjects are better enabled to actualise their selfhood. The analysis of mediating structures is focused on the dynamic relationship between public policy and civil society, understood as the entire complex of intermediary institutions. The insight that this perspective generates is meant to improve public policy – public policy designed for the autonomy and emancipation of social subjects.

Charles Taylor (1995) suggests that Montesquieu is the originator of the perspective of intermediary institutions. However, on closer inspection, this appears to be mistaken. Taylor believes that Montesquieu envisions a social organization in which powers are distributed among several independent intermediary bodies – the so-called corps intermédiaires – which would constitute Montesquieu’s perspective of civil society. There are some flaws in Taylor’s analysis. For Montesquieu, intermediary powers are not independent, but dependent upon the monarchical state, while they do not even have a place in the republican state (a point that Rousseau later preached). In fact, for Montesquieu, intermediary powers are intermediate ranks in the kingdom, which include the nobility, the clergy, the guild system and the bourgeoisie. These ranks do not mediate between public and private interests, but moderate the paternal powers of the monarch. Nobility, merchants, guild and clergy do not act outside the state in civil society and the market, but function, through legal bodies, corporations, craftsmanship and ecclesiastical bodies, as a check on absolutism within the political community. In contrast to what Taylor suggests, Montesquieu offers no civil society perspective at all; his concern is the development and protection of citizenship through the intermediate ranks of the monarchical state.

Berger and Neuhaus (1977; 1996) are the ones who designed the intermediary institutions perspective of civil society, as a result of their commitment to the realization of the social self. For Berger and Neuhaus, intermediary institutions exist, not within but, outside the state, in civil society. Intermediary institutions, as they understand them, have very little in common with Montesquieu’s intermediate ranks, but, on the contrary, include communities and associations like the family, school, church, voluntary work and neighbourhood. These are the institutions – located in between the nation-state and the individual – that, in the perspective of mediating structures, constitute civil society. Through intermediary institutions, social subjects, such as children, elderly persons, and inhabitants, are socialised to feel more ‘at home’ in civil society. As a result, families, schools, neighbourhoods and even nation-states are no longer collectively experienced as abstract entities, but are recognised as the means through which the self is realised. Intermediary institutions are mediating structures because they function as a broker between the public interest of the state and the private interests of ‘the people’. In the perspective of intermediary institutions, civil society attaches public policy objectives to the private experiences of self-realisation.

For Berger and Neuhaus, civil society is a concern of public policy. They observe that intermediary institutions arouse public affection for private interests and private affection for public interests. Through mediating structures, the real interests, real needs, and real values of ‘the people’
are expressed, rather than the imaginary and abstract visions of policy makers. Berger and Neuhaus argue that it is the responsibility of public policy to empower families, churches, schools, neighbourhood watches and voluntary associations, so that the government comes to know social reality, not through questionnaires, statistics and monitoring systems, but through empowerment of active membership. In order to empower people through empowering intermediary institutions, public policy is called to increase the autonomy of mediating structures vis-à-vis the state and the market. Through civil society’s mediation between public and private interests, the social order of individualized society is sustained through a dialectical process of social participation and individual responsibility. For Berger and Neuhaus, by empowering people, social cohesion is strengthened: intermediary institutions are the cement of the Gesellschaft.

In Montesquieu’s perspective of the intermediary powers of the monarchical state, the state needs its citizens to maintain its sovereignty. The citizens need their state in order to preserve their (political) freedom – to govern themselves as citizens through the intermediary powers of their intermediate ranks, in the political community of the kingdom, for the glory of their monarch. For Berger and Neuhaus, civil society is the expression of the social realities of the people. Montesquieu is civically committed to political liberty from oppression. Berger and Neuhaus are civilly committed to autonomy from hierarchy (in particular the hierarchy of the administrative state), for the responsible realization of the self, through social participation in civil society.

The social capitalist perspective of civil society

Recently, several scholars have identified the possession of the civil virtues as the possession of a stock of social capital (Bourdieu, 1993; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2002). In this perspective, social capital is a key concept in the empirical analysis of civil society. The concept of social capital, however, is very problematic, because ‘capital’ is not a category of individualized society, but of industrial society. Though there is some disagreement about the precise meaning of social capital, social capitalism always refers to a particular organization of production, the social relationship between capital and labour, which defines the class relation. Therefore, social capital is a key concept, for Bourdieu, for analyzing social classes in industrial society, while Coleman stresses that social capital is productive, in the sense that, with social capital, certain objectives, like welfare, can be reached that otherwise would have been impossible to attain. If social capital is understood as an element of civil society rather than industrial society, then civil society is thought to be an instrument that serves common welfare purposes. And this is exactly what social capitalists like Putnam and Fukuyama think. Hence, Putnam (2002) establishes the relationship between bowling together and the common welfare of the population that is organized in the nation.

Generally, the concept of social capital refers to the civil capacity for responsible social interaction with others through civil association. It is hypothesized that when associates interact with
their partners in association (doing things together), they develop a stock of social values (trust) and social norms of reciprocity, which makes them socially wealthy. Through the acquisition of social capital, associates are able to reconcile multiple identities and bridge differences between their own self and the identity of strangers. Through social capital, they are able to transform strangers, enemies or competitors into partners, so that an associate’s consciousness extends from the ‘I’ to the collective ‘we’ of the partnership. Hence the meaning of ‘the social’ in civil society according to social capitalists. By reducing the extent and intensity of their social interaction with others (when they start bowling alone), associates lose their social capital, which means that they become socially poor (antisocial) and fail to realise themselves. Losing social capital – bowling alone – means that associates lose grip on their own selves, which implies, in the social capitalist perspective, that less social capital can be converted into economic capital. Social poverty leads to economic poverty.

In the social capitalist perspective, social capital is a precondition for the common welfare of the national population. It is assumed that when associates collectively start bowling alone, national growth rates will slow down. Its key idea is that social capital can be exchanged for economic capital. Social capitalism means that private companies are aware that they need workers who own a stock of social capital, which they have built up through civil society memberships, and which enables them to be skilful or capable in their management or profession (Novak, 1996). Thus understood, in the social capitalist perspective of civil society, civil association is needed to create trust and economic capital. Trust allows businesses to flourish as a joint enterprise. Through their stock of social capital, workers are able to co-operate in collective business ventures on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. In the absence of social capital, workers are strangers to one another, which makes co-operation and mutual trust difficult to achieve. Furthermore, social capitalism claims that, without the possession of social capital, local governments will prove ineffective in guarding the common welfare and levels of economic development will slow down.

Social capital is very important for welfare purposes and for civilising capitalism (Woolcock, 1998). It defines the social wealth of associates, who have the skill to manage businesses and network with partners, and who do not exploit the other’s labour. But social capital does not define citizenship. Social capital transforms both citizens and enemies into partners, who jointly participate in the common welfare. Social capitalism does not include political battlefields for citizens in civil society: for Putnam, civil society is the domain of peaceful, social, rule-abiding associates who enjoy bowling together. The underlying assumption is that political conflict is inefficient, often violent, and weakens the competitive position of enterprises and nations. In business, the challenge is not to struggle, but to cooperate for joint welfare. Civil society is conceptualised as the school of cooperation and the social condition for success in business, entrepreneurship, effective service delivery and the creation of communities of work (Novak, 1996).

Putnam is not concerned with, or perhaps does not recognize, fundamental political and moral conflicts in the Gesellschaft enterprise, so that he can see no reason why there should be battling
citizens. In fact, holding social capital creates the wish to escape from public conflicts into the private domain (Warren 1999; Roberts and Devine, 2003). It is in the private domain of the small circle of family and friends that welfare is enjoyed, where the fruits of hard labour are consumed, where the working self is realised through bowling together: the public domain is a necessary evil. It is a necessary evil because it is not the public interest of citizenship, but the common welfare of the population that social capitalists seek to guard. Welfare, however, is, like work, not a feature of civil society, but is attained by cooperative production with partners, and competition with competitive businesses, in industrial society.

The civic perspective of civil society

Social capitalists are often portrayed as ‘neo-Tocquevillians’ because they assume that civil society is not only a precondition for a flourishing industrial society, but is also necessary for liberal democracy that seeks equality of autonomy. Though it is certainly correct that Tocqueville holds that there can be no democracy without civil society, his perspective of civil society is radically different from the social capitalists (Gannett, 2003). From a civic point of view, social capitalism demands less from associates than they are capable of achieving as citizens (Lasch, 1991: 174-5). If civil society is to be the domain of citizens, then Putnam’s bowling clubs are to be transformed into arena’s, battlefield and forums, in which citizens are able to exercise their civic virtues. This is not Putnam’s, but Tocqueville’s project (Ossewaarde, 2004). In his civic perspective, civil society does not consist of bowling clubs, political parties, grassroots associations, non-profit organisations, voluntary work and partisan institutes for purposes of selfhood, but of townships, boroughs, assemblies, municipalities, provinces, cities, juries, forums, town halls, public meetings and counties for the development of self-governing, patriotic citizenship.

Tocqueville has an alternative, civic definition of civil society. He does not plead for a return to antiquity: individualisation is a fact of modern society and the challenge is to create citizens in this society. For him, is the Puritan township a model of a civic civil society. The same can be said of the French commune or the German town. In the civic perspective, civil society is understood as civic society, as the entire complex of townships through which citizens exercise their civic virtues and settle their own affairs all by themselves, in accord with the public interest. The township is not thought to be a civil institution or a social construction, but, like citizenship, is understood as a phenomenon of nature. As Tocqueville (2000: 57) states,

‘the township is the sole association that is so much in nature that everywhere men are gathered, a township forms by itself. Township society therefore exists among all peoples, whatever their usages and their laws may be; it is man who makes monarchies and creates republics; the township appears to issue directly from the hands of God’. 
The ancient polis enabled the citizens of antiquity to govern themselves directly in their small-scale and exclusive republics. Township society enables the citizens of modernity to realize their political nature, their political animality, in democratic citizenship, by taking an active part in local affairs. In the civic perspective, it may be civil to be governed, but it is *unnatural* not to govern oneself in the public domain.

Through the small-scale and exclusive township associations (Tocqueville observes that their size is limited to about 3,000 citizens) citizens are able to govern themselves in accord with the civic virtues, debate face-to-face about the public interest, and settle their political and moral controversies all by themselves (Chandhoke, 1995; Seligman, 1995; Rosenblum, 1998: 43-4). Citizenship in civic society means that township associates are directly involved in enacting their own laws, jointly vote their own taxes, appoint their own officials, and have the right to trial by jury. Townships are like little platoons within, and not outside, the wider political community of the nation-state (the great platoon). In the little platoons of the townships, which resemble the ancient fatherlands and the intermediate powers of aristocratic society, associates are, as self-governing citizens, able to elect their own national representatives whom they want to govern the great platoons.

Tocqueville understands townships not as a possession of citizens (entitlement, capital, or status), but as the habitual pursuit of the civic virtues, out of religio-political passion for self-government. To be a citizen, it is not enough to possess a certain predisposition, good will and altruism to do something for others. The development of the civic virtues depends upon their political *use* in the public domain, upon the actual performance of great deeds for the city. Thus, when Tocqueville argues that, ‘in order that men remain civilized or become so, the art of associating must be developed and perfected among them in the same ratio as equality of conditions increases’ (Tocqueville, 2000: 492), he refers to associations specifically organized for civic purposes, rather than for welfarist and emancipatory purposes. The birth of the citizen in civil society takes place through the ‘natural’ association of the township, in which political nature is realized.

Tocqueville seeks to extend the possibility of citizenship to individualized society. By relating the modern democratic nation-state to township society, he attempts to rescue township citizenship for democratic society (Ossewaarde, 2004). In the civic perspective, the challenge of modernity is, not to further shape an individualized society of autonomous and emancipated individuals, but, on the contrary, to resist individualism and develop a democratic *Gemeinschaft* of civic fellowships. For, it is only in the political *Gemeinschaft* of natural township associations that a democratic people is able to realize its political nature as a citizenry and rule over its common destiny, through township practices of self-government and the joint combat against oppression, control and domination that Tocqueville so strongly identifies with centralization of executive powers and that Weber calls ‘rationalization’. Only through joint self-government, are citizens able to resist the welfarist and administrative
pressures that, though often benevolently, attempt to define, regulate, monitor, categorise and satisfy citizens as social subjects, as stakeholders, tax payers, units, administrative numbers or individuals.

Concluding remarks

If civil society is understood in the classical sociological sense, as a social organization of individualized society, then it becomes clear why it is difficult to reconcile civil society with citizenship. The civil project of the autonomous self is the antithesis of citizenship and the direct cause of governmental monopolization that seeks to institutionalize individualism through welfare programs. In recent discussions, two types of ‘worries’ have arisen concerning how to approach civil society and put the concept to practical use. It has been repeatedly pointed out that in the social organization of civil society, the decisive role of the urban bourgeoisie, its power, its passions and its commitment to autonomy from hierarchy and emancipation from community should receive critical examination. Protagonists of civil society hold that ‘talk of… civil society is not simply Western bourgeois ideology’ (Keane, 2003: 172), while critics believe that civil society legitimizes the exercise of power, so that it fails to deliver the promise of democracy, let alone the promise of freedom (Hearn, 2001; Goodhart, 2005; Lipschutz, 2005). A second, related worry concerns the ‘fetishization of civil society’ that is manifested in Third Way thinking. As Craig Calhoun stresses, the language of ‘civil society’ is all too quickly deployed as ‘a mongoose to kill all manner of theoretical snakes’ and is all too often ‘articulated in ways that exaggerate the meaningful distinctions among state, market, and the “rest” of society’ (Calhoun, 2005: 361).

The first worry concerns the antithetical relationship between the civil and the civic, the associate and the citizen, which the idea of civil society cannot solve. It cannot solve this problem because, as classical sociology shows, civil society is a category of individualized society, which is a distinctive type of modern society that is organized for civil purposes of autonomy and emancipation. Citizenship can be reconciled with the idea of civil society when civil society is organized as the civic society or township society that Tocqueville has in mind. Civil society can be understood and studied as ‘a realm of citizenship’ (Somers, 1995: 230) only when the relations and communications in civil society do not have a civil, but a natural, civic character. For the study of civil society and citizenship, it is therefore crucial not to dismiss the antithesis between the character of the bourgeois and that of the citizen. These two types of persons belong to two antagonistic types of social organization – the one organized for the development of the self, the other for the public interest. In the bürgerliche Gesellschaft, the citizen disappears in bowling clubs and companies; in township society, the bourgeois is lost in the public domain.

The fact that the idea of civil society receives the attention of institutions like the World Economic Forum and the World Bank, does not mean that talk of civil society is ‘simply Western bourgeois ideology’ that serves to legitimate a welfaris order. What is at stake is that individualized
societies are a reality, making citizenship impossible. Citizenship cannot be sustained by autonomy and emancipation, common sense, and self-realization, but requires hierarchy, political bonds, intellect, and self-government. To be more than ‘simply Western bourgeois ideology’, civil society protagonists would have to show that civil society is organized for no other purposes than self-governing citizenship. In other words, to go beyond the paradoxical conception of civil society without citizenship, the social organization of civil society should be transformed in a civic society of forums and battlefield. This is how Tocqueville, and recently Neera Chandhoke (1995), approach civil as civic society, but this civic vision is not supported by the policy makers of international organizations, civil and political associations and non-profit organizations (Ebrahim, 2003: 38-41).

The second worry is related to the first, in the sense that the idea of civil society is all too readily borrowed for other purposes than citizenship, in particular for the ‘higher’ purpose of the common welfare of national populations. Classical sociology, however, insists that common welfare is neither an objective of association nor of citizenship, neither of Gesellschaft nor of Gemeinschaft, but is the objective of industrialized societies that organize the relationship between capital and labour. As a category of individualized society, civil society is as such not organized for redistribution of income and public service delivery, but for autonomy and emancipation. It is not industry and welfare but civil and political opportunities for self-realization (for instance, through mediating structures and bowling clubs) which belong to the core of civil society. Thus understood, civil society can be conceptually approached as a complex governance network that pluralizes powers and problematizes violence, for no purpose other than individualism, that is, autonomy and emancipation (Keane, 2003: 8).

The ‘fetishization of civil society’ becomes worrisome when civil society comes to be seen as a policy instrument that is applied for improving government effectiveness. The ‘fetishization of civil society’ makes government and civil society membership a common executive task, demanding not so much the mediation between private interests and the public interest, bowling together or the exercise of the civic virtues, but the active cooperation from all to realize policy objectives, designed by social planners or engineers for the common welfare of the population. Public policy instrumentalizes or rationalizes civil society as the third sector, as a policy partner in government – transforming civil associates into civil servants, to fill gaps that governments themselves cannot or will not address (Gilbert, 2002; Lewis, 2004; Rau, 2006). The instrumentalization of the concept ‘civil society’ has been attractive to the third sector because it has helped them in the process of legitimizing themselves. However, their concern with public service deliveries and aid operations are so shaped by economic conditions of competition and commercialism that there can hardly be any room for civil and political association (Turner, 2001: 203). The third sector, however, neither promotes autonomy and emancipation, nor citizenship. It is not the domain of associationalism or citizenship, but of management in industrial society.
Literature


